

Supernatural by nature

It had taken a bit of manoeuvring, careful planning and making sure everything was nailed down with plenty of time, but the whole group had finally gotten together for a vacation. Even if it was just a week, a win was still a win. And so far everything had gone according to plan, even the smallest and most minute detail. Their main worry was the weather, but that was completely out of their hands.

And yet, despite the infamous reputation the weather of the British Isles had, it was greatly exaggerated. That, or they had expended what reserves of good luck they had left for the rest of the year. A shiny sun, clear blue skies and warm temperatures had been accompanying the group during their vacation to Scotland. The worst case scenario so far had been a few scattered clouds here and there.

Although he did feel a bit displaced, Barry was content with letting Barbara have her time with the girls. It had been a while since his alter-ego had revealed herself to Vale, but letting the rest of the group in the secret had felt far more daunting. Two sides of the same coin, but like night and day. One was her dear boyfriend, while the other side was a classy and elegant lady.

So what of it? If anything she had gotten a hell of a deal with this particular Jeckyll and Ms. Hyde. Besides, the words of reassurance she had given them still rang true. They thought they were weird? Had they *seen* the people around them? The woman that could merge with others? The potion-making kitsune? The were-cat? The literal genie? And that was setting aside the different transformations all of them went through.

Hell, even Vale herself was anything but ordinary, if the strips on her skin were anything to go by. Or if her feline ears and tail weren't clear enough. If anything, the odd one out was Gale, head of the emporium and -probably- only regular human among them. And she didn't seem bothered by it. Quite the contrary, she enjoyed her presence, helping thaw any ice and awkwardness that might have remained.

The whole group had rented a boat for the day, setting sail into the waters of Loch Ness. It wasn't anything particularly fancy, but the machine held steady and was well-maintained despite its age showing here and there. Nothing major, but something that could be noticed at a third glance. Despite having a single deck, most of it used by the wheelhouse, it left enough room for everyone to move around. A handrail followed the form of the board, making sure none fell to the water.

Alex and Gale sat on the back, ignoring the rumbling of the engine while spending some quality time together with their daughter; Maya and Kodaka sat before the wheelhouse, enjoying the oddity of the British weather; and finally, Dana and Vale jumped overboard, plunging into the water of the famous lake. Complete quiet and stillness, followed by splashes and either gasps or shrieks. And giggling, at least by Vale's part.

Gasping, Dana shook her head, reaching for the attachable stair in the starboard side of the ship as it floated in place. "W-water's great! No one up f-for a swim?"

A round of polite declining and shaking heads followed, moving like a wave from the stern to the bow of the ship, while Vale followed Dana up. The two werecats sat against the handrail, trying to dry and warm up a little, waiting -hoping- for the shivering to go away. And Barbara looked at them, a warm smile on her face, particularly towards Vale. "Water's warm and nice?"

"It's good!" Answered the liger, trying her best to stop shivering. "Mind joining us for a swim?"

"I'll have to politely decline, dear. I'm afraid that I'm not as adept as you in swimming. And, on top of that, with my outfit I'll sink to the bottom should water even splash me."

"Oh no, having to drag pretty Barbara out."

"Very funny" said the posh blonde dryly, huffing and looking elsewhere. "Save that for your dear muffin..." She made sure to say that last part as little more than a whisper though, although if the wide grin the ligeress has was any indicator, she had heard her just fine.

“Eh, your loss.” Vale turned around, leaning forward against the handrail. She was feeling warmer now, and the sunlight felt great, but the weak breeze that blew by was enough to send new chills down her body. However, she paid little attention to that, instead having her eyes glued to the dark waters below the boat.

Cogs turned in her mind. She wouldn’t push Barbara overboard, not in a million years, but thinking back to what she had just told her... how deep could she dive? The dark water looked daunting and intimidating, being hard to see in it. She couldn’t blame the rest for not going in, and it probably was not the wisest thing. But the question remained, nagging her in the back of her mind. Time and again, and again.

“Curiosity killed the cat, huh?” She blurted out, shattering the silence that had settled in. It also earned her a look from everyone, mixing confusion and amusement, but mostly confusion.

“What was that for?” Asked Dana, next to her.

“I’m going for another swim. See how deep I can go.”

Barbara immediately turned around, her usual posh expression now one of annoyance and slight worry. “Care to repeat that saying you just blurted out?”

