



# CRUEL TIDES

QUEEN OF TRIDENTS

2

SHANA BROOKE

CRUEL TIDES

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BOOK TWO

SHANA BROOKE



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Cover Design by Ryn Katryn Digital Art

Edited by Becky Edits

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# NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



CRUEL TIDES is the second in series of a slow-build medium-burn reverse harem romance. This means the main character will end up with more than one love interest. As a slow-build harem, some love interests in this book will get more relationship development as the series continues. There will be a cliffhanger at the end!

Please be advised:

This book contains mature and graphic content, including but not limited to: childhood trauma, bullying outside of the harem, steamy scenes, and cursing. All explicit content is 18+ and consensual.

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CLAIRA





## TWELVE YEARS AGO

Movement broke the quiet in the foyer the moment the palace doors swung open. I stared out from the safety of my alcove, stunned, wondering if one of my daydreams had somehow become real. Was something exciting actually happening in the palace?

Before I could pinch myself, two captains set a serving table up in the very center of the usually empty foyer where I spent my days. A line of chefs zipped by next, and I held my breath, amazed by what they carried.

I'd never seen so many fish.

Skilled hands delivered haddock to the table, one after another, until the gilded cage set in the center was stuffed full of wiggly fish.

Was a new festival starting? Even though the hall was filled with palace laborers, I didn't dare ask.

Here, hidden away in my little alcove, it was easy to pretend I wasn't really here at all. That was what my daydream had been about. Being away—wherever away was. But the more merfolk swam into the foyer, the more it felt like away had suddenly come to me.

A maid drifted by, and she set a sponge to work, scrubbing over the lantern above me like I wasn't even beneath her. More maids swept into the foyer, and they wasted no time polishing every wall and even the ceiling, whispering among themselves about how soon the party would begin.

A party? I was so excited that I wanted to squeal.

Papa had told me all about parties. I knew how magical they were, with music and dancing and tables full of more food than an entire kingdom could eat. He said I was still too young to be invited to parties, but maybe if I kept quiet, no one would notice I was here.

I pulled myself into the very back of my alcove, hiding away from the maids as they worked around me. By the time they finished, the colorful gems on the walls twinkled like tiny lanterns, and just one look up at the sparkly ceiling was enough to make my head spin.

As quickly as the workers had appeared, they all seemed to vanish. I poked my head out of my corner, looking at the table full of food and noticing the glittering instruments sitting across the grand hall.

I'd never seen an instrument up close before. I was imagining pulling

myself closer when the palace doors swung open again.

King Eamon was the first through the door, and I gasped at the sight of him. He was so large, even bigger than Papa, with his scales and armor shining as bright as the trident he held close to his side. Without even realizing it, I'd shrunk back into my corner.

A bright streak of gold zipped into the palace behind him, and I muffled a groan. Ugh. Lee was with him. I was wondering why he hadn't come by to bother me yet today, and now I knew.

Although I thought myself hidden, the prince's bright eyes fell right on me as soon as he entered the room. A smirk pulled over his lips, and I could already feel myself getting annoyed.

I was so close to seeing my very first party. If Lee ruined this for me, there was no way I would ever speak to him again!

A group of merfolk followed in after them, and I found myself stunned by how they looked. Everything about them was unfamiliar to me, from their warm tones to the wide scales on their tails. Beautiful frills trailed off their fins, ruffling like ocean silks behind them, and I glanced down at my tail, wondering if extra frills could help a mer swim.

When I looked back up, I caught sight of a merfry swimming in the very center of the group, tightly guarded by the merfolk around him. Dark curls fell over his eyes, and I could tell by the way he held his chin that he was nervous about entering King Eamon's palace.

But who wouldn't be? King Eamon was scarier than the biggest, toughest shark around.

My eyes fell to the merfry's tail, and I could hardly believe it. It was *red*.  
I'd never seen a red —

"Nerida," a deep voice whispered from across the foyer, and I shot straight against the wall of my alcove with a startled yip. Papa gave me a smile as he shut the palace doors. He rarely came back to the palace during the day, and I hadn't expected to see him. Today was sure full of surprises.

It wasn't until he swam closer that I remembered the party and why I was supposed to be hiding. "I know you say I'm too young for parties, Papa, but please—" I paused. He wasn't wearing his sash. My eyes shot to his spear, and there it was, tied up into a bundle underneath the tip. "Did you bring me something?"

Amusement glittered in his gray eyes, and he held his lips tight like he might not tell me, but Papa was the worst at keeping secrets. "Maybe I

brought back a little something.”

I was practically vibrating with excitement as he dug into his sash. “I found an oyster on the swim back.” With a soft smile, he set it in my awaiting hands. “It’s from a very special place called the Red Sea.”

“The Red Sea,” I repeated, staring down at the oyster. I’d never heard of a red sea, but I knew it had to be a special place for an oyster this beautiful to live there. “Do you think there’s a pearl inside?” I asked, feeling hopeful.

Papa’s eyes glittered even brighter. “Now, Nerida, have I ever picked up an oyster that didn’t have a pearl waiting for you inside it?” He chuckled.

“Never,” I said, returning his grin. “Can I hold on to it? It’s so pretty, I don’t want to open it just yet.”

“Of course.” He gave me a quick pat as he laughed, then turned back to where the other captains gathered.

“Oh, Papa?” I asked, just before he swam to join them. “Can I stay for the party? Please? None of the palace guards or the maids said I needed to leave, and I promise I won’t be a bother to anyone or get in anybody’s way.”

His thick eyebrows drew together, and I worried for a moment he might tell me no. “Just this once. But only because it’s so early in the day. I don’t get off duty until after the Feast horns.” He ruffled the top of my head before taking off.

I couldn’t believe it—I could stay for the party!

Now that Papa had said it, everyone had to listen. Not even a palace guard could carry me away without risking getting into serious trouble with my papa.

I pulled my head out of my alcove to look at the wide-scaled merfolk again. They were still in their group, but King Eamon was now in the center of it, and every eye was on him. Behind him, the musicians gathered up their instruments, and a few chefs reappeared, carrying golden platters around the foyer. I could hardly believe such an ordinary day had turned out so amazing!

Grinning, I turned my beautiful oyster over in my hands. I told Papa I wanted to hold on to it, but really, I just wanted to try prying an oyster open for myself for once. Setting my fingers into the groove, I strained, trying to force it open but —

“What’s this?” a voice asked from above me, and the oyster was snatched right from my hands.

“Lee!” I shrieked. I swung my arms to grab it back from him, but quick flicks of his tail had him darting zigzags all around me. “Give it back!”

He stopped his tail's expert movements only to scowl at me. "I told you to call me Prince Lee," he corrected. Dragging a hand through his hair, he flashed a showy smile. "Because I'm so *princely*."

My molars ground together. There wasn't a single merfry in the entire ocean more annoying than Prince Leander of the Atlantic. I swiped for my oyster again, but he easily twirled out of my reach with a twist of his tail. Showoff!

"I've got loads of pearls, you know," he said, the golden scales on his tail glimmering in the lantern light as he spun. "All colors and sizes and —"

I gasped as the merfry with the curly dark hair plucked the oyster right out of Lee's fingers.

Although he looked to be around my age, I couldn't believe how large he was compared to me and Lee. Just as the scales on his tail were wider than normal, his chest and shoulders seemed wide as well, almost double the size of Lee's. *Wow*.

Lee grabbed for the oyster again, but his father's sharp voice called from across the room, and he was gone in a streak of gold, leaving me alone with the dark-haired merfry drifting in front of my alcove.

"Is this yours?" the merfry asked quietly, his eyes peeking at me from the blanket of dark curls falling over his eyebrows. There was something about his voice that made it hard for me to understand it, and I felt my neck turn as I worked through the words. "Yours?" he repeated, and he held the oyster out to me.

"Oh, yes, it's mine," I said, taking it back from him. "Thanks for getting it back for me."

His mouth formed into a small smile, but his gaze drifted down like he was trying to hide underneath his hair. "You are welcome."

When I looked back down at my oyster, my face felt strangely warm. Weird. My fingers went back to the shell's groove, and I tried to pry the two halves open, pulling at them just like Papa always did. My muscles strained, but no matter how hard I pulled, I couldn't get them apart.

"May I?" the merfry asked in his strangely thick voice, and suddenly he was in my alcove, palms outstretched, offering his help.

"Sure."

The merfry cupped it in his hands just like I had, but when his fingers pried into the middle, the two halves snapped right open.

"Whoa." I looked up at him, totally stunned. "That was amazing."

“Mmh.” He offered the halves back to me, but I froze when I saw what was inside them.

Two beautiful pink pearls sat nestled together in one of the halves. *Two.*

“Doubles?” I gasped, leaving the oyster halves in his palms as I dug the pearls out. “I can’t believe it. That’s like super rare.”

They were perfectly round and such a delicate shade of pink, too. This was the first time I’d ever opened an oyster with two pearls inside it. Was that because it came from the Red Sea? Papa had said it had come from a special place, and it was a lot prettier than normal oysters. The shell felt thicker, too, and this merfry had cracked into it like it was nothing.

“You’re so strong,” I blurted, still amazed by how easily he’d pried it apart. His shoulders jerked at the compliment, and I wondered for a moment if it was as hard for him to understand me as it was for me to understand him. “Your arms,” I said, poking at them. “They’re strong.”

He glanced up at me slowly, his dark curls nearly hiding his eyes, but he didn’t say a word. Maybe he wasn’t used to getting compliments.

“Here.” I pressed one of the pink pearls into his palm and gave him a smile. “For helping me.”

Just as his chin turned down to look at the pearl, one of the wide-scaled mermen called out a word I didn’t recognize, and the merfry was drifting away. When he got back to his group, he glanced over his shoulder, and I gave him a wave.

Maybe I’d made a friend for once. That thought made me smile—parties really were magical, just like Papa had said. And this one had hardly even begun.

But my smile quickly faded as Lee swam back over. His mouth slipped into a smirk, and I stuck my tongue out at him as a distraction while I hid my new pearl in my ocean silks. There was no way I would let him steal it from me again.

Music started playing, and with a crescendo of notes, the party had officially begun.

“Hey, Lee,” I said, and he spun at me with a teasing grin.

“Yes, Nera?”

My eyes rolled at that horrible nickname, but still I asked, “Do you know who that merfry is?”

Lee’s lips fell. “Yeah, I know him.”

“Well?” I pressed. “I’m just wondering why your father brought a merfry

to his party. I didn't think we were allowed."

"He's not a merfry, Nera." Lee's voice turned serious. "Maybe he was, but not anymore." He took a pause to run a hand through his hair. "That's Barren Arwa, and he's about to be a king."

# LEANDER



## PRESENT DAY

I'd never regret protecting Clairra from my father.

As soon as I held the trident in my hands and felt its immense power whirling through me like a raging storm, I knew I couldn't let him have it. I had to hide it away, even if it meant sacrificing my body as a vessel for its magic—the magic my father would have used to force Clairra down for the other relics, collecting them one by one, until all five tridents were his.

To his captains, he claimed the tridents would grant us the power to break the curse. But I could see his lies as easily as I could his anger. Power was what my father really wanted. To bring about a war that would end countless lives. And for what? More fucking territory? To control the ocean with the very power Poseidon himself had once wielded?

I knew Clairra, and she would never forgive herself if my father's plans had come to fruition. It would tear her apart to know her abilities had caused a war. So, I'd done what I had to. What needed to be done.

And even if it killed me, I'd never fucking regret it. Never.

"I thought you were supposed to be mad at me," I mumbled against Clairra's neck. I managed a small smirk before my head slumped forward, catching on her soft shoulder. Fuck, I was exhausted.

She stood silently before me, her nimble fingers working at the pants Barren had pulled on my legs before hauling me up to Kai's rented bedchamber. One of my brows lifted as her hands ventured closer to the lever holding them on my hips.

The clasp at the top popped free, and rough sand grated against my groin as she jerked the material halfway down my thighs.

"I am mad at you," she said finally. She tugged at the fabric again, and a shower of grit rained over the washroom floor as my pants fell around my ankles.

"But you're helping me," I pointed out with a chuckle. My forehead rolled over her shoulder to take in the warm, salted scent of her neck. Even with the sparks of pain working through my chest and down my arm, my cock managed to throb with an ache of its own.

"You're my mate," she said stiffly.

Fuck. I'd never grow tired of hearing her say that.



Claira's eyes narrowed. "But not because of some ancient spell cast by Poseidon, okay?" Her fingers brushed along the same pattern over my chest she'd been tracing since I'd taken in the trident. I couldn't see the markings she'd described to me, and I fucking hoped no one else could, either. The last thing I needed was for someone to see hints of the trident's location scrawled all over my chest and arm.

A gentle hand came under my jaw, and when my spine straightened, I noticed a fiery blush had spread down Clair's neck.

"You're my mate because *I* say so."

Had sweeter words ever been said?

"Your mate..." I leaned back on the vanity, ignoring all my aches, all my pains, to pull my sweet mate up against me. "I'm glad you finally realized what a catch I am." My smile deepened into a smirk. "But are you sure you can stand being stuck with me?"

"Well, you do drive me crazy..."

"But you love it," I cut in, nipping playfully at her pouty lips. Even after our time in the ocean, they were still as soft and luscious as ever.

My cock pulsed against her stomach, and I grumbled as her hands braced against my hips, pushing me away.

"Do I love it? Really?" she breathed out—a clear taunt. She shifted on her feet, driving me crazy as the slight movement dragged my lengthening cock against her clothed belly.

"You do." I groaned, fighting the urge to grind myself against her. Desire burned in my throat, hot and heady, roughening my voice. "You fucking love it when I tease you."

Her blush flared over her cheeks as her gaze averted, drifting down to my cock against her leg. "But you're forgetting why we came in here," she said slowly before biting at her bottom lip. "I told Barren I would help you get cleaned up, since, well..." Her voice trailed off as her fingers brushed over my bare chest again.

Steam from the bath she'd started for me was already filling up the washroom, but getting clean couldn't have been further from my mind.

My hands moved to her waist, slipping underneath the stiff fabric covering her hips. I pressed a light kiss on her neck as I worked at the top of her pants. "Then help me."

She let out a huff, but her neck leaned into me, welcoming even more attention. "I would if you'd stop trying to distract me."

She thought this was a distraction? No, this was nothing compared to what I could give her. She was about to forget all about the bath, the steam, the fucking insanity we just went through, everything.

She gasped as I ripped her pants down with a quick jerk. “Lee!” Seizing her by the hips, I swung around, setting her up on top of the washroom vanity. “But you’re still hur —”

The crash of our lips coming together silenced her, my hips nudging her legs apart until my cock was nestled high between them. She was right. The trident had fucked me up, and my body was now warring against itself, struggling with the new power electrifying my insides. But with every passing breath, my limbs grew stronger. My senses sharper. Even Clair’s scent was somehow sweeter, her nearness easing all my aches, this pain running through my chest. And I needed more. I wouldn’t stop until I’d completely lost myself in her. “I’m already feeling better,” I said, grinning.

“Clearly.” She laughed, the sound soft and comfortable. She was at ease now, but soon I’d have her writhing in my arms, panting for all the pleasures I could give her.

Without warning, I yanked up on her shirt, and what was waiting for me underneath had me breathless. In the bright lumination of the washroom, her skin shone more silken and perfect than ever.

“You’re not wearing your underthings,” I said, my throat going incredibly dry. My hand reached, moving underneath one of her bare breasts. I watched her expression change as I dragged a callused thumb over a rosy nipple.

Her shoulders bowed at just the slight touch, and I circled it again, enjoying the weight of her in my palm. Lips glistening, her mouth parted on a pant. “Is that a problem?”

My mouth quirked, and I leaned in, capturing her sweet breast in a kiss. The whimper she made when my tongue massaged her nipple into a firm point had my human cock leaking pre-cum onto the floor.

Poseidon help me, she was addicting.

Her taste was like a melody playing over my tongue, and I drank down every note, greedy for more.

“Lean back,” I ordered between teasing sweeps of my lips, and my beautiful mate didn’t even hesitate. The mirror behind the vanity squeaked as her back reclined against it. Her legs fell readily open, and I had never been so thankful for lantern light. “*Fuck*, you’re beautiful.”

“Yeah?” she breathed out, color washing over her cheeks again. Her

shoulders shifted like she was nervous about me seeing her, but every soft curve, every glorious bend... Even in full view, everything about her was perfect.

“Yeah,” I answered with a growl, running my thumb down her slit. I loved how soaked and needy she was for me, with the little nub she liked me caressing so much already swollen, begging for my attention.

“And these legs.” I leaned in, tickling the side of her knee with the press of my lips. “They’re as perfect as your tail.”

A vision of her tied up under the waves came to mind—my prick spreading her scales wide, filling her up, both our bellies locked together. *Fuck.*

Water poured from the spout on the wall of the bath, the steam it made beating against my bare skin, heating me through. “I want to take you back to the ocean,” I confessed. My lips glided down her leg, and she groaned when I paused just short of her center.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you, beautiful?” I planted a soft kiss against the smooth skin of her inner thigh. “The weight of my tail pinning you to the sand...” Another kiss, this time on the other side. “The feeling of my big cock rocking in and out of you while the waves crash over us.”

Her eyelashes fluttered, a guilty smile forming over her lips like she was enjoying imagining such a scene. Her eyes trailed down to the swell of my human cock, and I swear I could almost feel the caress of her tongue as she swept it over her lips. “Sounds nice,” she said, almost too soft to hear over the rushing sound of water behind us.

It didn’t just sound nice.

In the depths of the palace dungeons, despite the bonds holding her captive, we’d almost shared a similar moment. The next time I had her alone in the water, our joining would be fucking *perfect*.

With that thought in mind, I kissed her, my lips surrounding the swollen peak crowning her slit. Clair’s legs jerked, closing around my shoulders, but I only deepened my affections, laving a broad stroke over her slit, tasting her arousal.

I hummed as my tongue dipped into her again. “You taste amazing.” The bite of salt water still lingered there, but I didn’t mind it. If anything, it made me want to take her into my arms and haul her back down to the beach with me all the more.

“Wait, Lee—” Her voice quaked as my tongue flicked in teasing circles.

“I’m supposed to be the one cleaning you up.”

Oh, I loved how her comebacks lost their edge whenever my hands were on her. The control she gave me, how her body moved against me, shy but eager for more.

My arms shifted beneath her hips, pulling her closer, and either she or the mirror let out a squeak as her back sank down the washroom wall.

Hands found my hair, winding and tugging, holding me closer. That sting—oh, it made my cock steel so hard I had to press it against the vanity while my mouth worked her over.

Human legs were truly a wonder, and even though hers were the first I’d ever explored, I knew that none could be better than these.

Gasping sounds spilled from her throat as I growled against her, her hips squirming like she couldn’t decide if she should seek higher pleasure by grinding over my face or try to get away. I held her there, my muscles tightening even as the grip of her hands in my hair turned into clawing fists.

“Lee! I—I’m...” She moaned, and my fingers kneaded into her hips, my lips endeavoring to coax her closer, to push her body over that edge. My beautiful mate.

*Yes, fucking come for me, beautiful.*

I chuckled as her hips twitched underneath me, a low moan building as she found her release on my tongue.

Her head rolled as she keened, her knees clamping on my shoulders until something snapped inside her and she finally yielded, her whole body going pliant in my arms.

I waited until her hands fell from my hair before I set her back down on the vanity. Her eyes were misty when they finally opened.

“I love those little sounds you make.” I brushed a section of hair back behind her ear.

Her lips pursed in the cutest way. “I bet you do,” she panted out. “We were supposed to be getting you a shower, you know.” Her head shook, but I could tell she was still in a daze. “I can’t believe how much hot water we’ve wasted...”

My smirk grew. “Let’s remedy that then, shall we?”

Her expression quickly changed as I hoisted her up off the vanity, delivering her to the side of the shower. I drew back the curtain and stepped inside, taking her into the bath with me.

My back acted as a shield, guarding Clairra against the hot stream pouring

out from high on the washroom wall. As soon as I set her down on her feet, her eyes wandered over me. She took in each hard angle, every droplet of water trickling off my shoulders, until her gaze simmered hotter than the stream beating against my back.

Slowly, she wet her lips. “Looks like you’ve recovered.”

“Getting there.” Fastening my arms around her waist, I pulled her close enough to kiss. “But I think I might enjoy your help.”

Her palms landed on my chest, and I almost lost my balance as she bounced up on her toes, urging me back a step. Water dripped over my eyes as I passed under the stream, its warmth flowing through my hair and down my chest. When she leaned forward again, I expected her to kiss me underneath the spray of water, but she only snatched up a dark green bottle from the side of the bath.

Popping the top, she poured a good amount out onto a hand. Its strong scent mixed with the steamy air. Her lips sank into a frown as the smooth puddle of goo spread out over her palm.

Concerned with her sudden change of mood, I cupped under her chin, tilting it back until our eyes met. “You don’t like this soap?”

Her head rocked back and forth in my palm. “It’s not that.” She worked the pale goo into a frothy, bubbly mess between her hands before running it through my dampened hair. “It’s just—it’s *lemon*...” Her voice trailed as her fingers worked, massaging heavenly circles all over my scalp.

Fuck, it felt like magic. Every muscle in me relaxed at once until I could barely keep my eyes from drifting shut.

When her fingers paused, I had to hold my tongue to keep from asking for more. *Fuck*. How did such an innocent caress feel so damn good?

“It’s nothing. Don’t mind me. I was just thinking out loud,” she mumbled. Her fingers drifted lower, massaging over the nape of my neck, but I wasn’t about to drop whatever had made her so unhappy all of a sudden.

“It’s not nothing.” I rolled my shoulders, enjoying the careful attention of her hands on me.

“Time to rinse. Close your eyes.” The scent of the soap hit me full force as she pushed my head back into the stream. “It’s seriously not something I should even be thinking about. Not at a time like this. I mean, I’m in here with you right now and —”

My eyes opened to a look of guilt spreading over her face. “What? You don’t want me smelling like Kai?”

“Th-that’s not it!” She nearly knocked my head off my shoulders as her hands pulled out of my hair. “I don’t think he was even using this. I mean, he likes the smell of lemons, but he never *smelled* like lemons whenever he— whenever I —”

Looking absolutely mortified, her eyes cut to the bath curtain exit. If it weren’t for my arm around her, she might have darted out of the washroom, wet and naked.

“*Shh, shh.* It’s okay.” I gathered her up in my arms, leaning in close enough for my lips to brush over hers. “Claira, look at me.”

Her vulnerable gaze found mine through the mist, and I swallowed slowly, carefully wording what I knew needed to be said. “I know you’re worried about Kai, and that’s okay. Really, it’s okay.”

“But, Lee —”

“I’m worried about him, too.”

Claira’s eyes filled with questions, but her lips snapped shut.

“I don’t hate him,” I offered. A lift of one of her eyebrows told me she didn’t believe me.

Whether or not she acknowledged it, I was telling her the truth. Sure, I had hated him once. But not now. When Kai took that polearm to his back in Claira’s place, everything changed.

Claira wasn’t cursed. If that weapon’s twisted metal had pierced her, I would have lost her to the sea. I’d have been powerless, watching her bleed out in my arms. And in killing her, that polearm would have killed me, too.

But Kai had willingly taken the blow in her place. And for once, I was thankful for the curse, as well as the knowledge my father’s beatings had given me on using the curse to my body’s advantage. Because if Claira hadn’t let go, and if Kai had spent even a moment longer without his wounds closing, he might not have made it out of the ocean alive. And I would have had to watch part of Claira, my beautiful mate, die along with him.

Kai claimed to be her mate, and at first, I hadn’t believed it. But now, how could I not? He’d almost sacrificed his life for her. And what was I doing? I’d been too busy letting my fucking guard down and patting myself on the back, thinking we’d won. Like an idiot. I’d missed the true danger. But Kai hadn’t.

Even though Claira already knew, I had to say the words. Maybe it was so I could hear them for myself. “If it weren’t for him, you wouldn’t be here.”

Her hands fell from my hair, down to the sides of my jaw. She took a slow breath, her eyes focusing intently on my lips. “That’s true. But if it weren’t for you telling me to let go, he wouldn’t be here.” Gentle lips met mine, tender and sweet, and for once, I let her have all the control. “So thank you for that, Lee.”

Fingertips pressed into my jaw as one of her hands dropped, moving down to my chest, my abs, even lower, and I growled against her mouth as her fingers curled around my cock.

She pulled back to look at me, her eyelashes sweeping as her gaze flicked down to my length she held in her palm and up again. “You’re still hard.”

My lips quirked. She was so damn adorable. “Well, you did just kiss me.”

Her look turned incredulous, but I shifted forward, hitching up one of her legs, drawing her knee up in my arm.

“Whoa, wait! What are you —?”

She gasped as I slid a hand over her seam. My grin widened. “And you’re still so slick, so open. Fuck, I love how needy you get for me.”

Claira scoffed despite the fierce blush rising over her face. Her arms went out to brace on the walls like she didn’t trust me not to let her fall. “Humans don’t *open*, Lee.”

I cupped a hand over one of her frantic palms, easing it down, leading both of us between her legs. “Is that right?” I rumbled, watching her nerves play over her face.

She bit at her lip as I guided her high between her legs, her head shaking. “At—at least I don’t think they do,” she whispered, sounding nervous.

I rocked our joined hands back and forth in gentle motions, nestling her swollen nub against the flat of her palm until her hips started rolling on their own.

“Well?” My arm holding her leg up lifted, drawing her knee even higher, and I leaned in to kiss along her neck. Fuck, my cock was throbbing.

I wanted nothing more than to move her fingers aside and toy with her, brushing and coaxing out little jolts of pleasure until she was begging me to fill her—but not yet. She might not admit it, but I knew she loved being teased.

“Okay, I guess I’m a *little open*.” Her elbow moved against my stomach as she touched herself again.

I nipped at her earlobe, growling the only question that mattered in her ear. “And why are you so open, beautiful?”

Her fingers retreated then, coming out from between her legs and curling into an adorably weak fist. I could feel her throat tensing as she swallowed.

“Because I...” The sweet sound of her whisper was as light and airy as the warm mist around us. “Because I want you.”

My lips slid down, vibrating over the column of her neck as a laugh hummed through me. “You don’t want to say it?” I paused with a gentle press of my lips against her skin, waiting to see if she would offer me what I wanted to hear.

Instead, her hand came up under my cock, rubbing light strokes. I couldn’t help but chuckle again.

One day, she would say the words. She’d tell me exactly what it was she wanted, and I’d give her everything she could dream of. Until then, I would say the words for her.

“My cock, beautiful?” My length throbbed against her palm, and her movements slowed. “Is that what you want? To feel my cock sliding into you, filling you up?”

“Yes,” she panted, and her palm cradled underneath me like she was trying to urge me closer.

The stream of water beat at the back of my legs as I stepped forward, gathering her leg up higher in my arms until I had lined myself up with her. Her nails bit into my chest as I drew the tip of my cock along her slit.

“I want your... your *penis*,” she gasped out as I dragged along her slickness again.

One of my eyebrows rose, and I offered her nub a little extra pressure that had her squirming in my arms. “... You mean my cock, beautiful.”

“Humans have—” She tried to get the words out, but I circled that swollen bit of flesh with even more pressure before sliding against her, letting her feel every bit of my hard, pulsing length.

“You’re forgetting I’m not human. Even on land, I’m still a merman. And what do mermen have, beautiful?”

Her lips wobbled, and for a strange second, I wondered if she might burst out into laughter. Then her face fell, and she looked suddenly dead serious.

“What?” My rocking against her slowing to a halt. “What’s wrong?”

Her lips parted, and I barely saw her mouth move.

“Sea cucumbers.”

... *What?*

My jaw ticked as she looked me square in the face and said, “Mermen



have sea cucumbers.”

“Sea cucumbers?” A strangled laugh worked up my throat as I speared into her, my head shaking wildly.

Her lips parted on a gasp as I drove in higher, easing the weight of her propped leg down to seat myself as deep in her as I could. “Are you sure this isn’t a cock inside you?”

I nearly pulled all the way out, and her head fell forward with a gasp as I slid in again. “Well, beautiful?”

She answered with a snap of her lips at mine, her tongue teasing a few slashes at my bottom lip to ease the sting, but I wasn’t about to give in to a distraction.

“Say it,” I said in a low, rumbling growl, nipping right back at her.

One more snap, and I felt her mouth pull into a tight grin against mine.

My head was shaking before she even got the words out. “I do feel a sea cucum —”

Claira yelped as I seized her other leg up, taking her entire weight in my arms. Her arms locked behind my shoulders, but my hands had already found the best place to grip to hold her steady, nestled under the globes of her ass. My fingers flexed, biting into that perfect, firm flesh. She hissed against my lips as my cock rocked inside her.

Then she moved forward on her own, taking me even deeper. I let out a groan. Legs tightened around me, and I wasted no time driving forward until her back was flat against the wall.

“How’s this for a sea cucumber?” I grunted, my thumbs sinking into her waist as I thrust into her. Each bounce of her hips against mine sent her back even further up the wall. “Is this what you wanted, beautiful?” I rasped, driving in faster. “To work me up, teasing and biting at me, so I would fuck you up against this wall?”

Heavy breathing turned into gasping moans as I chased her higher up still, my foot finding the side of the bath, using it as leverage, until her head swung forward, catching on my shoulder as she whimpered out her answer.

“Yes. Oh—*please*, Lee, more. I’m about to...”

Hearing her moan my name was the sweetest melody, almost as magical as when her voice called to me.

As her moan grew, its pitch shifted, a trailing high note followed by a painfully low droning note, and I knew I’d made the right decision, letting her find her release once already.

“Good girl,” I purred, keeping our rhythm steady. Fuck, she felt perfect. I wondered if she knew I could feel how she tightened up around my cock whenever I whispered praises to her.

Hands braced on my shoulders as I sped up, aiming for the spot that had her gasping the loudest, hoping to give her everything she needed to push her over that edge.

And then she came apart, her body flexing all at once as I drove into her, her legs locking and spine twisting in my arms.

Feeling her tighten around me as she found her release had my human balls swelling. Fuck, she felt so... so *amazing*.

My spine was tingling, my fingers curving as I drew into her even faster when finally —

*Ca-craaaaack!*

Claira’s head shot up. “Was that thunder?”

My hips were still driving in and out of her, my pulse hammering in my ears as I worked into her at a feverish pace. I was so close; I was about to —

*Crrrack!*

“Leander!” Claira gasped as I seated fully into her, pulsing out my release. *Fuck...*

The entire universe seemed to move around me as I held myself inside her, cradling her in my arms. When I looked up, her eyes had grown far too wide for her face, her gaze locked on something behind me. I turned to look over my shoulder and gawked at the vortex of water hovering in the tub behind us.

“Uh...”

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and as my cock expelled its very last spurt of cum, the tiny whirl detonated, bursting in an explosion of water.

There was a knocking noise—or maybe another clap of thunder—and when Claira eased out of my embrace, she went straight for the lever that controlled the stream of water. As soon as the stream dried up, I could hear Barren’s deep voice calling from the other side of the door.

“Storm outside.”

“Thanks, Barren,” Claira called back, her voice still shaky and breathless. “We’ll be out in a second. We just finished.”

She froze, and I shook my head as all the color seemed to drain from her face.

“Letting me know when you’re about to come is one thing, but telling

*Barren...*”

She swatted at my arm, putting a finger up to her lips to tell me to be quiet, then threw the curtain back, gesturing to the washroom.

“Holy fuck,” I said aloud, totally not quiet at all.

The entire room was drenched. Droplets fell from the ceiling, streaming down the mirror, and even the center of the vanity was overflowing with water. “What happened in here?”

Claira swatted at me again. “You tell me, Lee!”

“What?” I looked at her, and then at the washroom. “You don’t think I...?”

Her jaw tightened. She definitely thought I’d caused it.

“Didn’t you see that swirly little whirlpool thing?” she whisper-screamed, stepping out of the bath. Her hands went to test the towels hanging on the wall, but water was dripping down them, too.

“And the *thunder*,” she said suddenly, throwing her arms in the air as she shot me another look.

“Barren said there’s a—” I tried to say, but she cut me right off.

“It, uh, crackled along with you, Lee.” She nervously drew in her lip like she was trying to work it all out in her brain. “I mean I—I counted. You and the thunder. It started right before you, uh, yeah... And then you were both barely a fraction of a second apart. One, two, three, four... five.” After she finished counting it out on her fingers, her eyes, full of suspicion, shot up to mine.

“So you’re saying,” I started, taking in a deep breath, “you think, while fucking you, I summoned a storm here on land?”

Unblinking, she motioned back to the vanity where tiny little mini vortexes were still swirling over the reservoir in the center. “That’s exactly what I think.”

The very last of the residual pleasure faded, and the tiny swirls crashed into the reservoir, exploding into a dozen tiny sprays of water. Stunned, I ran my hands through my wet hair. “Well, fuck.”

## CLAIRA



“You could just wrap yourself in a towel,” Leander suggested from the other side of the bathroom door.

I vented a huff as I pulled on one of Kai’s shirts. Did he really hate the idea of me wearing another man’s shirt so much? The doorframe creaked, and it was easy to imagine Leander rolling his forehead against it on the other side. Even though I’d told him I needed a minute alone, he’d been pouting since the moment I kicked him out of the bathroom.

Yeah—sorry, *not* sorry. With the way things were going earlier, neither of us was ever going to get clean or dressed or out of this bathroom.

“So you want me to just go around naked,” I answered, buttoning up the front of the longest button-down Barren had brought for me to try on. “Maybe that look works for you, but I think I’ll pass.”

I definitely needed something on. Now that Leander had his energy back, he couldn’t seem to keep his hands from roaming. Not that I was complaining—well, not until he’d summoned a freaking thunderstorm and forced enough water out of the plumbing to drench the entire bathroom. That warranted some complaining. So I made the call, and out he went.

Plus, there were some things a girl just had to do in a bathroom alone. Like taking the necessary after-sex pee. Leander seemed to enjoy looking at me, and that certainly wasn’t a task I required an audience for.

When Gram had first given me *the talk* and told me about this necessary peeing after the deed, I’d wondered why the cleanup portion of sex was never talked about or shown in movies or books. Now I knew. No one needed to

see or read about the stuff that had just worked its way out of me. No—gravity was a cruel mistress, and thanks to her, there was a lot of stickiness down there to clean up.

Thank goodness I was about 99% sure I couldn't get pregnant. There were so many things about being a mermaid I'd never learned, but that was one thing I'd managed to figure out thanks to the maids that worked in the palace.

One of the things they liked to talk about the most was what they would do when they were old enough to deliver a merfry and be free from their service to the kingdom. I hadn't known quite what they meant then, but the memories had stuck with me because of the way the maids giggled together as they schemed, arguing over which captain would be easiest to seduce when the time came. Naive as I was back then, I'd thought that they were looking forward to finding love and starting a family of their own. Now that I was older, I knew it was never a family they were after. Mermaids wanted their freedom, and leaving a merfry behind for a captain to raise on his own was apparently the easiest way for them to get it. Disgusting.

Looking down at my bare legs, I hoped the no-merfries-until-you're-older rule applied to the reproductive organs of mermaids in their human form as well. Like really, *really* hoped.

"I'm okay with you coming out naked," Leander's low voice rumbled from the other side of the door. I couldn't keep from rolling my eyes again. Of course, he was Team Naked. Leander hadn't even bothered asking for some of Kai's or Barren's clothes to try on—though it would surprise me if either fit.

While Kai's shirts fit me well enough, it was his pants that were the problem. My hips were just too wide. So while I wasn't quite Team Naked, I was yet again a member of the No-Pants Club. I swear, I needed to start hiding pants like I hid knives.

*Maybe we should get T-shirts*, I thought with a snort. If any club deserved a T-shirt, it was the No-Pants Club.

Although making light of the situation helped, Barren was probably still out there—not to mention Kai and Laverne. And though Kai still hadn't awoken, Laverne would no doubt have something to say about me parading around without pants. I could almost hear her shrieks of disapproval knocking into my head already. "*Shameless!*"

But what choice did I have? I'd like to be dry for once, and thanks to

Leander's new water tricks, everything I'd worn into the bathroom was soaked. Apparently, he was now a thunderstorm god—or something. So that was fun. Definitely not the outcome I'd expected when he stabbed himself in the heart with his father's trident.

I'd even cracked the door open to ask Barren for more towels, and one long, awkward pause later, he'd brought us a couple of fresh towels from his room. I'd been grateful, but it was hopeless. After a second in the literal water closet, they were soaked, too.

My hand rested on the doorknob as I cast a quick glance at my reflection. The mirror was still foggy, but I could see my reflection enough to verify that Kai's shirt covered most of my ass.

Sighing, I toed one of the soggy towels away from the door and turned the knob. "How's Kai doing?" Cool air hit me as soon as I was through the door, but it barely had time to register. My jaw dropped. "What are you wearing?" I gasped, taking Leander in. He'd been naked when I kicked him out of the bathroom, but *this*... This was something I never expected to see.

"They're Barren's," Leander said with a grin. He shifted, smoothing out the bottom of the pair of maroon boxer-briefs he was wearing with his palms. It was a fit loose on his legs, but the band miraculously held to his waist. "He made me put them on."

"Barren wears underwear?" I said the thought aloud, and practically jumped out of my skin when a ceramic plate clanked against the countertop of the kitchenette across the room.

"I do," Barren announced before clearing his throat. His expression stayed even until one of his dark eyebrows slowly rose. "Would you prefer it if I didn't?"

My jaw unhinged, gaping open, but before I could stammer out some foolish comeback, his head inclined back to the countertop. "A joke," he said simply, and he started picking at the grapes on his plate.

A *joke*. Of course—a joke. I let out a nervous laugh. "Sorry, you just surprised me." My face felt like an inferno. "I didn't know mermen knew about underwear."

"Mmh," Barren hummed as he snapped a sizeable grape from the bunch.

Something about Barren was off since our time in the water. He seemed more present, more open. Like, for once, he wasn't trying to shrink away from us. Or that maybe he was confident or comfortable enough to finally let himself take up space. I wasn't sure what had changed, or why, but...

Suddenly, Barren's eyes cut back up to me as he passed a grape into his mouth. The squared edge of his jaw moved in a slow beat as he chewed it. One corner of his lips lifted into a smile, and I nearly fell over.

Barren was *smiling* at me?

And not a normal smile. The way he'd moved almost felt... *flirty*.

But there was no way. Even though he'd kissed me briefly under the water, it had been just that. A brief kiss. Nothing more. Nothing since then. And now that we were out of the ocean, he had to have known about Leander and me, and all the time we'd wasted getting distracted in the bathroom together. Sure, the shower and the bathroom fan had both been running, but we hadn't exactly been quiet. Plus, he'd been there when Kai had declared himself my mate. It would be crazy for him to feel for me what I... I...

It took Barren passing another grape into his mouth for me to notice I was still staring at his lips. *What the heck is wrong with me?*

Cursing myself, I turned away to walk over to the side of the bed where Kai was still sleeping. At least, I hoped Kai was only asleep. A quick rest, and then he'd be recovered, smiling up at us, awake. He would open his eyes soon, wouldn't he?

Laverne dozed next to him. Her whiskers twitched, fluttering against his bare shoulder. I took a mental note to offer Kai a shirt as soon as he awoke and drew a hand over Laverne to gently stroke through his hair. I was surprised by how soft the short spikes felt moving through my fingers.

Arms slid over my hips as Leander closed in, pressing up against my back. I thought he might pull my hand away, but he only held me, his chin resting on the top of my head like he was content with watching my fingers brush through Kai's hair.

His voice came the second my hand retreated, low and serious. "You're drawn to him. Aren't you?"

"I—" My heart thundered, my hand closing into a fist. Was I really that obvious?

I tried swallowing the lump forming in my throat, but the more I thought about Leander's question, the more my emotions grew. "I don't know what's wrong with me, Lee." My words sounded weak and brittle, just like I was. Damn, I was pathetic.

"My heart, it just..." I couldn't explain it. I didn't know the words to say to make him understand. It was like I was suspended between them, my body pulled in different directions as my insides stretched and twisted. Toward

Leander, toward Kai, toward —

*Oh goodness.* What was I even thinking?

Gritting my teeth, I whipped around to throw my arms around Leander. I needed to feel his embrace, his comfort. My heart hurt—it literally *hurt me* seeing Kai injured and not being able to curl around him and hold him close while he recovered. But if I did, what would Leander think? And Barren? He was watching, too, wasn't he? Would he stare at me, jaw tense, if I crawled in bed next to Kai?

The need to cry nearly choked me, and I buried my face into Leander's chest as I fought back the urge. His arms came around me easily, wrapping me up in his warmth, and all I could think about was what a curse it was to be born a mermaid. Leander was offering his comfort freely, but it was the same comfort I yearned to give Kai. But *why*? Why did mermaids have to be like this? It wasn't fair to them, to me. Why was my heart drawing me in different directions?

"I wish I didn't feel like this," I breathed out, pressing my cheek against Leander's chest as his arms tightened around me.