“I know, Barb, I know.”

“Then-”

“Dana, I’m counting on you if anything happens.” Vale said, ignoring the handrail and taking a leap. Her feline side allowed her to do so gracefully, diving head first into the cold and dark waters.

“Sure thi-”

“Bloody he-”

The voices of Dana and Barbara were cut short by the splashing of the water, and then it was quiet. Something only interrupted by the humming in her ears and the lake's own noise.

It was dark, and she could hardly see what she had before her. She could barely see her own hands, as she reached deeper and deeper. The water, a A screen of dark that mixed greys and browns, felt like it did its best to keep the sunlight out,.And the depth was nowhere near. It was just her, going in a direction she believed was down, with the only company of her heartbeat and her blood running.

Plenty of tiny particles floated in the water, harder and harder to see as the light dimmed. It didn't feel like she was underwater even, if she didn't know otherwise, she could have thought she was floating in a cold and damp void. It was eerie, just the monochrome water before her. And around. She spun in place, holding her breath the best she could, her long and blonde hair flowing freely like her own mass of algae.

And yet, something felt off. A pit in her gut that only grew wider and deeper. A crawling that spread through her body, never mind the water. She had the feeling something, or someone, was watching her. And she had seen more than her fair share of horror movies. She tried to calm herself. Probably just a fish swimming by, nothing else. Yeah, just a fish... which they hadn't seen any of. Why? Hell if she knew. But suddenly, the dark and murky waters didn't seem like a void, somewhere she was all alone.

Her lungs burned. Time to go, and quickly. She looked up, the light showing the way, and she started swimming. Her arms and legs ached a bit, but the water got lighter. She could even make the shadow of the boat. *"That's a relief."*

What little light made its way down, along with the shadows of the ship and what waves there could be, made it worse. Her mind screwing around, or something else?

Her surroundings felt like they were blinding her, unable to see anything that came her way. And the truth was that, for her mind, anything could come out, from the smallest fish to the scariest monster. She would jump out of her skin anyway. Even as she came closer and closer to the surface, the dark below seemed to creep upwards, towards her, to plunge her down. Show her the depth she had longed for.

She turned around, one last time, and her heart skipped a beat. There was something below her. Close. Really fucking close. A long and slender shadow moved in the water, using several fins to swim forward. It was almost invisible, had it not been by a shadowy silhouette and the faintest movement in the water. And then the shadow got much bigger, freezing her in awe and horror. A bigger shape, dwarfing the one she had seen before, with a set of fins moving the new monster forward as a body swam into view.

She let out a muffled sound as time seemed to stop for good. The small thing moved a long neck like it was a snake detached from the body. The head looked directly at her. More air escaped her mouth. Her lungs burned. Her body ached. She didn't care. She swam, moving her arms and legs as quickly as she could. Each stroke brought her closer to the surface. To the boat. To her friends.

To Barbara.

To Barry.

The surface of the water, still like a mirror, shattered as she gasped for air. She felt the sun in her skin and the chilly breeze. Someone said something, but she barely paid attention to the voices. She reached for the stairs, scrambling her way up quickly.

“...ck from the dep...”

“...ew recor...”

“...rong? Ack! My dre...”

“...le, Vale, you o...”

“...le... ale... Vale.” She finally came back to her senses, realising she had run straight to Barbara and pretty much tackled her. She had drenched the decorated gown of pink and purple the woman wore pretty much always, but she had not let her go. Instead, the blonde bombshell held her close, her green eyes not annoyed, but worried. “Vale, you’re incredibly pale, what happened?”

Trembling, unsure of which of the reasons took the lead, she huddled against her. "...there's something in the water."

The deck fell silent.

"What?"

"I-I don't know Dana. But it was big, and there were two of them."

She could feel Barbara growing stiff, as tense as herself almost, but not letting her go. Meanwhile, the other werecat took a reluctant peek over the board of the ship. Maya mirrored her move, but if Dana was on the starboard side, she took the port one. Gale joined them too, glaring at the water on the stern of the ship.

For the several next minutes, there was nothing but a tense silence. The three women tried to find something, anything of what Vale had seen. Even the smallest glimpse. Other members of the group gradually joined them too. Kodaka watched the waters from the prow, while Gale and Alex walked around, trying to either do a round or just fill in the gaps. But, for better or worse, nothing happened.

"Vale, are you sure you didn't drink too much water?" Said Dana, trying to lighten the mood. "Not that we can see much, but there is nothing here."

"It's there."

There was a rustling sound, as Barbara changed her form and let Barry have the spotlight. The big and curvy woman shrank, taking a much less curvy and smaller in size body. Her cascade of blonde hair became short and dark, while the dress of pink and purple vanished along with her, bonnet included. In her place stood Barry, still holding Vale and with a serious look on his face. "That's enough sailing for the day. I'm taking us back to the shore."

There was no protest or disagreement, just silent nods as the boat's engine again rumbled to life. Slowly, the ship veered and set course, moving steadily towards the shore as the group on board kept an eye on the water. Nothing had happened, but just in case.

Lunch should have been relaxing. A table with great views to the shore and the lake, filling food, and lovely weather that refused to abandon them. What was there not to love? Instead, it had been awkward. Vale, even if she slowly was going back to her usual carefree self, was unusually quiet. And any questions she was asked about 'the monsters', she was vehemently defensive about it. She swore that she knew what she had seen, even if none were going to believe her. Which left Barry in a somewhat precarious position.

On one hand, Vale was not one to lie about things. He knew her well, and it just wasn't her style. But on the other hand, it was very hard to see in the waters of Loch Ness, so maybe she had thought she had seen things? None the wiser, he kept his mouth shut, despite not feeling quite right.

Which was why he had made a beeline to her once they were done with lunch. The werecat sat on the rocky shore, her eyes fixed on the water, while playfully toying with one pebble she had picked up. It was rather picturesque if one paired it with the trees that encircled the beach and the lovely weather they had been blessed with. But Barry's attention was centred solely on her.

The stones and the gravel crunched beneath his trainers, sitting quietly next to the silent Vale. He considered his options. To remain quiet and offer comfort, to start a conversation trying to understand what she had seen... he was even tempted to pick his own pebble. Anything to break the silence. Instead, he focused on the one she had on her hands. A small pale and greyish stone, but one that looked smooth and round, no doubt due to erosion and the doing of the elements.

"You're going to try and have it skip on the surface?"

"Nah... never knew how to do that."

“Well, that makes two of us.” He chuckled weakly. “Listen Vale, about today-”

“I might not be the brightest, Barry, but I know what I saw.”

“I know” he sighed “I’m just glad you’re alright.”

“...thanks.” She smiled at him, his heart fluttering. “I know I can be a bit of an ass.”

“Eh, not an ass, but you can be a bit scary when you get angry. Maybe that liger side is flaring up?”

“I’m not scary...” She pouted, leaning against him. “Besides, what about you? What about Barbara?”

“I don’t think she’ll come out for a while. She did mention something about swimming not being her forte, and she’s not a fan of the water. At. All.” Mused Barry. “Plus, trying to do so with that outfit must be a nightmare.”

“I’ve always seen her with it. Doesn’t she ever change?”

“She really likes it, so maybe that’s why she sticks with it. Kind of something she has on her own.”

“Next time I’ll ask her.”

“I’ll let her know. She’ll have your answer for sure.”

“Thanks, muffin.”

The two were quiet, leaning against the other and just enjoying the company. The rest of the group could be heard chatting not far away, and the tiny waves of the lake broke the silence along with it. They gazed at the lake, minuscule waves going back and forth, finding their way through the piled pebbles that made the beach.

“it’s just... hard to believe, you know?” Said Barry “Nessie is supposed to be just a myth.”

“Well, I can guarantee something’s down there. And it has a smaller thing with it.”

“Just in case one was not enough, right?”

“Yep.”

They were quiet again, but the silence was gone, as the sound of crunching footsteps behind them announced company. Maya sat next to Barry, Kodaka following the brunette in tow and sitting next to her girlfriend. Dana followed, sitting next to her liger friend, while the footsteps of Gale, Alex and their daughter stopped behind them, standing.

“So, what’s the plan for the evening?” Asked Dana.

“Dunno.” Answered Vale. “Something not involving water?”

“Well, the camping house is not far away, so we can improvise.” Pitched Gale

“How about a walk? Not like there’s any rush.”

“Good suggestion, Barry” Agreed Gale. “A walk along the shoreline sounds pleasant. A chance to enjoy this lovely weather and vistas.”