Leander's deep voice rumbled against my ear. "Don't be ashamed of how you feel." He pulled back, tipping my chin up with a finger, and his expression softened as he looked down at me. "Even when I thought you were dead, I still loved you. I couldn't help it." His damp hair shone like spun gold as he slid a hand through it, his lips drawing into an equally bright smirk. "You don't regret loving me, do you?"

My breath caught as his piercing blue eyes looked right at me, unwavering. "No. Never."

His smirk broadened. I'd evidently told him exactly what he wanted to hear. "And you feel the same way about Kai?"

The entire room seemed to go silent as I drew in a breath. Even Laverne's thunderous snoring faded as my pulse kicked up in my ears.

I hadn't expected him to ask me that. Not straight out like he had. Especially not so calmly, right after he'd given me one of his cocky grins.

"I don't know." But as soon as the words left me, I knew I wasn't being truthful to him or myself. "That's not true," I mumbled, my head shaking.

Even if I was still confused, he deserved to know how I was feeling. He'd asked me plainly, and the only way we could work through this was if I told him how I really felt. "It's different, Lee. Between you and me and me and Kai. No one else can rile me up like you can, and when you're not around,



driving me crazy, I find myself wishing that you were. But Kai, he... feels like an old friend." I raised my chin to gauge Leander's reaction. He didn't look mad or anywhere near as upset as I'd expected. "So yes, I'm drawn to him. But I'm drawn to you, too," I added, giving him a small, nervous smile, "though I think you already know that."

"I've had my suspicions." Leander pulled me in closer, and his grin deepened until his eyes flashed over to his arm. Although he'd already said he couldn't see the black marks there, I could tell he was thinking about the trident. I still had so many questions. Like why he had done it, and what he was planning to do now that he had the trident instead of his father. But before I could ask, he continued, "You don't need to change how you feel. You're perfect how you are, Clair." "

"But, this—" I gestured to him, to me, to Kai, and before I even realized, my eyes had landed on Barren. A shiver passed through me when I found his dark eyes were already looking directly at me, and I quickly averted my gaze. Although I tried to swallow down my emotions, my voice still cracked when I said, "*Us*. Just yesterday, you hated Kai."

Leander's body shifted against mine as he looked past my shoulder, down at the bed behind me. All his charms faded as his lips parted, a troubled look coming over his face. "I did. I thought he was a spineless fucking idiot, but it turns out I was wrong." His throat bobbed in a dry swallow. "Even if we never get along, I'll always love you more than I hate him, Clair. That's a promise."

"When did you become such a romantic?" I breathed out, feeling my face flush. It was like my heart flipped in my chest every time he said he loved me.

"Clair." His voice dropped lower, its slow cadence wrapping around my ears and drawing me in like a somber melody. "There might be a time when I'm not around. When I can't protect you anymore, even though I want to."

And then the words sank in, and it was like the spell of his song had shattered. "What do you mean?" My eyes searched his. "I don't need you to protect me, Lee."

"I know you don't. Trust me, I know." His grip on me tightened. "I'm trying to say that there is a price to pay for hiding one of Poseidon's relics away like I did. Like I had to do."

Barren let out a loud huff from across the room. But when I turned my head, Leander tilted my chin right back toward him. "Believe me, Clair, I

only did it because I was out of options. There was no other place to hide it. Nowhere safe, where my father couldn't have reached it."

A stool screeched against the floor, and Barren grunted like he'd gotten to his feet, but Leander kept talking, an urgency rising in his voice. "If he'd gotten it, he was going to use its power on you, on me, on anyone or anything that stood between him and the other tridents. He was going to start a war and —"

"You could have held on to it," Barren growled from across the room. *Holy...* With how thick Barren's accent was, it sounded like he'd *actually* growled.

Leander's eyes shut as he drew in a slow, deep breath. "You don't understand. My father knows all my weaknesses, and if he knew I had it, he would have hurt everyone that mattered. Then he wouldn't stop, even when he got the trident back." When his eyes opened again, they were glassy, somehow deadened. Like perhaps he had seen enough horrors through the years to know exactly what his father was capable of. "Now he can't have it. Ever. He'd have to kill me for it, but I... I—" Horror rounded his eyes as the words formed on his lips. "I finally have the power to hurt him first."

I brushed my fingers over the dark marks covering his chest. "But the trident hurts *you*, doesn't it?" I asked, feeling like I already knew the answer. "Can't you take it back out?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that," Leander said, his voice suddenly soft. "But yes, it might hurt me if I use its power. That's why I don't plan on using it."

"So it won't hurt you as long as you don't use it?" I thought of the whirlpools he'd made in the bathroom and the storm he'd apparently summoned outside. That had definitely been him using magic. He hadn't even seemed to know he'd done it. "But how much magic do you need to use before —"

"It will be a slow death," Barren cut in. He came up beside us, the muscles lining his square jaw pulsing with tension. Eyes darker than coal stared Leander down as Barren bared his teeth, showing off an anger I'd never seen in him before. "One that will not only destroy you, but those around you." My breath caught as Barren's dark eyes dropped to mine, focusing on me like he wanted to ensure I heard every word. "You can be sure of that."

The warning in Barren's voice made me shiver, but before I could say

anything, Leander had turned, placing himself between me and Barren.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I won’t use any of the trident’s magic.” There was a resolute tenderness in his voice. “I’m not like my father. I don’t crave power just so others will fear me. I only want to protect what’s important. You. The kingdom.” His hand came up to cup under my chin, his thumb brushing a line across my bottom lip. “At least, I hope I’m not as cruel as he is.”

“You’re not.” I pressed a kiss to his thumb, then turned down to kiss his palm. “You’re nothing like your father, Lee.”

The stiffness in his shoulders relaxed, and he let out a long breath like I’d eased his fears.

But I was anything but relaxed. “You realize you’ve already used its magic, right?” I stared at the marks on his chest. “When we, uh—” My eyes cut over to Barren. He stood behind Leander like a massive statue, anger and annoyance lining every muscled inch of his face and neck. “While we were in *the bathroom*.”

“I’ll learn to control it,” Leander threw right back, and I let out a heavy sigh. So it was that easy, huh? He’d just *do the thing*. He’d been just as certain he could teach me to swim, but last I checked, I was still as useless in the water as I’d always been.

“But you didn’t even know what you were doing until after you finished,” I reminded him.

Humor twitched at the corners of his lips. “True,” he rumbled, his hands pressing into my lower back until our hips aligned. “But maybe with some more practice...”

The rising tension between us shattered as Barren barked some word I couldn’t place. The harsh syllables struck like a curse as he stomped back over to the counter.

I was about to ask if he was okay when Leander stopped me with a shake of his head. “It’s okay, Clair. I understand why he’s upset.”

I couldn’t help but feel like maybe I understood why, too. Barren was always quiet, but Kai and Leander clearly meant a lot to him. “It must be hard,” I whispered, staring off at Barren as he rounded the countertop. “Watching your friends get hurt.”

Of the three of them, Barren was the one who kept surprising me at every turn. He’d seemed stony-hearted at first, but I had a feeling there was a deeper layer to Barren. One that he rarely let others see. Someone uncaring

wouldn't have risked his own scales to save Kai. He'd even recognized what Leander was preparing to do and tried to stop it before Leander had even turned the trident to his chest. They were lucky to have Barren looking after them.

"I hope you're not too angry to give me a ride back to the warehouse?" Leander asked suddenly, turning to Barren.

My eyes snapped back and forth between them. "What? Like, right now?" My brows furrowed. Kai still hadn't even woken up yet. How could I leave him?

"Don't worry. I won't be gone long." Leander chuckled. "I'll be back here in the morning."

"Wait—you don't want me to go with you?"

"I think it would be better if you stayed here, don't you? In case he wakes up." Leander's eyes turned down to the bed, and a torrent of emotions showed on his face. "I know his pet is here with him, but I'm sure he'll still want to see you and know you're safe."

I knew the trident had affected Leander's chest and arm, but had it done something to his head, too? This wasn't like him. "Are you sure you need to go back to the warehouse? How can we be sure King Eamon won't notice the marks all over you?"

"I was planning on grabbing clothes on the way." He took a breath, rolling his wrist and watching his arm move like he was making doubly sure he couldn't see the marks I saw. "With any luck, I won't even see my father. But there are a couple of captains I need to talk to. Ones I would trust with my life. When I disappear, I'll need them to keep watch for me on the inside."

"When you... disappear?" Was he planning on leaving the Kingdom of the Atlantic now that he had the trident? Or was there something else he was planning? My heart hammered in my chest at the thought. Where would he even go?

Leander's lips pressed against my forehead. "We can talk about that tomorrow. After Barren brings me back and I've worked out all the details. But you'll be safe here for tonight. Well, as long as you don't get too close to Kai's fancy walrus pet."

"Laverne," I corrected. "She's a sea lion."

He gave a shrug that said he couldn't care less what animal she was.

Although I hated being told to stay put, for once, I couldn't find it in me

to argue. I didn't want to leave this hotel room. Not until Kai woke up and I knew he was all right. "Fine. I'll stay here for the night."

Leander gave a quick nod. "You ready, Barren?" he called, and Barren gave a grunt that might have been a yes. The tense way they looked at each other made my spine tingle. Something told me the ride over to the warehouse would not be a peaceful one. There was obviously a lot that needed to be said between them.

Leander leaned in to give me another quick kiss, this time on the lips.

"Wait. You're really okay with me staying here with him?" I asked as soon as he pulled away. My eyes searched his face for even a shred of doubt. "Are you sure it won't... bother you?"

He rubbed a thoughtful hand through his hair. "My mother was never happy to return to my father. Or to me," he said slowly. "But you're different. I can feel it, down deep in my bones. I know you mean it when you say you love me."

He took my hand in his, squeezing it lightly. "So as long as you promise you'll never push me away," he continued, a hopeful smile forming on his lips. "And that you'll always come back to me. Then I think that when Kai wakes up, the three of us can work this out."

*Work this out.* Could it really be possible?

"It will be hard, won't it?" I asked, feeling uncertain.

"Did you think loving me was going to be easy?" His thumb came up to smooth between my brows. Apparently, I looked as worried as I felt. "Love is a fucking mess. But it still feels nice sometimes, right?"

I snorted a laugh. "Yeah, it does feel nice. I promise I won't push you away, Lee," I said, meaning every word. Closing my eyes, I enjoyed the feeling of my skin soaking up the heat from his hand. "At least not on purpose. You might eventually get tired of me, though."

He let out a chuckle. "That's the last thing you should be worried about." He went to pull away, but paused as his eyes fell back on Kai. "It helps that I can trust him to protect you. If anything ever happens to me, he'll still be here."

"Nothing will happen to you," I said, and his lips curled as he turned for the door. Oh—*hello there*. I realized then that he was leaving dressed in only a pair of boxer-briefs. Ones that were barely clinging to his waist.

Barren's car keys jingled as he fished them out of his front pocket. He waited until Leander was out the door before turning back to me. "I'll come

check on you tonight,” he said firmly, then he went for the door.

“Oh, uh—okay,” I stammered, barely able to get the words out before he was out of the room. Barren was coming back to check on me? A blush crept up my face as the hotel room door shut behind him.

# 4

## CLAIRA



I glanced back at the bed where Kai was resting. He looked so relaxed, but I knew better than to think he was just taking a nap. It would be impossible for anyone to sleep with Laverne blowing noisy huffs of fish breath across their face.

On second thought—as tired as I was, maybe I could. Now that Leander and Barren were gone, it was like my exhaustion had finally caught up with me. I wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and let my body recover, too.

Rolling out my shoulders, I sighed. My senses were still on high alert, but now that our lives weren't in danger, I knew I should get some rest.

“Guess I need a pillow,” I mumbled as I scanned the room. Kai had mentioned the hotel staff stashing pillows away, so the closet seemed like a good place to start. Maybe I'd get lucky and find a blanket in there, too—though I doubted the housekeepers would willingly provide more material for Kai and Laverne to use for their pillow forts.

*Ha.* The thought of them building forts and hiding pillows for the housekeepers to find every morning brought a curl to my lips as I eased open the closet. Just as I thought, someone had piled two stark white pillows on the top shelf inside it. *Score.* They looked nice and fluffy—way better than the sorry lump Leander slept with.

I pulled them down, then moved back over to the bed, pausing to weigh whether or not I was brave enough to climb in it. My eyes fell on Laverne, and I winced. There was no telling what she'd do if she woke up to find me

in bed with them.

Okay, I had *some idea*. One that involved her nose nudging me off the side of the mattress, and me waking up when I faceplanted on the floor.

Picturing it made me snort. Yeah, that was exactly what she'd do. The couch it was, then.

Hugging tightly to my pillows, I made my way over to it. The fabric was still damp from where Leander had laid out on it earlier, but I took a seat anyway. It might have been a little sticky, but the lingering scent of salt water was a welcomed reminder of home.

My heart twisted in my chest—I missed Dad and Gram so much.

Pulling my legs up onto the couch, I found a comfortable position and shut my eyes.

An image of Gram, her hands working over the tangled weave of a net, was waiting for me behind my eyelids. I let the tune she always hummed play in my mind like a lullaby as I waited to drift off to sleep.

I'd go back to them soon. As soon as I could.

A sudden thought almost shook me back upright, but I took in a slow breath as my mind raced with questions.

Sure, I wanted to go home, but what about Leander? Kai and Barren? Would returning home mean never seeing them again?

My life had gotten complicated, and for once, I couldn't clearly see what I needed to do next.

The one thing I did know was that a huge part of me didn't want to leave. I wasn't even sure if I *could* leave them. But Dad and Gram...

My head shook over the pillows, and I forced my mind back to the image of Gram gently rocking on the back porch, a net draped over her lap, until the steady sound of Laverne's snoring became muffled, and I finally drifted off.

... *Whack!*

My whole body jumped at the noise. I jerked upright, my eyes on high alert as I searched for whatever had fallen. The whooshing sound of a flushed toilet carried into the room as the bathroom door swung open. From the doorway, Laverne's body appeared. Her neck rocked back as she reared up on her tail to bop the light switch with the tip of her nose. The lights cut off, and when her chest slapped back on the floor, a splash of water reminded me that the bathroom was still very much flooded.

With the switch now off, just enough light filtered through the window for me to notice Laverne's eyes as they narrowed on me.



“I took the couch. See,” I said, feeling strangely defensive. I held in a breath as I waited for her to project something back to me, but she turned her nose up and snorted before waddling out of the bathroom.

Wait—the bathroom. I’d definitely heard a flush, which meant Laverne was... toilet trained?

I mean, I shouldn’t have been too surprised, but still —

Laverne’s long neck slung over as she passed by the couch. Her wide jaws clamped down on both of my pillows in one quick snap. Her head swerved, and my pillows followed. The two white clouds flew into the air as she tossed them onto the bed. Then she jumped up herself and shot me a pointed look as she curled her body around them like a possessive dragon protecting its hoard of gold.

Well, okay then. It was clear the whole trident-rescue thing had solidified her hatred for me. Although she hadn’t said it, I knew she blamed me for what had happened to Kai.

My lips twitched as I reclined back on the couch, my head now having nothing to rest on but the stiff edge of an armrest. It *was* my fault. I knew it. Laverne knew it. And part of me wanted her to scream at me for it. I wanted someone—anyone—to say it, and then maybe all this guilt hanging over me like a knife to the back of my neck could finally drop, slicing me, destroying me, and I could be the one hurting instead of him.

“It should have been me,” I whispered before taking in a shaky breath. “I was the useless one, not him.”

The long huff that came from over on the bed told me that Laverne agreed.

I turned over on to my back to stare up at the ceiling. Tears stung my eyes, but I held them back. Crying wouldn’t change anything, and I sure wasn’t going to get any sympathy from Laverne. I stared up at the blank, white nothingness above me until Laverne’s breathing slowed, and her snoring started up again. Finally, I pinched my eyes shut. I thought about Dad standing at *Lady Ochre*’s helm and imagined I was there beside him. I looked happy in that vision. Human. But that place beside him seemed so far off now. Like a beautiful dream I wasn’t confident I could ever return to.

Sure, I’d never truly felt human on land, but it was easy to trick myself into thinking I was when Dad and Gram were there beside me. They’d always treated me like I belonged, and that had been enough. But now...

I drifted back to sleep on that thought until the sound of plastic rustling

stirred me. My eyes opened to an enormous figure standing stock-still at the foot of the couch.

“Oh, Barren.” I rubbed at my eyes until they focused. “You’re back.”

His thick eyebrows drew together, and I blinked up at him, wondering why he was staring down at me with such a grave expression on his face.

“Is everything okay?” I asked through a yawn. I glanced over at the bed to make sure Kai and Laverne were still on it.

Barren’s head shook like he was coming out of a daze. “Yeah,” he said finally and plunked a plastic bag he was holding onto the floor. Sliding a key card out of his pocket, he set it on the corner of the couch. “Brought you water, a toothbrush, some toothpaste.” He drew the back of his hand over his stubbled jaw, looking somewhat abashed as he turned away.

He took a step, then a heavy breath, before glancing back over his shoulder. “You’re not... cold?” he asked carefully, his dark eyes sliding down the entire length of the couch.

It was then I realized how comfortable I’d made myself on the couch when I was sleeping. One of my legs was drawn up, giving the entire room a wide view of what was underneath the bottom hem of the borrowed shirt I was wearing. Or what *wasn’t* underneath it. Namely, some underwear.

My knees snapped together, and I shot up, pulling Kai’s shirt down around me. Why, oh why, did my hips have to be too wide to fit into Kai’s pants? “Sorry!” I blurted, and my entire body heated to the point of boiling.

I wasn’t sure why I was sorry. I mean, it wasn’t like I’d chosen to be half-naked on purpose, and I’d already seen all of him at the beach, and he was the one who was looking at me, so —

“You should be on the bed,” he said, and my eyes flicked back up to him.

“I’m fine with the couch.” I gave him a smile I hoped was convincing. Gosh, my face felt like it was melting. I was so embarrassed. “Three is too many for one bed, anyway.”

One of Barren’s eyebrows lifted. “Is it?” he asked, and I gave a little laugh at his joke.

He stared at me, his jaw tense, and seconds passed as I stared back.

He... wasn’t joking?

My lips parted, but before I could say anything, he’d turned for the bed.

Lifting off the couch, I got to my feet. “Wait—what are you doing?”

Laverne’s whiskers twitched as Barren’s arm slid underneath her. The mattress depressed until her body rolled into his arm. Her nostrils flared as he

lifted her, though when her head flopped back onto his shoulder, she looked like she was still asleep.

“Taking her to my room.” There was a gentleness in the deep hum of Barren’s voice that I wasn’t prepared for. “So you both can get some rest.”

Laverne thundered out another snore that perfectly accented his point, and he gave me a nod before heading for the door.

“Hold on.” I grabbed the key card and chased after him. “The doors. Let me get them for you.”

Part of me wondered if he would still try to open it with one arm, but he waited patiently for me at the door.

“Thank you,” he said as soon as my hand landed on the handle.

I felt a new wave of heat beat against my face. “You’re welcome.”

Following Barren down the hallway, I watched Laverne’s head lightly bounce against his shoulder with each step. She was going to be delighted beyond belief when she woke up in Barren’s bed. That is, until she realized that meant Kai was alone with me.

When we arrived at Barren’s door, he waited for me to get the handle. But when I went to reach for it, I realized I had the key to Kai’s room, not his.

“Front pocket,” he said gruffly, shifting his grip on Laverne to give me better access to his left hip.

My mouth went dry as I stared at the neatly pleated front of his slacks. Boy, did those pockets look deep.

“O-okay,” I said, swallowing hard. I slipped my hand into his pocket in search of the card. His body heat rolled up my wrist, and he shifted on his feet as my hand sank further.

“Got it.” Pulling out the card, I used it on the lock and opened the handle. “There you go,” I muttered before sliding it back into his pants.

His dark gaze rested on my lips. “Thank you, Clair.”

My stomach fluttered.

“Good night,” he said before carefully stepping through the door.

“Good night,” I called after him, and even after the door shut, I stared at it for a moment.

*... He wanted to kiss me.*

Wait, no. Surely, I was only getting that feeling because I was overtired, right?

Either that, or *I’d* been the one wanting him to kiss me.

Geez, I was pathetic. Turning back down the hall, I grumbled, “You stick your hand in a guy’s pants and suddenly you think —”

I nearly tripped over my own feet.

The door across the hall was open, and a man and a woman were gawking at me, mouths gaped, luggage in tow.

“Good evening,” I choked out, but I didn’t stick around long enough for them to greet me back. Sprinting, I rushed down the hallway, my eyes set on Kai’s room. When I reached the door, I swiped the card and dove through it before anyone else could see me.

Could tonight be any more embarrassing? I sat the key card on the counter. I was as bad as Leander was—showing my goods off to just about everyone I came across. First thing tomorrow, I was going to ask Barren to find me some pants, some underwear... *something* to cover up with.

With a sigh, I toed over to the side of the bed. Kai was still asleep, but he looked different without Laverne beside him. Strangely lonely.

I didn’t like it. Kai shouldn’t ever feel lonely.

Frowning, I turned down a corner of the comforter and slipped underneath it, careful to leave plenty of space between us. Pulling the covers up over my shoulders, I stared at the side of his face. There was so much I wanted to tell him when he finally woke up. About the cecaelia, the shell, the trident that was now inside Leander... My hand found his underneath the covers, and my fingers curled around it, holding on to him so maybe he wouldn’t feel all alone now that Laverne wasn’t here with him.

It felt like I’d just barely shut my eyes when I awoke to the whispered sound of my name.

“Claira?”

# 5

## KAI



Where was I? And why did my throat feel like it was stuffed with sand? I shifted and—*whoa*. Okay, nope. No more moving for me.

My bones *hurt*. And not like they had when my legs first formed on land. That discomfort had been brief, but this was a pain that started deep in my spine, radiating down my —

“My back,” I croaked, but my throat and lips were both so dry, barely more than a raspy breath came out. I could still feel the sting where metal tips had lodged in my spine. How had I forgotten that a cecaelia had driven a pole into my back? They’d aimed their weapon at Clairra, tossing it through the rocks at an alarming speed. I was beyond grateful my tail proved fast enough to move me over her in time.

I’d felt the blow of the piercing metal, but it had been Clairra’s eyes, wide with heart-wrenching terror as I wrapped around her, that had told me the wound would be fatal.

But I wasn’t afraid. Not of pain or my own death. Now that I’d lost Freechia, I knew what death meant, and I would rather die than live through losing someone again. Honestly, I was more afraid of the look Clairra had on her face right before she’d let go of me than anything else. Like she’d somehow felt the same stab of metal that had pierced me, too. Like maybe she would carry that wound, that hurt, long after I was gone, just as I carried the pain of losing my sister. So although I felt my heart slowing, my arms numbing, I’d smiled for her. So she would know I had no regrets.

... So this was the end, huh? I had to admit, dying wasn’t quite what I’d

expected.

If the stories were true, I should have been living my death up right now, swirling in the great eternal sea. But I wasn't, was I? My eyes ached as I stared at the long stretch of gray before me. Man, was it wrong that I'd expected a little more fanfare? Where was the welcome party for newly departed souls? And this sure didn't feel like the sea. My body was too stiff, my legs too dry.

Wait, *legs*? I tried to move them, but they were so achy that I settled for wiggling my toes instead.

Dude, this definitely wasn't the sea. Did that mean Poseidon's Deep was just a myth? Gosh, I'd wasted so much time reading over the glyphs in the ruins that depicted how the afterlife would be. The grand party, the singing, *the games*. Okay, maybe the ruins hadn't explicitly mentioned games in their sacred scripts, but what kind of party would it be without them?

I stared some more at the big, gray void. So... there wasn't going to be a party. But why this gray void, why these human legs? Could it be that our magic was only ever borrowed from Poseidon and in the end, the afterlife saw us as human?

My lips cracked and stung as I broke into a smile. Being treated like a human... That was a nice thought.

Sure, humans didn't have magic, but I'd gladly give up my magic to be able to actually feel what humans felt. Humans had warmth. They had freedom. How many times had I disobeyed my father's orders and watched them at a distance, wishing I could join their carefree lives on land?

If death treated us like humans, then I'd have loved to see my father's face when his time came. There wasn't much he hated more—except maybe upholding the Pacific's timeworn treaties with the Atlantic—so he never let us go on land. But that hadn't stopped me from hoping to one day walk on legs.

In the end, was I truly a human all along? I wiggled my toes again.

I hadn't told anyone about my dream of walking on land. No Pacific mer could ever set tail on dry sand, and although it wasn't a Law of the Ocean, my father had made it a law in *his* ocean, and he had ways of making sure we obeyed it. Then the curse happened, and I'd gotten my heart's wish. But it came at a price I would have never willingly paid had I known what the freedom to walk on legs would cost me.

*Freechia.*

If she was in the afterlife, too, then maybe I could finally see her again. I could tell her how sorry I was for not finding her sooner and how I should have been smarter. Done more to protect her.

The bones in my neck pulsed with pain as I shook my head, choking back my emotions. Darn it, was death supposed to hurt?

A warm puff of air tickled my cheek, distracting me from my thoughts. I turned my head to the warmth of more steady breaths fanning over my face. Someone was beside me?

Waves of hair flowed like a cascade of water next to me—wild, unruly hair that desperately needed to be combed and styled—and my chest ached like my heart had been gripped and squeezed. Could she really be here?

“Freechia?” I went to reach out to her, but something was wrapped over my hand, holding it and my arm down. I flexed my fingers and found warm, delicate fingers woven in between them. Whoa, this wasn’t Freechia. The grip of the hand holding mine tightened, giving me a squeeze, and my entire arm went rigid underneath it.

I ignored the pain in my back and shifted onto my side. Using my free hand, I brushed a wave of hair back so I could see the face hidden underneath it.

“Claira?” I gasped. No—she couldn’t be here with me. She couldn’t be *dead*.

I’d made it over her in time to take the blow. Barren and Leander would have taken her back to land. It was the last thing I remembered them doing before I’d shut my eyes. Unless —

Had the metal pierced me all the way through and made it to her?

I clutched at my chest, then down my stomach, checking for exit wounds. There were no holes, but my belly plunged when I realized there were neither ocean silks nor a human shirt covering my skin. Were there no clothes in the afterlife? My eyes jumped up to Claira.

At least she had on a shirt—a familiar one I’d picked out because the buttons looked like someone had carved them from a nautilus shell.

Wait—she was wearing my shirt?

I moved closer, fascinated. It hung from her shoulder, nearly falling off her, the top two buttons carelessly left undone. Shadows did little to hide the smooth skin of her collarbone, and my hard swallow at the sight was like attempting to force down sea glass.

Her chest lifted with each breath. A gentle inhale, then exhale. It was the

most beautiful vision I'd ever seen.

A blanket sloped over her hips. I wondered why she'd decided to curl up next to me, her hand tangled up with mine. Then I recognized the crisp feel of the blanket and realized where we were. But how had I made it back to my rented bedchamber?

I brushed more of Clair's hair back to get a better look at her face. The room was so quiet, it almost felt like we were the only two souls left in the world. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so at peace. Was this some final sweet dream before death, or was Clair really sleeping next to me?

Her eyebrows tensed, and I found myself stroking the edge of my thumb over her bottom lip. She was so close. Too close, and yet, somehow, it wasn't enough.

My thumb froze over her lip.

It wasn't enough? What was wrong with me? What more could anyone want than this? Gosh, even though I wasn't wearing a shirt, my body had grown so hot.

I didn't know why, but I suddenly wished she was awake. "Clair?" I didn't want this to just be a dream. I wanted this to be *real*. "Clair?" I repeated, then held my breath as I waited to see if her eyelashes would flutter open.

Then they did, and here I was, holding my breath some more.

Blinking awake, her eyes focused on me. As she stared, her eyebrows furrowed like she wasn't sure where she was or what to think of me being next to her, either. Then her mouth eased open, but before she'd even gotten one word out, tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. "You're... you're awake."

She was crying? "Hey, hey—it's okay," I whispered, my voice straining as I drew an arm around her shoulder. I wasn't sure of the best way to comfort her, so I squeezed her hand like she'd done to mine, hoping it would help. A tear spilled over, and I brushed it away with the back of my fingers before it could make it down her cheek. "I'm okay. I'm awake now, see?"

"But you weren't okay, Kai. You—you almost *died*." She sat up, studying me like she was trying to decide for herself if I truly was okay. Only, the longer her eyes were on me, the more my skin heated. Our stare was broken when she suddenly gasped. "A shirt! I should get you a shirt!"

That's right—my chest was totally bare. Reflexes had me going for the blanket, but I stopped myself before I'd pulled it halfway up my chest.



It was weird, but I... I didn't want her to get me a shirt.

But what did I want? For her to keep looking at me?

A flush of heat moved down my face and neck. That was exactly what I wanted. Gosh, something must have been really wrong with my head.

"No, that's—that's okay," I said. She'd mentioned once before that she wouldn't mind looking at my chest. The thought was mortifying—I wasn't built like Leander or Barren—but maybe... maybe she would still like what she saw. Summoning my courage, I squared my shoulders and drew the blanket back down to my waist until cool air beat against the burning skin of my chest, down to my hips. "It's kind of hot in here, don't you think?" I asked, nervous. I was about to give her a smile when she shot off the bed.

"It's pretty hot in here, yeah," she said, hurrying over to the counter. "So water? Uh, that sounds good when you're hot, right?" She turned her head over her shoulder to glance at me for only a split second, but then focused back on her task as she cleared her throat. "I'll get us some water."

Plastic rustled as she crouched behind the counter, and my heart sank. Had my bare chest really made her so uncomfortable?

I waited for her to pop back up, a bottle of water in each hand, before asking, "Did I do something wrong?" I reached for the blanket, but hesitated before pulling it up. "Do you... not like what you see?"

One of the bottles dropped straight from her hand and hit the floor with a loud *thunk*. "No—I, uh—I mean, I *do* like it," she stammered, looking like I'd somehow cornered her from all the way across the room. "It's a very nice erection."

# 6

## CLAIRA



Did I seriously just compliment his erection? Kai's chin turned. "Erection?" he asked, raising a lavender-blonde eyebrow like I'd broken into a foreign language. Then he must have noticed the tent he'd pitched under the covers, because he jerked, his hips twisting to conceal it. "Oh, ow. Right—moving. Not great right now." His teeth clenched and his body curled while he tenderly rubbed at his lower back. Even through the pain, a flush of red wrapped across his face, all the way to the tips of his ears. "Sorry—I'm just so happy you're actually here."

"I know. It's hard to believe all of us made it back." I couldn't help but blush, too. *Nice erection? Ugh.* That moment was going to haunt me until I was as old as Gram. "I'm happy you're here, too, Kai." I crouched down to pick up the bottle of water I'd dropped. When I straightened back up, he had lifted the edge of the covers to look at himself.

Horror drained the color from his face as he stared under the covers. "How long have I been naked?"

"Uh, pretty much since you got back to land." Returning to the bed, I sat down beside him. "But don't worry. With the way Laverne was shrieking and carrying on when we got in the lobby, I don't think anyone noticed you hanging off Barren's shoulder."

Kai's lips parted as he eyed one of the bottles of water. He strained to sit upright, and I shifted the pillows behind his back to help prop him up. He looked at me curiously while I fluffed the pillow behind his shoulders.

“Aren’t these supposed to go under my feet?”

“Pillows? Um, no,” I said with a laugh, then passed him one of the bottles Barren had brought for us. “Here on land, people sleep with a pillow under their *head*. Usually one, but sometimes more. They’re pretty comfy, don’t you think? Better than wrapping yourself up in seaweed to keep from drifting out of your bed at night.”

Kai sat up straighter as he untwisted the bottle cap. “Interesting. Laverne sounded so sure when she told me humans put them under their feet.” After he took a deep gulp of water, he folded his hands over the bulge on his lap. The blush on his face fired again. “Life on land is full of constant surprises, isn’t it? Humans are fascinating.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I guess. Although I think most humans would find having a shark tail and breathing underwater much more fascinating.”

Kai took another sip before sputtering out a wet, rumbling cough.

Feeling helpless, I leaned in, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Do you need anything? I can get you some more pillows, or help you get to the bathroom if you need to go. Should I go get Barren or Laverne?”

I stood halfway up to do just that when a hand on my arm stopped me.

“No, wait,” Kai said between coughs. Pausing, I sank back onto the bed. He carefully took another sip of water, then cleared his throat until he had composed himself. “Can we rest here for a bit?” Shifting uncomfortably over the pillows, he scratched at the back of his neck. “I mean—if that’s okay?”

There was a tentative hopefulness in his voice that pulled at my heartstrings. What an unexpected request. I’d assumed he would want to see Laverne as soon as he’d woken up. “Of course,” I said, swinging my legs back up on the bed. Our shoulders brushed as I snuggled into the side of the mound of pillows supporting his back.

Our pinkies sat over the covers, barely an inch apart—the same hand I’d desperately clung to as I drifted to sleep. How many hours had I held on to him? Even a full night of sleep couldn’t justify the urge I had to slip my hand back into his, counting the rough calluses covering his palm until my fingers had every one of them memorized.

“Laverne is okay, though, right?” Kai asked, beaming a contented smile.

“Oh yeah, don’t worry. She’s safe. She’d be here right now if Barren hadn’t taken her back to his room so you could get some rest.” Though I had a feeling Barren had been more worried about me getting rest than he was about Kai.

I took a sip of my water as Kai shook his head, looking amused. “*Barren’s room?* Gosh, I bet she’s thrilled. Laverne’s been trying to get all three of us to have a sleepover since the very first night we stayed here.” He chuckled. “It was the snoring, right? I swear she grunts louder than an entire pod of blue whales.”

Although I’d never heard a blue whale grunt, I joined in his laughter. “For real. It’s a wonder you slept through it.” My mouth eased shut, and my fist clenched around a handful of the thin, off-white covers as all the humor in me drained away.

He wasn’t really sleeping, was he?

I squeezed until I could feel my fingernails press into my palms through the fabric, just to keep myself from shaking. “Kai, I... I was afraid you weren’t going to wake up.”

The pillows shifted behind us as Kai turned. “I’m okay now, Clair. I don’t really know how, but I’m fine now, see?”

But he didn’t understand. Sure, I was upset, but it was more than just him. It was everything. The trident, the cecaelia, the bloodshed. I’d thought that once Leander got the trident, it would be the last thing I’d need to do as a mermaid. Now I had this dreadful, gut-churning feeling that the ocean wasn’t done with me. That it might *never* be done with me. That maybe retrieving the Atlantic’s trident wasn’t enough to break the curse, and now that it was absorbed, Leander might be more cursed than ever.

If he couldn’t figure out a safe way to use its magic, there would be more danger, more trials, more bloodshed.

Just as I slumped forward, warmth wrapped around me as Kai’s arm drew over my shoulder. It was an odd embrace, with his elbow cocked at an angle that kept it well away from my chest and his hand resting conservatively on my shoulder. As awkward as it was, I still appreciated the sentiment.

“A lot happened after you got hurt,” I confessed.

A soft puff of breath tickled my ear. “Don’t tell me you had fun without me,” he said in a gentle, teasing voice.

*Fun?* I barked out a laugh. “I promise you, nothing that happened down there was fun. Not at all. Just disaster after disaster after disaster. After you got hurt, Lee told me I had to let you go. So I did, and *pop*.” I demonstrated the abrupt magical transformation with a flourish of my fingers. “You turned into a betta fish.”

The lean muscles of the arm around me tensed. My spine stiffened as his

hand lowered, closing over mine. “I think I remember that part,” he said on a hum. His usually hyper voice was so subdued, low and relaxed, a soothing caress to my ears. My heart thumped against my rib cage as his fingers coaxed mine to open so they could work in between them. “I guess I’m not surprised Leander wanted you to let me go.” There was a tinge of self-deprecation in his voice that I wished wasn’t there.

“No, no, it wasn’t like that. Lee was trying to save you. You were losing so much blood, and I wasn’t thinking clearly. I kept clinging to you, even though it was only hurting you more.” My head shook, my throat growing thickening at the memory. “I didn’t want to let go, but he knew your wounds would close if you turned into a fish.”

“Whoa,” he blew out. “I would have never thought of that. Sounds like I owe him a life debt.”

Kai was clearly relieved, but if anyone owed a life debt, it was me.

“Barren helped, too. He stayed behind to take you back,” I added. “Which was actually really brave of him, because as soon as he let go of me, he turned into a fish, too.”

I wanted to demonstrate the *pop* again, but Kai’s hand held strong around mine. He gave my fingers a squeeze while he chuckled. “So Barren dragged me back to shore even though he was a fish? Wow. That dude really is amazing.”

“Well, he tried to bring you back,” I said, returning the squeeze. Holding hands with Kai felt nice. Strangely *right*. Like our hands had sought comfort in one another countless times before. Which... didn’t make any sense, did it? “But then he said Laverne showed up, and she carried you back to shore. Apparently, she was upset we left without her.”

“Sounds like Laverne.” Kai’s thumb brushed absently over the inside of my palm as he chuckled. The light caress sent tingles shooting through my arm that settled deep in my belly. “But how did she find us?”

I squirmed on the bed, shifting and pressing my bare knees together to stifle the arousal building between my legs.

*Kai is recovering.* I shouldn’t have needed to remind myself. That was why he’d kept his shirt off, and it was why he was drawing me close to him now. He was tired and needed comfort while he healed—and not in the way my body was apparently anticipating.

“You’ll have to ask her in the morning,” I said, adding in a casual shrug. He didn’t need to know what his soft touches were doing to me. “Or I can run

over now and wake her and Barren up?” That was a good idea—I wouldn’t need to worry about getting too comfortable with Kai if Laverne was here. Her attitude was even more impressive than her snoring. No one could kill a mood quite like she could. “I’m sure they’ll want to know you’re okay.”

Kai’s thumb paused, hovering over the delicate skin of my wrist. “Can we just stay like this?” he asked, and my insides thrilled as he reclined back into the pillows, taking me with him. “Just you and me?” His voice was suddenly rough. Was he really that exhausted?

“Of course,” I blurted. The two simple words had sounded far more eager than I’d meant for them to. “I mean, uh, you’ve been through a lot. We both have.” I was stammering now, and I let out an awkward laugh, trying to play it off. “Even after I tell you everything that happened, you’re still not going to believe it.”

Kai’s mouth drooped. “So, you *did* have fun without me?”

“What? *No.*” I gawked over at him. “It was the opposite of fun, actually. It was more like a nightmare.”

I almost believed he was actually upset when his lip started twitching. His frown cracked, turning back into a playful grin. “But you’re smiling.”

“Well—that’s because you’re here.” Heat flared over my face. It was hard not to smile while Kai was around. “You woke up... I was so worried you wouldn’t.”

“But I’m awake now.” His voice turned tender as his arm tightened around my shoulders. Then he pulled me in closer. “You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

“Just some scrapes,” I whispered, staring ahead. Normally, I wouldn’t have mentioned scrapes, but my mind was presently distracted. My eyes were level with one of his nipples—hard and pebbled, exposed to the air. My own breasts prickled as I thought about running my fingers over his smooth chest. Kai was built like a swimmer, compact and toned, the perfect body to stare at from across the beach. Or from right in front of your face.

But Kai was so modest about his chest, and from what he’d told me, every mer in the Pacific had the same complex. Even though I wanted to, he would hate it if I touched him... Wouldn’t he?

“Scrapes?” he asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, but they’re nothing compared to what happened to you.” That’s right—he’d experienced more pain than I could imagine. Pain that had been meant for me. “I’m so sorry, Kai. I just—I don’t understand why you did it.”

His body froze like petrified stone, and his breath hitched before he whispered, “What do you mean?”

“Why did you risk your life like that?” I asked, setting myself up on an elbow to look at him. He looked like he was in pain, but not the physical kind. Like maybe it hurt that I didn’t understand why he’d done it.

*Why did you risk your life for me*, was what I really wanted to ask him, but I didn’t know what I’d do if he said it was because of *the thrall*. I didn’t want that type of attachment—a spell, a curse, a magical net that held us captive together. Not with Kai or with anyone. I wanted something more. Something *real*, like what I felt for Leander. That was more than some conjured spell. Beyond the magic of *the thrall*.

“You almost died,” I said, the words a bare ghost of a whisper. My eyes searched his as my heart surged with both fear and eagerness, waiting to hear why he’d protected me, and knowing full well I couldn’t bear it if *the thrall* was his only reason.

A contemplative hum vibrated Kai’s lips as he dropped his water bottle down to the bed. “No one has ever truly seen me before, Clair.” His hand drifted toward me, and the back of his knuckles skimmed over the side of my jaw. Goosebumps rose over my skin as all the hairs on the back of my neck lifted.

“Back in the Pacific, I’m just a number,” he continued. “I laugh and pretend to be what everyone expects me to be. A bother. A nuisance. Always last, never first. But when you look at me, I...” A tempting mixture of devotion and longing pooled in his eyes as he tucked a section of hair back behind my ear. “I know you see me,” he said, then his smile turned lopsided. “And I don’t know what to do. No one has ever looked at me before—not like you do. You look at me, and it’s like my heart is so tight it wants to explode. But then you look away, and I can’t wait for you to turn back to look at me again. I know we haven’t known each other very long, but this feeling I have, it’s deeper than that. Even if we had just met underwater, I still would have guarded you. So please don’t look sad because of me, okay? Because all I want to do is make you smile.”