The group slowly got back up. Stretching arms and legs, and even letting out some groans as a few cracks and pops could be heard. Gale and her mothers on the lead, followed by Dana. Barry and Gale followed next, while Kodaka and Maya closed the march. Then the crunching began again, a cacophony of steps that slowly made their way back and mixed with the lapping of the waves on the shore. A noise that grew louder and more frequent.

“Uh... Vale?” Maya was heard from the back, her footsteps stopping.

“Yeah?

“What was what you saw?”

The liger inhaled a bit sharply, annoyed at the insistence and wanting to drop the subject.
“Again?”

She received no answer. Not that she had any rebuttal either. Her eyes were glued to the shoreline, the same they had left behind a moment ago. The murky waters were violent and wild, as what she could only describe as a pair of monsters washed ashore.

A body from which spread four fins and a tail that was not too long. Maybe it was the distance, maybe it was the angle, but it looked stubby even. A long neck stretched forward, ending in an angular head. And it looked like it reached the same distance as the body itself. Barring the tail, that was. All of it covered in scales that mixed the brownish tones of the water, only for the colour to change to the palette of greys of the rocky shore. And even from a distance, spotted patterns could be noticed, something that would have made them hard to see had they not caught them landing ashore.

The two reached the rocky shore, making landfall on one of the far sides of it. They seemed to... stand up? If that made sense. Their necks made a wide arch, or at least the big one's did, while they approached the trees that were next to it using their fins. It was... odd. The two animals galumphed towards the trees, almost wobbling side to side, with the small one particularly excited at the prospect of food.

Vale was speechless. Part of her wanted to rub it on their faces, feeling vindicated. But she could only watch as the two animals reached the treeline, the big one stretching the neck and chomping on some branches. Each move was slow and methodical. It had either all the time in the world or it was incredibly laborious to do so, but once it had plenty, it pulled back.

Branches fell to the floor, and the small one rushed over while making a guttural sound. It sounded like childish glee... even if it was worlds apart. Still, it was just as ravenous, digging in and eating away what was within reach. Each chomp and bite was quick and voracious, swallowing all it could with surprising -and somewhat scary- ease.

They had grouped together again, watching in a silence that had gone from stunned to amazed. None were mad nor hallucinating, and the Loch Ness dinosaur and the smaller version of it were proof. “No way...”

Galex’s amazement turned into terror, as the two animals turned their heads around and looked at them. Some paled, some took a step back, locking eyes with them. There was not a sound, besides the munching, as the dark eyes of the beasts looked at them, acknowledging their presence, but otherwise uncaring. Well, for the big one, that was. The smaller one jumped in place and made those guttural sounds again.

The atmosphere was one of cautious curiosity, Vale even taking a couple of steps forward. For Galex, it was one of terror instead, the genie rooted in place and not taking her eyes off the big one. The one thing she got in return was the munching and a stare that blurred a line she did not think possible between watchful and incredibly bored.

“Galex, you don’t have to stand still like that.” Mused Gale at the antics of her daughter.

“It can’t see me if I don’t move.”

The blonde woman sighed at the rebuttal. “First, wrong species. Second, you *do* know that’s not true at all, do you?”

“And how are you sure about that, Mom?”

“Well... she does have a point.” Intervened Barry. “Can’t remember the exact name, but I don’t think they were herbivores precisely.”

“Great, so they do eat people.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Galex crossed her arms on her chest, her mother taking notice her pose had relaxed somewhat. “Then?”

“They *didn't* eat plants, but now they do. Probably had to adapt to survive.”

“Alright, fine. And how do you explain no one seeing one all this time?”

“Maybe the same applies to them to those cowboys from a while ago?” Pitched in Dana.

“The arcane plains or whatever it was called? Maybe they had to make some drastic moves to live on.”

“Oh, fantastic. So you’re saying there can be more of them.”

“Uh...” The idea that several of these animals could call Loch Ness their home was... unsettling. And Barry did not like the implications of that thought. At all. He glanced at Gale and Dana, who returned gazes that tried to hide the sudden rush of worry. Some vacation this was going to be, constantly worrying not to be dragged to the depths by an angry leviathan.

”Maybe?” He squeaked.

“Mom and Vale are headed straight towards the small one.” Galex blurted.

“Wha-” Barry and Gale’s heads turned around like loose screws, confirming that their respective partners were indeed walking slowly towards the small animal.

“Alex, what do you think you are doing?”

“Vale?”

The genie and the werecat closed the distance with the animals, each step taken done so slowly and carefully. The small one made more of those sounds, galumphing towards them almost too gleefully. It was something strange, watching the two gorgeous women stretch their hands at the eager creature. Although, maybe the interest was not in them, but in something they had, as the small creature poked Alex’s long mane.

“Oh, you like it?” The woman giggled, taking the cascade of blonde behind her and making it fall before her. The cub was elated, mouth open just a tiny bit and its black eyes fixed on it. It

leaned forward, Alex mimicking the move, only to eek and pull back. “No! Bad dinosaur! You don’t get to eat my hair.”

The cub let out a series of low sounds, giving her what she could only describe as puppy eyes and leaning forward again. She couldn’t resist. “Fiiiine, you can touch.” She pulled her hair back for a moment “but you’re **not** eating my hair.”

Did the animal understand? Neither had the foggiest clue, but it did take the chance to poke it. Twice and thrice. Its appearance changed, from its previous palette of stone-like greys, the scales took on a clearer colour. A warm yellow spread through the animal’s body, a few traces of pink here and there, running across the neck and the body, as well as the tip of the fins or the tail.

The animal leaned back again, clapping its forward fins as that guttural laughter-like noise filled the air again. “Aw... who’s the cutest little one on this beach? Who’s the cutest one?” Cooed the genie, carefully rubbing the snout of the animal. “You are, yes you are!”

Vale smiled at the display, wanting to join in the fun. She was about to caress and pat the neck, but a line of gills made her think otherwise. She didn’t like it when strangers grabbed her tail without warning, so that could be something similar.

Letting Alex have the spotlight, she shot a brief glance over her shoulder revealed a whole display of dumbfounded looks from the rest of the group. And Gale and Barry in particular were mortified, to which she stuck out her tongue. Mama Nessie also stared at the three of them, and she liked to imagine those black eyes had the same mortified and exasperated gaze, but with her little cub instead.

Soon was her turn to be the centre of attention though, as the cub shifted towards her. Out of reflex, she held out her hand before her, as if it was cattle or a dog that was way too big. It didn’t bother the cub in the slightest thought, pressing the snout against it and changing colours and patterns again. Alex’s yellow and pink became a different golden hue, a slightly darker and a bit dirtier one. But, where the streaks of pink had been, now light brown spots took the place.

It was mesmerising, seeing the hue change, even if it was an incredibly subtle thing. Darker streaks of brown on the fins and the neck, showing her liger side, while the spots went from subtle to not-so-much. *“That’s the point, duh.”*

Regardless, it was just as alluring. They first appeared as very light and small moles, dots that grew in size and darkened to match those she showed when she got angry. *“Maybe Barry was right on that one...”* A sheepish thought, but one that made her smile warmly.

She patted the cub, which once again “laughed” and clapped the forward fins, but her smile became a bit strained. Something was off. Her hair stood up, and her feline ears twitched. There was something nearby, not in sight yet, but she could feel her muscles tense in anticipation. And, by the looks of it, she wasn’t the only one.

Mama Nessie had stopped eating, letting the branches fall to the shore and instead had turned her neck around, looking -glaring- at the water. She followed the glare, trying to see what it was. Something moved near the shore. It was hard to see, but the ripples that streaked across the otherwise still water gave it away. It was like seeing a mirror tremble, but she was far more focused on the gaping pit in her gut. Similar to that when she had taken the dive.

The cogs in Vale’s mind moved and turned. The mother had a calf with her, so maybe it was the father that had come to pay a visit? Why the hostility then? If not... she didn’t like where it was going. And the more she thought the more she remembered the saying she had blurted back then. Hindsight was a bitch, and reckless didn’t even begin to describe her attitude.

Things happened in a blur. Water splashed and something roared. It was big, bigger than Mama Nessie even, lunging the ass of its whole body towards Her. Towards Alex, and the calf. Her eyes zoned in the mouth of the beast, a maw filled with razor sharp teeth. And heading straight for her.

She jumped to the side, shoving Alex out of the way. The calf avoided the monster too, the lunge falling short and the maw chomping nothing but air. Still, it was way too close for comfort, and the attention was directed towards the fleeing small animal. The mother approached, roaring and snarling, doing her best to lunge at it. The new arrival leaned back though, easily avoiding it as it sized up its new rival.