“Kai...” I was nearly breathless; I didn’t know what to say. I’d been worried he would blame his actions on *the thrall*, but how he felt about me was so much more than that. “You’re more than a number,” I whispered, just in case he needed to hear it.

His smile deepened, and the movement brought my eyes down to his lips.

“Thank you, Clairia.”

If it weren't for Laverne, those lips would have kissed me once before. I'd wanted it then, but that longing was nothing like what I felt right now.

Unlocking our fingers, I drew my hand up, hovering it over his chest. Slowly, I eased in a deep breath. “May I... touch you?”

Kai's eyes rounded as he stared at the flat of my palm. “Yes,” he breathed out, and his lips hardened like that word was the most wicked thing that had ever slipped through them.

My hand landed on the middle of his chest and both our bodies stilled as his warmth sent little sparks of heat up my wrist. Kai's easy smiles had a way of disarming me, and I realized now I'd never truly noticed how masculine he was underneath his playful persona. He was smooth, yet firmer than I'd imagined, his skin easily sliding underneath my fingertips like it was urging me to feel out more of it.

Next to Barren, Kai had seemed so small. Now that it was just the two of us, it was obvious that the body before me held all the innate allures of a merman. How ridiculous it was that I hadn't noticed before.

My hand kept grazing, skimming over the dips and curves of his pecs as his stomach clenched, his chest rising and falling in increasingly heavy bursts.

With anyone else, this would have been an innocent touch. But with Kai, it felt wildly intimate.

His deep draws of breath had me thinking he was enjoying this just as much as I was until I noticed his eyes flicking from where my hand slid against him, up to my face. Panic strained his features, and I pulled away, stricken.

Clearly, I'd rushed things. The poor guy had just woken up from nearly dying, and here I was, asking if I could touch him. Now that Leander had accepted my pull toward Kai, and Kai was finally awake, all I could think about was getting closer to him, bending the boundaries between us. *But look at him, dammit.* He looked so uncomfortable.

Kai gulped down a breath as his eyes rolled up to the ceiling. “Please—” he gasped, his voice straining. “Don't stop.”

I drew in my bottom lip and shook my head. He was saying the complete opposite of how he looked. “Kai, no. You look so uncomfortable.”

His eyes turned pleading. “I'm... nervous. No one has ever touched me here before.”



Goodness, Kai was innocent. What would he think of me if he knew I'd spent two nights cradled against Leander's bare —

“And it feels *fantastic*.” Kai drew out the last word with a rough, raspy edge I wasn't prepared for. The covers pulled tight over his hips as he shifted to massage a palm over the underside of his tented erection.

*Whoa*. I nearly fell straight backwards off the bed. I... hadn't expected that. Kai was normally so shy, but then again, he never seemed to mind having his pants off around me—although, to be fair, that had been before he knew he had a penis.

My lips parted. “Yeah?” The word barely slipped out. I was so distracted by the slight movement of his hand over the sheet.

“So you can keep touching,” he whispered, tempting me back to his chest as his fingers curled around his erection. Although his elbow hadn't moved, his grip was changing, kneading over his hard length.

*Wait, wait, wait*. This wasn't what I had planned. Honestly, I just wanted to give him a sweet kiss. To thank him for saving me.

But now his eyes were on me, his lids heavy with an incredibly *un-Kai-like* emotion. Like I was a tasty treat, and him a starved shark. One with a craving that he was ready to satiate. And if it weren't for his injuries, he would have already attacked.

*I take back what I said before*, I thought with a gulp. Kai wasn't so innocent.

He'd only known about his human anatomy for a moment, but by the way he was handling himself in front of me, without an ounce of shame or embarrassment, he'd already found time to master the basics.

“Sorry.” His sweeping lips tilted, revealing those perfect, pointed teeth. A graceful tongue flicked over their tips as his elbow started up with long, leisurely movements, and I practically choked on my next breath.

He was staring straight at me, and although there was a layer in the way, he was still touching himself in front of me, slowly but deliberately. “Everything is so different on land. It's crazy. I've had my legs for months now and it was never a problem. But ever since I met you, I can't get this hardness to go away.” His voice strained in a way that made me want to chug down my whole bottle of water and then what was left of his next.

His free hand tangled with mine. “Though I still feel like I should be using both hands,” he added, his tone wavering between a groan and a laugh.

He couldn't get his hardness to go away... because of *me*? That thought

was a head rush. Damn, he really was hard. Even when his movements had caused him obvious pain, he'd stayed fully erect. "Wait... Both hands?" My voice trailed as the image of him cupping his balls with one hand and sweeping long strokes up his length with the other sprang to mind, the sheet covering him long gone.

Then my face almost combusted, because *what the heck was I thinking?*

"I'd never thought about human reproduction. Well, not until after that time in the pool," he continued, color rising over his cheeks like he was finally embarrassed. "But I get the gist of how it works for merfolk. Well, in theory. I saw depictions of it in glyphs, and my brothers, they love to gloat whenever—" His expression soured, and he looked like he wanted to stuff the words back into his mouth. Even the hand on his dick had stopped moving. "Sorry. You don't want to hear about this. I keep forgetting you're an ex-mermaid, and what would an ex-mermaid need to know about tails?"

*Tails.* Of course. He was referring to his... *mer*-equipment. I had some idea of how merfolk reproduction worked. Leander had made sure of that. But not when it came to shark-tailed mermen—though I had already felt Kai's claspers press against me right before Laverne had gotten between us. Plus, I'd seen the extent of his tail when all four of us were in the water. Unlike Leander, Kai's tail didn't appear to have a sheath that held its reproductive organs. No, they were right there. Out and proud.

Two long projections had sat on his underbelly, seated between Kai's pelvic fins, fully rigid and exposed. *Huh...* Maybe it was fitting that his first orgasm had been from a stream of water.

I'd only snuck a quick glance, but his claspers had looked even thicker than they had felt brushing against my scales. So thick, in fact, I wasn't sure if they were a part of him or if he had tried concealing a weapon down there, much like the harpoons the other two had strapped to their backs.

"You really have *two*?" I asked, my gaze flicking up to him.

His eyes searched mine. He took a strained breath and answered huskily, "Yeah." Those lilac eyes were pulling me in again, gleaming like clouded gems in the low light. There was a hint of pride in his voice, too, like he could read my curiosity plainly on my face, and was enjoying the fact that, for once, he possessed something that other merfolk around me didn't.

When the silence had stretched too long, Kai's gentle hand moved to the side of my face. His thumb rolled over my lower lip, bringing flutters up from the depths of my belly.

“This might not be great,” he admitted, but damn, did he look determined. Lips tilting, pain pinched his eyebrows as he leaned toward me. He kept pushing forward, like even pain wasn’t enough to steal away this moment, until he paused just short of my lips. His hand swept back, passing through my hair to curl around the back of my neck. “But I really want to kiss you.”

I could barely contain my smile when I said, “I want you to kiss me.”

Kai’s face flared with heat as his gaze sank to my lips. He was staring at them so intensely I could almost feel it. “I’ll try to be gentle,” he murmured—wait, *what?*—then his lips were on mine.

He’ll try to be *gentle*? That didn’t seem like a phrase typically used to preface a kiss, but—*Oh*.

Kai’s mouth gradually opened, and I realized what he meant by being gentle. His tongue lashed at mine, eager to deepen the kiss, and as my tongue slid against his, the top of it grazed the tip of one of his teeth.

He pulled back even before I registered the slight twinge of pain.

“No, no—it’s okay.” I pushed forward until our lips were back together, my hand landing on his chest. He gave a groan, and for a moment I wasn’t sure if it was from my mouth or my hand, until he placed the hand he was holding beside the one on his chest.

*Well, okay then.*

My fingers splayed over his skin as our kiss sank deeper; only this time his tongue moved slower, growing more cautious with each stroke, like he was restraining himself. He was clumsy, sure, but I was just as clumsy, if not worse. This was likely his first kiss, and he was trying his best not to hurt me. But, unlike him, I wasn’t afraid of feeling his teeth again. In fact, I wanted it. I’d felt them on my neck—that wonderfully strange bite he’d given me in the pool—and part of me hadn’t been able to shake that moment since.

Bites were supposed to hurt. I’d been bitten by numerous fish, as well as a stray cat or two, but when Kai’s teeth had locked on to my shoulder and the pain had mixed with that buzzing of need left from the water pulsing between my legs, it had almost unraveled me. Maybe it was a fluke. But what if it wasn’t? Either way, I was ready to find out.

He pulled back for a breath, and I struck, capturing his bottom lip between my teeth. The breath he took turned into a hiss as I tugged, giving him a playful nibble. I’d laid out the bait perfectly. The hold he had on the back of my neck weakened as I toyed with his lip, and he stilled, giving all control in the kiss over me. Then I nipped a little too hard, and his spine

arched, his chest pressing into my hands. The heat in his groan morphed into genuine pain. I popped off his lip, pushing his chest back flat on the bed.

“You’re too hurt. I shouldn’t have tried to—” I stammered out between gasping breaths.

When his eyes blinked open, his pupils were blown, his bottom lip full and red from where my teeth had been. “Shhh, Clair.” His arms wrapped around me, drawing me in closer. “I like it.”

I gave him a stern look. “You’re in pain, Kai. I can tell your back is still healing.”

“There’s some pain I don’t mind,” he said with a smile, his breathing slowing along with mine as we both caught our breath. “Sometimes it’s worth it.”

I shook my head, and he bit back a grunt of discomfort as his spine stretched to fling the covers back, pulling them off of us.

“Wait,” I started, but he’d already pulled me on top of him, our stomachs pressed together.

His voice wrapped around me, low and warm. “You’re worth it.”

I pressed against Kai while propping myself up, my hair raining down over his face as I found my balance on top of him. I hadn’t expected him to throw the covers off, and I *really* hadn’t expected him to pull me so close.

He broke his smile to blow a strand of my hair away from his mouth when a curious look crossed his face. “You’re wearing my shirt.”

Oh, damn, I was. “Yeah,” I panted, my head still reeling from the kiss we’d just shared. While preparing to explain myself, my mind slid to a naughty thought. I sat back, my hands popping to the shirt’s topmost button. “Do you want it back?”

The sound of him gulping sent my heart racing.

“Wow, Clair...”

I’d meant to tease him with my offer of returning his shirt, but he wasn’t even looking at where my fingers flirted with taking it off for him. His gaze sat just below where the fabric ended—where the covers would have been if he hadn’t just thrown them off the bed to pull me on top of him.

Where my underwear *should have* been. “... Oh, right.”

My mind drifted to the bathroom, where I’d hung my panties up to dry next to the rest of my clothes across the curtain rod, when something hard pulsed beneath me, sending my spine into a shiver. I didn’t need to look down to know what it was, but I couldn’t stop myself, and my mouth fell

open at the sight of the swollen head of Kai's penis poking out from between my legs. I was straddling him—straddling *it*—my bare center aligned with his.

“Yes,” he murmured, and my head snapped back up to face him.

“Yes?” I repeated. *Yes, what?* I was so flustered; I'd forgotten what we'd even been talking about. Had I asked him a question?

I must have looked confused because his hand joined mine at the top button of my borrowed shirt. Oh... *Oh!* I'd offered to give it back, but that was before I'd realized my legs were already spread for his viewing pleasure. Was he seriously okay with me taking it off?

“I'm not wearing anything underneath it,” I warned, and his eyebrows twitched, his mouth turning serious.

“I know.”

My stomach dipped and tumbled. Were we really doing this? Both of us were going to be naked?

... Well, he'd let me see all of him, so it was only fair, right?

Gulping, my hands slid away from the buttons, allowing him to take control and unfasten the top one for me. I'd only wanted to tease him a little, but now that his eyes were on me, I realized a part of me wanted him to see me, too.

Kai's fingers trembled as they worked down the buttons, one by one, his eyes growing wider every time he moved to the next. When the last button popped free, I eased the shirt back over my shoulders, opening it up for him.

There was nothing disappointing about his reaction.

He hissed like a man burned, a deep craving flickering in his lilac eyes. He clearly wanted to touch, to explore my chest like I'd just explored his, and I held my breath as I waited. But his hands only hovered, then dropped, settling low on my hips.

Perhaps he needed a little encouragement.

“Gosh, it's warm in here.” I shrugged the shirt the rest of the way off with a dry laugh and dropped it on top of his chest.

His teeth gritted as he watched on in silence, not even regarding the shirt I'd just returned.

Oh, his eyes might have shown a slight panic, but he was definitely enjoying this. The Pacific's customs were still a mystery to me, but with the way he was watching me, it wouldn't surprise me if their women kept themselves wrapped up as tightly as their men did. His gaze slowly panned

over my breasts. Then his dick throbbed, its hard heat practically begging for relief.

Should I have told him we were playing a dangerous game? That humans didn't typically bump their junk together just so they could do the *totally more intimate* act of feeling each other up? Only this quiet moment together was so real, so comfortable after all the chaos... *No*—I wasn't ready for it to end.

"You can touch me," I breathed out, leaning forward. Before I could press our stomachs back together, Kai's attention snapped to his shirt, and he yanked it right off his chest, casting it off the bed like the thought of breaking this moment and putting it on was the furthest from his mind.

That made two of us.

"I want to," he all but groaned, though his hands settled right back at my hips. I leaned forward to give his chin a teasing peck.

Damn, he was cute. Even his lips were pulled at a weird angle. Like he'd seen me and his muscles somehow forgot the correct way to smile. "Then why don't you?" Another nip, and he groaned again. I could get used to teasing him. My lips aimed higher, pressing a soft kiss against his mouth so he could feel my bare skin against his chest.

Oh, he felt it. His fingers curled, biting into my thighs, and my body rocked forward. I wanted him to make more sounds. A groan, a whimper, a grunt. Something. I just wanted to hear him.

My nipples drew against his chest, flaring little tingling sparks through my breasts as our cores rubbed together. One kiss. Then another. For someone new to kissing, he was sinfully good at it. His lips pressed back with a fiery strength, leaving no room for doubt or hesitation. More fire, more heat, more urgency. It wasn't until we broke apart in a combined gasp, both of our faces alight with arousal, that I realized I'd been grinding away at him. I hadn't meant to do it, but *damn*, it felt good, and with the way Kai's dick throbbed between my legs, the feeling was mutual.

Kai stared up at me, all wet lips and lust-drunk eyes. We had paused momentarily, taking each other in. Did he notice how aroused I was? I was pretty sure his dick was slick with evidence of what he did to me. All I knew was that he didn't want us to stop for long. His fingers sank into my thighs, coaxing my hips to move over him again. I failed to stifle a gasp as I slid against his length some more. Yeah—there was no way he didn't know the mess I'd made all over his dick.

“It’s like back in the pool,” Kai rasped, his hands kneading into my hips, urging me to keep grinding against him. “Nothing ever feels as good as it does when you’re with me.”

Moving at a frantic pace of my own, I seized one of his hands, bringing it up to my breast. “Sorry, but I can’t take the credit for the water jet.” I puffed a laugh that was snuffed out as soon as his thumb stroked over my nipple.

A moan built in my throat, and Kai stopped immediately, his hand popping off my breast to stare up at me like a puppy that wasn’t sure if it deserved a scolding.

“No, no—it’s good,” I coaxed, drawing his hand back to me and grinding against him again. *Damn*, it was like the more weight I gave him, the more his steely dick pushed back. “*Really* good. I love it when you touch me here.”

I leaned back down, feeling out every slick inch of him, and caught his lips with mine as our bodies rocked together.

Then he did something unexpected, pulling off my mouth to move to my shoulder. His tongue traced up my neck, and it nearly threw my hips off their rhythm.

“Kai,” I moaned as the tips of his teeth grazed the sensitive edge of my ear. My nails bit into his chest to keep myself from falling off of him. Another graze, more pressure. He was testing me, seeing how much I could take. “More,” I begged, and he laughed. He actually *laughed*.

He flicked my ear with his tongue, then scraped it with his teeth. Hot breath beat against me as he pulled me even closer. “As if I had any intention of stopping.”

His teeth sank, biting into the fleshy part of my earlobe. It wouldn’t leave a mark, but it did ignite a burst of adrenaline that went straight to my head.

I gasped. “Yes, like that—” Goodness, I could become addicted to that feeling. The way the little spark of pain messed with my brain, confusing it into thinking it was pleasure. Then again, maybe it *was* pleasure, and I’d just never known how incredible the slight sting could be to one’s senses. I moaned, leaning into him. “Just like that.”

His mouth slid back to my neck, his teeth grating all the way down. I arched against him, my hips grinding. He was so hot between my legs, his hips, his cock, all lying so perfectly still underneath me, letting me use him to chase these feelings higher and higher. More, more, *more*. When I was biting into my own lip, those sharp tips that had been working me into a frenzy sank into the spot between my neck and shoulder. I cried out, the sudden spark

sending me hurling over the edge. Stars glittered in my vision as Kai tensed, garbling a moan against my skin while every inch of him shuddered underneath me.

Hot spurts jetted over our stomachs, but I kept moving, kept grinding, until I almost lost my balance and he had to forcefully grab hold of my hips. “Easy...” he groaned, leading my movements until I finally slowed, both of us spent, panting messes.

When our bodies stilled and we both started coming out of our haze, Kai held me there like he wasn’t ready to let go. I blew out a long, satisfied breath as he rubbed up and down the small of my back.

“That was... *Wow.*” I looked down at the trails of cum smeared over his abs. Heat flared over my face as I rubbed a hand over my neck. My skin still stung from where his teeth had been, but it was a good sting. I lurched forward, rolling off of him, and as soon as I hit the bed, his mouth was on me again, easing the ache with a flurry of soothing kisses.

In between kisses, he whispered against my neck. “Was that too hard?” His hands ran light strokes over my skin like he was eager to relieve any pain he might have caused. “Did I hurt you?”

“A little,” I admitted, leaning into each caress of his lips. It felt nice. Loving, even. Like he loved taking care of me. But he was the one always looking out for me, wasn’t he? Getting me clothes, doing my hair. Making sure I always had what I needed. “But I asked you to do it harder, so it’s not your fault. I bet it won’t even leave a mark.”

“Damn,” he blew out under his breath before kissing over my neck all over again. It was the first time I’d ever heard Kai curse. “I swear my mouth just does things,” he grumbled. “Moves all on its own—but that’s no excuse.” He pulled away to look at me, his eyes full of sincerity. “I won’t do it that hard again, Clair. I’m sorry.”

I scoffed. “Don’t be sorry,” I said, then rolled onto my back. Cum was smeared all over my stomach, which was a first for me, but I didn’t really mind it. I stared down at it, taking it in. *Wow.* Did human males come as much as mermen did, or were these guys part sperm whale? “It wasn’t what I expected, but I enjoyed it. I should have said this earlier, but thank you for saving me.”

“Not what you expected, huh?” Kai’s grin was waiting for me when I glanced back over. “Same goes for me,” he said, rolling on his side to face me. He winced with the movement, but when his eyes settled back on mine,



he was smiling brighter than ever. “I *really* enjoyed—” He paused. “What would humans call that?”

“Uh...” I glanced at our cum glazed bellies while my mind grasped for the correct phrasing. What was it called when you got off by grinding on each other’s genitals? It certainly wasn’t a *dry* hump. “Foreplay, I guess,” I said with a noncommittal shrug, and he nodded like he was soaking up the information.

“I like foreplay,” he said, his teeth flashing with the words. “Even better than the pool.”

Now I was laughing, my head shaking as I scooted off the bed. “I sure hope I’m better than a pool,” I teased, getting to my feet.

The corners of his mouth fell. “Where are you going?”

I gestured to my stomach. “Don’t you think we should clean up?” Leaning over the bed, I planted a kiss on top of the soft spikes of his hair. “Then we can cuddle until Barren and Laverne come back.”

His eyes lit, but I knew that there was a lot we needed to talk about before they came to check on us. Like what had happened after he’d been knocked out. The cecaelia, the sea wizard, Leander taking in the trident...

Then there was the shell that had saved my life. I’d stashed it as soon as we got back from the beach, too afraid that it might accidentally cut someone if I kept it out, but the others needed to see it. Maybe there was an easy explanation as to why it had acted as a blade when I’d tried to clobber the Rook over the head with it?

I massaged my temples as I walked to the bathroom.

Yes, there was a lot to discuss, and I felt whatever happened next was the beginning of something greater than all of us.

## BARREN



When I returned to my room, Laverne was still snoring. I eased the door shut and took a breath, using the end of my workout tank to dab at my forehead. The fitness center had been empty, and I was thankful for every moment alone. Being around others was a change I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to. I'd hoped a workout would help clear my head, but the fitness room was ill-equipped, and I'd barely worked up a sweat.

*What I wouldn't give for a pull down machine and some free weights,* I thought, thinking of my equipment back home. But driving to a gym wasn't an option. Not while Clairra was here.

My shirt was dry, but I pulled it off and bagged it up with the rest of my laundry. A sharp snore tore through the room, and I shook my head as I checked on my phone.

No calls, no messages. When I placed it back on the counter, my chest felt lighter.

I still had time.

While gathering fresh clothes, I shuffled through my rolls of socks and paused over the leather brace folded neatly at the bottom of my luggage. My jaw set as I scanned over the perfect round of stingray leather, overcome with the need to put it on.

The impulse won, and I pulled it out and placed the stiff leather against my shoulder, taking a deep breath as I lined it up. The tension in my muscles eased before I even had the strap around me. I threaded the buckle next, tightening it into place over my chest.

Under the firm weight pressing down on me, I finally felt whole. The shoulder brace looked foolish paired with sweatpants, but I didn't care. I'd been exposing painful memories for too long. Memories that were better off strapped up and hidden.

I moved to the dresser, carefully checking my new brace's placement in the mirror, watching my muscles swell around the leather as I bent and flexed them.

Adjusting a brace was second nature to me by now. I made a point of overlooking the jagged dips and scars that covered half of my chest while I worked. It was easier to hide a weakness from others when you stopped looking at it yourself. I didn't need a reminder of what might have been.

The leather was thicker than my last brace, hewn from a larger ray, stiff and far from molding to the grooves of my shoulder. But with my previous brace lost to the Atlantic, this would have to do.

I flexed again, curving my spine to the left, then the right, until I was certain the strap would hold in place. Not bad. It would break into shape faster in salt water than on land, but I would survive the sores until it did.

The adrenaline from my workout drained away as I stood there, allowing memories of Clair's soft hums and rolls of laughter to seep into my mind like a delicious nectar. The ones she'd made after following Leander into the bathroom.

My teeth gnashed as my fingers worked, tightening my brace's strap until my lungs pinched and my shoulder burned.

There was a time, not long ago, when I would have given her up for Leander's sake. Stayed silent as he and Clair and Kai worked things out.

Now, I could barely keep my mind from trying to work out how to make my voice call to her like hers did to me—even when she was an entire room away, wrapped up in the arms of another merman.

I'd stood in front of the bathroom with lead feet, tortured by the smile I could hear in her voice from the other side of the door. Both of them were laughing, recklessly carefree. Like we hadn't just been dragged through the jaws of the Undersea, chewed up and spat back out.

Huffing, I scrubbed a hand over my face and squared my shoulders up with the mirror. I leaned in, staring down my reflection, waiting for my jaw to loosen enough to test out a smile.

I finally managed a simple, awkward smile, and it only took a second for my lips to fall.

“*Alhey*,” I cursed, slipping into my native tongue. What had I expected? Maybe it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was.

When I turned my back on the mirror, Laverne’s sleepy stare was waiting for me. Lost in thought as I was, I hadn’t even registered that her snoring had stopped.

Her eyes darted around as her head lifted from the center of my bed. “*Ren?*”

Then her eyes widened, and I lifted my hand out to calm her like I’d seen Kai do countless times before. “Laverne, wait —”

“*Where’s Big Brother?*” She dived from the bed in a quick swoop, her tail and flippers slapping against the carpet. Her neck whipped, taking in her surroundings, the panic in her eyes growing. When she realized where she was, her eyes narrowed on me. “*Where did he go!*”

The hand move wasn’t working, so I switched tactics, giving her soft clicks with my tongue in the way one did to keep a frightened barracuda from striking.

She took obvious offense to that.

“*How DARE you?*” Her hiss was so scathing, it burned a path as it rattled around my head. “*Tell me where he is! Why did you take me away from his side?*”

Her voice cracked, unleashing a flood of raw emotion inside of me that sent my pulse into a frenzy. For a split second, her panic was mine, and thoughts and emotions poured into my head, unrestrained.

*Kai dead.*

*All of them, dead.*

*Now I’m all alone.*

I swung my head like it could shake the thoughts out until I could recover. “Nothing happened to your brother, Laverne.” I kept my tone even, but she didn’t look any less concerned. “He’s safe. He needed to rest, so I —”

The whack of Laverne’s flippers pounding on the ground cut me off as she snapped into action. Her jaw dropped, her teeth bared. But instead of taking her rage out on me, she bounded for the countertop, leaping up and balancing on her tail so she could scoop up the pile of room keys in her jaws. Then she pushed off, giving herself a sliding start to the door.

“Laverne!” I called after her, my pulse hammering in my head. But she had already slapped the door open and nosed through it, darting headfirst into

the hall.

“*Alhey.*” I grunted before chasing after her, making sure to flick the door wedge so I wouldn’t get locked out of my room. Wrestling my key back from her would be a miracle, especially after she found out I’d left Clairra alone with Kai.

When I got through the door, Laverne was already down the hall, her nose pressed against the door to Kai’s room. “Laverne!”

She didn’t even pause, trying out the different keys to the lock. She had the door open a second later, and I was only halfway down the hall when the screaming started.

Clairra’s screams.

I made it to Kai’s door in a flash and growled out my frustration when I found the door had already relocked. I was deciding whether to rip the lock off or break the door down when the handle turned. The door flew open, and there was Clairra, her red hair swinging as she threw a panicked look over her shoulder at Laverne.

I stood there, chest heaving, too stunned to move.

She was completely naked.

“*Harlot!*” Laverne screeched, projecting loud enough for any merfolk within ten leagues to hear. She was barking, too, her tongue frothing as she snapped at Clairra’s feet.

Laverne charged forward and Clairra jumped with a squeal, her eyes meeting mine as she bolted through the door. A flicker of something passed over her face, and she shoved right into me, throwing her arms around my waist like she thought I could protect her. Those soft lips whispered, “Barren,” sinking into me with a sigh of relief, and my body moved on its own.

I yanked her close, wrapping around her as a shield while Laverne bounced and yipped at my heels.

“*You strumpet! Dirty sand slug!*”

“Stop it, Laverne!” Kai’s voice called from behind us.

My arm closed around Clairra’s bare waist as the barking faded. Seeing Clairra like this, it should have been obvious Kai had awoken, but the realization hit like a blow to the chest. Relief that Kai was alive mixed with something charged and dark, making my jaw clench.

Laverne’s joyous cries filled my head as she retreated into the room, her flippers pounding the carpet in a gallop. “*Big Brother! You’re awake!*”

“Wait, Clairra, don’t lea—*oof*.” Kai’s voice cut off, and I didn’t need to look back to know that Laverne had done a belly flop, tackling him back down to the bed.

My mind was blank when I scooped Clairra up with my arm.

“I thought she was going to murder me,” Clairra said, shaking where I held her against my chest. She was nearly breathless, like she had just come back from the fitness center herself. I pushed that thought from my mind, and it wasn’t until I was already down the hall that I realized I was carrying her back to my room.

“How is a sea lion scarier than a cecaelia?” Clairra panted the words against my neck as I shouldered my door open.

The door knocked against the wedge as I set her down in the center of the room. My heartbeat hammered in my head as I straightened up, suddenly faced with the question of why I’d brought her here, and what I was going to do now that I had.

I watched her initial relief fade away from her face, replaced by a flair of panic as the same questions likely popped into her mind, neither of which I had an answer to.

So we stood there, pausing for a breath, taking each other in. I could tell she was waiting for me to say something, to react in some way, but my mind was blank; I couldn’t move. Couldn’t think.

*Say something.*

My mouth opened, but her eyelashes fell before I could force any words out. She slanted away from me, awkwardly folding her arms over her chest.

“I’m sorry.” Color rose over her face. “I should have known she would barge in like that. I should have been... prepared.” She took a hesitant step toward my bed, like she was thinking of using its sheets to cover up, but had thought better of it. “Do you have something I could wear?”

Sweat pooled down my back as I realized that, for once, I didn’t want to clothe her.

I wanted her on my bed, wrapped in my sheets, my body next to her so she could use me as she saw fit. As a shield, as a lover, I would do anything to get my voice to call to her. I didn’t care how she used me, as long as it gave me the chance to prove my worth.

Her eyes darted to where my luggage sat. “Just like a T-shirt or something?” she whispered, and the vulnerability in her voice tore my selfish thoughts away.

I could barely speak while she was around, and I thought that taking her to my bed would be enough to prove my worth?

I managed a strained, “Mmh,” as I went for my luggage.

My gaze landed on the side of her neck as I passed, and my vision tunneled, everything in me going blank. Before I was aware I’d moved, I was in front of her, brushing her hair away to inspect the side of her neck and shoulder.

Red marks swept down her skin like footprints scattered in sand. I didn’t realize my thumb was tracing down the line, feeling the slight swells, until her skin shuddered underneath my touch.

Friendship meant nothing to me as I growled out three low words. “He hurt you?”

Her shoulders shivered as she craned her chin to meet my gaze. A bold defiance glittered in her eyes. “I liked it.”

Another gut punch. “You... liked it.” My shoulders slumped as I sank away, going for the counter. My fingers shook with lost restraint as I grabbed my phone, my mind drowning in a surge of thoughts.

I needed to have clothes delivered to her. To cover her up, so I wouldn’t have to see what he’d done.

He had hurt her. But she *liked* it.

My body burned, overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. Before I realized it, I was at her neck again, brushing more hair away to get a second look.

She swallowed down a gulp, her lips slowly parting as she watched the madness overtake me. “You believe me, don’t you, Barren?”

I froze, reminded of the last time I’d doubted her sincerity. In the ocean, I’d taken a look inside her mind that had resulted in my hand clamping around her throat. In that moment, it had taken everything in me to hold back my strength, and even though I’d successfully fought the impulse, I’d still hurt her before I’d forced my hand to let go.

I’d used my magic to look inside thousands of minds, but Clair’s was like nothing I’d ever seen. Layers of darkness crowded its corners like a fog, impenetrable except for a glimpse that I sorely regretted. A dark truth hidden so deep, even she wasn’t aware.

Telepathically linking to her had been a mistake I would never repeat.

I pulled away from her, letting her hair fall back in place against her neck. My jaw barely moved as I answered. “I believe you.”

I didn’t need to pry inside her mind with magic to know she was telling

the truth. Kai hadn't really hurt her, but that knowledge did little to keep my *thrall* crazed mind from wanting to rip his jaw off.

"I'm going to get you clothes," I said, turning on my phone. "Don't open the door. Not for anyone."

"Hey, wait a second—" Clair's voice followed me to the door, but I didn't stop. I needed to get somewhere my head could clear. Throwing the wedge back, I closed the door, not even caring I didn't have a key to get back in.

One look at Clair's body, and I couldn't think. I wasn't built for carefree flirting and smiles. My body had been trained to react, and I needed to get out, to get away, before the impulses had me doing something I would regret.

My hand shook as I scrolled through the contacts in my phone. When I landed on the right number, I held the phone to my ear and waited. The line picked up before it even rang.

"Sir?"

I blew out a slow breath, composing myself. "Putting in a request for a delivery. Female clothes, warm, for travel. Have them sent up to my room."

Soft keyboard clicks tapped in my ear until the voice on the line continued, "And what size pants, shirt, and undergarments will we be sending up, sir?"

Instantly, Clair stood naked in my mind. I cleared my throat, shifting on my feet. "Small... a-and curved."

The soft tapping abruptly stopped. "Small... and *curved*," the receptionist drawled, and I ground my teeth, feeling foolish.

"If that is all, sir, someone will be there to drop off your request within the hour. Glory to the Queen."

I nodded absently, my throat scratching as I repeated, "Glory to the Queen."

The line went silent, and I dropped my phone, noticing then that I was still dressed in what I'd worn to the fitness center. "*Alhey*." The gray sweatpants were revealing exactly how foolish my thoughts had been, and I wondered if Clair had noticed.

After adjusting myself in vain, I set my back against the wall next to my door and tried not to think about how I'd abandoned Clair on the other side of it.

Then my phone buzzed, reminding me who the hall I was standing in belonged to. My eyes glazed as I read the text message I knew would be



coming.

Lynn: It's about time. You've kept me waiting.

A second message came, and as I scanned it, my jaw set.

Lynn: I trust you won't leave any messes behind for me to clean up when you take her.

I turned my phone off and leaned my head against the wall.

It was all hers. Every room, every staff member, every personal spy hidden in the corridors. Even the kitchen where I'd distracted myself by cooking meals for everyone so that I might forget that I belonged to her as well.

## CLAIRA



I couldn't believe Barren carried me back to his room just to leave me here all alone. My heart had raced as I'd watched him leave. Even more than it had when Laverne was snapping at my heels, though I didn't blame her. If I'd found someone I hated spooning with my best friend, I wouldn't be happy either.

But then Barren had appeared, carried me away from the madness, and practically ran from me. And for at least ten minutes, I stood exactly where he'd placed me, staring at the door, waiting to see if he would change his mind and run back.

Honestly, it was thoughtful of him to get me clothes. I needed them. So why was I so disappointed he hadn't burst back into the room? *Sigh.*

"Because you're a pervert now," I mumbled to myself as I rounded the bed, heading for Barren's bathroom. Maybe there would be a towel in there I could cover up with until he returned with some real clothes.

I might have been a pervert, but was it really my fault when these mermen kept touching me, hoisting me up and carrying me around like it wasn't a big deal at all? And after being tucked close to Kai for the last few hours, my body was welcoming the contact. Heck, it was practically *expecting* it. Which wasn't fair to Barren at all.

Leaving a hotel room naked after being chased out by a sea lion? Yeah, that wasn't how I'd imagined my morning going. But again, Barren had saved me, dropping me off in his room and staring down at me with those dark, lustful eyes as he brushed his hand along my neck. And then he'd left

me. Now *that* wasn't fair.

Pushing the memory away, I stormed into the bathroom. Two rolled towels sat up on a little shelf next to the vanity. I grabbed the top one, snapping it open and folding myself inside it. Then I tucked the end of the towel into my cleavage, completing the look. *Beautiful*, I thought with a roll of my eyes.

I still didn't know why Barren hadn't offered me one of his shirts. He was so large, they'd probably reach past my knees. But everything in his room was so orderly, so maybe he was just as particular with his shirts? That made sense. I wasn't exactly keeping up with my clothes these days.

Damn, now that I was looking, his bathroom really was eerily immaculate—complete with a toothbrush and tube of toothpaste sitting perfectly perpendicular to the edge of the vanity. Even the towel hanging over the shower curtain had its corners aligned, like he'd deliberately taken time making it square after he'd hung it. "*Huh*. Can't relate," I muttered. He would hate seeing the inside of my closet.

Wandering back out of the bathroom, I took a seat on the edge of Barren's bed and waited. And waited. Then the blank TV started calling to me, and while I was looking around for its remote, I noticed the phone sitting on the bedside table.

... How hadn't I realized there were phones in these rooms?

I could have been checking in with Dad and Gram this entire time, instead of waiting around all sulky because a merman I barely knew hadn't ravaged me the moment he'd had me alone and naked in a room with a bed. Though Barren *had* wanted me—well, his body had, at least. The front of his sweatpants had made that beautifully, pointedly clear. I bit my lip at the memory.

*Mmm... Gray sweatpants*. I hadn't imagined someone as put-together as Barren would wear them, but I certainly wasn't complaining.

My stomach heated, and I pressed my legs together to stifle it before I got carried away. *Simmer down, pervert*.

I needed to get that image out of my head before I made my call. So, I slapped my burning cheeks, then reached for the phone.

Just as I picked it up, two knocks rapped against the door, quick and confident.

Somehow, just by the sound of it, I knew it wasn't Barren. Putting the phone down, I tip-toed to the door, holding on to the front of the towel to

make sure it wouldn't fall. "Hello?"

I peeked through the peephole and saw the distorted figure of a woman waving a hand in front of her face, her lips tight as she called back, "Hurry and open the door, darling."

My hand hesitated on the doorknob. Barren had told me not to let anybody in. But when I didn't immediately let her in, she added, "I've brought your clothes."

My face heated. Barren had gone to see a woman about getting me new clothes? Nope, even though I had no right, something in me didn't like that one bit. As soon as I turned the knob, the door swung open, and the woman strolled right inside, dragging a sleek, black suitcase behind her. My eyes followed her in, amazed at how every inch of her oozed a confidence I could only dream of. She swung the luggage right on top of Barren's perfectly made bed like it was her own.

Who was this woman?

The emerald polish on her fingernails shined as she went for the zipper, and it hit me. The harpoons. The bag of pearls. She had sat in her Mustang in front of the hotel to deliver them.

"Claira."

I jumped at the deep note of Barren's voice. He was standing in the hallway, far enough away that it was clear he wasn't trying to follow her in.

My eyes slid down his body, which was a mistake. He was still shirtless, still in those damned sweatpants. Had a store really let him in? A shoulder brace hardly counted as clothing. And more importantly, had he asked this woman to go with him for help? I couldn't keep the tint of envy from shrilling my voice as I asked, "I see you're back from shopping. Who's your friend?"

*Damn.* That had come out at least a hundred times more accusatory than I'd meant it to, and Barren's dark eyebrows drew together like it had shocked him, too.

His lips parted. "Clai —"

"We're not friends," the woman sang out behind me, cutting Barren off. She waved a hand over her shoulder and tapped a heel over the carpet like she was already bored with the whole situation. "Now close the door, darling, so we can get to work. And then I can leave with a nice chunk taken off of my debt, okay?"

Well, that was blunt and to the point. I was about to close the door when

Barren's voice stopped me. "My Queen employs her."

"Oh?" I looked over at her again, taking in her otherworldly features. She was a mermaid, of course, but she worked for Barren's queen, not Barren. "Right. That makes sense." I'd never heard him mention his queen. For Barren and the Indian Ocean's sake, I hoped she was nothing like King Eamon.

Barren scratched at his neck, looking extremely uncomfortable.

"Okay, bye-bye now," the woman trilled, edging next to me and forcing the door shut in Barren's face. Then she turned her attention to me. "You can trust me, darling." Grabbing me by the shoulders, she urged me over to the bed, where she'd already lain out an assortment of pants and sweaters.

"I'm Rocci. I didn't know your size, so I just pulled together what I could find." She took a step back, humming and focusing on my chest like some sort of psycho. Instinct had my arms moving up to the top of my towel, but she swatted them back down to take in all my angles.

I definitely hadn't signed up for this. "Um—" I started, but my voice died away when she pulled out a couple of bras that could easily fit my entire head in just one of their cups.

"Well, these certainly won't work." Her tongue clicked as she tossed them aside, making room to dig through the rest. "*Curved* didn't exactly give me much to go by." Why was she talking so loudly? It was like she was trying to make sure everyone on the entire floor heard every word she said.

As she worked to untangle a wad of G-string panties, I noticed a beige bra that looked close to my size and went for it. "What do you mean by curved?" I asked, dropping the towel to put the bra on.

The woman threw her dark hair around as she chuckled. "They asked for your size when they took the order, and can you believe that oaf said you were *small and curved*?" She backtracked to the door as she spoke, taking another look out of the peephole like she was making sure there wasn't someone listening on the other side.

My belly swooped as I thumbed through panties, looking for something that was held together by more than just lace and strings. "Barren said that?" Sure, next to him, everyone probably seemed small, but it was nice to hear. Then her words sank in, and I shot her a look, frowning. "He's not an oaf."

But her entire demeanor changed now that she had revisited the peephole, and dread pooled over her face as she pulled away from the door. "Oh, *honey*," she whispered, corralling me in her arms into an embrace I was *not*

prepared for. “What has that beast done to you?”

“What?” My voice cracked as I shuddered, but she kept *hugging* me.

*Nope, nope*—I didn’t like this.

I ducked down, sliding out of her arms, and when my eyes found hers again, there was a sympathy swirling in the depths of her emerald eyes. “He was supposed to capture you, but this...” She kept to a whisper, cupping the side of my face when her voice trailed.

I really did *not* like this.

It was then that I realized where she was looking—the marks Kai had left on my neck. “Oh, you poor thing,” she continued, “I knew he was a monster, but I never imagined he would take you like *this*.”

Pity soaked her words as her eyes swept over my body. Like *this*. This, meaning, *marked and naked*. The look she was giving, she thought Barren had done something unspeakable to me.

Wait—Barren was supposed to *capture me*?

“Barren... Barren hasn’t done anything to me.” I kept my voice as low as she had kept hers. It was a good thing, too, with the way she was throwing around words like *beast* and *monster*.

Rocci hummed, leaning over to pick up a black knit sweater with an extra long neck, testing it against me to see if it would cover all the marks. “*Poor thing*. Everyone is on standby, waiting for his signal to take you.”

*What?* It wasn’t true—it couldn’t be true. If Barren had wanted to take me without asking, he would have already done it. Nothing would have stopped him. He’d already had me alone when Kai and Laverne were both still asleep.

But he did steal glances at his phone a lot, that checking often accompanied by a nervous energy I hadn’t felt comfortable prying into. This wasn’t some sort of covert operation for him, was it?

Rocci offered me the sweater along with a pat on the shoulder, and my hands felt oddly numb as I took it and pulled it on. Although the knit was warm and loose around my neck, my throat was tight when I asked, “Where is he supposed to take me?”

“Oh, honey, I know you’ve got brains in there.” She planted a hand on her hip with the same attitude she’d had when she strolled into the room. “Or it wouldn’t have taken him this long to steal you away from the Atlantic. I think you know *where* and *why* he wants you.”

I shook my head. “He wouldn’t force me to go to the Indian Ocean. Not

without asking first.”

*Would he?*

Rocci gestured at my neck. “You sure about that, darling?” She leaned in, lowering her voice to the barest of whispers. “Don’t let his silence fool you. You don’t know what he’s capable of. He knows every thought you’re thinking, so he’s always one step ahead, just like his scheming sister. Then there was that scandal with his *impairment...*”

A weaker neck would have snapped with how fast I pulled away from her. While she might have had good intentions, now... now I was angry.

“There is nothing wrong with Barren.” Despite trying, I couldn’t keep to a whisper. Rage shook through me as her eyes widened. I snatched up a pair of pants and a wad of underwear without even bothering to check their sizes. “I think I’m good with these. Thanks for the clothes. Sorry you had to bring them.”

Rocci settled her hand back on her hip as she sized me up. Then she scoffed. “Don’t worry, honey, I’ll be compensated nicely for this little errand.” She turned away with a twist, acting as if she was the one dismissing me. “Blow Queen Javalynn a kiss for me when you see her.”

She started throwing clothes back in her luggage, and I took the time to wrangle the plainest, least chafe-inducing G-string out of the bunch. Fantastic. I could only hope these weren’t hers.

When she had the suitcase zipped, I’d pulled the pants up. Fortunately for my curves, they had some stretch.

She threw the suitcase down on its rollers and headed for the door, her nose held high. When she opened it, Barren was waiting on the other side. His eyes snapped straight to me as he backed away, giving her room to leave.

“Take care now, darling,” she called out, waving her emerald painted fingernails over her shoulder, obviously not meaning a word.

I shuddered, thankful to see her go. Mermaids were something else.

Barren was just standing at the door, so I toed over to him and stepped out in the hallway, just to make sure she was gone.

“I seem to have trouble getting along with other mermaids.” I huffed, and although my sweater covered me, I could still feel Barren’s dark eyes on my neck.

Well, it was official. Even with clothes on, things were still weird between us. Rocci sure hadn’t helped on that front.

When he finally tore his eyes away from me, he let out a breath and

shouldered through the door. “Let me get changed, and then we’ll leave.”

Wait—we were going somewhere?

Although he flipped the lever to keep the door cracked for me, I didn’t follow him in. Something about standing in the open felt safer, and I couldn’t help but think over Rocci’s words as I looked down the empty hall.

*“Everyone is on standby, waiting for his signal to take you.”*

Merfolk were savage—I knew that—so why would the Indian Ocean be any different? They’d bought a whole hotel at some point, though I’d assumed they’d done it when the curse had hit to monitor the Atlantic. But what if they’d purchased it to keep an eye on *me*?

I pondered that thought until the door creaked as Barren came back through it. He’d gotten dressed so quickly, he was still straightening out his suit jacket so the buttons would lie flat underneath the strap of his brace.

“That was fast.” I offered a smile, then noticed his curls had gone flat. His hair spilled over his eyes. “Did you get a shower?” That had to be some sort of record.

“Mmh,” was all he said, and it made me nervous.

*“Don’t let his silence fool you.”*

“So, where are we going?” I asked, then held my breath as I waited his answer. At the top of his pocket, his car keys were just visible.

Barren froze to look at me from under his curls, his hand still on his jacket. “To breakfast.”

I exhaled. Breakfast sounded innocent enough, and I’d never known Barren to joke about food.

“Great. We ate all the food you left for Kai in the fridge hours ago. It was delicious, but now I’m starving.”

It was barely noticeable, but the corner of his mouth lifted, just a hair.

Then he mussed his wet hair, looking up at the ceiling. “And then I thought we could go for a drive,” he said, carefully. Too carefully.

*Dammit.*



# 9

## CLAIRA



Sitting in the front seat of Barren's car felt strange. Especially since Laverne hadn't been shy in letting everyone know this seat was *hers*. But after Barren walked me to his car, he'd opened the passenger door for me, so I took the cue and climbed inside like a good little hostage.

Okay, maybe I wasn't a hostage. Not yet, anyway.

But Barren's phone had buzzed so much during breakfast, it sounded like he had a vibrator hidden in his pants. He'd somehow managed to ignore it, though, leaving his phone in his pocket while he assembled breakfast sandwiches for us. Then there was the tell of his jaw. It was so tense, when it came time to eat, he could barely pry his molars apart long enough to take a bite.

Clearly, something was about to go down.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled as I fastened my seatbelt. I was on high alert, and not just because I was half expecting Laverne to pop out of nowhere, landing on the hood of the car to give me the stink eye for daring to sit in her seat. If Barren's queen was aiming to steal me, merfolk from the Indian Ocean had to be close by, and I wasn't about to let someone throw a burlap sack over my head again.

Using my hand as a visor, I looked through the windows as the driver's side door opened. "Damn, it's bright out," I mumbled. The car rocked as Barren dropped in next to me, folding up like a lawn chair just to get his legs inside. I eyed Laverne's sunglasses and wondered if putting them on my face would be enough of an affront to summon her soul out of thin air to smite me.

Barren unclipped his sunglasses from his visor and offered them to me. “Here.”

“That’s sweet of you.” I waved him off, not wanting him to have sun in his eyes. “But that’s okay. You’re the one driving.”

His arm didn’t budge. “Take them.” He looked oddly concerned, like my comfort during this kidnapping was important to him. Maybe he thought giving me sunglasses would soften the blow of this horrible betrayal. Okay—now I was being dramatic.

Barren’s eyebrows sank further, and the slight frown of his mouth chipped away at my icy heart.

“Thanks,” I breathed out, relenting. I put his sunglasses on and was immediately surprised by the clarity of the lenses. The ones I wore on the boat were always smudged and scratched from salt water. I wasn’t used to looking through a clean pair. “The curse of being born with these eyes,” I said wryly, shaking my head.

Barren turned on the engine and threw me a puzzled look.

“They say lighter eyes are more sensitive to light.” I slid the frames down my nose to show him my gray eyes. Then I leaned into the center console so he could get a closer look. “See?”

Barren blinked at me, his dark eyes on mine long enough to make me feel self-conscious for showing off my eye color—like *gray* was spectacularly rare or something. “I see,” he finally mumbled as he shifted the car into reverse.

“Yeah, so I always like to keep some sunglasses with me when I go out on my boat.” I pushed the sunglasses back up my nose and sat back, sinking into the seat. My belly might have been full of a buttery croissant sandwich, but now that we were actually leaving, painful knots were cramping around my breakfast.

The car idled as Barren’s hand lingered on the gearshift. He hadn’t seemed ready to leave the kitchen after we’d both finished breakfast, either.

Then his phone hummed in his pocket and he released a breath, backing out of the parking spot.

The question I was still mulling over jumped to mind: if he took me to the airport, would I run?

I always wanted to travel overseas, but not like this. I tapped my seatbelt, nervously playing with the strap as we pulled out of the parking lot. When we got to the main road, the direction he turned would tell me all I needed to

know, and then fight or flight would kick in, and I would have my answer to that question.

“Where are we going?” I’d tried to keep my tone light, unaffected. Unfortunately, it sounded more like I was a second away from a breakdown.

He threw on the turn signal and arched an eyebrow. “Would you rather not go back?”

The right blinker flashed. *Right*. He was taking me back to Longshore Bay. Back to the warehouse.

My gut twisted in confusion. “You’re taking me to Leander? But he said you’d drive him back to the hotel today.”

Barren’s shoulders stiffened. Although the main road was clear, we sat at the stop sign while his teeth ground together. “I couldn’t leave—” He paused, mouth open wide like he was rearranging all of his words. The leather steering wheel creaked as his fist clenched around it. “I didn’t want to leave you alone.”

Now he was worried about leaving me alone? Crossing my arms, I sank back in my seat. “Yeah, well, you left me alone for over an hour while you went to get me clothes.”

He mumbled something deep and incoherent as he took the right turn. My heart raced. He actually took the turn—we were really going to Longshore Bay.

I huffed, though secretly my insides were screaming with relief. Rocci had been wrong, and although Barren was totally acting weird, he wasn’t actually stealing me away.

“Well, you did leave me alone.” I waved my wrist, trying to hide how glad I was that he hadn’t betrayed me. “I had to entertain myself by going through your luggage and moving all your socks around.”

His spine shifted upright as he leaned forward, bearing down on the steering wheel. “You didn’t,” he said evenly, but a mist of sweat broke out over his forehead. I could practically see the veins in his temple bulge. “You didn’t touch my socks.”

“I sure did.” My lips pursed together as I fought to keep up my poker face. “Switched all the pairs around. The gray are now matched with the black, and each white is matched up with a tan. And when I put them back, I lined every pair up perpendicular to your underwear but *one*. That one I left slightly askew, because I knew it would be the perfect revenge.”

That did it. A smile cracked over the stone titan’s face. His eyes crinkled,

but he kept them trained on the road. “I don’t own white socks.”

“No?” I leaned against the door and gave a shrug. “Darn. I almost had you, though. You looked like you were about to turn this car around to go check.”

He shook his head, though he was visibly more relaxed. “So, you looked through my underwear?”

“*What?*” My face practically lit on fire. “I didn’t touch your luggage—it was a joke, obviously.”

“Obviously,” he repeated, the slightest chuckle vibrating his deep voice.

I turned toward the window and covertly adjusted the air vent so it would blow on my face. Even as my skin cooled, my smile stayed. It was nice, joking around with Barren like this. Just a day ago, I didn’t even know he could joke.

“I didn’t leave you.” The humor faded from his voice. “I was right outside the door.”

I hummed a note in response, watching the buildings roll by. *You could have stayed*, I wanted to say. But it wasn’t like I’d pushed him out, or even hinted that I wanted him to leave.

We passed the Aquatic Center, and I thought of the last time I’d been there. One of the front windows was still broken from Leander smashing through it. “Do you think Lee is okay?”

When Barren didn’t answer, I turned to look at him. “King Eamon won’t know he has the trident, right? He can’t like... sense its magic, or something, can he?”

Barren’s head tilted thoughtfully, but he kept his eyes on the road. “Can you sense it?”

“No. I guess not.”

Though I could *see* it, even when no one else in our group could. But as long as Leander found a shirt before he went to see his father, he should be able to keep his magical tattoo hidden, even if there were other merfolk like me who could see the marks.

The car slowed as we rolled into the gravel parking lot, and I stretched out my shoulders. The warehouse was open, with a few unfamiliar merfolk hanging just outside of the rolled-up doors.

*Wait...*

A young girl was next to the bushes, her dark hair bouncing as she rocked on her toes. I squinted, pulling Barren’s sunglasses off to get a better look.

Yes—I knew that merfry. Echinea.

Relief hit me. I'd hoped to have time to talk to her about the sea wizard. I pulled my seatbelt off as soon as the car stopped and handed Barren back his sunglasses. "Thanks, Barren. You can wait here if you want. I'll be right back." Throwing him a quick smile, I hopped out of the car to head toward Echinea.

A bucket sitting between her legs held her attention, the water inside it sloshing around as she stirred it with a long stick. "Echinea." I flashed her a smile and a wave.

When she saw me, all the childish amusement on her face soured. "Oh." She dropped her stick and crossed her arms high over her chest. "It's you."

Ouch. Okay, it seemed she was still mad at me for getting her into trouble with her father. Smiling again, I looked down at her bucket where a heap of shells glittered along its bottom. "That's not salt water, is it?"

Echinea's eyes rolled. "No," she said, looking exasperated that I would even ask. She gave the side of the bucket a tap with her foot that sent water sloshing all around. "My papa says we have to stay away from salt water, remember? I got this from that wall over there." She pointed to the side of the warehouse where a spigot jutted out, a hose coiled in the bushes in front of it.

"That was clever of you," I praised, but her lips hardened like I'd cursed her.

"What do you want?" she asked, snatching the stick back up to swirl her shells around some more. "If you want to tattle on me to my papa, he already knows what I'm doing. He helped me reach the bucket."

"I actually wanted to talk to you about"—I inhaled a breath before forcing out—"Poseidon."

Her eyes sharpened as she looked up from her shells, honing in on me. "What about Poseidon?"

"I met him," I said, and her face immediately lit with excitement. Oh, crushing her little Poseidon-believing heart was going to be painful.

She gasped, dropping her stick again. "You did?" Energy buzzed through her as she ushered me closer to the bushes. Leaning down, she whispered, "And?"

"Black hair, white eyes, carries a trident," I recited, just as she had listed off to me days earlier.

Echinea nodded fiercely. "That's him, that's him! What did he say to you? Did he tell you a riddle?"

There was no way she would believe the truth, but I had to try. “Echineia, listen. The man you met when you were looking for seashells... I met him, and he *isn't* Poseidon.” Her mouth snapped open, but I shook my head. “So, if you see him again —”

“I wasn’t looking for seashells,” she spat out, a look of disgust on her face. “I was hunting lobsters.”

“Uh, what?” My head tilted. “Lobsters? I thought you said lobsters were yucky?”

Her shoulders deflated as she tossed her head back. “They *are* yucky.” She sniffed at the air, her eyes suddenly glistening. “But my papa likes lobsters, and I wanted to make him happy.”

Suddenly, she looked about two seconds away from bursting into tears.

“Oh—oh, I see. That was sweet of you —”

“When all of us moved here, my brother never showed up.” She sniffed at the air again, and my heart sank. “Papa made me promise not to go near the water to look for him. I didn’t. I stayed far, far away from the water, but every day he would go out and come back really sad.”

“Echineia—” I reached for her shoulders, but she swatted my hands away.

Crinkling her nose, she kicked the side of the bucket again. “Just when I found where the lobsters were hiding, they outsmarted me, and I almost *died*.” She picked up one foot and pointed to it, wiggling her toes in the air. “They sent a jelly to trap me! I hunted them all the way back to their cave and stepped on the squishy jelly they’d hired to guard it.”

She let out a hiss like she was reliving the memory. “It started stinging me, and I knew it was a jelly.” Her chin lifted. “I wasn’t crying or anything, but Poseidon heard our battle and came to save me. He zapped it with the end of his trident and BAM!” She made an explosion with her fingers. “He murdered it for its treachery. Jellies aren’t supposed to attack mermaids,” she added.

The sea wizard had saved her? My head buzzed as it tried to wrap around what she was saying. And she was correct. Live jellyfish wouldn’t sting merfolk, but it sounded like the one she had stepped on had likely been long dead. “Are you sure? You told me before that he came to you with a riddle and offered you a gift.”

“I asked him for a gift,” she said plainly, then her voice fell to a mumble. “I really wanted to make Papa happy...”

I pressed against my forehead, taking it all in. I’d assumed the seashell

the sea wizard had given me had something to do with Echinea, but maybe —

“Echo?” a voice squeaked, and I looked over to a small girl with big, coral pink eyes toeing closer to the bushes where we were standing. “I set them all out in the sunshine, just like you asked me to.”

“Good!” Echinea picked up her stick to poke around her bucket of shells. “These look like they’re just about done cooking. This will be the greatest Captain’s Feast this kingdom has ever seen!” Both of them giggled, and then Echinea looked up at me, throwing a signal with her brow that told me that now that her friend was back, she was ready for me to leave.

“Listen, Echinea. Adults can be dangerous,” I warned, leaning in so she knew I was serious. “If you see him again, don’t go near him, okay?”

Echinea scoffed, but it needed to be said. Even if he had helped her, I still didn’t trust the sea wizard. Sure, he’d helped me, too, but he’d also tied me up in a dungeon, so...

“She’s an adult. Does that mean she’s dangerous, too?” the other merfry whispered as soon as I stepped away.

My lips quirked while the bushes behind me erupted with giggles. “Yeah, right! She didn’t even know not to stand on the edge of the pier. If I wanted to, I could have pushed her right in.”

Two merfolk glared at me as I headed for the warehouse, but I kept my eyes forward. I had no clue where Leander was, but I didn’t want to stick around longer than necessary. When I crossed underneath the rolled-up doors, I immediately regretted coming in alone.

Numerous heads turned, poking out of makeshift bedrooms and stopping mid-conversation to look over at me. I scanned the crowd for glints of gold, but didn’t see Leander or his father anywhere. As I was about to run back to Barren, a knock shook the building. Then there was another knock, followed by the loud clang of metal.

The merfolk didn’t seem to care. They snapped back to what they were doing, the entire warehouse decidedly ignoring the noise even as a low, wailing groan echoed up to the ceiling. But not me—I cared. My feet had dashed toward the sound even before my eyes had settled on the storeroom it had permeated from.

Another blow, and the door in front of me shook, the metal grinding on its hinges as something—*someone*—yelled from within.

My eyes fell over the door’s placard.

*Storeroom 2B.*

The place Leander's dad had taken him when he'd come back to me, bloodied and bruised.

I couldn't move—could barely think—as panic flooded me.

When the next painful scream echoed from inside the storeroom, I screamed back, clawing at the door's handle, but it was locked from within.

I rattled the handle, but the heavy door barely shook. "Leander!" Panic had me smashing my shoulder into the door, my fist pounding against it. If he was in there, I needed to save him. To stop his pain. I didn't know what I could do against King Eamon or one of his captains, but I couldn't wait here for them to finish. I had to try. In a tight, raw voice, I pleaded, "*Please.*"

A lurch in the door jerked me forward, and I buckled against the doorframe as I struggled to catch my balance. "Lee—" My eyes jumped to the face of the person who opened the door. Deep coal eyes, slick hair, a chin lined with old scars, and blood. So much blood. It speckled his face and sat in the coarse hairs of his beard.

He wasn't who I'd expected, and given the expression on his face, he hadn't expected me either. "What are you doing here?" he asked, but my breathing stalled as I looked around him, my eyes immediately drawn to dark pools of liquid smeared across the concrete.

Why was there so much blood?

Behind the door, another voice called, "Let her through. That's his daughter."

Without thinking, I took a step inside. "E-excuse me?" My fists shook, my blood in my face draining away like the pools on the floor as I stared at the other captain. I recognized him instantly—Echineia's father. His arm muscles bulged, slick with a sticky crimson fluid as they wrapped around a struggling man, restraining him.

Blood flowed down the captive's hair, raining down on the concrete in sickening drips whenever he swung his head. Hunched forward, he struggled to escape from the captain, his clenched teeth grinding with desperate groans.

I would never forget the build of his shoulders, the way he held himself like nothing in this world could ever phase him.

*Papa.*

I'd once believed he was invincible. Unshakeable. And I'd trusted him more than anyone or anything in this world. He'd been my comfort, my joy. But that was another life—not me as I was now.



“Nerida?” he gurgled, spitting out blood around the name as his wild eyes fought to angle toward the ceiling.

Hearing him say the name he’d given me struck like a fiery brand, and I stumbled backward, repulsed in a way that pools of blood hadn’t even accomplished. Whatever was happening in this room, it wasn’t what I’d expected. If I’d known Papa was in here, I never would have barged in. I would have ignored his screams like the merfolk outside —

“No,” he roared, thrashing even harder. “No!” It seemed whatever fit he was having, my presence had amplified it tenfold. “I can’t look at her! Don’t make me look at her!”

Echinea’s father grunted, his arms straining around Papa like he was holding back a raging bull shark. A violent shiver ran through Papa’s body as his elbows jerked, thrashing wide with a growing sense of desperation. “I can’t—I can’t!” Words gushed out like the blood from his mouth. “I can’t!” he repeated in a crazed, panicked burst.

“Hurry,” Echinea’s father called out. “I won’t be able to hold him much longer.” At the captain’s word, a woman leapt from the corner of the room. Despite stepping forward, her eyes remained focused on the bloody floor, turning her face a few shades paler. Her hands shook as they flew out, landing on Papa’s shoulder. He bucked away from her touch, but his fight was short lived. Papa’s arms slumped, his strength draining until he trembled as he mumbled more words. Whatever she was doing was working fast.

It was almost like magic.

Her eyes jumped to mine, her irises glittering, energized by an odd light. A magical light. She was *glamouring* him.

Papa’s face dazed, lost in the haze of the mermaid’s magic. Then he fought it, breaking through with a startling yell that shocked everyone in the storeroom. He threw himself backwards, and Echinea’s father’s neck rolled as Papa knocked the air out of him.

Papa was rabid again, his mouth ringed with blood. “I can’t look at her!” he roared. Then his voice broke into a sob, a desperate plea that had his shoulders crumbling. “*Don’t make me look at her.*”

Papa shook, or maybe I was shaking. My mouth hung open, my throat locking up. Every word I could have said was as dead as my birth father was to me.

*Don’t make me look at her.* I let his words echo in my mind so I might become numb to their sting.

“This is the only way we can restrain him,” Echinea’s dad called out with panting breaths, drawing my attention. “When he found out Prince Leander had returned alone, he became... distraught. We removed him from the others after he attacked the prince.”

Papa attacked Leander? *Oh no*. Leander was strong, but it was taking two captains and a mermaid’s glamour to keep Papa under control. If he hurt Lee, I’d—I’d —

I couldn’t take this. Never again did I want to see this horrible, wretched merman.

Blindly backing away, I caught my spine on the edge of the wall, but it didn’t faze me. As I slid out of the storeroom, the merman holding the door looked just as confused as he had when I’d demanded entry. I kept moving back until I bumped into something massive, immovable. I knew who it was even before his arm wrapped around me, twirling me around.

“Barren,” I nearly sobbed out. I sank into him, grateful that he hadn’t listened to my suggestion to wait in the car. Even as his muscles flinched beneath my touch, I wrapped my arms around his waist. “He... he...” My head shook against the warmth as I anchored myself to him. I couldn’t even say it. “We have to find Leander.”

Barren lifted my chin from his chest, concern knitting his eyebrows. Just as his lips parted, rapid footsteps interrupted the moment.

“Why would you bring her here?” Leander asked, running up to us. He looked to Barren, whose jaw immediately hardened to stone. Then Leander turned his attention to me, stealing me away from Barren with a strong, deliberate slide of his hands. Within seconds, I was engulfed in his embrace, his arms wrapping around me. “Are you okay? Your face, it’s pale.” His eyes slid down the front of my sweater and up again, lingering at the top of my turtleneck long enough for me to wonder what he would do when he saw the marks hiding underneath it. “Whose clothes are these?”

Leander’s head tilted, and I noticed the purple tint to his jaw. It was slight, like the fist or shoulder hadn’t connected at full force. But he was in clothes now, too, and there was no telling what could be hiding underneath his white shirt and jeans. My nerves swirled, my body still shaking. “He attacked you?” I asked, ignoring his question. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay.” Leander gave me a steadying squeeze, his eyes focused on my arms and how badly they were shaking. Reassuring lips pressed against my forehead. “Don’t worry, I didn’t hurt him.”

“I don’t care about *him*,” I croaked, burying my face into his neck, my fingers clenching against his chest. “He can rot in there. They said he attacked you, and I thought you might be hurt—” My voice cracked on the words. “Why would he do that?”

Leander cupped the back of my neck, drawing me closer. “I’m not sure. Captain Maris had him off me after the first punch,” he said softly. “I can try to ask him, if you’d like.”

“No,” I snapped, the tremors in my arms intensifying. *Dammit*—I needed to get ahold of myself, but being near Papa had a way of robbing me of all my strength, reducing me to a helpless merfry, no matter how hard I fought to escape the memories of my past.

“Barren, can you take her outside?” With the way Leander was holding me up, he must have thought I was about to pass out in his arms. “I’ll be quick.”

“No, don’t talk to Papa,” I cut in, then immediately bit into my tongue because I’d actually referred to him as *Papa* out loud. “He’s crazy. So crazy that a mermaid is in there. She had to glamour him and —”

“Shhh, you don’t need to worry. I’m not going in there.” Leander pressed a gentle finger to my lips as he passed me into Barren’s powerful arm. “I have one more captain to speak to, then I’ll be done and we can leave here for good.”

*For good?*

What did he mean by that?

“Leander, wait —”

But Barren was ushering me back out of the warehouse, his arm steadying my shoulders. The merfolk standing near the entrance scattered when they saw him. And the next thing I knew, we were back at Barren’s car, his body leaning into mine, supporting me up.

“You don’t look well.” Barren’s deep voice vibrated in my ear as my vision tunneled, my head going light. Then his face was in front of me, pulling me close. “What can I do? What do you need?”

This wasn’t fair—none of it. Being born a burden, the strength of these mermen who passed me around like I couldn’t walk on my own, and especially the way Barren’s words swelled around me, those deep syllables turning into a ballad that soaked into my skin, filling me completely with *him*.

While I focused solely on that thought, there Barren was, distressed and

staring back at me. His mouth wasn't moving, but I could still hear his words ringing. Feel them against me like an intimate caress. Drawing me closer...

*Oh no.* I knew this feeling.

Yet again, *the thrall* was messing with my head. Would I ever escape this madness?

"I—I'm going to be sick," I choked out, all my emotions converging and moving straight up my throat. Barren didn't seem ready to let me go, but I pried out of his arm, my hip bumping into the car as I scrambled to run around to the other side of it. "Don't follow me!"

I barely made it around the car before I lost my breakfast on the gravel beside it. This time around, Barren's sandwich hadn't tasted too good. When I was sure I'd finished, I let out a moan and braced a hand on the side of the car, staring pathetically at my feet. Fantastic. How many merfolk had watched me do that? I turned away from the evidence, wanting nothing more than to disappear.

The passenger door was cold on my forehead as I slumped against it, until a wide hand landed on my shoulder, and my stomach rolled again. "I told you not to follow me," I groaned, pushing Barren away, but the freaking titan wouldn't move. Great—how pathetic could I get?

Barren's face was serious as he stepped over the mess I made and went for the driver's side door. "Sit," he said, holding the door open for me.

My legs were so unsteady, I didn't need to be asked twice. "Fine." I practically collapsed inside. For a split second, I was surprised at how far the seat had been pushed back. Then I remembered Barren was the driver and how he needed every inch of space he could get to fit.

I barely opened my mouth to apologize when Barren cut me off with a shake of his head. "You don't need to apologize."

My lips pressed back together, and I leaned into the seat while he walked to the trunk, popping it open for a second and then slamming it shut. When he came back, he passed a bottle of water into my hands.

"Thanks," I mumbled, opening it up and taking a sip. It was strange how far away he seemed, with him standing and me sitting. I stared at Barren's slacks, perfectly clean and pressed, as he shifted uncomfortably on his feet. Not a single gray thread was out of place.

When I took another sip, Barren said, "I was behind you when you went inside."

"Oh." My gaze dropped to my lap. Of course he was.

He'd heard everything, then—all the sickening things Papa had said. Shame reddened my face as an uncomfortable silence stretched between us. Then his pocket started buzzing.

If I hadn't been so close to his hand, I might not have seen it flinch. Rather than reaching for his phone, Barren tightened his knuckles against the doorframe until the hinges creaked.

The vibrating continued, one buzz after another, filling me with clarity. Barren was trying his best, but he couldn't ignore whoever was on that phone forever.

I swallowed down the sour taste of bile and took a steadying breath. "Barren?"

He dropped to my level, taking a knee in the gravel. "Yes?"

The chaos of this morning had worn me out, and I was tired of it. Tired of *all* of this. There were too many uncertainties in my life right now. I wanted the truth, and I needed to believe Barren would give it to me. "Are you supposed to kidnap me?"

His expression changed—concern morphing into pain before settling on a hazy, detached stare. "Yes." His lips barely moved.

Although I already knew the answer, my stomach still lurched, and it suddenly seemed like a blessing that I'd already lost my breakfast. I forced out the next question before my heart could keep me from rethinking it. "And if I don't want to go"—I swallowed dryly—"would you make me?"

There was no hesitation. "No."

My pulse skipped. I sat the bottle of water beside me and folded my hands in my lap. "No?" I chewed my bottom lip as I thought it over. "But your phone keeps ringing."

Gravel crunched under his knee as he leaned closer, his face nearly coming into the car. "I would never force you to do anything you didn't want to do."

The words swirled in a dizzying song that flowed straight to my head, filling me with a mix of warmth and giddiness. His voice was like a blanket that I could wrap around myself to feel safe and cozy. Protected from every hard truth in the world.

I could lose myself in it. In *him*.

"Claira?" Barren's voice cut through the heady spell it had conjured, breaking the magic's hold over me and leaving me with a hot face and panting mouth.

Damn, *the thrall* was going to be the death of me.

When I didn't answer, he placed his hand over mine in my lap. His palm was so wide it easily domed mine. "I can return without you."

As he spoke the words *without you*, my whole body bristled.

Some feral part of me didn't like that he'd suggested it, a lurking beast that curled and clawed my insides at the thought of letting him go. Maybe I was as unhinged as Papa was. I licked my lips, my mind racing. "And if you don't follow your orders? What will your kingdom do to you?"

His jaw clenched. "You don't need to worry about me."

Considering what I knew about merfolk, and especially their royalty, I had good reason to worry. It didn't matter how strong Barren was if his kingdom turned against him. I had no idea what horrors his queen was capable of.

Placing my hand over his, I sandwiched his palm between mine and took a breath. "I'll go." Maybe I was unhinged.

Barren's head tilted, sending dark curls spilling over his eyebrows. "You'll go?"

My hand tightened over his. "But only if Leander and Kai can go—well, if they want." That monstrous part of me shuddered, possessiveness coiling around my insides like a vise. I knew Barren and Kai had traveled to see the circus freak who still had a tail, but could princes take off for other kingdoms? I hoped they would. How could I leave any of them?

A speechless Barren stared me down, jaw set, his dark eyes searching mine.

"I think Leander is planning on leaving, anyway," I added, brushing my fingers over the back of his hand. His skin was rough, but also clean and well groomed. "Maybe I should hear his plans before I decide on anything."

"I've always wanted to go to your island," a voice called. Leander came around the car—thankfully from the side I hadn't been sick on—with my backpack slung over one of his shoulders. Barren pulled away from me, straightening to full height, and I frowned down at my hands, surprised by how much I missed the feel of his hand in mine.

"You have an island?" As I blinked up at Barren, he frowned.

His shoulders shrugged. "My kingdom has an island."

An island didn't sound so bad. Gram's cousin had a beach house on an island where we occasionally stayed for a weekend.

I turned to Leander. "You're okay with leaving? Won't King Eamon be

upset?”

He let my backpack fall from his shoulder and passed it over to me. “I don’t care what my father thinks. I’ve already talked to the captains. They know that I’m leaving and that I intend to come back.” Anger rose over his face, his fist clenching as he ran a hand through his hair. “I know if I stay here, with how I am now, I’ll end up killing him.” Then he turned away as if it embarrassed him to admit to such a dark thought.

Honestly, if he did kill him, I wouldn’t blame him. I slid my bottle of water into the side of my backpack, then toyed with the bag’s zipper. It was nice of him to get my things for me. I wasn’t sure if I could handle going back in there, especially if my father was still screaming. “But what about your stuff?”

“I already grabbed it.” As he let go of his hair, he sighed. “It’s just one thing. I put it in with yours.”

Curious, I unzipped the bag to poke around inside and immediately saw turquoise and black. “You wanted to give back my pajama pants?”

“Fuck no, those are mine.” Leander gave me a heart-melting smirk. “They’re my favorite.”

I rolled my eyes and turned back to Barren. “Can I ask you for a favor before we leave?”

Barren cut a quick glance over at Leander before saying, “Anything.”

“Could you take me to see my dad and Gram first? I want to make sure they’re okay before I leave.” Was I really doing this? Going to a strange island to be forced underwater yet again? Now that I knew we weren’t the only ones seeking tridents, there was no telling what awaited us down there. But somehow, with both of them accompanying me, the thought wasn’t as scary as it should have been.

Barren nodded, his hand sliding to his pocket. Then he took his phone out, and his thumb swiped over the screen. “I can arrange it,” he mumbled, and my heart leaped.

IO



## KAI



“I can’t believe you’d turn your back on me to chase after this—this harlot!”

Claira had only just returned, and already, Laverne was upset.

I froze while stuffing clothes into my bag, one hand supporting my back to dull the lingering ache. “Laverne,” I warned, keeping my voice low as I cast a look at Claira. Thank goodness—her mind hadn’t seemed to pick up Laverne’s scathing words. As usual, Laverne was doing everything she could to exclude her.

Claira was crouched next to the couch, crimson hair pooling over her shoulder, holding tight to a spiral shell she’d pulled from underneath it. A shiver ran through me when I noticed her bottom lip pop between her perfectly polished teeth. My nipples stiffened at the memory of those teeth tugging, raking against my skin, until my shirt pulled uncomfortably across my chest.

I swallowed as I watched Claira stuff the shell into her backpack, then turned my attention back to Laverne. “That isn’t how we should talk about our friend —”

Laverne screeched, and the bed underneath her released a similar note as she lunged to the foot of it. “*How dare you!*” Whiskers splaying, she tossed her nose up to the air. “*I will never be friends with that algae-haired sea slug. And neither should you!*” She cast a downward glance across the room, her eyes narrowing on Claira’s back. “*A friend wouldn’t have let you get hurt,*” she added, a sharp wave of her fury stabbing into my head alongside her words. “*She left you for dead, Big Brother. Or are you too bewitched by her glamour to remember that?*”

Wincing, I held up a hand. “Laverne, stop.” Emotions were powerful manipulators, and although we typically held them back when we communicated, Laverne’s anger had a habit of slipping through unchecked.

But she kept going, her teeth bared and neck pitched like she was preparing to lunge off the bed and chase Clairra out of my room again. “*Have you forgotten why we came here? Forgotten about Freechia? How can you not see that this mermaid is using you?*” She stopped to let out a round of barks that had Clairra nearly toppling over herself to scramble behind the couch for cover.

*“The moment she gets me away from you, I come back to both of you canoodling, stuck together like a couple of mantis shrimp—!”*

“That’s enough, Laverne!” I banged my drawers shut as I got up, the jerky movements sending a harrowing pain up my spine as I fought and failed to distinguish Laverne’s invading rage from my own. Anger wasn’t what I was used to. It solved nothing—only made matters worse. No moral decisions could be made from it.

With long breaths, I steadied myself until my rage subsided enough for me to think rationally.

“I know you have big feelings about all of this. I get it. But I’m going with Clairra, Barren, and Leander. I don’t care if it’s to the Indian Ocean or the bottom of the Undersea—I’m going with them.”

Laverne snorted her disapproval, but I pressed on. “You don’t have to accept it, Laverne, but there it is. We can talk to Barren downstairs. I’m sure he can get you on a plane back to the Pacific, but I won’t be going with you.”

Emotion tugged in my chest, and my face heated as I quietly added, “I won’t return to the Pacific if it means leaving my mate behind.”

Laverne’s jaw plunged open. Her tongue twitched, likely agitated by the weight of a thousand comebacks she wanted to sling at me. But then her mouth snapped shut, and with a derisive roll of her neck, she dropped off the bed with a heavy *thunk* and strode through the door that joined both our rooms without so much as a backward glance.

I rubbed at the back of my neck as the door slammed shut, my eyes falling on the discarded keycards Laverne had spat out all over the floor earlier in the day. Now that I’d packed the last of my clothes, these rooms wouldn’t be ours much longer.

Clairra moved closer, stealing quick, cautious glances at the door. It surprised me she’d even returned to my room, knowing Laverne was likely

inside it. Laverne had treated her so cruelly this morning, I'd wondered if Clairra would ever want to get close to me again.

When she came up next to me, she slung her backpack over one shoulder, her features furrowing with concern. "I can't blame her for being upset," she said with a frown, nodding at the door Laverne had used for her dramatic exit.

My head buzzed with a swirl of warmth and giddiness as the last of Laverne's anger drained away.

Clairra was concerned about me.

How was I lucky enough for Poseidon to match me with someone as amazing as her?

Sure, both Freechia and Laverne had cared about me—in their own intensely commanding sort of way. But the rest of my family and my kingdom? They'd never cared. As long as I was out from under everyone's tail, they were happy to think of me as just another number. The spare of the Pacific.

But not with Clairra. There was nothing commanding about how she spoke to me, and there was nothing dismissive in her gaze. Every time she reached for me, each delicate touch was precise and deliberate. Meant for me, and me alone.

I might not have been her *only* mate, but I knew I was more to her than just a number. I could feel our connection as acutely as I could feel the pain in my back.

"You sure you're well enough to go?" she asked, then drew in her lower lip again.

My fingers fiddled with the short hairs on the nape of my neck while I cleared my throat. "Yeah, of course I'm sure," I said, my voice extraordinarily manly and convincing.

Well, that's what I'd aimed for, at least.

"Sure you are." Her eyes veered into a roll while she wrapped an arm around me as an offer of support. "You're still in pain, aren't you? Your face is so red... Do you have a fever?"

Sweet breath filled the air as she leaned in to examine my face, making my nerves flare like a bonfire swept up by an ocean breeze. Her soft palm touched my cheek, and I closed my eyes, enjoying the cooling sensation of her hand against my heating skin. "I'm fine," I said, smiling. And I meant it. With her here with me, how could I not be?

Claira let out a hum before dropping her hand from my cheek. “You do feel warm. It might be better for you to stay here while Barren takes me back home.”

My heart stuttered with a sudden sense of dread, the world spiraling downward. Like the shock of the last drop of salt water evaporating off my tail, sending my bones ripping apart, transforming into human legs.

“No, I—I can go.” I didn’t want to be left behind. Not again.

“Hmm...” She eyed my bag before bending forward, picking it up by the wide strap and testing its weight. “At least let me carry your duffel bag down to the car.”

My flush deepened as I stole the strap back from her. “That’s all right. I can carry my bag.” What kind of partner would I be if I let my mate carry my things when she was already lugging around a bag of her own?

There was a creaking sound as the door connecting Laverne’s and mine opened, then snapped closed again.

Claira’s eyebrows lifted. “Is she spying on us?”

“I wouldn’t put it past her.”

Seconds later, the door swung open. Laverne’s tail wedged into the room, followed by her body as she came through the threshold backwards. Her neck was low and stretched long, tugging on a thick strap clenched in her jaws.

Her flippers scooted across the carpet, and with a final tug, she emerged with a bag nearly identical to mine. The one she’d insisted on taking along during our plane ride because I’d had one, too, even though hers was empty.

As far as I knew, Laverne hadn’t found anything to fill it with since we’d come to the Atlantic. So why was she struggling to drag her bag across the room now?

With a flip of Laverne’s neck and an exasperated huff, she swung the bag to Claira’s feet. Then her head curled back in perfect sea lion posture, her teeth and tongue neatly concealed in her snout. “*Since you’re offering.*”

Claira blinked, and her hand came up to her temple like Laverne’s words had finally reached her.

My spine ached as I leaned down, snapping up the bag’s strap before Claira could make a move for it. “Not nice, Laverne,” I scolded, wagging a finger at her nose. I lifted the bag and nearly lost my footing when a stench slapped me in the face.

Though I couldn’t be sure what was in it, I had a feeling it held about a dozen regurgitated fish Laverne had originally scarfed down for lunch.

“No, no, I can carry it.” Although Clair’s nose scrunched at the smell, she still moved to take the fish bag away from me. But Laverne was practically my family—not Clair’s. My mate didn’t need to deal with the smelly outcome of Laverne’s little temper tantrum. I hoisted my bag over my other shoulder and headed for the door before either of them could stop me.

*“Not you, Kai-Kai! You don’t need to carry it,”* Laverne shrieked, crowding under my feet as soon as I stopped to open the door. *“She’s right there. Let her do it.”*

If Clair thought my face was hot earlier, she would be burnt if she tried touching it now. “Playing these childish games is getting old, Laverne.” Pain and exhaustion gave my voice a harsher edge than I’d ever used with her.

*“But—”* Laverne’s moon eyes rounded, her ears drooping. *“Big Brother...”*

I propped the door open with my shoulder to let Clair through before starting down the hallway, gritting my teeth in anticipation of more pain. Strangely enough, the bags balanced me in a way that alleviated the ache.

“Grab the keys before you leave, Laverne, since you’re the one who tossed them on the floor. Barren said we need to return them to the humans at the counter downstairs.” I watched as her head sank, her tail sulking lifelessly behind her as she collected the keys in her mouth.

Even the elevator couldn’t lift Laverne’s spirits. It was her favorite part of the entire hotel. I loved watching her enjoy the rides, but I needed to remain firm. Our relationship didn’t have many boundaries, but she needed to know my stance on Clair and that I wouldn’t tolerate her disrespecting her. I’d hoped she would warm up to Clair without my interfering, but it was clear that Laverne might never stop trying to drive a wedge between us.