Both monsters kept their distance, the calf running behind its mother while the newcomer roared. The mother roared back, but it was going nowhere. Standing up, Vale helped the other woman to her feet. “Come on!”

Alex didn’t need to be told twice, scrambling to her feet and rushing back to the safety of the group, which had backed off. Gale and Galex received her back with a relieved hug, while Vale ran to Barry. Still, she looked over her shoulder at the monstrous standoff. A back and forth of roars and snarls, while the terrified calf remained behind its mother, trying to roar too.

“What’s the deal with that?!”

“I don’t know Alex...” Said Vale, looking and squinting at the display behind her glasses. “I have read that some species kill the offspring one might have when they want to mate, but-”

“Doesn’t matter.” Cut Barry “Everyone off the beach, now.”

His voice was serious, and the tone made it explicitly clear there was no room for discussion. Galex and her mothers did not need to be told twice, as they backed off immediately. Maya and Kodaka took a couple of steps back, but refused to leave the rest behind, while Dana, a bit hunched forward, stood her ground. Her body tensed as spots of purple spread across her, as well as taking a more feral look. Her bared teeth looked sharper, and her nails more like claws.

And Vale... she glared at the scene, processing Gale's words. “*The pettiness.*” Vale tensed her jaw. “*The sheer audacity.*” She clenched her fists. Killing off a kid because it wanted to mate? Screw that, displaced and mutated dinosaur or not. “Yeah, well, not letting that happen.”

“Vale, whatever you're thinking... don't.” Barry’s tone was difficult to process. A warning? Quiet anger? She had her gaze fixed on the small calf, pathetically trying to roar from behind its mother.

“Not letting it happen.” She repeated, unsure to whom.

A series of pops and cracks came from her body. Her blonde mane receded into her, instead having blonde hair spread across her body. Her clothes vanished into thin air, a mantle of golden fur enveloping her as she went from bipedal to quadrupedal, a few darker streaks visible on her four legs.

As her arms and legs changed and morphed, they became far more fitting for a predator. Strong and powerful, her fingers shortening and each ending in a dark and sharp claw. The curves of her figure flattened, breasts sinking into her chest while her rear became that of an animal, exchanging sensuality for feral muscle. And as this happened, she closed her eyes as her face pushed forward into a snout.

All that made her human was replaced by feline. Her nose flattened, taking a triangular shape as whiskers grew in size; her mouth grew wider to match her new teeth and her round ears moved to the top of her new head.

“...t is she doi...”

The voices sounded muffled. She breathed in, steadying her the sudden rush that shook her. She felt heavy, but also much more than that. She felt strong. She felt nimble. She felt powerful. And when her eyes opened, the blue irises still had the shine of intelligence on them.

She heard Barry’s voice. “Can’t be helped, follow my lead.”

She chose to ignore it.

Leaping forward, she closed the distance with moves that felt natural and fluid. The male was caught off-guard by her sudden tackle, and she roared, sounding like thunder. It made the beach silent for the smallest moment before the two animals roared at each other again. The loch monster lunged at her, trying to bite and tear her apart with the teeth, but the liger made it difficult. Even if her movements were a bit janky, her claws remained sharp.

And the beast understood that well, backing off a bit, but enough for Dana to get the jump on it. And the leopard woman had no qualms about slashing, as her not-as-human hands left gnashes on the base of the neck. Not deep enough, but the redness revealed many small lacerations that the scales had not stopped.

Both werecats stood between the attacker and the mother and the calf. Snarling and teeth bared. Something to which the newest arrival answered in kind, with plenty of its original murderous intent. A standoff ensued, the attacker looking for an opening to end the calf. It stretched itself as tall and high as it could, dwarfing even the mother, but that would not scare the werecats away. However, the next movement did not come from the standoff. A rock hit the side of the head, and another flew by, missing the target.

Out of the corner of her eye, Vale saw two of her friends crouch and pick some rocks. *“What are they expecting to do, peel away the scales?”* A myriad of fleeting thoughts went through her mind. Amusement and disbelief at their actions. Anger at them jumping on *her* prey. Worry that they would be hurt... and at her previous thought.