When we made it to the counter, I gently took the keys from Laverne’s mouth and set them on top of it. Then I gave the man standing behind it my best smile. “I was told to return these.”

His attention dropped to the keys and the shiny ring of drool forming on the counter around them, though he made no attempt to retrieve them. “Thank you—er, sir.”

“You’re very welcome.” I beamed, then a burst of thunder cracked in the distance, making every one of us jump.

“What the—?” Clair swung around me, looking out the transparent doors. There was another thunderclap, a bright flash quickly replaced by darkness.

“The weather forecast for today didn’t mention storms,” the man behind the counter mumbled, moving to a small window to inspect the dark clouds forming outside.

“A storm...” Clairra let out a loud gasp and bolted for the doors. They parted for her immediately, and when she was through them, the wind whipped her hair as she ran out into the swirling darkness.

“Clairra, wait!” I slapped a hand on the counter to turn the man’s attention back to the keys, then threw him a thumbs up. “We good here?”

“Uh, yes, sir,” he stuttered, moving back to the counter. He slid the keys closer with the edge of a colorful rectangular document he’d pulled from a display beside him. “You’re all checked out.”

“Thanks, man!” Holding tight to the straps of the bags, I chased after Clairra into the storm.

Outside, Clairra had stopped short of the car, her body facing the shoreline where a dense, turbulent mass of storm clouds formed over the water. Through the dark haze, white-tipped waves churned, falling over each other in great, angry claps that rivaled the sound of thunder in the air.

Barren was at the trunk of the car, his hand on the open lid, his gaze on the storm.

“*Look at those waves!*” Laverne’s head perked along with her spirits. I opened my mouth to stop her from going out to surf when Clairra called over to Barren.

“Is it Leander?” There was an evident crack of panic in her voice.

Barren nodded, turning toward us with a swing of his strong shoulders. “He’s chasing after a seabird.”

Clairra’s hair blew over her face as her mouth hung open. “He’s *what?*”

My head tilted. “Chasing a seabird?” I hoped that repeating the words would give them some clarity, but... it did not. I glanced up at the sky soaked with dark clouds and turbulent winds. “Why would a seabird be out in a storm like this?”

“This isn’t a storm,” Clairra deadpanned, dread forming over her face. “This is Leander.” With that, she sprung forward, heading for the shore. I didn’t even think before throwing down the bags I was carrying to chase after her.

I wasn’t sure what she meant at first, but it took about thirty paces to find out she was right. Leander was on the shore at the center of the ominous storm. With every movement he made, sand whipped up around him,

collecting in the wind and circling him in a gritty fog. Smaller twists of sand formed at his flanks, scattering like fish in a feeding frenzy as he took predatory steps forward, the rumble of his deep voice carrying on the wind.

“Whaleshit you *‘didn’t do it on purpose!’*”

He was yelling at the sand twists—no, wait—he was screaming at something trapped inside one of them. A flash of gray and white feathers flew in a tight circle, trapped in a sandy spiral in front of him. Leander roared at it again, but the only answer he got was a pitiful squawk.

*Whoa.* He really was chasing a seabird.

“Leander!” Clairra yelled, but he must have been too caught up in his rage to hear her. He pressed forward, closing in on his unfortunate prey.

Thunder crackled in the air as his voice boomed again. “It’s your fault she suffered—your fault they put her in danger!”

There was enough anger in Leander’s voice to stop Clairra in her tracks.

I stalled the moment I came up beside her, both of us taking Leander in. He was all fury and power, his arms held wide, fingers bowed like he might rip the seabird in half if given the chance.

*Dude.* The bird must have really upset him.

Maybe he was going to kill it, but for Clairra’s sake, I hoped he wouldn’t.

Clairra shook where she stood. Then after a deep breath, she took a step forward, grounding a foot in the sand. “LEANDER!”

All the taut, overexerted muscles across Leander’s back and shoulders rippled at once. Although he hadn’t turned to look at us, he had halted.

Now that Clairra had his attention, she took another step.

“What the heck do you think you’re doing?” she screamed across the shore, and even with all his power and his rage and his muscles, the Atlantic’s Crown Prince flinched.

The wind whipping through his hair became erratic, but still, he didn’t turn back. The edge of his jaw moved as he answered, “Avenging you.”

Clairra let out an exasperated sound. “It’s just a seagull, Lee! How can you get so worked up over a damned bird?” She wrung her hands together, kicking up more sand for the wind to take. “Look at this! Look around you! You promised me you wouldn’t use your magic.”

Another flinch. “I’m not—” His neck snapped around, taking in his surroundings, before whipping back to look at her. His eyes widened as he did, and even the surrounding storm seemed to sag as he realized what was going on. “Fuck, I—I didn’t know.”

Although the wind in the swirls had slowed, the seabird was still caught in a whirlwind, slapped in the face by its own wing with every pass.

“This town is a *bird sanctuary*, Leander,” Clairra shrieked, thrusting a finger out to point at the poor thing. “Why would you attack something as defenseless as a seagull? Let. It. Go!”

Leander startled back a step, and the spiral followed. It stuttered over the sand, causing the gull to pop free.

The wind drained from the air. Suddenly, I could hear Clairra’s breathing, heavy with irritation. “Give us a moment,” she said, and although her eyes were stuck on Leander, I knew she’d spoken to me. “Please,” she added in a softer tone.

I tossed a quick look at the retreating storm before nodding. “Of course. Yell if you need me.” I gave her hand a quick squeeze. “I’ll come running.”

When I turned back for the parking lot, Laverne was there behind us. “Let’s go,” I said, and although she seemed curious about the waves, she followed without protest.

By the time we made it back to the car, the clouds had dissipated enough for bright beams of sunlight to spear through them. Barren had finished packing my things into the trunk and was holding Laverne’s floppy bag up in concern, his nostrils flaring.

“No.” He passed the bag into my chest the moment we walked up. Before I had my mouth open, his look turned severe. “No,” he repeated, firmer this time.

Oh great, now Laverne had gotten both of us in trouble.

“If you hadn’t been so childish, maybe you would have been able to keep your bag,” I mumbled to her, passing her the fish bag. I set the strap around her neck and motioned to the side of the hotel. “There’s a place around back where the humans put their trash. Since you made this mess, it’s only right that you clean it up.”

Whiskers twitching, her teeth grated. “*Fine*,” she hissed, her big attitude not the least bit cowed as she stalked off, head held high. What was I going to do with her?

Sighing, I watched to make sure Laverne was heading in the right direction before turning my attention back to Barren.

“Hey, big dude. How’ve you been?” I put a hand on his shoulder in a proper greeting, hoping he would return the gesture. After a moment’s hesitation, Barren set his heavy palm against my shoulder. Although he didn’t



keep it there long, it still made me grin. It was a start. “I turned in the keys like you asked me to.”

Barren nodded, then looked back out at the shoreline.

I had been trying so hard, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t keep holding myself back.

“Thanks for saving me, man,” I blurted, emotion straining my throat as I pulled him into an enormous hug. I meant to clap him on the back of his shoulders, but when my hands couldn’t reach, I settled for clapping on the sides of his back until he returned the gesture.

“You’re welcome,” he mumbled, his movements stiff as his palm tapped my back. With all the rumors swirling around about him, I knew he wasn’t used to contact, but I trusted my gut more than any rumors. I’d always thought Barren was a good dude. The fact that he risked his life for me proved it.

After giving him one last squeeze, I pulled away. “I mean it. I heard how you stayed behind to save me.” I hurried to get the words out before I got too choked up. “I’m honored, Barren. I’m glad to have you as a friend.”

Before I could get a response out of him, Clair and Leander’s bickering came into earshot. As they made their way back from the shore, Leander’s hands clenched and unclenched, and Clair nursed the sides of her temples like the ordeal had given her a colossal headache.

“The gull betrayed me,” Leander mumbled to Barren as he came up to the car.

“Mmh.” Barren didn’t look convinced. He passed Leander over for Clair, and she gave him a small smile of thanks when he reached out to help put her bag into the trunk. When the last of the car was packed, he went to go cram himself into the driver’s seat.

“Err—I’ll just…” Clair hesitated as she came around the car, looking at me, then at Leander, before ducking into the backseat. It took a few moments of Leander staring at me for me to realize why she’d hesitated.

There was only room for one of us beside her, and of course, like usual, it was going to be Leander.

The crazed look he’d had on the beach was mostly gone from his eyes. Still, his jaw flexed, and he took a step toward me in challenge.

“*Wait!*” a nearly breathless voice barked into my head as Laverne came around from the back of the hotel, her flippers kicking up in a race toward the car. Now that the fish bag wasn’t weighing her down, she moved twice as

fast. “*You guys weren’t going to leave without me again, were you?*”

“You know I wouldn’t leave my best girl behind.” A smile spread across my face as I called back to her, enjoying the familiarity of falling back into our old routine. Then I realized I literally told her I *would* leave her behind when I suggested she go back to the Pacific alone, and my smile quickly faded.

When Laverne reached the car, she nosed Leander in the legs, urging him toward the front seat. “*Come on, come on. I can’t get in until you do.*”

“Excuse me?” Leander backed away, causing Laverne to grumble in frustration. She changed tactics, snapping at his feet like she hadn’t just witnessed him eroding half the sand on the beach and using it to black out the sky. “The fuck—? Hey!”

Her teeth got him on the ankle. He jumped, bouncing on one leg to yank his foot out of her mouth. “*Kai-Kai can’t sit with me while he’s injured!*” she yapped, and part of me was relieved that, for once, she was thinking of my comfort.

“She has a point,” Clairra called from inside the car. Leander’s eyebrows pulled tight as he focused on the empty seat beside her. After whatever had happened between them on the beach, I was sure he wanted to use the car ride as a chance to smooth things over.

Then his icy sharp gaze shot to *me*, like *I* had suggested this new seating arrangement, glaring with a deadly intent that had me gulping down my next breath. Then he took notice of how I was standing, one hand pressed to my back, and his eyes averted.

He scrubbed a hand over the underside of his jaw and mumbled, “*Fuck,*” before diving into the front seat. “Whatever. Get in.”

Laverne didn’t need any more encouragement than that. She leaped right onto his lap, the car rocking from the impact. He was still grunting from the weight of her when I got into the seat next to Clairra.

She scooted over as far as she could to give me more room. But room wasn’t what I wanted. As soon as I had my car leash fastened and had checked to make sure she was leashed as well, I sank against Clairra’s side, finding a comfortable place for my head to rest on her shoulder.

My gut told me Leander wouldn’t approve of the contact. Maybe he would come back here and rip me off her, demanding I get my hands off his mate.

But I was willing to risk it.

She was my mate, too, and one way or another, both Leander and Laverne would have to accept that. And honestly, I was too tired from all the movement to care about what anyone else thought.

“I like this new seating arrangement,” I whispered, reaching to take hold of her hand. I stopped when I realized that she was already holding something—Barren’s phone?

“Just a second.” Her fingers glided over the flat side of the phone. “Barren asked me to plug in my address before we leave.” I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I watched a box of letters and numbers pop up over the phone. *Whoa*. Her fingers moved over them so fast, writing out words even faster than a scribe could. When she stopped pressing the buttons, the picture on the phone changed, and she passed it back up to Barren. “That should do it.”

Barren grunted a thanks before turning on the car.

As soon as Clairra leaned back, I took the opportunity to capture her hands before she found something else to hold. I loved that instead of holding hands like clamshells, she threaded her fingers with mine in a way I’d never seen before.

“So, does this mean Laverne is coming with us?” Clairra glanced over to her. She was twisting and turning, her flippers kneading Leander like she was trying to find a comfortable spot on his lap. “She seems different—she let me hear everything she was saying just now.”

“Really?” Maybe my talk had gotten through to her. “I’m not sure —”

“*As much as I trust you not to get murdered without me, Big Brother,*” Laverne interjected, her voice laced with sarcasm, “*I’m still going with you.*”

“Thanks, Laverne,” I said, relieved that she was sticking around. Clairra gave my hand a reassuring squeeze when a loud voice came over Barren’s phone, telling him to turn the car left.

Clairra shifted restlessly as she peered out the window. “I can’t believe we’re only a little over an hour away from my home.”

Barren’s eyes flicked back in the mirror to look at us. “You can call them when we get on the main road,” he rumbled, his jaw tense. “There’s thirty miles until our next turn.”

“Really?” Clairra sat a little taller in her seat. “Thank you, Barren.”

“Mmh.”

For the next few minutes, her eyes didn’t leave the phone. “I’ve been meaning to ask you,” she called back up to him. “How do you know so much about all this land stuff?”

When the only answer Barren supplied was a shrug, I decided to step in.

“He spends half of the year on land.” I paused, trying to remember the things I’d heard about the Indian Ocean. “It is half a year, isn’t it? That’s what my mother says. That the Indian Ocean has a second palace where they spend their time collecting riches on land.”

Barren gave a noncommittal grunt.

“Your island has a palace?” Now Clairra was sounding excited.

This time Laverne cut in. “*Filled with riches, you say? What kind of riches?*”

Barren vented a grunt that had Leander laughing. He gave Barren a playful nudge with his fist. “Guess we’ll see for ourselves soon, won’t we?”

Barren tensed, jerking his shoulder away from Leander, his teeth grinding.

*Huh?* That was weird. Something was off—Barren and Leander were the best of friends. Had something happened while I was asleep?

“Well, my kingdom isn’t ever allowed on land. We can’t even breach the surface of the water,” I said, hoping to distract from the tension. “Under the penalty of exile—if you’re lucky. And if you’re not lucky? Excruciating death!”

Clairra laughed at that, but stopped when she noticed no one else had taken it as a joke. Her eyebrows lifted. “So, the curse was the first time you’ve been on land?”

“Oh, uh—” ... *Oh no.* There was no way I could lie to her face. I closed my eyes, my face pinkening all the way up to my ears.

Laverne gave a dramatic sigh. “*Of course, it is! Weren’t you listening?*”

I released a breath, thankful for her interruption.

Clairra nudged me with her shoulder. “Then how did the two of you meet? I’m pretty sure sea lions need to breach the surface at least every twenty minutes if they want to breathe.”

“She found us,” I said, smiling as I thought back on the memory. “Freechia and I were hunting when Laverne popped by, stealing all the fish we were after before we could even get a bite.”

Laverne cackled. “*It was the day I taught you both how a real hunter hunts!*”

Clairra gave me another nudge and whispered, “It’s okay. I bet the teeth give her an unfair advantage.”

My grin widened. I turned my head and gave her shoulder a little nip

through her shirt to remind her of this morning.

“Oh!” she yelled, loud enough for both Leander and Barren to glance back. “Oh, uh, it’s nothing guys—sorry,” she said hurriedly, then dropped her voice to a mumble. “You’ve got teeth, too. How could I forget?”

“I’m not sure how you could.” I snapped at her again.

“For real. My neck is *covered*.” She mouthed the last few words, moving her shirt down to show me the marks on her neck.

“Whoa.” I was half disgusted at myself, and half tempted to close in on her neck again. It took a while for me to swallow down enough saliva to say, “That’s—I’m so sorry.”

She popped the top of her shirt back in place and looked out the window. “It’s all right. At least with this turtleneck on, Dad and Gram won’t see it.” She hummed for a moment, watching the scenery pass. “I can’t believe I’ll see them soon, and you’ll get to meet them.” Her voice rose loud enough for everyone to hear. “All of you will.”

Then she gasped, panic rising in her face like she’d realized that we were in fact all going to meet her land family.

“Oh no.” Dread paled her face. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

Then the voice on the phone chimed in. “Turn right at the next exit.”

As Barren directed the car into a turn, I gave her a reassuring pat. “It’ll be fine, don’t worry. They’ll love us.”

Her eyes scanned over each one of us like she was taking in our every detail for the very first time. “I’m not sure how to say this,” she said a little too cautiously, “but you guys don’t really look... normal.”

“Hmm...” I ran a hand through the spikes of my hair. Light purple wasn’t common among merfolk, and it seemed doubly so for humans.

Maybe she had a point.

II

## CLAIRA



“It’s that road there,” I said, pointing and ignoring the fact that Barren’s phone was supplying the same directions. “Gram said she’ll be waiting on the porch.” The moment I unbuckled my seatbelt and threw it off, Kai frowned.

“Hey, it’s not safe —”

I swatted his hand away from trying to refasten the belt. I knew Kai had a weird thing about seatbelts, but we were going, what, ten? Fifteen miles per hour? He could deal for a minute. “That one, there.” I was practically leaning off the edge of my seat. We were *so close*. “Third on the left.”

The front porch came into view, and I took a deep breath. There Gram was, rocking in her favorite chair like it was just another lazy evening.

I was clutching Kai’s shoulder a bit too tightly as we turned onto the rocky driveway, but he didn’t complain. Then I reached down to unclip his belt, too, and that got a grumble out of him.

“But the car is still moving,” Kai said with pouty lips.

“Sorry, I’m... excited,” I lied. Well, *half* lied. I was excited to be home, sure, but I was mostly worried about keeping this joyous reunion from devolving into an outright skirmish. Fishermen versus fishmen.

Leander, Barren, and Kai... These guys probably didn’t know how intimidating they looked to normal humans, all sharp-cut jaws and broad, confident shoulders. Sure, their faces were handsome enough to make a heart hurt with the need to touch them, but that didn’t take away from how much larger they were compared to every local in town. Well, mostly—Mr. Terance was a heavily built man, but he was about as threatening as the half-dead bloodworms he sold as bait. About as lively, too. The rest of us were

insignificant shrimps in comparison, Dad included.

Freaking mermen. With Leander's arrogant charm, Kai's boundless energy, and Barren's, well, *everything*, Gram needed to see that I was okay before she got a good look at them.

Because without Dad home to reason with her, knowing Gram, she was probably packing some heat.

My legs turned restless as I inched even closer to my seat's edge. I wasn't going to push Kai out or crawl over him—he was still recovering, after all—but as soon as this car parked, I needed him to tap into his endless well of energy and *move*.

Would antique lead shots do as much damage as modern bullets? I wasn't even sure if Gram's prized pirate pistol would fire if she tried, but today wasn't the day I wanted to find out.

The car eased to a stop, and I scrambled over Kai to open the door. "Do you guys mind waiting here while I go talk to her?"

Barren grunted in affirmation while Leander agreed. "Go for it."

"Great—I'll give you a signal when I'm ready."

Laverne's neck stretched until the breath from her nose fogged the windshield. "*Look at those waves.*"

"Is your dad still gone?" Leander asked, struggling to see around Laverne.

I followed his gaze out to the beach, where the sight of an empty pier made my stomach sink. "Yeah, the boat's gone," I said, chewing my lip. *That's all right*, I reassured myself. It was getting late; he'd be back soon.

Barren cut the engine, and I didn't push Kai out of the car as much as help him along with an insistent scoot of my hips. When we'd both touched down on the driveway, I tried to nudge him back in the car before Gram could see him.

Kai wasn't as tall as the rest of them, but he was still a man—err, merman—and I'd never brought a man, human or otherwise, back to the house.

His lips upturned into a warm, reassuring smile as he sat back in the car. "Take all the time you need." He reached up to brush my hair back over my shoulders, smoothing it with his fingers. "She looks worried," he breathed, a somewhat wistful lilt in his voice as he nodded toward Gram. "I bet she missed you a lot."

I softly smiled. "I missed her, too."

He gave me one last grin before pulling the door shut.



The sound of Gram's voice spun me around. "Keeping me out here in the cold until suppertime, Clair?"

Although she was still on the porch, she'd risen from her chair, the rusted and weather-beaten rocker still teetering behind her. She beckoned me with a wave, then set her hands on her hips.

I took off for the porch at a sprint, and her arms found their way around me before I'd even made it up the last step. "Shhh, shhh, dear girl," she soothed in my ear. While I wasn't crying, I was close. A gentle warmth seeped into me as her arms embraced me, making it hard not to feel like a little kid again. I wasn't usually one for hugs, but Gram's hugs were the best. "You look like you went on quite the trip."

"I hadn't planned on taking a trip at all." Sighing, I held her tight. "I'm sorry I left. And that I lost your slow cooker."

"Don't you worry." She chuckled and gave my forehead a big, wet kiss. "Slow cookers are replaceable. You are not."

Somehow, my heart melted even more. She smelled of aniseed oil and white linen, and... was that gun smoke? My nose wrinkled as I pulled away. There might have been a suspicious lump underneath her knitted shawl. One that wasn't normally there. "Gram —"

Her smile turned wry. "You can never be too careful," she confided, shimmying her shawl to better conceal what was hiding underneath it. Definitely her pirate pistol. But what was holding it up?

The thought of Gram stashing a weapon in her bra popped to mind, which wasn't a visual I appreciated. As soon as I shook it away, another thought appeared.

*Huh...* Maybe I'd gotten my penchant for stashing knives from her.

A car door opened and slammed behind me. I twisted around to look, but it was just Laverne darting out of the car. She headed down to the beach, her mouth wide and tongue flapping out of the side of her face as she ran.

Gram must not have noticed the spectacle because her hands fell to the sides of my arms. She gave them a squeeze as she backed up to get a good look at me. "Well, you look hale and hearty. Must not have seen too much trouble while you were gone," she said with an exasperated sigh that had my smile turning nervous. If only she knew the half of it.

Then she huffed. "John has been beside himself with worry. I know that boy's going to hate that he's not here."

My heart pulled tight. Gram looked so concerned not only for me but for

Dad, too. It must have been the mother in her, still trying to look after her son-in-law's well-being—the only family she had left—even though he was long grown. “I'm sorry I made him worry,” I whispered, my throat tight.

She gave my arm a good pat. “It's done now, so no more apologizing. I radioed the boat right after you called, so I expect John will be here soon. No tears, now. You know John will have enough for all of us when he gets here. That boy can sure blubber.”

Something in my chest twisted. When Dad got here, I would have to tell them I wouldn't be staying long. I knew they'd get by without me—they'd been taking care of each other since before I was even around—but it hurt not knowing how long I'd be gone.

I just needed this trident nonsense to end or for someone to find a way to break the curse. Then I'd be back. Merfolk were gifted with all sorts of magic, right? So why not curse breaking magic?

I froze—that sounded a lot like what my touch did. *Freaking hell.* Why did all these things have to point back at *me*?

Suddenly, Gram's voice was in my ear, shaking me back to the present. “Are you going to introduce me to the good folks who brought you back to us?”

“They really are good folk...” I assured her, but my voice trailed as Gram's hand crept underneath her shawl.

*Oh.* How could I forget Gram's personal brand of sarcasm?

“Wait, wait—” I gasped. “They're not the ones who took me.” In a rush, I squared myself in front of her in case she whipped her pistol out to do something crazy like shoot at their tires. Or worse.

“They're my—my *friends.*” I cringed as soon as the words left my mouth. That last word came out so wobbly, there was no way she was believing it. Not for a second.

One of her thin eyebrows hitched as she looked around me, her hand still planted firmly underneath her shawl. “Your friends?”

A burst of heat flared inside of me, setting my face ablaze. “Yes—er, no—” My hands were waving wildly. Why was I so bad at lying? “Just, *please,* Gram. They aren't bad guys. Not at all.” I pleaded with my eyes, and I must have been convincing enough because she dropped her hand with a sigh.

“I just worry about you, you know.” Her tongue clicked a time or two before she huffed. “You haven't done anything like this before, Clair. It's not in your nature to run off.”

“I know, I know,” I agreed. “I’m not sure what Dad told you happened, but...”

Suddenly, there was the sound of doors opening and closing behind us. Before I could turn to look back, I knew by the look on Gram’s face that the guys had gotten out of the car.

“Shit.” The curse slipped out on its own, and Gram broke her bewildered stare to swat me with the end of her shawl.

“Language, young lady! I raised you better than that.”

“Sorry, Gram,” I choked out, turning around to give the guys a look that I hoped screamed *what-the-heck-are-you-doing?* They were walking up the driveway with confidence that annoyed me way more than it should have. They weren’t getting my look’s meaning. Not at all.

“Why did you leave the car?” I mouthed, and Kai was the only one to stop in his tracks, confused.

“What?” he mouthed back. “You were waving your arms like this.” His voice rose to a whisper-scream as his hands started flailing wildly like he was impersonating a monkey. It was enough to revive the blush on my face.

I had *not* looked like that.

“Told you.” Leander gave Barren a nudge that bounced off him like it was nothing. “You should have read her mind to see if that was our signal.”

Wait, *what?*

“Read... my mind?” I repeated, and Barren’s expression turned brittle, his shoulders somehow bunching even tighter than his jaw.

Knowing it wasn’t likely that Barren would elaborate, I turned to Leander as soon as he reached the bottom stair of the porch. “What do you mean by that?”

He shot Barren a sidelong glance before shrugging like it was nothing. “He’s good at reading people. That’s all.”

I was about to press him with an ‘*oh, really?*’ when Gram’s hand tightened on my shoulder. Her eyes had gone wider than dinner plates. “You disappear for days only to reappear crawling out of the backseat of a car with this... this *boy band?*”

Whoa, what? I looked around, searching for whatever had put that idea in her head. “Th-they’re not a boy band, Gram.”

Then Barren’s deep voice supplied, “I’m the drummer,” not even missing a beat, and I thought my brain might actually explode.

“Barren,” I gasped, swiveling around to gawk at him like he had uttered

some unthinkable curse. I had to fight the urge to borrow the end of Gram's shawl to swat some sense at him. What was happening here? I would have expected a wisecrack like that from Leander, sure. But from *Barren*?

Gram's eyes slid to Barren's missing arm and narrowed. "Is that right?" she questioned with a hum.

His mouth was straight and firm when he nodded without a hint of sarcasm on his face.

Poseidon's balls—these guys were going to be the death of me.

I took a step between everyone, hoping to shield my guys from Gram's watchful eyes. "Really, Gram, they're *not* in a band."

"I've seen the magazines, Clairra," she clucked, her hands on her hips again. "This one looks like he should be covered in piercings." She pointed a finger aimed at Kai's ears that had him startling back a step.

"Piercings?" Kai must have thought she was pointing at his head because he swiped a nervous hand through his lavender hair before his face lit with understanding. "Oh!" he piped up. "I did have my back pierced recently!"

Gram's jaw almost hit the floor. "Your *back*?" She looked absolutely appalled and turned that energy into a disapproving look she aimed right at me.

"*What?* Wait—no," I stuttered, shaking my head and pushing between them in panic. "He didn't—he didn't mean that like you think he meant it."

How was I supposed to explain that he'd taken a spear to his back, not a piercing? A spear was even worse, wasn't it? I was so panicked I wasn't even sure anymore.

Gram let out a long, drawn-out sigh. "Well, y'all better come on inside before you catch your death. Or before Clairra starts having more of a fit." She stepped to the front door, easing it open.

"Really? You'll let them come in?" I blinked at her, awestruck. I'd expected her to shoo them back to the car. She gave me a nod that I returned with a smile. "Thanks, Gram," I said, relieved. She wouldn't risk starting a fight inside the house. At least, I was pretty sure she wouldn't. She was almost as fond of her rugs as I was of the shaggy pink one I kept in my bedroom.

A wall of heat hit me when I stepped inside, followed by the hearty smell of meat and vegetables cooking. My eyes fell on the kitchen counter where a shiny new slow cooker sat, glossy with stainless steel accents. It was at least double the size of her old one.

“It’s nice, eh?” Gram said with a wink. “The last one was getting a little long in the tooth, anyway.”

“These shells are lovely,” Barren said, making me turn around to him and the other guys. He was looking at the shadow boxes full of seashells set up on the wall beside the front door. I was surprised he’d spoken up, just as he did on the porch when he claimed to be a drummer, of all things.

“Why thank you, drummer boy.” I crossed my arms over my chest. The corner of Barren’s mouth barely twitched into an almost imperceptible smirk that I found myself returning. “I made the box you’re looking at. Dad made this one, and then Gram’s box is over here.” His eyes moved along the boxes as I pointed each one out.

Leander leaned in, giving Gram’s box an appreciative look. “Your giant cockle is beautiful,” he called out to her across the room, gesturing to the big brown and tan striped shell set in the center of her box. He gave me a smug smile like he was waiting for the same praise I’d given Barren.

Poseidon, help me. This was going to be an interesting night.

“And where did you learn your manners?” Gram called to Leander from the kitchen, a hand firmly placed on her hip. “I don’t know where you come from, young man, but here in the south, it’s considered impolite to comment on a lady’s *cockle*.” Despite her scolding tone, there was also humor there. “At least not before you buy her a drink first,” she added with a wink.

I hadn’t expected Leander to be the one to amuse her—especially not so quickly—but here we were.

“This is Kai, Barren, and Leander,” I cut in before Leander could attempt to confess where he came from. Surely even he wasn’t idiotic enough to admit to learning his manners in an underwater palace. But Gram, like the rest of the humans in town, was unaware of the merfolk living deep in the waters she frequented, and that’s how I planned to keep it.

“And I promise they’re not in a band.” I laughed dryly, gesturing to the three of them and watching their chests puff and backs straighten as they dutifully presented themselves. A blush bloomed over my face at how serious they looked, their eyes focused, determined, with their attention turned fully to Gram. Then my gaze caught on Barren, who, for once, didn’t look intent on shrinking his enormous frame into his surroundings. Like maybe Gram’s appraisal meant something to him, too.

A lump tickled my throat as I added, “But they did help me get back home.”

It was strange seeing them in the place where I'd always felt the safest. Surrounded by everything I cared about, it was impossible to deny how well they fit in. How in Poseidon's Deep had the three of them become so dear to me in such a short time?

When Gram didn't answer, Kai blurted, "It's nice to meet you, ma'am." He gave her an exaggerated bow—much too low for a normal, sane human greeting—before turning his head to throw me a sheepish smile. *Oh, Kai.* He was trying his hardest to earn her approval like Leander just had, but Gram was a tough cookie to crack.

And crack, she did not. Gram completely disregarded Kai's flashy bow, her sharp gaze bouncing dismissively from his short, spiked hair to focus back on her slow cooker. "Is that right?" She hummed as she opened the lid to check on her stew.

Okay—it was official. Gram wasn't a fan of my bubbly, purple-haired shark man. That thought made me want to give him a hug because Kai was as kind as could be, and how could anyone not be drawn to his infectious laugh and genuine smile?

"Oh, Clair, before I forget," Gram piped up, returning the lid and moving to rinse her ladle at the sink. "One of Rita's grandkids found your bag while the town was out looking for you. You know, the shy one who helps out around the docks. Such a polite boy, that Shaun... I always thought he was a bit sweet on you."

*Uh-oh.* And there she went, baiting them like the shrewd fisher she was. She'd obviously picked up on my *'friend'* lie and was trying to uncover which of the three men standing in her living room had caught my attention. Only, I wasn't sure she would ever be ready for the answer to that question.

Heck, I wasn't sure *I* could confess the truth to her out loud. Not without my cheeks melting off and Laverne bursting in here to slap around what was left of my face for daring to claim members of *her* harem. I could practically hear her screaming in my head now. *Shameless, shameless, shameless!*

Barren must have been the only one to understand Gram's meaning because his dark eyes flicked right to me like he was seeking some confirmation or denial of her statement. Before I could react, Gram continued, "I put it in your bedroom, right next to your bed. It still has your money in it and everything. Goodness, John and I were shocked when we noticed—Rita sure is raising those boys right."

I winced, my stomach twisting at the thought of Shaun's hands on my

bag. Of all the people in town, why did it have to be him? “Wow, that was... nice of him.”

Shaun was neither shy nor sweet, but I couldn't blame Gram for thinking the best of her dear friend's eldest grandchild. Gram and Rita had been steering us together for as long as I could remember, all because we happened to share the same age.

But although both of our families were fishers, we were as different as they came. It was like comparing a stately kingfish to a lowly seaworm, and he knew it, too. Shaun was popular, and I... Well, I would always be the awkward new girl who hadn't known humans usually *cooked* their fish before eating them—and that classrooms sometimes had tanks filled with class pets that certainly weren't meant to be eaten at snack time.

I couldn't recall if he'd been among the unlucky classmates who'd witnessed my blunder or if he'd just been a part of the horrible aftermath of mourning and tears that followed. But even if Shaun hadn't seen it, there wasn't a soul our age within a hundred miles who hadn't heard of the redheaded fish murderer as the tale of that snack time grew and twisted.

Had I reached in and stuffed one fish into my mouth or lunged onto the side of the tank and stuck my entire head in the water to gobble down every last cute, defenseless guppy? I'd heard the story retold so many times, even I wasn't sure how I'd gone about it. I just remembered being really, *really* hungry. And then equally embarrassed when the school called Dad to come get me for '*upsetting the class.*'

At least Dad never scolded me for it. He understood. Shaun, on the other hand, never let me forget. He and his friends usually went with the more colorful versions of the tale, and even after learning to blend in and growing accustomed to life on land, the normalcy I'd found hadn't mattered to guys like him.

“I can't believe my bag survived,” I mumbled, glancing back at the hall. I was so sure I'd lost it, along with Gram's old slow cooker, back when the Turbula twins knocked me out. But now that I knew Shaun had his hands all over my bag, I itched to go check on my things.

Barren was still staring straight at me, his eyebrows pinched, assessing me. If he really was as good at reading people as Leander claimed, then he knew how wrong Gram's words had been. Shaun was *not* sweet on me. Not in the least bit.

*Sproing-oing!* The sudden noise severed our locked gazes, and Kai

released a delighted gasp that had all of our necks snapping toward the front door.

He'd discovered the doorstop and was completely mesmerized by the simple metal spiral. He nudged it cautiously with the side of his shoe a third time while I shook my head.

"Maybe I should go check on my bag. See if my phone's still in it."

One of Leander's eyebrows hitched in my direction as I sidestepped closer to the hall. Surely they couldn't get into too much trouble in the time it took me to run to my room and back, right? Kai looked so drawn to the doorstop that I was positive it could entertain him for a couple of hours, at least.

"I'm sure I saw it in there, but go on, dear," Gram said. "And come on out of the doorway, you three. Make yourselves at home." It didn't sound like she'd meant her offer one bit. Still, a weight on my heart lifted. She was at least trying to be hospitable.

"Excuse me for a minute." Spinning around, I bolted for my bedroom.

My shaggy pink rug was a welcome sight, and as soon as I made it through the door, I tossed myself down on my bed before thinking better of it.

"Oh, how I missed you." Rolling my head over my cupcake covered pillow, I sighed, contented. It smelled of fresh detergent, and I breathed in deeply, enjoying the way it actually supported my head.

"You feel so good," I practically moaned, face down in the fluffy, cool fabric, just as my door creaked open.

"Remembering yesterday?"

I jolted upright at the smooth yet uninvited voice.

When I saw it was Leander coming through my bedroom door, I scrunched up my nose. "No one ever did teach you manners, did they?"  
*Damn cocky prince.*





## CLAIRA



“Ever heard of knocking?”

Leander combed his hair back with a hand and shrugged. “I don’t recall *you* knocking when you came into my bedchamber.” Chuckling, he cut a glance over to my wall and tipped his chin to the marlin tail in a greeting. “I wanted to see if you’d added to your collection since the last time I was here.”

My eyes rolled, then conveniently landed on my bag sitting next to my bedside table. “Oh, there you are,” I mumbled, snatching it up. Recalling the reason I’d come to my room in the first place, I began rummaging through it. “Not gonna lie, Lee—I did have the urge to flay some tails after your last visit. Do you know how many times I had to shampoo my rug to get your funky fish smell out of it?”

One by one, I took stock of my things. Lip balm, compact mirror, emergency fishing wire... I thumbed through my cash and moved a folded wad of receipts to uncover my phone. *Ah ha!*

I tried to turn it on, but the black screen told me the battery had drained while I was away. “Figures,” I huffed.

Leander rumbled another laugh, a teasing sound that drew my attention away from my phone. The smirk waiting for me was equal parts flirty and sinful, like he was readying to pounce and spread me out on my bed. “So, you wanted to collect more trophies, but then you realized my tail was the only one worth having, right?”

He moved a step closer, his icy eyes sharpening on me until anticipation hummed in the air around us. My core was afire with his nearness, my body begging to be claimed and pinned by him. Damn, what was wrong with me?

Was it the *thrall* or these mermen that had my libido in overdrive? I shoved those feelings down, way down, and took a steadying breath. Now was *not* the time.

I shook away the spell of his merman charm by reminding myself that he'd summoned trident magic to get back at a freaking seagull. "Still trying to smooth things over from when you broke your promise and raged on the beach, huh?"

It was hard to accept Leander's childishness. Especially right after he'd told me he wasn't ever going to use the magic in the first place.

Sighing, I got to my feet and shouldered past him to get to my phone charger.

As soon as I had my phone plugged in and set on my dresser, Leander's arms came around me from behind. A second later, his breath was in my ear. "I've been waiting to do this all day." His jaw nuzzled into my hair, and I almost hated how good it felt. How easy it was for him to distract me. To melt away my frustrations.

With a deep breath, I turned in his arms until our gazes locked. "You told me you wouldn't use any more magic."

"I really don't know what happened," he confessed, his palms planting on either side of me, and suddenly he did have me pinned, right to the dresser. "But it won't happen again. Well..." His voice trailed, and my eyes narrowed. "I'll have to use magic. Just one more time."

"Just one more time," I echoed, not believing what I was hearing but also not too surprised. Of course he would keep using the trident's magic despite all the reasons not to. Even though he was putting his very *life* on the line. Barren seemed to be aware of this outcome from the start.

Leander pressed in closer, and I pushed back on his chest. "I think this is going to be a problem, Lee. You, this trident." An exhausted huff escaped me. "I wish..." I swallowed the words before they escaped, but Leander tensed up like he'd already understood my thoughts.

*I wish you had chosen differently.*

He drew away like I'd stung him, a shaky hand finding its way back into his hair in a way that made my heart ache. "I did what I—" He stopped with a shake of his head, turning away from me. But not before the sorrow in his eyes had told me he didn't think I'd ever truly understand. "I'll need to use the trident's magic one more time. When we go back down to the portal."

"Wait, what? The *portal*?" Without realizing it, I'd reached for him,

using his arm to steady myself.

We couldn't go back down there, back to the portal. That's where those—those *things*, the cecaelia, had been. “I don't know, Lee...”

“I've seen my father work it a thousand times,” he assured me, but that wasn't the issue at all.

“You're forgetting that the trident wasn't inside your father like it's inside you.”

The arm I held tensed as he flexed his wrist. “One quick tap. That's all the portal needs. And you say you can see it. Right here.” He gestured to his arm and my eyes fell on the dark stain the trident had branded over his skin.

“We... we almost died the last time we went in the water, Lee.” My breathing deepened, my chest feeling heavier with every movement of my lungs. We couldn't return to the Atlantic, where the sound of our pursuers surely still echoed off the waves and the danger of being torn apart seemed imminent.

He chuckled then, though it was a brittle, joyless sound. “We're merfolk, Clairra,” he said. Not at all the comfort I needed. “Water isn't dangerous to us. It's like a human not wanting to stay on land because of the otters.”

I paused to stare at him. “You've... never actually seen an otter, have you?”

“Well, I know fish are fucking petrified of them. Come on, you have a boat. We can take that, pop down, and if I can't get the portal to open, we'll swim back up.”

“Oh really? It's that simple, is it?” I scoffed, my fear turning into frustration. “Like I'd really abandon my boat in the middle of the Atlantic. I don't expect a prince to understand, but *Lady Ochre* is Dad and Gram's livelihood, and I'm not giving her up just so the Indian Ocean can get their trident back faster. Barren and Kai flew here. If Barren's queen wants me there so badly, she can book us a flight.”

My words hung heavy in the air, and the silence that followed felt like it would last forever until Leander finally gave a nod. “You're right.”

All I could do was blink. “Excuse me?”

“You're right. Barren and I should have talked the plan over with you before deciding,” he continued, his quick acceptance of my feelings an unexpected shock. I'd expected him to try to convince me. To use more smooth words, more charms, but he seemed to understand. “We didn't want Queen Javalynn to know of your arrival until Barren discovered her

intentions for you, but we shouldn't have assumed you'd be comfortable going back into the water after that fucking hell we went through."

I was still working through his words when he wrapped his arms around my shoulders. "Take all the time you need to visit your family. Your face lights up when you talk about this place and the humans here. I owe them a great debt for keeping you safe on land." His arms tightened over my shoulders before falling away. "I won't let anyone take you away until you're ready."

A warm sensation spread through my chest. Leander might not have been able to keep the Indian Ocean from taking me away, but it was a comfort to know he wanted me to stay as long as I needed.

"Thanks, Lee. For understanding." I gave him a smile that he returned with a grin, his hands sliding over my waist to draw me closer.

"See, I do have manners," he pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah. You're such a gentleman," I deadpanned. I could feel an eye roll coming on, but my skin tingled where his strong hands held my hips. "I want to spend time with Dad before we leave. Maybe I can tag along next time he takes the boat —"

A thought struck me, and I turned the idea around in my head a few times before voicing it out loud. "I suppose Dad could sail us out by the portal if he knew the way. He knows about... *Us*."

Leander's eyes turned smoldering as his chin dipped, golden hair spilling over his forehead as he leaned closer. "Oh, really? You told him about us?"

His arms caged possessively around me. I tried to wiggle out of them, but he wouldn't give me up. "Not *us*, us. When would I have even done that, Lee?" My voice rose with exasperation even as a smile tugged at my lips. "I haven't even seen him since we—" My jaw snapped shut in a way that caused his smirk to grow, his lips practically taunting me to complete that thought as their curve widened. Sighing, I dropped my voice to a sharp whisper. "Us as in what *we are*!"

"Even better," he threw back smoothly. "If he knows, then I bet he'll be willing to help us."

"Fine, I'll find time away from Gram to ask him."

The sound of the front door opening reverberated through the walls, sending my heartbeat into overdrive. I wriggled out of Leander's grasp like an eel, dodging his fingers as I dashed for the bedroom door. My feet carried me through the hall and back into the living room before the sight in front of

me registered, and I nearly stumbled over my feet.

Kai and Barren were both seated at the kitchen table. Their forks scraped against the delicate serving plates sitting in front of them as they dug into slices of pie. Gram sat in her usual rocker, her eyes glinting in the light while she kept an eagle-eyed watch on the table. As they ate, she rocked back and forth in her chair, casually buffing the pirate pistol on her lap with the end of her shawl.

“Can never be too careful,” she said in a low, eerie voice just as Dad’s shoulder edged through the front door.

“Jeanette, I don’t believe it! You’ll never guess what’s sitting out here, right on our front steps.” He threw a look back over his shoulder, stomping his boots out on the welcome mat, completely oblivious to my presence. “I’ve never seen a creature more beautiful,” he continued, gushing. “I caught sight of it first while I was docking the boat, and can you believe it? It followed me all the way back up to the porch! Sitting right there, the prettiest sight I’ve ever seen.”

“And you’ll never guess who else has turned up,” Gram said, her voice carrying over the creaking of her rocker. “And the friends she’s brought with her,” she added, throwing me a mischievous glance.

Dad’s head snapped forward, and his boots nearly took out the doorframe as he pushed inside to reach me. “Claira!”

He’d hardly gotten his arms around me before I heard Gram’s voice, exasperated and sharp. “Now, now, don’t start blubbering, John. Not in front of our company.”

Dad clenched his eyes shut like he was attempting to stop himself, but then his head shook, and the tears still spilled over, wetting his cheeks. “You’re all right? They didn’t hurt you or nothing, did they?” I shook my head no, and he held me tighter. “Jeanette, she—oh, she missed you so much.” The tears were really streaming now, and Gram sighed as she lifted off her rocker.

Her arms waved in defeat as she mumbled, “I’ll get the tissues.”

“Thanks, Gram.” My lungs were tight from being squeezed half to death, but I couldn’t help but laugh, feeling that we’d already fallen right back to our crazy sort of normal.

Between the two of them, Dad always seemed to feel things more deeply. Or, at the very least, he wasn’t afraid to show his emotions. Even when I was a kid, whenever I’d been hurt, he was always the first to get teary. He taught

me it was all right to express my emotions. That even if merfolk couldn't cry underwater, it was okay to cry on land.

Gram broke up our embrace by handing Dad a tissue, and after he blew his nose a few times, his damp eyes settled on something over my shoulder.

A voice called out, "Sir," from behind me, and when I looked, Leander was folded forward, bowing low and straight. It wasn't the same as when Kai had done it. Leander had so much confidence and authority that it rendered me speechless.

Then it hit me—I'd never seen Leander bow to anyone.

Well, okay, he'd bowed to a card table turned phone charger shrine once. But that bow wasn't like this. This was as if he was showing respect to a king.

Dad glanced from Leander to Gram before noticing the two others seated at the kitchen table. He took a second, his eyes sliding over their unique features, before he turned down to me. The unspoken word, *merfolk*, passed between us as understanding settled over his eyes.

"This is Barren, Kai, and Leander," I said, gesturing to the three of them. Then I swallowed hard. *Here we go again.* "They're my... friends." Thankfully, the lie came out smoother this time. Totally believable.

That is, until Gram threw her hands in the air and vented a "*Ha!*"

Dad's eyebrows drew in closer, and I quickly cleared my throat. "Gram let them come in. I hope you don't mind."

He gave Leander another look just as the front door creaked open. Laverne's flippers made a slippery swishing sound as she glided along the linoleum. After a quick survey of the room, she made for the kitchen table, where she flopped into the chair next to Kai, her snout pointed high.

"And this is —"

Dad's gasp cut me off. "Would you look at that? It followed me inside! Look, Clair. Look how beautiful it is."

He veered over to the table, drawn to Laverne in much the same way Kai had been drawn to the doorstep. "I've never seen a sea lion this far south. Look how fit and sleek its coat is."

Laverne puffed and preened, gobbling up the praise while Kai gave her a good scratch underneath her chin. "This is Laverne," Kai said, giving Dad a smile. "She's also included in the group of Clair's new friends."

Then Kai suddenly turned his bright smile on me, and my stomach tumbled at the sight. "The most beautiful girl I've ever seen," he said airily,

and his face flushed a pale pink as his gaze lingered on me, leaving me uncertain if he was referring to me or Laverne.

Laverne didn't doubt his intentions one bit though. She rumbled a series of clinks, her chin nuzzling into his hand.

Dad picked up the empty plate in front of Barren with a frown. "Now, Jeanette, don't think you can give these fine folks some pie to get out of feeding them dinner." He walked the plate to the sink, then returned to gawk some more at Laverne. She was sitting in my usual seat, but something told me he wasn't about to ask her to move.

Gram stood there with one hand on her hip and another on her pistol, her face pinched like she was aware she'd been caught. Then she stared at Barren, maybe a little too long, before sighing. "I better throw in a few more potatoes into the pot, then." She stuffed the pirate pistol back under her shawl. "Looks like we're going to need them."



I COULDN'T BELIEVE Gram agreed to let Laverne eat with us at the dinner table. Or that Laverne had demanded we place a bowl of stew on the table for her so she could have the same thing we were having.

Okay, maybe that one wasn't too surprising—Laverne seemed to enjoy watching everyone bend over backward to please her.

At least Leander didn't care enough about her to bother masking his disinterest. He was too focused on shooting me heated looks and trying to find my leg with his underneath the table to notice anyone else. But Dad was thrilled with the arrangement and had no trouble recruiting Kai to help him fetch a few dusty chairs from the shed to make sure everyone had a place at the table. By the time dinner was ready, we sat shoulder to shoulder, and it was definitely not awkward.

Not at all.

Dad took a bite of stew, then wiped his mouth with a napkin. "So, how is Laverne enjoying the Crystal Coast?" It was hard to ignore how interested he was in her journey, yet he hadn't pushed me for more details about mine.

I stopped my negative train of thought right there. *Pull yourself together, Clair.* It only made sense that Dad hadn't brought up what I'd been through.



It wasn't that he didn't care, but that he was trying to avoid talking about it in front of Gram.

Kai dropped his spoon, eager to reply to more of Dad's ceaseless questioning. I couldn't tell if Laverne was the one supplying Kai with the answers or if he already knew all there was to know about her.

"She's loving the surf," he said, then gave Laverne's thick neck a firm pat. "Aren't you, pretty girl? She goes out as often as we can spare her company."

Spare her company? *Pfft.*

Laverne's whiskers pulled flat as she gave a quick, confident nod.

I scooped up a chunk of meat, perhaps too forcefully, and stuffed it into my mouth. I wasn't jealous of a *sea lion*. Nope. Nu-uh.

"I bet you never want to take your eyes off her." Dad's dreamy sigh had me inadvertently kicking Leander in the shin when I shifted uneasily in my seat. He didn't appear to be bothered by it, though, and his leg quickly returned for more.

"The water can be dangerous around here. Riptides and all that," Dad continued. "Wouldn't be wise to let her go out alone, don't you agree, Clair?"

"Yeah," I said tightly. "Laverne is a joy to have around and should be protected at all costs."

"Exactly!" Dad said, snapping his fingers. Barren masked a bark of laughter with a cough as Dad leaned forward in his chair. "We've got lots of predators around here. Even something as small as a sharpnose can do a lot of damage if they get their teeth around you just right."

Embarrassed that Barren had picked up on the sarcasm in my remark, I turned down to stare at my bowl. I couldn't believe I was being immature enough to voice my jealousy out loud. I'd been so excited to be back home, only to have Laverne steal the spotlight. Maybe I shouldn't have been so hard on Leander for taking revenge on a seabird.

By the time dinner was over, I knew Laverne's preferred fish to hunt, where she grew up, and even her favorite song to yap along to on the radio. All very important Laverne facts that would surely be useful to me sometime in the future. You know, if she ever decided to not hate me. *Yeah, not likely.*

After Kai finished the last bite of Laverne's portion of stew, I stood up to collect the dishes. She'd made a noise from deep in her throat when he'd first gone for her bowl, as if she was about to snap at him for daring to take the

offering meant for her. But then she'd glanced at my dad and thought better of it. Wouldn't want to spoil my dad's perfect image of her by showing her actual personality, now would she?

Barren stacked Leander and Kai's empty bowls over his own and rose from the table.

"Oh, let me get that," I said, but he headed for the sink before I could take the stack from him. Then, to my surprise, he started doing the dishes. I stood behind him in awe, watching how efficiently he worked and scrubbed with one arm.

Wow. No matter what he did, Barren was amazing. Even in the water, he was the fastest swimmer out of the three of them and never let anything slow him down.

When he'd finished washing what was in the sink, I tapped him on the left shoulder. "Mmh?" he hummed, and my lips curved up into a smile as his head tilted back to me.

"Thanks, Barren," I said softly, passing him the rest of the bowls. "But I could have done those."

"Oh, let him work without you fussing and hovering over him, Clair." Gram got up from her chair, making a show of stretching out her back. "Hard to find a man these days who knows his way around a sponge." She shot Dad a look that could freeze fire. "Isn't that right, John?"

Gram had been surprisingly quiet during dinner, letting Dad do all the talking. She was never one to open her mouth during a good meal unless it was to put more food inside it. Now that she was full... Well, who knew what she would say?

Dad's mouth drooped into a frown. "What? I clean up around here plenty."

"Mm-hmm." Gram tutted, her nose wrinkling in distaste at the sight of Dad's muck-crusting boots. Then she turned her soured look to me. "And I suppose you'll be wanting them to spend the night."

My heart raced. "Oh, I..." Had I expected them to spend the night? It hadn't even occurred to me how late it was getting and how we'd all need somewhere to sleep.

I turned to Leander and Kai at the table for some help, but their expressions were split between sinful mischief and eager curiosity. I barely kept my voice from squeaking when I said, "I mean, I guess. Could they? Is—is that okay?"

I'd never had a guest stay overnight. *Definitely* not three grown men. Or a sea lion.

"Of course they'll stay," Dad chimed in. He was scratching Laverne under the chin now, in the place where Kai had told him she liked to be scratched on the most.

Before I could ask the obvious question of *where* they were going to stay, Dad supplied, "If we move the couch back a bit, there'll be plenty of room out here."

"I guess I'll grab some quilts then," I said, feeling strangely excited. "And we've got some extra throw pillows in the closet."

It was oddly comforting to see Dad and Gram so ready to accept them into their home.

"Make yourselves comfortable, you three—" Gram's gaze fixed on Laverne. "—*Four*. Bring the fish in too, John. Might as well invite the rest of the ocean in there while we're at it." She waved a hand around before exhaling a deep sigh. "What a day this has turned into."

When I passed Gram on my way to the linen closet, I gave her hand a squeeze and quietly said, "Thanks, Gram. For letting them stay."

"Of course, dear," she said before turning back to the others. "There's water in the tap, and the bathroom is down the hall." She gave the back of my hand a loving pat before snapping her hand away and leaning in to whisper, "But don't think I won't be keeping one eye out here tonight, young lady. I'm determined to find out which of these troublemakers might end up becoming my future grandson-in-law."

"Gram!" I let out a gasp, glancing back to see if anyone else had heard her.

"Oh, I'm only teasing, dear." She laughed, deep and rich, like hosting this crazy dinner party was the most amusement she'd had in ages. "But if I were you," she started, leaning back in, "I'd choose the one who did the dishes without being asked." Then she waggled her eyebrows. "I've always had a thing for drummers."



WORDS COULDN'T DESCRIBE the joy of taking a hot shower, getting into clean

underwear and pajamas that actually *fit* me, and then lying down in my own bed. I barely had time to think about whether Leander would ignore my request not to sneak into my bedroom or if the others would be comfortable sleeping on the living room floor before I drifted off to sleep.

Leander must have respected my privacy for once, because when the sound of the front door opening woke me, I was still alone, just me and my unicorn comforter. When I looked at the five on my alarm clock, I knew it was Dad who had left through the front door. It seemed even staying up late to dote on Laverne hadn't kept him from waking well before the sun.

I took an extra ten seconds to savor the comfort of my pillow before rising out of bed and changing into my thermal overalls. If I hurried, I'd be able to spend some time with Dad before the others woke up. Opening my closet, I grabbed a fresh pair of boots and took special care to lace them tight. I spared a second to brush out my hair and smoothed it back before slipping out of my room.

A medley of snores reverberated from the living room, and I was relieved to hear Laverne among them—by far the loudest snorer of all. Without her around as a distraction, maybe I'd actually get to talk to Dad. I was on my way to the front door when something snagged me by the leg.

Looking down, I spotted Kai's sleepy grin in the darkness, his arm stretching out from under his blanket to wrap a hand around my ankle. His voice barely reached a whisper as he said, "Have fun."

"Thanks," I mouthed back, and my heart melted when he lovingly touched the side of my boot, holding his hand there for a moment before letting go. "Get some more sleep," I said, and his smile held when he tucked his arm back under the quilt and closed his eyes.

Outside, the air was crisp enough to wake me more than a cup of coffee would have. The light was on in the shed. I jogged over, and when I opened the door, I found Dad winding a net at his workbench.

"Need some help?" I asked, even though we both knew how terrible I was at winding nets. Dad always managed to keep the nets in a neat and usable state as he wound them, unlike the tangled disaster I created whenever I attempted the same.

The look in his eyes when he glanced up told me he was glad to have me for company. "I've got a few on top of the barrel that need mending."

"Sounds easy enough," I said, and he chuckled as he continued to work. After gathering my favorite mending shuttles, I fetched the topmost net and

sat on the empty stool at the workbench.

As I held the shuttle and net in my hands, my head began to clear. Mending a net often felt like working through a puzzle, and it was nice to face a familiar problem I knew I could solve. Starting at the top and working side to side, I cut threads and tied new knots as we fell into a companionable silence.

For a moment, I could imagine nothing had changed, and I was home for good. That tomorrow morning, I'd wake up and do more of the usual, living this beautifully simple human life.

Only something in me had changed since the last time I'd sat here next to Dad mending nets. I wasn't the same Clairia I had been, and I wondered if I could ever fully return to this life.

Or if I even wanted to.

After securing the last nylon knot, I let the net sag in my lap. "Hey, Dad?"

For the first time since I came to join him with his chores, Dad's hands stopped moving. He looked up from the net he'd been winding, his gaze thoughtful. "What's on your mind, Claire-bear?"

"I—" And that's when I told him. About fishing up Leander and about the merfolk's curse. About King Eamon finding out, which led to my abduction and the impossible task that the mer kingdoms expected from me.

There were things I didn't tell him—things that were too hard or too uncomfortable to explain, like the *thrall*, the *cecaelia*, and my encounters with my birth father. But Dad didn't seem to mind the gaps in my story, and if there were any parts that didn't quite make sense, he didn't dwell on them.

By the time I'd made it to what our plan was next, the shuttle was shaking in my hand, and streams of silent tears had wet Dad's face all the way down to his neck. Even though I'd left out the danger and uncertainty of heading to the portal, Dad was so overcome with emotion I wondered if he'd somehow felt all the words I was keeping to myself. "So, would you mind taking *Lady Ochre* for us? So we can see if—if the portal will work?"

He took the net I'd been working on from me to pull me into a tight bear hug. "I'll take you to the Indian Ocean myself if that's what you need." When he pulled away, he sniffled, wiping fresh tears from his eyes. "Anything for you, kiddo. That's what family's for."



## CLAIRA



I wasn't ready to leave. Not yet. But as Gram left to run her errands, I knew this would be our best chance to slip away. After all, how would we explain to Gram why we needed to leave in Dad's boat? What would she say when we didn't return on the boat later in the day?

It was best for us to go out while she was gone.

Not answering questions about our upcoming journey was in everyone's best interest, even if leaving without saying goodbye to Gram wasn't ideal. It definitely wasn't something human Claira would do. But for now, it seemed I was stuck trying to pretend I was a mermaid. A mostly useless mermaid, armed with night vision and a magical seashell stuffed in my backpack that I was pretty sure was a switchblade, but a mermaid, nonetheless.

And mermaids were good at leaving their loved ones behind, weren't they?

Why, then, was this so hard for me?

My heart ached for me to stay, but at least I'd spent time with Gram over breakfast. The hug we shared before she left for her errands would have to last me until I could come back home. Which would hopefully be soon.

Dive down into the sea, pass through the magical portal, grab the Indian Ocean's trident, and have Barren return to his kingdom as a hero. Totally easy and doable, right?

Yeah—nothing was ever that easy, not for me, but the others didn't seem to share my worries.

Kai followed me eagerly down the pier, his hands constantly moving like he could hardly contain his anticipation for the trip. "I can't believe we're going by boat!"

“First time?” I asked, and he responded with a vigorous nod. “Well, I hate to admit it, but I’m kind of glad Dad agreed to take us.” I drew in a heavy breath of the salty air, tinged with the musky smell of the pier underfoot. “I’ve missed this.”

Leander brushed past Kai, wedging between us. His arms folded over his chest as he chuckled. “We were just in the ocean, beautiful.”

“This is different. It’s like home to me.” Nose scrunching, I frowned at him. “This is *my* ocean, my shore, my boat.”

“We’ve been together on a few boats now, haven’t we?” He gave me a smoldering look that brought me right back to our first kiss. Leander’s body, chest heaving and tail dripping with salt water, pinning me to the deck of the boat back at the warehouse.

“A few,” I said, biting back my real retort. Dad was already aboard, and he didn’t need to hear me teasing Leander about how his naked ass and sea cucumber looked the last time he was on this boat.

Hopping off the pier, I landed on *Lady Ochre’s* deck and gave Dad a wave. Leander jumped next, his feet hitting the deck as lightly as if he were a feather, not even a single strand of his hair moving out of place. *Show off.* His grin turned teasing, like maybe he knew I was currently visualizing his sea cucumber, and I rolled my eyes.

Barren didn’t bother jumping. The distance between the pier and the boat was barely more than a normal pace for him. His knee hardly lifted when he stepped over the rail and onto the boat.

Dad was busy stowing away his gear, so I turned to assist Kai onto the boat, only to be greeted by his back.

“Come on, pretty girl.” He was hunched over Laverne, his voice bright and full of enthusiasm. “You can make it. You just have to try!”

Laverne’s moon eyes rounded, going so big and glossy that I could see the whole boat in their reflection. She made a soft whimper, then another one after Kai straightened up to scratch at the back of his neck.

“I, uh... Sure thing, I guess.” He stretched out his back, then massaged the area near the bottom of his spine like it still hurt him. He leaned in like he was going to pick her up, and I almost tumbled over the railing to grab hold of his shoulder.

“Wait—what are you doing? You can’t pick her up.” I pulled him back, ignoring Laverne’s shocked gasp. “You’re still recovering.” Laverne’s helpless facade cracked as soon as Kai’s back was turned. She bared her



teeth, her fury radiating without a sound.

“Laverne wouldn’t have asked for my help if she could have made the jump by herself,” Kai said, speaking so gently, with such understanding, that it made my heart hurt.

Uh-huh. Like I was going to believe that.

“Trust me,” I deadpanned, barely restraining my annoyance with Laverne. “She can flop right into this boat.” I shot a glare at her that she returned with a hot snort.

“Don’t worry about me, Clairia.” Kai moved my hand off his shoulder and drew a finger up to his lips. “Laverne is afraid of heights,” he mouthed, and I looked down to watch the water ripple and foam as it filled the gap between the boat and the pier.

Yeah, she could totally make that.

“Trust me, she’ll be okay.” I didn’t want to see him in pain just because Laverne liked having his attention. Determined, I reached a hand back out to Kai, beckoning him into the boat with me. “She was flying through waves three times this high this morn —”

I felt the warmth of Barren’s body pass me as he went to grab Laverne from the pier. Laverne’s eyes bulged in surprise when he scooped her up with his massive arm without warning. Her long snout fell agape as he stepped back into the boat, rocking it slightly with his weight.

“Oh, oh!” Kai clapped his hands, ignoring my offer to help him on deck. He sprung up on his toes as Barren crouched down, gently releasing Laverne on deck. “Thanks for helping, Barren. Me next?”

Barren must not have been interested in entertaining him. As soon as Laverne was safely out of his arm, he was up again, making his way over to the nautical charts Dad had brought on board.

“I think he’s more worried about showing Dad the way to the portal.” Clearing my throat, I offered him my extended arms again. “Guess you’ll have to settle for me.”

Wow—that was corny. Like something Leander would say to me. So *smooth, Clairia*. And yet, my cheeks flushed as if I’d asked for something far more than a hand on deck. I leaned in, propping a boot against the railing to ready myself, only to be interrupted by Leander just as Kai’s hands were about to touch mine.

“Shall I pick you up and carry you?” Leander bared his teeth at Kai in a fearsome display, just as Laverne had done to me moments before.

“Uh—” For half a second, the smile faded from Kai’s face, as if he was mulling over the offer. “Sure, I guess?” He spread his arms out to Leander, grinning bashfully.

Leander’s shoulders rolled as he sighed heavily. “Get the fuck in the boat.” He grabbed Kai’s shoulder and yanked him over the rail before I could stop him.

“Ow, ow—!” Kai landed, spinning on one foot.

“You call yourself a merman,” Leander spat out, steadying Kai back on his feet now that he was on deck. He leaned in, talking in a low voice that made it obvious he hadn’t wanted me to hear. “She thinks you’re a fucking warrior. Start acting like one.”

A heavy sigh came from where Dad and Barren were standing at the helm. “Let them flirt, Leander.” Barren’s words hit like a blow, sending a wave of embarrassment crashing into me.

“W-we weren’t—” My tongue twisted, knotting over itself as I tried to deny it.

Okay, maybe I *was* flirting. Or trying to, at least. Right in front of everyone. My dad, too. *Ugh*. What was wrong with me?

Thank goodness Gram wasn’t here. I wasn’t sure what she’d think. Especially since she seemed convinced Barren was the reason for my perpetual blush and constant stuttering over my words whenever I started talking about how we were all *friends*.

My eyes lingered on Barren, and my heart thumped faster. Even though he wasn’t looking at me, my heart wrenched and fluttered like it might give out any second. He didn’t care if I flirted with Kai, did he? If he did, it didn’t show. Unlike Leander, who was never shy in showing his dislike for Kai.

His arm glided over the map, a pencil in hand, likely showing Dad the best spot to drop us off.

Why did the thought of him not caring... disappoint me?

*Wow, Clairra. I gave my face a brisk slap. Way to be terrible. You want Barren to be jealous? Time to get over yourself.*

But if I saw he was jealous, then maybe I’d know if deep down he actually —

Kai’s sudden gasp interrupted my thoughts. “Oh, hey, man!” He shaded his eyes with a hand while gazing up at the shore. “What about the car?”

That... was a good point. I’d completely forgotten about the car. This was a problem. “It’s a rental, right?” I bit at my lip, contemplating what to do. It

was sitting up on the hill, parked next to the house. “I’m pretty sure Gram will notice when we’re gone but the car’s not.”

When I glanced back at Barren, he shrugged, too absorbed in the charts to lift his head. “Someone will be by to collect it within the hour.” He flashed us his phone before sliding it back into his pocket.

“Thank goodness,” I said, relieved. At least that was one less thing to worry about.

When Dad finally looked up from the charts, he clapped a hand over Barren’s shoulder. “Looks good, second mate. Not too far away at all,” he said, laughing lightly. “We’ll be there before y’all know it.”

“*Second mate?*” Kai shifted his gaze between Barren and me, his smile jumbling. “I—I thought. I thought I was...”

*Oh, yikes.* Kai was thinking about the wrong kind of mate. “He doesn’t mean —”

“I guess that makes me the first mate,” Leander cut in, smirking. Not helping the situation at all.

“Hold on, wait a second.” Dad’s brow furrowed as he pointed to himself. “I’m the captain,” —he thumped Barren on the chest— “he’s second mate, and she’s first mate.”

Of course I was first—*wait.*

I tracked the gesture of Dad’s hand until it reached the deck. Right to... Laverne!

My mouth dropped. “Dad!” I wrung my hands out as I fought for the words. “The sea lion? *Really?*”

“Oh, oh! So, it’s like a hierarchy,” Kai piped up, suddenly looking less discouraged. “And where am I in this hierarchy?” He paused, a horrified look playing behind his eyes. “Wait, m-maybe I don’t want to know...”

“Deckhand,” Dad offered after a moment’s thought, nodding. Then he nodded to me and Leander as well. He looked way too pleased with himself. “All three of you are deckhands.”

I scoffed. Dad had never had a crew before, and he was clearly having too much fun with this. “At least make me the boatswain so I can boss this guy around.” I threw a thumb at Leander. “It might be nice telling a prince what to do for once,” I teased, and I wasn’t prepared for the way the gold in Leander’s eyes smoldered at those words.

He came up behind me, sliding his arms around me, his voice a low purr in my ear. “Any time, beautiful. Just tell me what you need.”

I leapt away from him, shoving his arms away, giving him a seething glare that said, *not in front of my dad, idiot!*

“Hmm...” Ignoring our display, Dad came over to the railing to untie the boat from the pier. “Boat ain’t big enough for a boatswain. Plus, a good deck boss would have already had this here rope untied and ready to go.”

He had a point.

“Okay, fine, we’re the deckhands,” I said, taking the rope from him to roll up. “But don’t blame me if anything happens to you and your first mate has to take over.” I looked to where Laverne was pacing the line of railing, her head thrown back like she was already enjoying the breeze. “You think a sea lion is going to know how to steer?”

Dad responded with a low chuckle as he turned away.

“She’s got flippers, remember!” I called out to his back, then sighed when he threw his head back to laugh as he took his place back at the helm. Dad always had a soft spot for sea mammals, so it was no surprise that he was fascinated with Laverne.

The wind picked up as we pulled away from the pier, and I set my eyes on the horizon.

“Is it going to go faster?” Kai asked, coming up beside me.

Leander gave a derisive snort, his arm encircling my waist to draw me against his hip. “Already feeling sick, are we?”

Kai looked out at the water, and his lips tilted like he was recalling something pleasant. “No, the boats in California all go really fast.” He made a *vroom* noise as he gestured with a broad sweep of his hand, then let out a light laugh. “To be honest, I was kind of nervous about riding in one.”

Leander’s huff told me he was back to being annoyed with Kai for letting his feelings be known. But what he was perceiving as a weakness was actually one of Kai’s strengths.

“Don’t listen to him, Kai.” I playfully elbowed Leander in the ribs. “There’s nothing wrong with being honest about how you’re feeling. Better than keeping everything to yourself until it all builds up and explodes.”

A thunderous boom of lightning rumbled, illuminating the sky, and I felt Leander’s arm drop away from me. His face was inscrutable as his chin tilted to where the bolt came from the sky.

Bullseye. I’d obviously hit a sore spot.

“Sorry, Lee, I shouldn’t have —”

“They didn’t call for any storms today.” Dad’s brow furrowed, his hands

tightening over the helm. “Looks like we should turn back...”

“That was me,” Leander said hotly, a hand covering his face. “My apologies, sir.” He was uncharacteristically red, down to his neck, like it had hurt his pride to admit he’d lost control. “It won’t happen again.”

“That was... you.” Dad’s gaze slowly panned from Leander to me, his eyes full of questions. “Are you sure about that, son?”

“Yes, sir.” He bowed deeply, and my mouth fell open. “It won’t happen again,” he repeated, his voice sounding strangely empty.

“Lee, wait.” I reached for him, but he drew away to the other side of the boat where Laverne had her head stuck between an opening in the rail.

Kai’s hand landed around my shoulders, steering me away. “I don’t think it’s you, Clair. He’s going through a lot,” he said in a soothing whisper, his grip light yet reassuring.

“No, it is me,” I said, my voice shaky. “He was being too hard on you, and I—I goaded him.”

Kai’s smile turned warm. “I don’t mind him taking his frustrations out on me.” He shrugged like he was used to being a scapegoat. As the youngest of all his brothers, maybe he was.

“Just because you don’t mind, it doesn’t make it right.” My molars clenched. How would things work between the three of us if they didn’t start getting along?

“He’s about to leave his kingdom as a deserter,” he whispered, sadness filling his voice. “Abandoning something he cares about more than himself.”

I... hadn’t considered that. What Leander was going through, what he must be feeling, yet Kai had.

I swallowed dryly, my mind racing. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t speak. As we sailed across the water, the wind blew through my hair, yet my mind stayed locked on that thought.

I might not have heard Dad say, “Not too long now. We’re getting close,” if Kai hadn’t stretched his arms out right next to me.

“Time to get changed.” Barren drew away from the helm. The next thing I knew, he was unbuckling the strap over his chest.

I stared at him, captivated by the movement of the brace falling away from his shoulder, until his hand went to his top button and his words finally registered.

Dropping my bag from my shoulders, I unzipped it in search of my bathing suit. “Get changed, right,” I mumbled, and then my body went rigid

when I realized the most horrifying thought.

These guys were about to get naked. Right here, right now. Right on my boat.

*Right in front of my dad.*

“Crap, crap, crap.” My hands worked quickly underneath my shirt to exchange my bra for a bikini top. Hearing the guys shuffling around me made my heart work harder than *Lady Ochre’s* engine.

Whose plan had this been? Who had invited my dad along to witness this madness?

Forget about the threat of cecaelia, we could have swum. We *should* have swum. Anything was better than Dad witnessing three grown-ass mermen stripping down to put their hands all over his daughter.

Sure, it was because of their betta fish curse, but I hadn’t explained to Dad how my curse breaking worked. That detail hadn’t seemed like something he needed to know. But now...

“Shit, shit, shit.” I threw my wrap around me and tied it up, spinning it so the opening was at my hip. “W-wait, guys. *Guys*,” I called out, fumbling over each word as I threw my shirt down and wiggled my pants off from underneath the wrap.

When I looked up, a blindingly golden ass told me Leander had already dropped his pants.

“Oh, *heck no*.” I abandoned my bag to charge at him, my face already feeling the heat. Why was he always the first to get naked? It was like clothing melted off his perfect form with only a word or a simple snap of his fingers.

As I seized Leander by the shoulders, my gaze immediately shifted to my dad. His focus was still on the horizon—thank Poseidon—but for how long?

Laverne sure had noticed, though. Her snout plunged open, her tongue unraveling so far out of her mouth I was sure it would hit the deck.

“Uh, Clair?” I turned back to see Leander’s eyebrows curving, astonishment replacing the dreary expression he’d been wearing for the last hour. “What are you doing?”

“Get moving, Lee.” I grunted, urging him backward with an insistent press to his shoulders. Unfortunately, his muscles were rock solid, and I had to wonder if pushing an actual golden statue across the deck would have been easier.

“Why?” He barely took half a step backward, pointing to the starboard

side of the boat. “The ocean’s that way.”

“*Why?*” I threw back sharply. “Why are *you* always so eager to take off your pants?”

Leander surprised me with a laugh, and the sound gradually deepened as he allowed my strength to move him across the deck. “See, you keep complaining about that.” His lips curved, going smoother than the suggestive lilt of his voice. Then he planted a foot abruptly behind him, cutting off our momentum so I would fall into his chest.

As his arm hooked around me, he leaned in, his voice a dark whisper in the wind. “But I notice you’re always the first to look.”

“Now is *not* the time, Lee,” I grit out, putting my elbow into it to get him moving again. There might have been some truth to that, but I sure wasn’t going to admit it. Not when my dad was across the boat from us.

I didn’t stop pushing until I’d blocked Dad’s view of Leander’s naked princely glory, using Barren’s great size as a shield. “There.”

When I stepped back, Leander folded his arms over his chest like he’d realized what I’d done. “Kai’s got his dick out, too,” he said flatly, though I could hear humor in his voice when I whipped my head back to check. “But I’m flattered that you looked for mine first.”

“Stay right here, Lee.” My voice was low with warning. And maybe some panic. “Don’t you dare move.”

He laughed again, the last trace of his earlier moodiness dissolving. “Wouldn’t dream of it, beautiful.”

Embarrassment spread through me like wildfire. The way Leander said *beautiful* was like a ribbon of velvet wrapping over me. But in front of my dad? *Ugh*.

“Kai,” I groaned out, dashing over to grab him by the wrist. At least with Kai, his shirt would be long enough to cover his —

“What’s up?” Kai spun around to face me, and my eyes grew wide.

His shirt billowed out against his chest as the wind blew around him. Completely unbuttoned. All the way down.

Kai’s face was pink—so, so pink—and his lips were a tight line of intent. “Uh...”

Why now, of all times, had he decided to work on overcoming his modesty?

I inhaled deeply, my heart pounding, before forcing my face into a pleased expression. If I overreacted or asked him to cover up with his shirt,

the damage to his self-esteem could be irreparable. He returned my smile, and although he looked relieved, his face went at least three shades pinker.

“Right, okay. Well, come over here,” I said, pulling him along with me. Unlike Leander, Kai was excited to follow me wherever I went. When I had him out of Dad’s line of sight, safe in Barren’s shadow, my head finally cleared enough I could think.

“All right,” I said, composing myself. At least Barren had the sense to keep himself presentable for my dad, only worrying about removing his shirt to secure his brace back over his bare chest. “If you guys could wait here a second while I grab my —”

Barren moved his hand, and the buckle of his pants released with a dull *click*. Half a second later, his pants fell to the deck, pooling around his ankles. Laverne and I gasped in unison before I spun around, releasing a groan to the heavens.

A familiar whistle rode the wind. “This is quite a sight.” There was a tinge of hesitation in Dad’s voice, like he was trying to figure out how he should be feeling. “Not what I expected,” he said with a low, nervous chuckle, “but I’m sure merfolk ain’t modest like regular folk, eh, Clair?”

My hands flew to my face in an attempt to block out the embarrassment. “Their legs will be covered with scales as soon as we hit the water,” I answered through my hands. There was no way I could bear to look at him. Or them, either.

Would I ever be able to see any of them naked without thinking of this moment? “Sorry, Dad. I’m so, so sorry.”

“No need to apologize, kiddo.” He sounded amused. The wind quieted as the boat slowed. “You ain’t the one who made the rules. That was your Poseidon, wasn’t it?”

I dropped my hands from my face, my head tilting. “How did you know?” I’d never talked to Dad about Poseidon—or much of anything to do with merfolk, really.

He let out a hearty laugh. “You’ve only been cursing him under your breath since the moment Jeanette accidentally taught you how to curse.”

I vented a laugh as the memory came to me. Although Gram insisted we used proper manners at the house, she sure had a sailor’s way with words on the boat.

“We’re slowing down,” Kai said, and Dad nodded.

“That’s because we’re here,” Leander cut in, his eyes on the water’s



rippling surface.

“You can tell from up here?” I returned to my bag, diving into the front pocket this time, and pulled out a small tie bag I’d filled earlier. “Can you feel the portal’s magic or something?”

When I looked back up, Leander’s throat bobbed in a slow swallow. “Yes.” He rubbed over the black streak spanning his arm.

“Oh, damn. That’s new, isn’t it?” I mumbled as I got back to my feet. His fingers pressed into the spot where the trident sharpened to a point as he nodded. “Hopefully, that’s a good thing.” I shrugged. “Maybe that means this plan will work after all?”

Kai scratched at his head. “Do we have a plan?”

I blinked at him before shooting Leander and Barren a curious look. “We did tell you about the plan, didn’t we?”

Kai’s cheeks flushed, and he shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I-I thought we were just going for a ride until Barren told us to get changed like we were going for a swim.”

“Sorry, Kai.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. It was Leander and Barren’s plan, sure, but I’d assumed they’d discussed it in front of Kai, too. “The plan is to take the portal to the Indian Ocean.”

“Whoa, nice!” I could see Kai’s excitement start to bubble as he scanned over every corner of the boat. “What’s a portal? Oh! Are we all getting weapons this time?”

Wait—he didn’t know about the portals?

Barren’s expression turned grim. “No weapons.”

At the mention of no weapons, Kai froze in place. “Going with no weapons? That’s our plan?”

“Having no plan is still a plan,” Leander cut in, radiating an air of confidence I wasn’t sure any of us believed.

Kai scratched at his scalp. “No, that’s... not how planning works.”

There was something menacing in the way Leander’s shoulders tensed at Kai’s skepticism, so I stepped between them. “Well, I don’t have weapons,” I said, untying the string of the bag I’d taken from my backpack, “but I brought these.” Sticking my hand inside, I pulled out a handful of jewelry.

Barren gave the haul an appraising look before saying, “Pearls.”

“Exactly.” I couldn’t help but smile, feeling proud of my foresight. Then absolutely terrible, remembering that the pearls I was holding all belonged to Gram. I hated that I hadn’t had enough time to ask her. Instead, I wrote a note

promising that when I came back, I would buy her pearls of all sizes and hues, a set for every occasion.

“Sorry, Gram,” I mumbled, pulling a heavy bracelet made of multiple lines of pearls from the bunch to fasten around Kai’s wrist. Gram would surely think I’d gotten mixed up with a gang of delinquents when she found out her granddaughter was now a thief.

“Whoa, thanks.” Kai shook his wrist and watched as the pearls clanked against one another.

I moved to Barren next, pulling out a double tiered necklace for him. But when I stretched up to his neck, I stalled over the long expanse of his collarbone.

Barren’s neck was so wide, there was no way these were going to fit.

Something brushed against my arm, and I looked down to see his hand outstretched. A frown tugged at my lips as I reluctantly placed the pearls into his palm. “Here. Hopefully, we won’t need them.” I’d chosen the necklace for Barren because I wanted to make it easier for him to light them. Maybe if I tied some fishing line to the clasp...

“Feels familiar.” The gravelly rumble of Barren’s voice caught me off guard. His chin tilted thoughtfully as he turned down to the pearls resting in his palm. Then, dark curls cascading over his brow, he lifted his eyes to look at me. “Doesn’t it?”

My breath caught. *Familiar?* Like when he’d had me hold the pearls last time? But there was something there in his eyes—deep and expectant—while he waited for my response that had me doubting if I truly knew what he meant.

“Uh, guys?” Kai’s voice came from behind us. “Leander jumped.”

I was still trying to figure out what Barren’s dark eyes were telling me when Kai’s words hit. “Leander *what?*”

“*He jumped,*” Laverne echoed in my head. When I turned, she was hanging halfway over the rail, looking down at the ocean below. “*Should I go after him?*”

“Why would he do that?” I pulled away from Barren and brushed past Kai to get to the spot Laverne was surveying. Fear flooded me when the only thing I could see was the water’s churning surface. “Did—” My voice cracked. What the heck was Leander thinking? “Did he turn into a fish?”

Laverne must have lied about her fear of heights, because she slipped down the side of the boat nose first, plunging into the water.

“I—I need to get down there.” My voice was a shrill, almost inaudible sound. “Kai? Barren?”

They were already moving, and as the two mermen closed around me, I looked back, right at Dad in a panic. “Sorry, Da—” I couldn’t even get the words out before arms closed around me, and down we went, right over the guardrail.

We hit the cold water in unison, the chill of it seeping into my skin for merely a second before my transformation took over.

*Pop.*

My body jerked between the two of them as they reformed around me. I braced myself, wrapping around the nearest body I could reach, praying that the other could keep his hold on me. When the dead weight of my tail settled in place, I found myself sandwiched between the two of them, my head guarded, cradled by something set against either side of it for protection.

My eyes opened to a prickling sensation, like the light penetrating the surrounding water was forcing my night vision back. Only, my night vision didn’t seem to want to be held back. It pulsed and flitted around my irises, blurring my vision.

As soon as I opened my mouth, water flooded in, filling my lungs. “Does anyone see Leander?”

Instead of answering with words, the body behind me tensed up. I nearly choked on my tongue when the tail behind me slithered against mine, twining around it.

That was... certainly bizarre.

Then the tail grasped me and tugged, prying me away from the body in front. “W-wait!” What the heck was happening? I blinked rapidly, wishing away the mystical blurriness from my sight as I tightly hugged the figure in front of me. Then my vision honed, and I realized what I was holding on to.

Kai’s shark tail.

And those things that had protected my head? Yeah, I realized what those were, too.

“Your... your...” I tried, but I couldn’t say the words aloud.

Like a fool, I’d nestled my head between his claspers, thinking they were some sweet gesture meant to protect me from the rush of magic that came from our transformations.

Kai stared at me, absolutely lost for words, as if his brain had melted away.