All of those vanished though, because one of the rocks that Maya had launched did hit the beast, and in its right eye no less. There was a roar, and the animal backed off while snarling, water wetting its underbelly. It was eerily quiet, as if time had slowed down, but, If Barry and Maya had to judge, it was about to scream bloody murder. And so it was.

With a deafening roar, the beast lunged not at Vale and Dana, or the mother, or even the calf. It came directly at them, and fast. Far from galumphing or moving like a seal, it slithered across the beach, using the fins to move even faster. “RUN!”

Neither had to be told twice, as they followed Kodaka in a hasty retreat. Vale and Dana chased after it, as Maya and Barry scattered. Not only was the beast nasty, but it had something for vengeance it seemed, chasing after Maya. The brunette ran across the beach, further inland, but she was quickly losing ground. And no matter how fast Vale wished she could run, or how far she could leap, she was not making it on time.

There was a flash of light, blinding her and making her tumble to the ground. The rocky landing should have felt rough, and it probably had, but she barely registered it, as a wave of

heat washed over her. There was something that made every hair in her body stand up, the sudden warmth feeling like a wildfire had bursted out of thin air. A cracking sound filled her ears as she blinked, followed by a pained roar as she rose to her paws and shook her head.

The image of the monster, writhing in pain as it backed off was burned in her mind. Her ears flattened against her head, laying as low as she could at the image of Kodaka.

The woman rose from the ground, coated in bright blue flames that seemed to steam from her. Her eyes were two glaring circles of blue plasma, while the flames trailed behind her, dancing like many vulpine tails. Her foxy ears, concealed sometimes, now stood in full display, fire clinging to them. But her hands scared her out of her mind. Clearly visible through the flames, the fingers instead surrounded them, taking the shape of massive claws. Something that had been put to good use if the new wounds the beast had were anything to go by.

With each step the kitsune took, the beast retreated further and further, back into the waters. It had given up, now far more interested in staying alive. It roared in pain when the water splashed against the searing wounds, a hissing and the smell of burnt flesh reaching Vale's nostrils. But mere moments after, it was quiet.

Vale let herself flop to the floor, her form morphing back to her regular one. It had been exhilarating, or maybe it was just the adrenaline clinging to her, but she was glad it was over. A quiet guttural sound broke the silence, heads turning around to see the mother and the calf make their way towards the water. She felt uneasy, letting them go with that beast sharing lake with them.

"They will be alright." Barry said next to her.

"Yeah I hope so..." She smiled.

"You on the other hand... we are going to have a talk about making sensible choices."

His tone was dead serious, and she knew that no amount of cute kitty eyes would help her out this time. Still her ears pressed against her head as she nodded.

“Come on, let’s check on Kodaka. ”

“Yeah...”

She stood up, helped by both Barry and Dana, who offered her a quiet look of sympathy... and a closed fist. Which she bumped. *Hell yeah, ligress* the purple werecat mouthed. She kept a demure façade, but she was happy with herself. Mama Nessie was aware of the danger, and Little Nessie was safe. Overall, a good day.

Maya was kneeling next to Kodaka. The flames had died, but the woman remained pale, Maya clinging to her and soothing her. She kept repeating she was fine, but made no efforts to push the brunette away. She looked up, smiling at them weakly.

“Give me a moment, please.”

“Of course.” Assured Barry.

“Hell of a show.” Blurted Vale, earning a glare from Barry. “Thanks for the help.”

“I wish I could say it was of my own volition, but it wasn’t.” Sighed Kodaka. “I saw that thing closing on Maya, and something just... snapped, I guess. Next thing I know it’s reeling backwards and I’m on fire.”

“Still, that came in pretty handy.”

Maya did not seem convinced, holding her close. She kept quiet, but some words echoed loudly in the back of her mind. Words uttered by beings like Anubis himself and that she had not forgotten. “Kodaka, what was that?”

“I... I don’t know Maya.” the kitsune admitted. “But it does remind me of something grandma talked to me about. She called it Foxfire.”

Conversation died down. Both Vale and Kodaka had plenty to talk about with their respective couples. Something that would take time and might not be pleasant, but that had to be

addressed. However, it was something that would happen in private. Far from the ears of the rest of the group.

“That’s enough thrills for one day.” Said Barry as the group started making their way out of the beach. “Come on, Gale and her girls are waiting for us.”

“Probably the only ones to make a sensible move in this whole mess...” He thought to himself.