Wishing I'd somehow evaporate into the current as well, I turned down to confirm that the thing wrapping around my useless half was Barren's crimson tail. His strength supported me, and I scrambled to grab one of Kai's arms as Barren separated us. As soon as I was off of Kai's shark half, Barren pulled me back against his chest, his arm encircling me in the same way his tail did. Possessive, absolute.

With the stone titan wrapped around me, I felt more protected than ever before.

Uh, *what?* Why was I even thinking that?

Whatever *thrall* thing this was, we did not have time for it. My eyes frantically searched the ocean around us.

"Claspers!" I shouted at the two of them to remind them why we were here.

Wait—that wasn't right.

"L-Leander!" I choked out, correcting myself. "Do you see him?"

Laverne came into view right on cue, rounding out of a spiral. "*Caught him,*" she said, and she spat a golden fish out of her mouth.

"Thank Poseidon!" I silently retracted all the unkind remarks I'd said to myself about Laverne over the last day.

Fish-Leander tumbled through the water while Laverne let out a hiss of disapproval.

"I mean, thank *you*, Laverne." I offered a smile I hoped she found genuine enough to please her. "Not Poseidon. Definitely not."

Kai still looked dazed when I hooked his arm around my waist so I could reach for Leander. "Brace yourself," I said, then went for the betta.

*Pop.*

When the water settled, a disheveled Leander floated in front of us, and Laverne was clapping at the spectacle.

I couldn't help it—now that I knew he was safe, my relief immediately slid to annoyance. "What were you thinking, Lee?" When he didn't open his mouth, I shook my head and answered for him. "You thought you were going to show off, huh? Thought that the trident's magic was enough to break your curse?"

Honestly, I'd thought the trident would be enough to break the curse, too. I'd been counting on it, actually, but that was before he took it into his body. Now that the trident was a part of him, breaking the curse would involve him using the trident's magic, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Leander's lips thinned into a grimace. He mumbled something, but even if it was an apology, I didn't want to hear it.

"I didn't even get to say goodbye to my dad, Lee," I said, exasperated. Kai tapped my shoulder, pointing to where the boat was still very much above us, and my face soured. *So not helpful, Kai.*

Leander drew a hand up to his head, but instead of running it through his hair like usual, his face pinched as he massaged his thumb between his eyes. "I fell in," he mumbled, looking abashed.

*What?*

"You fell in?" Barren asked before I could. His tail slowly released its grip on me, as if he was reluctantly ready to share me with the other two.

"Kai said you jumped." I turned to Kai, who immediately averted his gaze.

"It was awkward for a jump, but I thought he might just be terrible at it." Kai cringed. "Sorry, man."

Dread filled me—did this have something to do with the trident, or had he merely slipped overboard?

Leander's expression hardened. "I'm fine."

A half-hearted *I'm fine* wasn't what I wanted to hear. "Lee, seriously, what happened?"

"I'm fine," he repeated, shrugging the question right off. He drifted closer, and his arm coiled around mine like he might try to take more of me from Barren. Only his eyes were sunken, weary, and he didn't try to steal more of me away at all.

Leander was fine? I didn't believe it. No, not one bit.



## LEANDER



Something was happening inside of me—a searing pain that twisted my insides, causing my vision to blur and my equilibrium to shift.

One moment I'd been laughing, watching Clair's panicked expression as she scrambled to hide us from her dad, when an ache began slithering up my arm. Then a terrifying tightness seized my chest and my lungs constricted. The air had turned so thin it was like I was inhaling nothing at all. Next thing I knew, *bam*. Fucking fish gills.

And although Clair's touch had brought me back to a merman, that intense pain that sent me tumbling off the damn boat hadn't let up. All eyes were on me as my arm burned and my temple throbbed, not from oxygen loss or from Kai's pet scooping me into her jaws, but from something I couldn't explain.

Not that I wasn't grateful Laverne had caught me—I was. Better snatched up by her than a predator who wouldn't be so keen to spit me back out. But whatever had happened to me was still happening. And that fucking terrified me.

"Enough floating around," I snapped, sharper than I meant to, and drew closer to Clair and the others.

Now that I'd joined them, our bodies formed a ring around her slender form. Barren's arm was firmly around her waist, helping her stay afloat. He stared right at me, his usually emotionless eyes filled with a challenge that I could feel even in the water. One that dared me to take her from him. To *try* to take her.

I'd noticed his possessive hand on her as soon as I transformed. I didn't like it, but I couldn't worry about that now. Not with the mystery pain I was

battling and the possibility of cecaelia looming close by. “Let’s get moving,” I said.

“Hold on.” Clairra looked up, right at the underside of the boat. “I want to talk to Dad first.” Her eyes softened as she looked over to Barren next. “Please?”

Barren reacted with the swiftness of a captain following his queen’s command. His broad tail cut through the water, and Kai and I were forced to hold tight to Clairra’s arms or be left behind.

I’d always admired Barren. His strength, his unique position within his kingdom. They kept him at a distance for reasons I would never fully understand, and whenever Barren had spoken of his solitude, it sounded like welcomed freedom to me.

Freedom that I’d always wished for, away from my father’s watchful eyes and expectations.

During my darkest nights, when I shook with a rage that I knew I had to keep hidden, I’d imagined being someone other than myself. I’d wished that someone was Barren. I couldn’t imagine a time when I hadn’t admired him.

But now, I was irritated by his unshakable strength as he supported my mate through the water. It was more irritating, more grating than any mysterious pain or unrelenting headache could be.

As soon as we emerged, Clairra gasped in a big breath of air. “Dad!” she called, but he was already leaning over the edge of the boat as if he’d been searching for signs of us in the water.

“Y’all sure took off in a hurry.” He frowned, and there was deep worry apparent in his eyes. The sort of worry I imagined a parent should feel for their child. “I thought I might set anchor here and wait.” His face tensed with fear. “Then I wondered about the whereabouts of where that anchor might land. Wouldn’t want it dropping on your heads... Or tails.”

Clairra’s arm trembled underneath mine. “No, don’t anchor. You’ve got to get the boat out of here in case...” Her voice trailed, and when she started gnawing at her lower lip, I realized she didn’t want him to know of the dangers we might face in the water. She gave me a desperate look.

“We don’t know how long this will take,” I said. Despite the skull-splitting pain, I managed to work up a reassuring smirk. “Clairra will worry about you wasting your day here. Won’t you?”

Relief softened her shoulders. “Yes. Exactly.”

Nodding, I turned up to Clairra’s dad. “We thank you for getting us this



close,” I said, taking it upon myself to speak for all of us. Then, remembering all that I owed this human, I added, “Sir.”

Claira’s dad brought a thoughtful hand under his chin. “Hmm, if you’re sure.” He leaned against the railing. “I do have a lot to get done today.”

Then he straightened up, and I swore there was a sheen of moisture in his eyes. “You keep our Claira safe now.” My chest tightened when I realized he was looking at Barren while he said it. Then his glossy gaze was on me, and before I could risk irritating my headache by bowing my head, he’d moved on to Kai. “I mean it.”

Kai cleared his throat, and while I expected a high-pitched sound to emerge, he kept his words steady and calm. “We will.” It was a voice that said he genuinely believed he could protect her.

*Good.*

Kai needed some toughening up, but I was sure that with proper training, I could trust him to keep her safe. I wasn’t sure if the Pacific cared to train their least valued prince in the art of warfare, but Kai had a warrior’s heart. I’d seen it. And I had to believe he could protect Claira, because now that I had this trident inside me, feeding off my anger and fucking up my insides, I wasn’t sure how much time I had before its magic became too much for me.

“Your room will always be ready for you.” Claira’s human father rubbed his nose, quickly disguising it with a wave of his hand.

Hearing Claira snuffle made me painfully aware that I’d been the reason she was separated from her land family in the first place. “Love you, Dad,” she said, waving the arm she was sharing with Kai. “I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

He was still watching us when Barren pulled us back under the waves. Claira squirmed in his grip, her arms stretching out to both Kai and me. Her eyes studied our arrangement before a deep, tired sigh escaped her. “I really don’t want to be strung out between you guys again, but how are we supposed to swim like this?”

She had a point. Our bodies brushed against one another, with Claira in the center. The sharp points of Kai’s spike-tail grated against my smooth scales, and my short frills were tangling with Barren’s long ones. Swimming like this was going to be uncomfortable for us all.

“It won’t take long,” Barren said.

I had to agree. A feeling completely unfamiliar to me traveled up my arm, like my flesh was filled with water on the verge of boiling. The trident inside

me was twisting and tangling with my insides, pulling me toward something—either the palace or the portal, I wasn't sure which.

But I knew there was *something* waiting for me. Maybe for us. And the longer I floated here, ignoring the pull, the longer I had to deal with all the whaleshit the trident was putting my body through.

“Yeah. Let's get going,” I said with a measured beat of my tail. Barren and Kai joined in, and I didn't even care that our fins were uncomfortably thrashing against one another or if Barren taking the lead meant Kai and I had to swim halfway upside down. We needed to *move*.

“Come on, pretty girl!” Kai called, and his pet came into view, diving from above.

“Wait.” Just a single word from Clair's sweet lips was enough to get Barren to cut off our momentum with a twist of his massive tail. She looked at me, and then at Kai. “What if you guys hold hands?”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

Kai's face mirrored my own confusion. Clair's red hair flared over Barren's chest as she tilted her head. “You know, like a chain? Maybe if you tried holding Kai's hand, Lee, my curse breaking would still —”

“I'm not holding his hand,” I said firmly, using my tail to shove Kai's away and increase the distance between us. “I'd rather be carried in her mouth.” When I pointed to his pet, she fluttered her lashes. *Ugh*.

“And while we're at it,” I growled, irritated that something as stupid as hand holding was keeping us from moving, “keep your fucking dicks to yourself. No one wants your damn spurs rubbing up on them.” I directed that one at Kai.

His face looked like I'd struck him. “Sorry, I—I... they're just there,” he sputtered, looking scandalized that I'd pointed it out. Unintentional or not, parts of him were still rubbing against the three of us as we moved through the water. “I can't do anything about them!” He looked at Clair with sad, dolphin-calf eyes.

He went to angle his hips away from the rest of us when Clair pulled him in closer.

I felt her grip tighten, her gaze going defiant as she glared at me. “You really need to get over this thing you have against spike-tailed mers, Leander.” They were practically belly to belly, the bony length of Kai's tail against the elegant line of her blue scales. Her lips softened as she turned back to Kai. “I don't mind your tail, Kai. Let's get going.”

His mouth fell open, and shockingly, no sound came out of it for once. Barren gulped a deep breath of water, then shot off in the direction my arm was tugging me.

The ache in my head flared, my arm burning. The trident inside me somehow knew we were getting closer to where I needed to be.

I tried to focus on that thought as we moved. Not the pain nor the way we were swimming. Now that Clairia had Kai underneath her and Barren at her back, I was an afterthought, kept an arm's length away.

My tail moved erratically in the water, desperate to keep up with Barren's pace. And it took everything in me to tamp down each wave of sadness that reared up inside me.

I couldn't ignore it. Being held away from the others. The heartbreak from being disregarded by the one soul in this entire ocean I loved.

From a young age, my father had conditioned me to believe that I needed to be superior to everyone else. He'd taught me weakness was unacceptable for his offspring. For royalty. For the Atlantic. And any weakness he perceived was swiftly beaten out of me.

Or so he thought.

My father's methods were flawed, and surviving his treatment hadn't meant I was without weaknesses. Each hard lesson hadn't only wounded my body but also left holes in my mind that neither time nor magic could heal.

Panic. Fear. Rage.

And now I was full of weaknesses.

Some days, it felt like I had so many holes in me, so many vulnerabilities, that I might collapse in on myself—a crown prince too weak to withstand the weight of his title.

And to survive through the days, I did whatever it took to distract others from the truth. That I wasn't superior, that I wouldn't ever live up to my father's expectations.

So now, as pain worked through my head, magic pulled at my arm, and the fear of seeing the kingdom I was meant to protect overrun plagued my thoughts... Well, it all felt like it might finally break me. Like the holes in me were suddenly far too large. And that was why I'd deflected, shifting the attention to Kai. I knew he could handle it, and I'd been successful in my efforts.

But the price had been high. Kai was in Clairia's favor now, and I was on the outskirts. She'd felt some sympathy for me when she'd learned that I'd

somehow fallen into the water, but that sympathy had vanished now that I'd made an ass of myself by unfairly berating her other mate.

The uncomfortable sensation in my arm gradually heightened as we moved, distracting me enough that I was only half listening when Kai whispered, "My claspers might not withdraw into my tail like their dicks do, but that doesn't mean they feel any less."

Claira's eyes opened wider, and Kai waited before moving again, like he thought she might wish to push him away, but she didn't. Then while Barren did the strenuous work of moving us through the water, Kai's tail started swaying rhythmically, lightly brushing against Claira's.

Claira leaned in as if to mumble something against his ear when a shudder worked over Kai's shoulders and down his spine, ending at the sharp tip of his tail.

A few days ago, this would have made me rage like Laverne was raging, her nose pitched and eyes narrowing on the two of them as she swam wide circles around us. But not now.

I'd known something might happen between them the moment I'd left Claira alone in Kai's rented bedchamber. I'd feared what would happen if Kai woke up and they came together, but now I knew it was mostly a sense of relief.

Kai would keep her safe if there was a time when I couldn't.

I'd make sure of it.

Even if the trident inside me wasn't an issue, one day I would be expected to rule, and Kai was the ninth in line for his throne. Claira could be happy and be provided for when my duty kept me bound to the Atlantic. And then, one day, when the trident's power tore me apart —

Claira's gasp pulled me from my thoughts. "I left my shell in my bag!" Her head smacked against Barren's chest as she struggled to look back. "Do you think Dad left yet? We have to go get it."

Rather than jumping to obey her, Barren's tail beat harder against the water.

"Your phone, too," she said, her chin tilting to look up at the bottom of Barren's jaw.

Barren's voice was as hard as rocks clashing against steel. "There's no need to rely on the dark spawn's magic when you have us."

Claira's expression shifted to dread. "Well, yeah, but..." Then she sighed. "I guess you're right," she mumbled, though she didn't look any less worried.

“I hope Dad doesn’t accidentally touch it when he brings my bag inside.”

“He’ll be fine, Clairra,” Kai soothed, but she looked too deep in thought to be listening.

“No, no, no.” The hand at the end of the arm I was holding balled into a fist. She bit her lip, her head shaking. “We didn’t bring any clothes with us!”

“*I never bring clothes with me,*” Kai’s pet chimed in, unhelpful.

“We’ve only got Kai’s shirt and your brace, Barren. That’s it,” Clairra explained, but I wasn’t seeing the issue.

“So?” I asked, shrugging.

“So,” she shot back, “you guys are going to be *naked* the second we dry off on land.”

I shrugged again. “That’s fine.”

“That’s *not* fine, Lee! Humans don’t just walk around beaches naked.” She paused then, her lips twitching. “Well, okay. Some do. Most don’t.” She turned up to Barren, her face flushed. “Or does your island palace happen to be surrounded by nude beaches?”

Barren’s jaw tightened as he considered the question. “Mmh,” was the last thing I heard before the sea whirled around me, and everything went black.

The next thing I knew, we were stopped, and Clairra’s sympathy for me was back as she frantically called out my name. “Lee! What’s wrong?”

I glanced around the dim water, my vision returning to find all three of them staring at me. “How long... how long was I...?” My world turned on its axis, my up and down switching as the flesh of my arm boiled. The trident in me fucking *burned*.

And then I realized what was happening. Its power—*my* power—was being sucked from me. My magic was ripping from my flesh, tearing me apart from within.

I felt my eyes roll up, my sight sliding to a bright white. I clamped my teeth together, using all of my strength to hold back a scream.

Clairra’s body shook over mine, jostling my shoulders and my chest. “What’s happening to him? Lee? Can you hear me?”

I couldn’t open my mouth to answer. The rush of whatever was happening was too great, and I couldn’t risk letting a scream rip through me.

“It’s the portal. We’re here.” Barren’s voice. I kept my attention on the sound of it while the dizzying vortex of water spun around me.

My arm was going to break off. Snap into fucking pieces. Disintegrate.

My blood turned to hot lava, my insides glowing with a fire that would consume me, burning the magic in me away until it left nothing.

Until *I* was nothing.

Something in me finally did snap, and everything reversed. Weakness became power, and pain became... something more.

An unexplainable burst of magic rushed into my arm, a sensation like nothing I'd experienced before. So much power flowed. Endless magic. More than one body could possibly contain.

It flowed from all around me, above and below, and my head was still reeling, my body alight as I marveled at how still the others were and how they could float so evenly when the ocean was a seething maelstrom of magic around them.

"The portal should be here," Barren said, "but there's nothing."

"It's gone?" In the middle of the tumultuous spinning, Clair's sweet voice wrapped around my ears. "But look at Lee's arm, it's—something's happening. The black line, it's *glowing*."

One final rush of magic surged into my arm, and the pain, the dizziness, everything, was gone.

Pure, vigorous power radiated through me like it was my lifeblood. Like whatever had been flowing through me all my life hadn't been good enough.

I wasn't sure what had happened—if I'd been gifted with or cursed with something. But I suddenly knew that I could undoubtedly take on anything.

I opened my eyes to a face full of worry, but it wasn't the face I'd been hoping to see. The brilliant purple hue of Kai's irises shone straight at me, nearly blinding my vision that had only just returned. Why did Pacific mer's eyes have to be so damn bright?

"Dude, what happened?" Kai asked, his eyebrows drawing closer together. "You okay, man?"

*I might be if you'd turn your fucking eyes away from me*, is what I wanted to say, but my tongue hurt from bearing down on it through the pain, and all I managed was a muffled groan.

My body shook with energy. So much so, I didn't know whether to swim in tight loops like Laverne had or to create a tumultuous whirlpool with the water around us.

Every scale, every hair on my scalp, all of me, was vibrating with a power that I ached to unleash.

Clair pushed in front of Kai, her face caught up in a similar expression

of worry. “What’s wrong, Lee?”

Panic bounced over Clairra’s features as her eyes scanned over my face, my chest, my arm. Poseidon help me, she was adorable when she was flustered. I wanted to drag her to the seafloor with me right now and kiss her all over. Then I’d slide my hands down the swell of her scaled rear, and —

Clairra shook my arm. “Has the trident done something to you?”

The tremble in her voice brought me to my senses, effectively numbing the intoxicating buzz of magic. Before I could work out my reply, Barren maneuvered, taking a dive that brought us to the seafloor.

“Look around,” he said gruffly, but Clairra’s face was so close to mine, her eyes too focused on studying me to let me see around her.

That is, until Kai hissed through his teeth. “I take it the portal wasn’t supposed to look like this?” He paused like he was still taking it all in. “I’m not sure what I thought a portal would look like, but... *dude.*”

Laverne’s voice filled my head. “*Not very pleasing to the eye, is it?*”

Following Clairra’s lead, I looked out expecting to see the six familiar standing stones that controlled the portal. But there was only open water around us.

Kai’s glowing eyes panned our surroundings, spotlighting the stretch of sea where the portal used to stand—where it *should have* stood.

It was said that Poseidon had raised the six sturdy stones himself, and for countless years, they’d rested in this very spot. Yet now there was nothing but desolation, the seabed reduced to a dark blanket of long-settled rubble and wreckage.

Whoever or whatever had done this had done it many hours, if not days, ago.

“The portal, it’s—” I tried to find the words, but my throat choked up. But what did saying it matter? The portal was gone, and nothing could bring those standing stones back.

I’d traveled here hundreds of times. Set my hands upon the stones and felt the magic vibrate from deep within them. I’d watched in awe as my father used his trident to call upon the ancient power stored here. The power that had taken us to other kingdoms.

As crown prince, I was also meant to command the stone’s magic. I had the trident within me. Knew the way to tap on the stones for which kingdom I wished to travel to. But what did any of it matter when not a single standing stone remained?

Now there was nothing—only useless rubble void of magic, as if the portal had never existed here at all.

Barren hung his head, his jaw working like he was trying to make sense of how such a thing had happened. Perhaps he was fearful for his own kingdom's standing stones. "It's gone," he said with a finality that had ice forming over my heart.

What did this mean for the Atlantic? What would happen to us now that we'd been cut off from the rest of the kingdoms?

"Not just gone," Clairra mumbled, staring off at the seabed. "Purposely destroyed."

I felt numb. Deadened. Had the cecaelia been strong enough to tear down the stones? Was this their payback for our escape?

I'd never known their kind to possess much magic at all, except for the sea witches hiding among them, but even then... Poseidon had constructed the portal. What, other than a god, could have torn it down?

I stared at the dark, crumbling rocks as if the standing stones might suddenly appear before us. Like maybe it was an illusion; the sort of mind-bending magic I'd known the Indian Ocean to use. But there was no magic left here. At least not any I could sense.

*Wait...*

Magic had just poured into me in an overwhelming amount, hadn't it? I flexed my wrist, feeling the power I hadn't possessed moments before moving deep within my bones.

As if listening along with my thoughts, Barren's hard muscles tensed. His tail swished through the rubble, and the rocks crumbled underneath the weight of his tail, dissolving into the current. "For a purpose or not," he mumbled, "the magic is gone from these waters."

Even without looking up at Barren, I could feel his dark eyes on me. I knew that a part of him had been looking into my mind as well.

Then I realized Barren must have known what was happening to me from the start. The throbbing, the headache, the dizzying pull of the trident as we moved closer to the portal. With a gift like his, how could he not?

That thought thawed my heart and sent my blood straight to a boil.

Yes—he'd known, and despite those dangers, he'd brought me closer. Brought me here. Even when I was in pain and my magic pulled, ripping from my body.

And that meant he also knew what I'd only just realized—that the trident



within me had drawn in the portal's old magic and that its magic was a part of me now.

Claira blinked, her eyes squinting through the half-light. "So, did all that magic just disappear?" She searched the rocky seabed, looking over all that was left of the once great standing stones. "Last time we were here, I saw glowing symbols all over those big, black monoliths. But now, I don't see any. Not even on the bigger rock fragments."

"The magic must have escaped when the stones broke." I sighed, holding my arm out to her. "And I took in every trace of magic that was left behind when we got here," I admitted. "The trident fucking absorbed it."

"It *what*?" Claira swallowed hard. "How is that possible?"

I shrugged, feeling the tension of my skin against my bones as I ran my hand over the spot where my arm felt like it might have ripped apart from within.

"It fought for it," I said simply. And now I was vibrating with the same magic that had once hummed through the standing stones. But what would that mean for me? "There was a push and a pull, like the portal was trying to suck the trident's magic out of me. But then it fought back." Bitter laughter filled my voice when I added, "The trident won."

What would have happened if it hadn't won was a question I wasn't ready to ask aloud. As if by instinct, a part of me knew that if the trident's magic was ripped from me, my life would have gone with it. That was the deal with fusing with a trident, wasn't it?

I looked up at Barren, and his eyes averted in a way that told me he was still in my head.

Barren's ability had the power to terrify those around him, but I'd always been fascinated by his gift and not nearly as afraid of him infiltrating my mind as I should have been.

Perhaps that was because I'd been so young when my father first warned me of the Indian Ocean's crown prince who could pry into minds. He'd told me Barren would become a formidable king one day because of it. A threat to the rest of the kingdoms.

But to look into minds and know my father's thoughts? To act and answer questions in ways that would keep me from being taught any more hard lessons? Foolish merfry that I was, I hadn't feared Barren's gift. I'd envied it.

And at our very first meeting, the young Indian Ocean crown prince had stared at me for so long I knew he must have looked into every corner of my

mind. And when it came time for our parting goodbyes, he'd carefully uttered the words I would never forget.

*"Not a single captain among us respects your king."* The sternness on his face as he mumbled those words far surpassed his years, and it compelled me to believe him. *"Yet every one of them cherishes the day when they'll finally serve you."*

He'd given me a stiff nod as he pulled away, and that was all it took to make me want to believe he could truly see into minds. And later that night I realized that, instead of using his gift to point out my weaknesses, he'd used it to build my confidence. To give me hope for my future that I'd been so desperate for.

I'd thought then that Barren was going to be the sort of king I hoped I would become one day.

And maybe that was why Barren and I had so easily chosen friendship. Because, unlike others, I'd never feared him.

He'd looked inside me and seen my insecurities, yet instead of fear, it gave me a sense of comfort to know that someone had seen all my holes. Stared into all my flaws, my fucking imperfections.

And I never had to pretend to be someone who I wasn't around Barren, because no one could ever hide anything from him, could they? He had to be aware of the darkness inside each person he came across.

But now, circumstances had changed. We were a long way from the merfry we once were. And for once, I wasn't sure if I could trust him.

Something passed over Barren's face, almost unperceivable, when Clairra suddenly hissed, "Kai, shut your eyes!"

"My eyes?"

"There's something down there." Her voice dropped, going deathly calm. "Slithering through the rocks."

When I glanced down at the debris, there was a pair of bright white eyes set above a line of crooked teeth looking straight at us. Undulating lines tracked down the creature's dark, slender body—at least the length of Barren's tail, if not longer. An eel, I realized. But its coloring was unlike any of the eels known in the Atlantic.

Upon seeing our interest, the creature's narrow body shifted, slipping between the rocks with a predatory silence that sent a shiver through my scales.

Had it come through the portal before it had been destroyed?

Kai's eyes closed, and darkness spread over my vision until all that was left was the tension between us in the water.

*"I don't like the dark,"* Laverne whimpered, her body cowering closer to us.

"Is it dark spa—?" Kai couldn't even get the words out before Clairra shushed him, her body going rigid.

*Dark spawn?* Apprehension coiled around my gut. Perhaps it wasn't just an eel, after all.

Clairra was always seeing things others could not. I trusted her vision more than I did my own.

"Swim," she whispered, and even though we couldn't see a thing, Barren's tail thrashed through the water, sending us moving back in the direction we'd come.

I felt a weight join us as Kai grunted. "I've got you, Laverne. Hang on."

"Get us out of here," Clairra said, louder this time. More urgent. My tail joined in, and despite the extra weight we were carrying, my fins sliced through the water twice as fast as I'd ever moved them before.

Blindly, we navigated the dark sea at a lightning-fast pace until we had gained enough distance from the portal for Clairra to calm down enough to whisper, "I don't believe it."

"What did you see?" I asked, but she only let out another sound of frustration. Whatever it was, she wasn't ready to say it out loud.

"Can I open my eyes?" Kai's voice cracked with desperation. "I'm about to—to drop her."

*"Don't you dare drop me, Kai-Kai!"* Laverne trilled.

For once, I couldn't blame him—with Barren's and my combined strength, we were moving too fast.

"Not until I'm sure it's not following us," Clairra said in a rush, and I didn't like how nervous she sounded. "Sorry, Kai. Hold on a bit longer."

We swam through the darkness for what seemed like ages before she finally relaxed enough to let Kai open his eyes again.

Little by little, our tails gradually slowed to a pace where Laverne could swim on her own again.

"You want to talk about it?" Barren asked, his chest still heaving from exertion.

Clairra shivered. "There was an eel." She paused, hesitant, before saying, "And I thought I saw—well, you guys will think I'm crazy."

“You believed me when I said I thought the trident absorbed the portal’s magic, right?” I said, giving her a light nudge. “There’s nothing you could say that would sound crazier than that, beautiful.”

“Well, I—I think that eel might have been the sea... wizard.”

Kai opened his mouth with a question, but Clairra cut him off with a groan.

“I know, I know. That’s crazy, right? But there was something strange about its eyes.” She sighed again, frustrated. “I don’t know. It looked *familiar*. But I do know, sea wizard or not, we needed to get out of there.”

“Mmh.” Barren nodded sternly, and she looked relieved that someone else agreed.

We only made it through a few more beats of silence before Kai opened his mouth again. “So, I guess this means we aren’t going to Barren’s island?”

“Fuck.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. I’d been too shocked by the destruction to realize that we needed a new plan. “So much for sneaking over to the Indian Ocean without Queen Javalynn noticing.”

“Let’s not talk about it down here,” Clairra said softly, stealing looks back behind us. “The intelligence that eel had in its eyes... I don’t know. It feels like someone was watching us.”

“All right,” I said with a nod. “We’ll get back to shore and come up with a new plan.”

Kai gave Clairra a playful nudge. “Hey, do you think this means we can go back to your place for dinner? I’ve been thinking about pie nonstop since yesterday.”

That seemed to lighten Clairra’s mood. “I could go for some pie,” she said, her voice warming. “You guys don’t mind going back, do you?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“I love it.” Kai’s smile was almost as bright as his eyes. “It’s fun, staying with your family.”

Clairra grinned, slowly nodding like she was pleased with the idea of us enjoying spending time with her land family. Then her face paled.

“*Oh no*, your clothes.” She groaned. “I swear, if Gram sees me strolling up the beach with you guys naked, she’s really going to take her pistol out and start shooting. She thinks I’m only with Barren,” Clairra said hotly, and she didn’t seem to notice the way Barren’s tail twisted, thrown off its rhythm. “Gram’s old-fashioned like that. She wouldn’t understand this whole multiple mate and *thrall* thing,” she added with a long sigh.

“Don’t worry.” I ran my free hand through my hair. It was amazing how much better I felt now that our swim had worked off some of my newfound energy. “We’ll resurface at one of your neighbor’s beaches. I’m sure they won’t mind the view.”

“Lee!” Clairia elbowed me in the ribs. Then she paused. “Well, actually... What if we come up by the docks? I could run into the surf shop and grab you guys some clothes before we head back home.” She took a moment to work through it in her head some more. “It might work, as long as they have your sizes. Dad has a ton of store credit that he’s never going to use.”

“If covering all of this up is so important to you,” I said, gesturing down the length of my body, and I couldn’t help but smirk as Clairia’s eyes rolled, “then go right ahead. Lead the way to the docks, beautiful.”



## CLAIRA



By the time we made it to town, I was sure we'd been swimming for hours. We broke the surface to the sound of seagulls cawing, and when Laverne glided up to the nearest sandbank, her barks echoed down the shore as she chased them away, emptying a stretch of sand for our arrival.

I was confident no one usually ventured this far south of where the boats came in and hoped we were far enough away from the storefronts that we'd be able to dry off without the risk of being seen. It was horrifying to think what would happen if we arrived at the house in this state. Sure, Dad would have shrugged it off like he'd done on the boat, but if any of the neighbors saw the guys, Gram would have been scandalized.

Her reputation *ruined*.

Okay, maybe she didn't care about all that, but Gram prided herself on raising me. She always complimented my good senses and strong moral fiber.

Now, here I was, disappearing for days at a time, stealing jewelry, and hanging around grown men in various states of undress out where people could see us.

Coming to the docks felt like the best decision—I just hoped it wouldn't backfire.

As we fought the waves, straining to pull through the heavy sand, Laverne moved gracefully alongside us, taking easy strides up the slope. When we finally reached the safety of dry land, the guys collapsed in exhaustion, their bodies and tails still dripping with salt water.

"That was fucking insane," Leander said through labored breaths. "Didn't know anyone could swim that fast. Did you see we were passing fucking marlins?"

On the other side of me, Kai groaned in agreement, his free arm thrown over his face as he gasped for air.

Despite being on land, Barren still held me close. His hard chest rose and fell beneath me as he settled on his back, his muscles tight from the journey. Leander lay out on the other side of us. He swept his wet hair back with a swish of his hand to look up at the dull afternoon sky.

I wasn't sure what was going on with Leander's mood swings, but I was grateful his sudden burst of energy had allowed us to swim back so quickly. Discovering that we were being watched at the portal's wreckage was terrifying. Not because of what the eel was—or who it might have been—but because of the warning it had projected into my mind moments after our eyes had met.

Even though its words hadn't been particularly threatening, something about how the eel had spoken them to me had fear clawing up my throat. I huffed out a breath, remembering how its weakly rasped words had burned a trail through my mind like poison.

*“Swim, little captive,”* it had said, its long body coiling through the rocks, slithering closer. *“Swim to a place beyond our reach if you value your freedom.”*

It was a striking contrast to the sea wizard's smoky voice. But the eel had addressed me as ‘little captive,’ and who else would call me that apart from the sea wizard? Unless he'd told the eel about his little pet name for me, which would have been an odd thing to do, right? Even for a self-proclaimed wizard.

My teeth ground as I thought over how the eel had told me to swim away. The sea wizard had known about my useless tail. He'd worked that much out about me quickly enough, and still, he'd told me to *swim*? “Freaking jerk,” I grumbled aloud, not even thinking that there were others around me.

Underneath me, Barren tensed. “Should I... release you?”

I rocked my head against Barren's chest. “Oh—not you.” Honestly, even if he was only doing so because of the curse, I still liked the way he held me. Maybe it was a *thrall* thing, but then again, I wasn't even sure if my voice had ever called to him like his has done to me. “I was thinking about the eel. It sent me a warning. Told me to swim and, well...” I let out a harsh laugh. “If only it were that easy for me.”

“Don't worry, Claira,” Kai said, a sharp tooth peeking out of his gentle smile. “We've got you.” The words were so full of love that it was



impossible to doubt them.

I feigned a snuffle. “Aww, thanks, guys.”

After being abandoned all those years ago, I’d told myself I would never be dependent on anyone like I’d had to be with Papa. But maybe depending on these three wouldn’t be such a terrible fate.

Even now, each of them had a hand on me, Kai’s laced with mine, pulled at an awkward angle thanks to Barren propping me up, and Leander’s grip was firm on my other wrist. Barren’s arm was like an iron band around me. His massive hand and fingers splayed across my stomach, making me feel like no danger could ever reach me. It was... a lot, though, always having all three of them there, their grips constantly shifting as we moved.

“I appreciate it, guys. Really, I do. But there has to be a better way to do this,” I said, wishing that there were more of me or maybe less of them. I held up my arms to show how we were all connected. Then I looked around at all their tight, glistening skin and sleek tails, and something deep in my belly warmed.

Maybe this wasn’t all bad.

A moan escaped Kai as I eased their arms back down. “My arms,” he said, and a mist of water droplets flew everywhere as he shook them out, the movement carrying up our joined hands like a wave. “They *hurt!* Gosh, Laverne, why are you so —”

Laverne interrupted him with an overly dramatic gasp. “*Excuse me?*” Her voice in my head was drawn out, seething. Her whiskers shot forward, splaying like she might lunge at his face.

“Slippery!” Kai blurted, scuttling backward in the sand to get away from her. He was dangerously close to joining me on top of Barren. “I was going to say slippery!”

Laverne pitched her nose high in the air. “*Uh-huh. Of course, you were.*” Her nostrils flared as she exhaled, seawater bubbling around them in a sound like a wet sneeze. “*I cannot believe you would say such a thing, Big Brother.*”

Leander scoffed, and I wasn’t sure if he was referring to Laverne or Kai when he mumbled, “Get used to it.”

Laverne gave another dismissive snort as Leander propped himself up on the sand, his eyebrows furrowing while he looked out at where the waves broke across the sandbank. He paused for a moment, watching the seawater drip down his tail, then asked, “Do you think there’s enough magic in me

now to undo the curse?”

Oh, great. We were back to this again. Was Leander determined to keep using the trident’s magic, despite his promise to me? Before I could even shoot him a glare, Barren’s arm lifted off me. His hand went straight up with a karate chop motion that popped Leander’s hand off my wrist, severing our connection.

*Pop.*

Leander’s body vanished in an implosion of magic, and my heart staggered a beat. “Barren!” I cried out, shooting upright. I almost rolled off him until I realized that landing wrong might mean squashing Leander. Beside us, gold glinted off his small fish form as he flopped over the gritty sand.

Barren’s voice was low, unaffected. “He wondered.” I felt my body sway with his shrug. “Now he knows.”

“Dude!” Kai laughed, leaning forward to watch the spectacle. “I can’t believe you did that, big guy.” He gave Barren’s shoulder a nudge, but his laughter was cut short when I extended a finger to Leander. One touch and sand pelted us, sandblasting the shore from his transformation back to a merman.

The moment Leander was back to himself, he let out a fierce growl. He threw his head back, shouting Barren’s name.

“Whoa, whoa, hold it.” I pressed a hand against his chest to try to hold him back. “Can all of us be mature for a second?”

Maturity looked like the last thing on Leander’s mind. His eyes were like two frozen shards, catching the light with a dangerous glint. “The fuck is wrong with you, Barren?” he spat. “I thought we were friends.”

Barren’s hum was so deep that it reverberated in my bones. “And now you don’t know if you can trust me.”

Leander made a noise, a mix between a whine and a growl, then lunged forward, going for Barren’s neck.

“That’s it,” I said firmly, caught between the two of them. “Fish time out!” I jerked to the side with enough force to send me falling off him and onto Kai, useless tail and all.

*Pop.*

Two bettas, red and gold, were next to us. Their colors intensified as they carried on with their childishness, flaring and stretching their gills out on the sand.

I lifted my torso from Kai, awestruck at the colorful display. “They really are like bettas,” I mumbled, remembering what I’d heard about betta fish—how you couldn’t keep two males together without them fighting for dominance.

“*Claira...*” Barren’s deep voice penetrated my head in a plea, but I tried to shake his voice right back out.

“No, Barren. This fighting thing? Yeah, it’s not going to work. Not if you expect us to make it to your kingdom. At this rate, we aren’t going anywhere together.” Their little bodies stilled, and I took it to mean they were finally listening. “You’re friends, remember? Leander—you told me I could trust Barren, and I do. And Barren, well, I know Leander can be a pain, but he cares a lot, and you can trust him when he says he has your back. So, let’s take a breather and calm down, okay?”

Both of them were on their sides, their gills gaping, when I realized their lethargy might have been more because they were struggling to breathe in the open air than because they were taking my advice. “Shoot, okay—my bad. Not what I meant by a breather.” But before I reached out to touch them again, I kept my voice calm and asked, “I have to leave you guys here while I go get clothes, and I don’t want to come back to a bloodbath, okay?”

I was about to touch them when—*pop*—my legs split.

*Pop. Pop, pop.*

The magic hit us one by one, crashing over me in a wave that almost sent me tumbling back down the shore.

When I looked back up, my eyes couldn’t possibly settle on who or where to look at, so I averted my gaze to the docks further down the shore. Then the icy chill in the air hit, and I scrambled to my feet. Now that the cold was affecting me, it became more apparent than ever that it was still freaking wintertime. I pulled my wrap to the front, cursing every glob of sand stuck to the fabric that was making it difficult to smooth down.

When my wrap was as presentable as it was ever was going to get, I said, “You guys stay here.”

Venturing out with wet hair, a bikini top, and a swim wrap in the winter was absolutely ludicrous—not to mention mortifying—but at least the town already thought I was odd.

Leander got to his feet, his jaw working like he was barely holding back his rage. “I’m not letting you go alone,” he declared like he thought he had absolute authority over our group.

“Not *letting* me?” I let out a harsh laugh as I pushed past the three of them to head up the shore. “Fine. If you don’t want me going alone, then Laverne can come if she wants,” I said with a dismissive shrug.

I turned back in time to see her giving Kai the stink-eye. “Yes, *let’s*.” Well, that was a surprise. I hadn’t expected her to ever agree to go anywhere with me. She must have still been irritated with Kai for making such a show of his arms being sore after carrying her.

Together, we broke off from the group, heading toward the hill. “If you guys want to compare dick sizes, wait until after we leave,” I threw back over my shoulder and nearly lost my footing when all three of them froze to stare at me in disbelief.

“What the hell, Clair?” Leander said with a look of absolute revulsion.

Yikes. Okay, maybe they’d taken that literally. “Err—human phrase, sorry.” I felt my face heat as I continued up the shore.

I could barely hear Kai’s hushed mumble. “Compare our dicks? ... Should we?”

Barren and Leander growled the word out together. “*No!*”

That they could agree on.

Gosh, I never expected they’d take that phrase literally. I certainly wouldn’t mind judging that competition, though I didn’t need to look to know Barren would be the winner.

I glanced at Laverne as she shuffled up the sand alongside me, remembering how fish-Barren had read my thoughts back when he’d tried to teach me how to swim, and gave her a sidelong whisper. “You, uh, can’t hear my thoughts. Can you?”

Laverne huffed. “*It’s so obvious what you’re thinking. Only an idiot would need to read your mind.*” Then she added, “*Harlot,*” and I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Yeah. Like you really weren’t thinking it, too.” I snorted, remembering her shocked face when Leander had first stripped down in front of her on the boat. “I see the way you look at those three.”

Laverne stopped dead in her tracks. “*THREE? Kai-Kai’s my brother,*” she snapped, her tongue arching out of her mouth like she’d tasted something terrible. “*I’d sooner let the barracuda pick out my eyes than look at him like that!*”

“Right, my bad. I keep forgetting.” I was still laughing when we came to the top of the hill. A thicket of pale green beachgrass separated the sand from

the pavement, and I parted the tall grass, letting Laverne go through first. The blades of beachgrass tickled my arms as we emerged. I took a deep breath as I scanned the rows of shopfronts lining the end of the strip.

The surf shop was the largest of all the stores, its tall windows lit up with neon signs and its walls decorated with bright wave designs. The sign in front had blown down a few hurricanes ago, so instead of being put back on its pole, it leaned against the building with a rock garden strategically built around it. The pole remained, but now it had a new job, acting as an anchor for tourists to lock up their bikes.

My eyes swept down the strip. I was thankful for the cold snap, because no one was out walking. If I hurried, maybe no one would even notice I'd brought a sea lion into town.

"I'll only be a minute if you want to wait for me out here." I tried to sound polite, but there was no way I could let Laverne follow me inside the surf shop.

Desperate, I looked for something to entertain her out here. There weren't any bikes chained to the pole, but I noticed an old-fashioned bike horn discarded in a planter beside it. I adjusted my wrap over my backside as I crouched down, pulling it out of the planter. After I brushed the dust off, I offered it to her—horn side first. "Here," I said and gave it a test honk.

Laverne's eyes shot wide, and I smiled. My hunch was correct—Laverne was just as easily entertained as her 'brother.'

I honked it again and passed it into her jaws. "Give it a try."

Her jaws clamped around it. *Honk. Honk.*

"Stay close, okay?" I said, and the horn jerked between her teeth as she honked it again. At least if she ran off, I'd be able to follow the honking to find her.

After a deep breath, I faced down the front door, hoping Mr. Brownlow, the shop's owner, would let me use Dad's credit. Dad had been helping maintain their fish tanks since before I came along. He dropped by the surf shop every week to check and adjust the salt water for their fish. When I was younger, he'd taken me along with him, and I'd sat in the back room painting new shells for their hermit crab enclosure.

Whenever Mr. Brownlow tried to pay him for his work, Dad had always insisted that keeping saltwater fish was a hobby he couldn't afford for himself. Store credit had been a compromise both men could live with.

When I pushed through the door, Mr. Brownlow was quick to pop out

from the backroom, a box cutter in his wrinkled hand. “Welcome!” He pushed up his thin-framed glasses, then blinked toward the windows like he was checking on the weather. I froze in place, wondering if he would spot Laverne outside, but all he said was, “Did it get warmer between my lunch break and now?”

“Ice plunge challenge.” I gave Mr. Brownlow a sheepish smile. “They, uh, say it’s good for the immune system.”

He still had a peculiar look, but he gave a slight nod before turning back to the backroom. “Keith should be around here somewhere,” he said with a wave of the box cutter. “Let him know when you’re ready to check out.”

“Wait, I—I left my wallet. Do you think I could use some of Dad’s credit?”

Mr. Brownlow spun right back around. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited to hear that. I’ve been trying to push John into surfing, just so he’ll use up some of it. Get whatever you need. Just let Keith know to put it under your dad’s credit.”

“Thank you.” I couldn’t help but grin, picturing Dad with a surfboard while I headed to the men’s section. When I reached the colorful display of swim trunks, I was thankful that surf shops carried swimwear year-round.

They were on sale, too. Double win.

Ignoring the flashy patterns, I concentrated on the sizes, selecting the largest one I could find and wondering if it could fit Barren. “Hmm...” I worked through each row until I’d picked out a pair of swim trunks in every size—just in case.

“If it isn’t Clair,” a voice called from behind me, and I whirled around to Keith sporting his smug smile and company polo, his arms crossed high over his chest. But Keith, I didn’t care about. He was harmless enough, though he thought his job here at the surf shop was far beneath him. It was who was beside him that had my heart dropping like a stone.

“Hey, Red.” Shaun’s pale lips curled into a nauseating smirk.

They had a girl with them too, one who had been a classmate of ours, yet I couldn’t place her name—was it Darby? Or Darcy?

She leaned into Keith as she looked me up and down, like maybe she was trying to remember me, too. Then she perched a hand on his forearm, marking her territory.

Keith pushed away from her, his voice going as rough as sandpaper. “I told you, not while I’m working, Danny.”

Danny—right. My next guess. I cleared my throat and shifted behind my armful of swim trunks, using them to help conceal my bathing suit. I'd never liked the way Shaun looked at me. Like I was inferior to him.

But Shaun wasn't done with me yet. No, by the cruel look in his eyes, he was only getting started. "Not so fast, Red," he said, digging a hand into his pocket and pulling out something that made my heart freeze.

Upon seeing my reaction, his smirk stretched across his face. He laughed, cold and cruel, and waggled the little book he was holding in front of me. "Yeah, I thought you might want this back," he whispered, leaning in.

My pocket diary.

*Oh, god.*

He'd taken my pocket diary out of my bag when he'd found it, and I hadn't even noticed it was missing.

I'd written so much in there. So many secrets. Not about my origin, of course. I would never be stupid enough to leave evidence like that lying around. But there were other things in there. Humiliating things.

And judging by that smug, all-knowing look on Shaun's face, he'd read every single one of my deeply embarrassing thoughts.

If there was one thing I was certain of now, it was that my plan of getting the guys clothes *was* backfiring, and now it was biting me in the most inconvenient way when I needed to be getting back to them. We had places to go, things to do. We didn't have time for this.

Shaun fanned the pages of my diary with his thumb. Then he parted it, opening it to a dog-eared page, and cleared his throat.

But before Shaun could start reading, Danny cut him off by stepping forward, her gum smacking between her lips as she studied me.

"Figures you'd be back," she said with no hint of professionalism, then snapped her gum again. She'd made some upgrades to her wardrobe since high school and was dressed to impress, her pencil skirt and fitted blazer a great match for her petite frame. With the way her lips pinched as she chewed, she was having a rough day, and running into me probably hadn't helped.

She inspected her nails, pretending Keith's earlier rejection hadn't affected her, and tossed out, "My aunt heard you hooked up with one of the crusty old fishermen at the lodge. Says you ran off together."

A crusty old fisherman? *Ouch*. It was an obvious taunt, but luckily, I was used to being talked about. Although my blood simmered, I kept my feelings

on that outrageous tale to myself. This wasn't the first time I'd been the subject of ridiculous rumors. It likely wouldn't be the last.

I took in a shaky breath, desperate to make a break for the exit, but they had me trapped. One step back, and my spine connected with the rack of swim trunks behind me. Fantastic.

Cue a snicker of amusement from Danny. "Well?" she said. "Go on. We're listening. Who's the lucky old man?" When it became apparent that I wasn't willing to play along, her expression frosted back over. "Just so you know, Keith had to cancel on me so he could cover shifts while everyone was out looking for you. Ruined my whole night." She planted a heel. "And you show back up here pretending like it was *nothing*. The least you could do is apologize for wasting our time."

My stomach dropped. The town really had formed a search party.

Although I had no control over leaving town, a soft "sorry" slipped from my lips. Being abducted by merfolk hadn't been something I'd planned, but she was right. Searching for me had been a waste of the town's time. Plus, I'd made Dad and Gram worry, and for that, I was sorry.

Danny smiled, though she didn't bother to put any emotion behind it. "See. Was that so hard?"

Clutching to my armful of clothes, I considered pushing past the three of them to escape. I needed to get out of here; but while Danny and Keith looked like a steady breeze might be enough to blow them over, Shaun was a problem. After years of working manual labor at the docks, he stood taller and broader than most. He used his size to his advantage, but even he had nothing on a merman.

That thought gave me the courage to stand taller, and I stepped away from the rack of clothes I'd been wishing I could dissolve into. When it came down to it, Shaun was only human, and I was a mermaid. A monster hiding under a vulnerable human facade.

Okay—maybe I was still pretty vulnerable as a mermaid. But I'd encountered cecaelia and survived. I could survive a little immature teasing by my miserable peers.

"Well, I'm glad you left." Shaun spun me away from Danny to flash my diary at me again. My attention immediately landed on the row of starfish drawn across the top of the page he held open, and my throat choked. "How else would I have found this? Though I would have thought you were a little old to be keeping a diary."



The world shifted, tilting around me. I stared down at those starfish, the words *New Year's Resolutions* spelled out in curly lettering underneath them. "Oh no," I whispered, and Shaun's cruel chuckle cut through the air like a knife as he pulled my notebook back to his face.

"Oh, yes. You're quite goal-oriented, Red." He snickered. "A real go-getter. With goals like these, it's no wonder you never made it out of this shit town."

Why, *oh why*, had I carried an incriminating list like this around with me?

Shaun brought a hand to his chest, making a show of clearing his throat again before beginning to read. "New Year's resolutions—Learn to tie a double fisherman's knot. *How ambitious.*"

Heavy dread settled over my stomach. I wasn't sure what else I'd written, but if these resolutions were anything like previous years, things were about to take a sharp and fast downturn.

Nope—I wasn't doing this. I couldn't. If they weren't above acting like children, why was I behaving like an adult?

"Yeah, *screw this.*" I made a grab for the diary, but Shaun's arms lifted along with his cocky smirk, the asshole delighting in my misery like my humiliation was fuel for him.

His eyebrows waggled suggestively as he continued, "Resolution number two: Go on a date."

My head buzzed as Danny cackled. "An entire year and all you were hoping for is *one* date? Yikes. I'm legitimately speechless."

I held my tongue between my teeth, my hands quivering with barely contained rage. Sure, I could knee Shaun in his balls and make a run for it, leaving with the clothes in my arms and continuing my new streak of thievery, but this shop meant everything to Dad. If I was being honest, the thought of straining his relationship with Mr. Brownlow was the only thing holding my feet to the surfer shop's floor. But only barely.

Shaun held up a hand to shush his friends. "Wait, it gets even better," he said with confidence. "Number three: make some friends and—*get this*—Red wrote, 'fish don't count.' Underlined. All caps."

Their laughter filled the store like thunder, the sound knocking around so wildly I was sure the fish in the tanks all the way in the store's front could hear it.

"What the hell does that even mean?" Keith said as Danny clutched his arm to keep from doubling over.

“*Fish* don’t count?” Danny howled. Her bracelets clacked together as she leaned forward, waving a hand in my face. “Wait, wait—so you’re saying you have fish friends? How would you even know if a fish wants to be your friend?”

I stayed silent, too upset to even breathe. Their laughter bled away, sounding distant, like an echo under the sea, as my body trembled with seething fury.

*Get ahold of yourself, Clair.* I forced down a breath. It was pointless to expend energy trying to be liked by those who were never going to like me, anyway. I just had to endure the ridicule, somehow make it to the shirt racks, and then leave—preferably after paying with Dad’s credit.

Though a life of thievery was looking more appealing every second.

I squared back up with Shaun and could feel his smugness radiating off him like a blight. He tapped the journal and offered his most charming smile—the one he used on Gram and me whenever we passed him at the docks. It might have fooled Gram, but it made me want to heave.

“You guys thought that was embarrassing? Just wait. I saved the best for last.”

Yeah... I’d been afraid of that.

The glint in his eyes as he turned back to my diary was nothing less than predatory. “Turns out Red’s a genuine freak.” He pulled the page close to continue reading, carefully enunciating every word. “Here it is. Red’s final resolution...” He paused for dramatic effect. “*Maybe* go all the way with a human.”

A fresh wave of nausea hit.

In the words of Leander: *Fuck*. In fact, I could almost hear him say it.

Internally, I was screaming. What had possessed me to write that?

I’d thought being around mermen was the problem, but clearly, I’d been horny long before they came along.

Danny’s eyes went wide. “With a *human*? What, like you’ve been out there fucking aliens or something?”

Keith’s expression shifted abruptly as his gaze diverted, though before I could wonder what had distracted him, Shaun crept up behind me to drape his arm around my shoulder.

His voice softened as he leaned into my ear. “Well, I can help you with a couple of these, Red.” His brown eyes smoldered in a way that made me wish I had my steel-toes on so I could stomp them right back out.

His weight bore down on my shoulders, trapping me in place. “I tie a mean double fisherman’s knot,” he said in a soft, low rumble like a purr.

Shaun paused, no doubt waiting for his friends to laugh at his clever joke, but there was only silence. Or maybe they all were laughing, but my brain refused to acknowledge it.

Then a velvety smooth voice filled the air, and it was like a balm to my ears. “Go all the way with a human?” Leander said, passing between two racks.

“*Leander?*” I squeaked out, and he grinned. It took my eyes several seconds to adjust to his presence. His golden skin seemed to dim every color in his vicinity, making even the flashy patterned swim trunks pale in comparison.

One hand brushed back his damp hair as he came up to us, the flex of his arm showing off his bare chest in a way that reminded me he was anything but human. “Why settle for a mortal when you can have me?” he threw out with a smug smirk.

Only Leander could look so damned cocky while saying something so corny. Still, even though he’d ignored my instructions to stay at the beach, my heart seemed to sing with his arrival.

When Leander approached me, Danny gasped. He held a tattered, sand-encrusted shirt up at his waist with one hand, barely concealing him. My eyes narrowed on the long slit. Something had sliced right through it.

“Is that Kai’s shirt?” I blurted, remembering what his back fins did to shirts. Had he wrestled it off him just so he could follow me? Poor Kai.

Leander flashed another smirk. “He gave it to me willingly,” he said huskily, and my mouth tightened.

Yeah, I doubted that.

Danny started nudging me with an arm. *The heck?*

“Oh, hey, Clair. Introduce me to your friend,” she said with a nervous laugh. Between her and Shaun’s looming presence, I was feeling suffocated. Danny cast a look up at Leander, her eyelashes fanning out longer than a deer’s.

Keith scowled. “We have a dress code,” he snapped, his voice grating.

Danny sidestepped Keith to extend a dainty hand to Leander. “I don’t think we’ve met.” She laughed despite the fact that nothing remotely funny had happened and—nope—Keith was not happy with how she was acting. “Hi. I’m Daniella.” She blinked up at him. “And you are?”

Leander glanced down at her, then drew himself up, puffing out his chest with pride. “Claira’s mate.”

Heat flushed over my face. Even though it made me inwardly groan to hear him profess such a thing in front of humans, a part of me was thrilled to hear him say it. He hadn’t even hesitated.

Then I realized—Leander wasn’t ashamed of me.

I could almost hear the whir of Danny’s gears turning as she tried to work that one out. Then her lips parted, softening as she whispered, “You’re European?”

“Hey, Red,” Shaun said, turning me away from the others. Now that he was no longer the biggest and most intimidating, he seemed nervous. Smaller. And it made me wonder why I’d ever let him intimidate me at all.

I narrowed my eyes at him, wanting to slap him across the face for touching me without my permission.

Laverne would have done it. Hell, she would have done it the second he dared to approach her.

My hand flexed open, my fingers straightening as my eyes worked out the exact freckles on his cheek to aim for when his gaze swept down to my mouth, and he licked his lips.

“Maybe *we* could be friends.” It was a soft suggestion. My spine straightened with absolute revulsion as he started massaging one of my shoulders. “If you ever want to meet up at the docks...” His tongue slid a line over his top lip. “I know you’ve always wanted a taste of this.”

I was speechless. After what he’d done, all the tormenting and teasing, was he really coming on to me right now?

I couldn’t help it—I laughed. Right in his face.

“A taste of what? Of *you*?” I suppressed a gag. “Yeah, sorry—I’m allergic to shrimp,” I said, dismissing him with a hand. I tried to shrug out from under Shaun’s arm, but he wasn’t letting up.

“Wait,” he said, and irritation lined his forehead in a way that made me wonder if he wasn’t used to rejection. “But you’ve always —”

“Uh-lergic?” Leander pushed in front of us, ignoring Danny, who was quick to follow behind him. The ice in his eyes was sharp as he watched all the places Shaun’s arm was touching me. Like maybe he wanted to rip that arm off.

“Yeah, it’s when your face and mouth swell up, and it gets really hard to breathe,” I said, and Leander’s eyebrows snapped together, his shoulders

stiffening.

“Why wasn’t I informed about this? You should have told me.” Panic raced across every one of Leander’s features. “You’re allergic to shrimp?”

The more intense concern that flared in his eyes, the harder it became for me to keep the misunderstanding going.

I held up a hand. “It was a joke, Lee. Calm down. I’m not allergic to shrimp.” He didn’t look any less worried, so I threw a thumb over at Shaun. “I’m only allergic to *his* shrimp.”

He must have understood my meaning because the tight concern in Leander’s mouth split into a deadly grin. “Oh,” he said, glaring at Shaun like he was already a corpse. “I see.”

Leander cracked a fist, then pointed a stiff finger at where Shaun’s arm rested on me. “Because this—him *touching* you. I don’t fucking like it.”

He paused to flex his jaw, perhaps giving Shaun a moment to remove his arm. Naturally, Shaun was too dense to realize the threat standing right in front of him—the possessive prince hiding under Leander’s pretty boy face. “But now that I know you’re allergic to his shrimp”—He grabbed hold of Shaun’s shoulder, and the puff of air that rattled out of that boy’s mouth as he hunched forward, his arm popping right off me, was pure bliss to my ears —“I’m going to fucking *crush it*.”

Initially, I thought the scream had come from Danny, but no. A pathetic noise slithered from Shaun’s gross throat as he crumpled to the floor, Leander’s crushing hand on his shoulder helping him down.

Although I would have loved to see Shaun’s manhood crushed, I said, “Please don’t crush his shrimp, Lee.”

Leander bent down, hovering over him with a scorpionfish’s cold fury. “Don’t ever touch my mate again.”

“Whoa!” Danny said, her knees buckling. With her eyes on Leander’s backside as he bent forward, it was easy to guess what she saw. And I did not like *that* one bit.

“Come on, Lee.” Now that I was free from Shaun, I grabbed Leander’s arm, but he wasn’t ready to release his unfortunate prey. He crushed Shaun’s shoulder again, making him cry out.

Nervous that Mr. Brownlow would come out to investigate the commotion, I yanked on Leander again. “I’d like to actually buy the clothes before we get kicked out.”

I glanced around for Keith, but he was long gone. Ugh—great. What were

the chances he would call the police on us?

“Wait, don’t leave,” Danny said when I finally pried Leander off Shaun. “How long are you in town?”

Ignoring Danny, Leander turned his attention to me, drawing an arm around my waist. “This is why I didn’t want you going alone,” he said, then he planted a possessive kiss on my forehead.

My molars ground. “It’s fine. I handled it.” Yeah, not really—but at least I got to experience the satisfaction of rejecting Shaun.

My gaze fell on Danny, her fists held straight at her sides. The jealousy in her eyes was unmistakable.

“You wanted to know who the crusty old fisherman was.” I gestured to Leander. “Here he is. Well—he’s one of the three, anyway,” I added with a shrug, and Danny’s mouth fell open.

Leander’s eyebrows furrowed. “I’m a *what?*” He shook his head. “Not a fan of that pet name, beautiful. You’ve done better.” He tilted his head and gave a flirtatious wink. “Pretty boy... My prince...”

Poseidon help me, this was embarrassing. Was he trying to make me melt right to the floor? “Come on, *my prince*. I’ll explain later,” I mumbled, and his mouth curved at the endearment I’d chosen. “Help me find some shirts so we can get out of here.”

Leander chuckled as I dragged him through the racks. “I still don’t see a problem with us going back naked.” His words trailed off, and Danny’s shocked gasp echoed from behind us.

Yeah, we needed to get out of here. At this rate, she was going to follow us all the way to Dad and Gram’s house. As I rounded a corner, I spotted the shirts. I scrambled to grab all the sizes I could find for the first style I came to and then hurried to the front of the store.

“Mr. Brownlow said I could put these on my dad’s credit,” I said as I set my haul on the counter. Keith stood behind the desk, his face ashen as he looked everywhere but Leander. He seemed too scared to look into his eyes.

I turned to Leander. “Barren and Kai are still at the beach, right?”

Leander drummed his fingers on the desk while Keith started scanning tags. “Yeah, maybe. Not really sure. We made it to the top of the hill, but you were taking so long, I had to make sure you were okay.”

To my surprise, I was thankful that he had. “Thanks,” I whispered, leaning into him as Keith bagged my purchase.

Leander adjusted Kai’s shirt around his hips and drew an arm around me.

“No need to thank me, beautiful. I’m here to keep you safe.”

I huffed, grabbing the bag of clothes from Keith. Hoping to hide my blush, I turned to the exit, only to see Laverne’s big black eye pushed up on the other side of the glass.

“*I tried to stop him,*” she projected in my head, panicked. The bicycle horn was limply dangling from her mouth. “*He slipped past me.*”

“It’s fine,” I mouthed back, biting back a laugh. For a brief moment, I could understand why Kai and my dad both adored her so much. Underneath her sass, Laverne had a good heart.

When we joined her outside, I gave Laverne’s head a pat. “Not your fault. Leander does what he wants, apparently.” I threw him a pointed look, then noticed the top of two heads poking up from the beach grass on top of the hill we’d resurfaced from. Spiked lavender and curly brown. That had to be uncomfortable—they must have crouched on their bellies to pull that off.

“Got the clothes,” I called, holding up the bag as we headed down the strip.

When we made it to the grass, Kai’s face was pink with a mix of embarrassment and concern. “Everything go okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. But are you okay?” I asked, looking him over. Even with the tall grass surrounding him, his arms were folded over his chest to conceal it. I gave him a smile that I hoped was enough to reassure him. “Lee says you gave up your shirt willingly.” I glanced over at Leander, who was still holding tight to the shredded shirt. “Is that true?”

“Yep.” Kai let out a shaky laugh. “Totally true.”

*Uh-huh.* “Convincing,” I threw back, then sighed, tossing them the bag of clothes. “All right, time to get changed. After we get home, we can figure out our new plan.”

“Sounds good,” Barren rumbled and dug into the bag.

For how hastily they’d shed their clothes earlier, it sure took them a while to put the new ones on. I waited with my back to the ocean as they figured out who would wear what.

“Eyes to the front, Laverne! I see you peeking,” Kai shrilled, and Laverne huffed, honking her horn at him to express her annoyance. As she walked up beside me, she lifted her nose up to the sky. We stared at the clouds together as Kai spoke up.

“It’s okay if you look, Clair,” he said, a hint of shyness in his voice. “I-if you want...”

Laverne's whiskers twitched, her teeth slowly peeking from behind her gnarled lip, and I gulped. "Thanks, but I'll leave you guys to it."

To my surprise, Barren was the first to finish getting dressed. He came up beside us, placing his hand on Laverne's head while I studied him out of the corner of my eye. His swim trunks fit snugly around his waist, digging into the muscles on his legs. Even the shirt was tight around his shoulders and neck.

But instead of complaining about the ill-fitting clothes, he gave me a short, encouraging nod. "Your dad will be happy to see you again so soon," he said evenly, his dark eyes moving to scan the town while Laverne nuzzled his hand.

"Oh—yeah." I smiled, looking out at the boardwalk. We were about a twenty-minute walk from my home and would hopefully make it there before dinner. "Though, it'll be hard saying goodbye all over again. How long do you think it'll take to come up with a new plan?"

"Mmh." His hand lifted off Laverne to scrub under the impossibly hard angle of his jaw. "Tomorrow."

Well, at least we would get things moving. The air of mystery around Barren made me surprisingly eager to learn more about where he came from.

"Ready?" I asked as Leander came up to join us. Kai was right behind him, holding the bag filled with the clothes they didn't use.

"Yep!" Kai said, thrusting a fist forward. He looked relieved now that his chest was fully covered.

Laverne took the lead, setting our pace as she started down the boardwalk. The walk was slow, but it gave me a chance to show them the different stores and sights along the strip. Kai was especially interested in the seasonal bookshop, which also sold the most delicious fudge I'd ever tasted.

"Fudge sounds *awesome*," Kai practically moaned as he lingered in front of the sign in the bookshop's window. "I wish it was open," he said, almost dreamily.

"Yeah, it's too bad. We'll have to come back during the summer so you can taste it," I said, then paused. Would they even want to come back? Would they be able to?

Kai bounced back to us, looking ecstatic at the idea. "I'm in!" he said, and my heart felt lighter. Perhaps my suggestion hadn't been as silly as I'd thought.

When we got to the bait shop, Leander stumbled a step, falling behind the



rest of us. “Lee?” I called, hanging back as well to wait for him. “Everything okay?”

Anxiety bubbled up in me when Leander didn’t answer straight away. Something was off in his expression. He leaned forward, bracing a hand on his leg like he was barely able to keep himself upright. “I-I’m fine,” he said, but he didn’t look fine. Not at all. He teetered on his feet with each heavy breath.

With a pained gasp, his knee buckled, and if it weren’t for Barren catching him and pulling him back upright, he would have faceplanted right on the boardwalk. “It’s just... it’s hard to... to bre—” Leander tried to speak, but he stumbled over his words. He rubbed his chest for a second before his eyes rolled up, his face paling as Barren slung him up and onto his shoulder.

As soon as he had Leander secure in his grip, he took off down the boardwalk at an alarming pace. I followed after them, grabbing Kai’s hand and dragging him along with me. My voice shook as I called out to Barren. “What’s happening to him?”

Barren waited for us to catch up to him to answer. “His body is paying a heavy price for holding the trident’s power.” His deep voice was laced with apprehension. “For now, we need to get him somewhere he can rest.”

“Lee,” I whispered, following after them. Leander had been fine only moments ago. How had his condition changed so fast?

I only realized Kai was still next to me when he squeezed my hand, causing me to glance at him.

“He’ll be okay, Clair,” Kai said gently.

As I nodded, I attempted to match his reassuring smile.

I desperately hoped he was right.



## KAI



**G**ram's pie hadn't cheered me up as much as I'd hoped it would. Sweetness lingered on my tongue, but the sugary treat sat heavily in my stomach as I gazed up at the ceiling, wondering if sleep would elude me for another night. Even in a quiet room surrounded by my closest friends, rest wasn't coming easily.

Had I slept at all since waking up in the hotel room next to Clairra? Would I ever sleep again?

Inhaling deeply, I tried to center my attention on the rhythm of my breathing and not on the vision of the dark spawn lurking in my mind.

I'd thought that as long as I never saw the cecaelia again, I wouldn't have to remember.

But now that I had, memories I wasn't ready to relive swelled up, and I found myself choked by the intense emotions that accompanied them.

Guilt. Shame. Loss.

*No—don't think about it.* My eyes scrunched shut, and I resisted the urge to hide underneath the quilt Clairra had given me for the night.

I couldn't afford to linger on these memories. Not yet—maybe not ever. I had to be strong and keep Clairra smiling, even when it seemed like everything was crumbling apart around us.

Among the torrent of emotions, guilt bubbled to the surface. I hadn't found the courage yet to tell her about my past with the cecaelia.

How could I when I could hardly bear the weight of it myself?

The thought of telling her petrified me. And the way she'd look at me after she knew? It would be too much for me to take.

My eyes dared to ease shut and curling tentacles, wisps of dark magic,

and a signature drawn in blood flashed behind my eyelids, jolting me back awake. A thin layer of sweat beaded on my forehead.

No, sleep wasn't happening. Not tonight.

I held tight to my blanket, picturing Clair's peacefully sleeping face. The quilt smelled just like her—a breath of fresh air with a touch of something delicious. Something that made my mouth water. I hadn't seen inside her room yet, but I hoped it was comfy and that she was getting some sleep.

Next to me, the heat of Leander's sleeping body stood out in the chill of the air. I listened to the soft sounds of his breathing, a steady reminder that he was still with us.

It was surreal that so much had changed in a blink of an eye. Like something had sucked away all his energy, and it had taken Barren bringing him inside and laying him down before he'd regained consciousness.

Of course, Leander's immediate response after waking was to insist he was fine. But we all knew better. Clair was so distressed that she didn't start calming down until Gram came home and consoled her.

These episodes, whatever was happening to him, weren't something that would just go away. There wasn't any taking back what he'd done. The trident was part of him now.

Despite my usual attempts to remain optimistic, I was struggling to see the bright side of this.

Since I wasn't getting any sleep tonight anyway, I thought over my understanding of the tridents, recalling the glyphs in the ruins back home.

Creation. Vitality. Conversion. Visions. Storms.

The five tridents—each one held an equal amount of power, yet all were distinct.

Although the ruins rarely saw visitors, there wasn't a glyph in there that I hadn't studied. Its sweeping walls were full of thousands of symbols explaining the merfolk's history as well as the trident's uses and powers. But there was nothing about joining or separating from one of them, was there? No evidence of anyone else having done the same. Not in the Pacific's records, at least, which went all the way back to before the oceans were divided.

Leander's sharp whisper broke through the stillness. "The fuck do you keep sighing about?"

Seems I wasn't the only one feeling restless.

Sighing again, I buried my chin into my quilt. "Nothing," I whispered

back.

Although Leander kept his voice low, the threat there was unmistakable. “You better not be thinking about sneaking into Clair’s bedchamber.”

My face burned—was it that obvious I’d been thinking about her only moments before?

“You know I wouldn’t. She told us not to, remember?” I failed to keep my voice steady. “It’s just... I haven’t been able to relax since my injury.”

That wasn’t entirely accurate. Clair and I had been exceptionally relaxed in the hotel together. But I’d been awake then, and that was a different type of relaxed. A type that I hadn’t known was possible until she’d shown me.

“I could really go for some foreplay,” I said wistfully, thinking about how good she felt in my arms. Even just holding her hand might have been enough to help keep these haunts away. “Maybe then I could get some sleep.”

Leander shot upright. “The *fuck*?” he snarled, a storm brewing in the depths of his voice.

*Oh no.*

I gasped. “She didn’t tell you about foreplay?” On instinct, I shielded my neck, throwing the quilt over my face. It wouldn’t protect me, but at least my last breath would remind me of Clair. The quilt muffled my words when I said, “Sorry, man—I thought she already taught you!”

I braced myself for the pain, but all that came was a deep, uncomfortable silence. Leander blew out a breath, then laid back down, mumbling, “I’m going to need you to keep shit like that to yourself.”

He may have sounded cranky, but it didn’t appear that I was in any real danger. Cautiously, I emerged from under the quilt’s security.

There was one final moment of stillness before Leander broke the tension. “Don’t worry about it. I know she’s your mate, too.” Some of the heaviness in the air seemed to dissipate. “If anything, you deserve her more than I do.”

“Whoa, that’s not true,” I said, frowning. If anything, he deserved her more than I did. He was a crown prince, after all. Well, he was before he’d left his kingdom, at least. Legally, I wasn’t sure what he would be now.

“It *is* true.” There was a bite of anger hanging on the edge of each word. “You used your back as a fucking shield for her because I was too blind to see what was right in front of me.”

I’d been wondering if he blamed himself for what happened when the cecaelia attacked, given his recent behavior toward me. But maybe it wasn’t

blame. It could have been the thought of not being able to save her himself that terrified him. I could relate to that.

Despite not being particularly battle-ready, the idea of putting Clairra's safety in someone else's control filled me with dread. She was my mate, and I wanted to protect her.

It was easy to assume Leander felt the same way.

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's not always about you, Leander," I teased, trying to lighten the mood. "If things go wrong, you don't automatically take all the blame just because you happen to be a member of this group."

Leander grumbled something and rolled over, turning his back to me and taking his blanket with him.

"It wasn't your fault. None of it was," I continued, even if he wanted to pretend that he was done listening. "Even the trident. What were you supposed to do when you got it? Hand it over to your father?" I snorted, thinking about what King Eamon might do as the sole ruler with access to a trident. It certainly wouldn't have looked good for the other kingdoms. "I'm sure he'd have spun Clairra around to make her pick up all the others for him, wouldn't he? Sorry for saying this, but your father seems to have some crazy ideations and some pretty wild mood swings."

When Leander didn't respond, I wondered if the exhaustion had gotten to him, and he'd finally fallen asleep. Laverne's steady snores rolled over me from the couch above, and I moved on to counting them, using anything I could as a distraction.

Even if my words hadn't gotten through to him, it had been nice talking to Leander. My heart felt lighter. Like maybe this was the beginning spark of something between the two of us. Maybe one day, he and I could be friends.

The haunts curled into my vision as my eyes began to drift shut again. Only this time, it was Leander's voice that chased the nightmares away.

"I thought you were an idiot."

"Dude, *ouch*." I had to hold back my laugh for fear of waking up Laverne. "My father thinks I'm an idiot. Oh, and my brothers." I let out a yawn as I pictured their disinterested faces all in a row. "My mother probably does, too."

"It's better to be thought of as the kingdom idiot," Leander mumbled. "Rather than everyone expecting you to have the answers to everything." My smile faded as the sorrow in his voice became clear. "My entire kingdom is

counting on me, and I can't even control my own fucking emotions."

I stared up at the ceiling, carefully choosing my response. This was the first time he'd confided in me, and I didn't want to mess it up. "I could never understand what it is you're going through, Leander. To hold the power of the Trident of Storms. Like, *dude*. What are you even supposed to do with that?"

Leander shot up again, his quilt sliding off him. "How did you —?"

"I don't read minds, if that's what you're thinking." I shrugged. This wasn't the first time I'd shocked someone with knowledge I shouldn't have had. "But I do read. And there is only one trident with mastery over the weather. Conjuring up tempests of thunder and lightning. Unleashing bolts of electrifying fury that can rend the skies asunder." I absently traced the shape of a lightning bolt glyph in the air with a finger. "Though I didn't know for sure until I saw you attacking that seagull. Maybe it was the Trident of Vitality, you know? You do have moments where you're livelier than usual." I grimaced, remembering how the seagull had looked getting bashed by its own wing. After all Leander had put it through, I wouldn't have been surprised if it had converted to a landgull. "But, no. It's storms."

Leander growled a warning under his breath.

"Look, I know the Atlantic doesn't want the other kingdoms knowing what it can do. Better to have them fear they could do *anything*," I said, absently plucking at a stray thread in the quilt. "I know how it is. My father keeps his trident's powers a secret, too. He refused to even meet with Barren back when he was going to be crowned as king."

Nobody, not even my oldest brother, was aware of the trident's capabilities. Though, thanks to the clues written in the ruins, I'd deduced its power long ago.

What a bummer that a king without any imagination wielded the power to create.

I could never find the same warmth in my father's creations as I did in natural life. Even the giant, fast-moving stingrays he would conjure up to win his tournaments for him seemed to lack the graceful, undulating movements of a natural-born ray.

"Allowing its wielder to control winds, summon torrential rains, and command thunderstorms to assail their foes," I recited from my memory, recalling the shape of each glyph on the ruin's walls pertaining to the Trident of Storms. "It can also manipulate the very fabric of weather, shaping clouds

and currents to its wielder's will. It's crazy to think what that kind of raw energy could do to one merman," I added.

Maybe this wasn't helping.

Through the darkness, I could see Leander scrubbing a hand over his face. "Do you ever stop talking?" he asked, and a smile pulled at my lips.

"No," I confessed. "Whenever I stop, that's when I start thinking." And once I started thinking, my mind quickly became overfull.

Leander must have reached his social limit, because he threw his quilt off his legs and stood up.

I raised my eyebrows as I tilted my head back to see him. "You're not going to sneak into Clair's room, are you?"

The floor underneath where Barren lay creaked, and I had a hunch Leander wouldn't make it very far if he tried.

"Of course not. She told us not to," Leander said, although he did cast a look toward her room like he might have been thinking about it. "Now move."

"Move?" I blinked up at him, but when he leaned down to lift the edge of my quilt, my entire body froze up. Did he want me to move over? Like, make room for him?

"I'm f-flattered!" I yelped, fighting to take the corner of my quilt back from him. "But when I said I wanted foreplay... I, uh, I didn't mean with *you*."

Leander's growl was like a thunderclap. "Get the fuck up!"

At his cue, I scrambled to move. As soon as I was upright, Leander's hand was between my shoulder blades, pushing me to the front door. "Wait—where are we going?"

He waited until we were outside in the night air, the door shut behind us, to answer. "Did your kingdom make you take lessons from a spearman?" he asked, directing all his focus on me.

I shook my head.

A lantern next to the door flickered on, revealing the tired expression on Leander's face. Despite passing out earlier, he didn't look to be sleeping well these nights, either. "Figured as much. How about any regular combat training? Education on war tactics?"

I scratched at the back of my neck and offered a nervous smile. "Err... Nope."

"Great." Leander's jaw tightened, telling me he did *not* think this was



great news. “You like games, right?” he asked finally, stomping off down the stairs.

That got a prickle of interest from me. “I love playing games,” I said, following him.

Without looking back, he threw up his hand. “You love *throwing* games,” he corrected.

I paused on the very last step. “What —?”

“Klester gave me his report,” Leander cut back in, whipping around to face me. “You played a series of games with him, sabotaging each move so that he would win.” He turned down to huff out a breath like he thought the notion idiotic.

“And then Clairra told me she played you for hours, and you know what? Although you demonstrated you knew the rules, you never beat her. Not once,” he said, accusation sharpening his tone. “Even when she tried to let you win, you lost.”

“I, uh...” *Uh-oh*. I didn’t know what to say. Nobody had ever noticed when I’d thrown a game before. No one had ever paid enough attention to me to notice that it wasn’t the game I was playing, but my opponent.

Backtracking, Leander stomped back to the bottom of the stairs to grab the front of my shirt. The light from the front door’s lantern glinted off his eyes. “Well, I’ve got a game for you.” His grip tightened, nearly pulling me off the step. “But you’re not going to throw this one. You’re done losing. You’re done throwing games, got it?”

Before I could answer, his eyes narrowed. “Now you’re going to fucking *win*.” He released me with a jerk and spun around, heading for the center of the lawn.

“It’s not always about who wins, you know,” I threw back as soon as he turned. “No one wants to play games with someone who wins all the time.”

Leander reared back over to me, scowling. “That doesn’t mean you have to throw every fucking game.”

I chuckled. I’d only done that because I *really* didn’t want Clairra to stop playing against me. Usually, I let myself win a game or two. Especially when I was playing over a bet I couldn’t afford to lose.

“Fine,” Leander grumbled. “Forget winning. From now on, this is about survival. If you want to be a part of this group, win or lose, you’re going to have to survive.”

That I could agree with.

“Your kingdom might have overlooked you, but don’t think I’ll let you slack off,” he called out, lifting his arms high above his head as if stretching. “Now get moving, Kaius. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”



# CLAIRA



I woke up with a start, my heart racing and my mind already jumbled with countless thoughts. Since coming on land, I'd always prided myself on being strong and capable. But lately, I'd been unable to shake this feeling of helplessness.

For a moment, I just lay there in bed, staring up at the ceiling and trying to make sense of it all.

"It's already nine?" I groaned, glaring at my clock like the number might flip upside down if I blinked hard enough. As a seasoned fisher, sleeping in until 9 a.m. was practically unheard of, but last night had been different. I'd lain awake for hours, my mind and body wracked with worry over Leander.

Over and over, he'd said he was fine.

He'd lied.

Leander *wasn't* fine, and the uncertainty of when his next fit would come was almost overwhelming. It had taken all my willpower to fight the temptation to crawl out of bed and join him and Kai out on the living room floor.

Since when had I become so needy?

There was a deep longing in my chest, an ache to have them near me and to know that both of them were okay. I'd experienced something similar before, but the extent of my need for them now was staggering. At one point, I'd stood at my door, my hand on the knob, wondering what they'd have done if I tip-toed out to the living room and settled in between them.

But then there was the problem of Dad and Gram—the only reason I'd ultimately collapsed back onto my mattress. Surely they would have noticed me out there on the living room floor, sandwiched between two grown men.

I swallowed, staring up at the sprinkling of stars Dad had helped me put up along the perimeter of my ceiling. If I had found the courage to go out there, would Leander and Kai have fought over me?

Yep, Laverne had called it. I *was* a harlot. Because that thought had my belly warming and my nerves fluttering in a deliciously pleasant way.

I chastised myself with a mumbled, “Pervert,” and dragged myself out from under my unicorn comforter. Sunlight streamed in through my window, casting a warm and welcoming glow over my shaggy pink rug, but it did little to ease the anxiety knotting my stomach.

Would Leander be better today? My heartstrings pulled—I needed to see him.

After getting up and grabbing fresh clothes, I headed for the bathroom. The smell of coffee and bacon wafted into the hallway from the kitchen, making my stomach rumble in anticipation. Gram was surely attempting to lift my spirits with her cooking after the emotional wreck I’d been over Leander last night. And worst of all, I hadn’t even been able to tell her what was wrong with him.

My feet dragged as I approached the bathroom, and I took a deep breath to stop myself from peeking in on them before I’d brushed my teeth and my hair.

Once I refreshed myself and threw some extra water on my face, I went to the living room, anticipating finding the guys lounging around. But when I looked inside, the room was almost completely empty. All the quilts I’d put out had been folded and arranged into a stack of neat squares, leaving a large, empty area where the couch usually was.

Empty, except for Barren.

His bulky legs stretched out in front of him as he sat on the floor next to the coffee table, a steaming mug in his hand. When he looked up and noticed me watching him, his brows furrowed slightly, his pupils dilating as his gaze traveled up and down my outfit. Then, a gentle yet awkward smile pulled at his lips, making his strong jaw look more inviting. I nearly had to turn right back around to go change my panties again.

“Morning,” he said and sat his mug down on the smooth tabletop. His voice was coarse, like that was the first word he’d uttered today.

Dad must have brought in all the clothes we’d left on the boat because his brace was fastened over the same shirt he’d worn yesterday. Even his cell phone sat on the edge of the coffee table.

“Good morning,” I replied, still surprised to find him all alone. Our chemistry had grown even more complicated in the last few days. Now that his voice had the same effect on me that Leander’s and Kai’s had, I wasn’t sure where we stood.

Did that make him my mate, too?

Did he even want that?

Yeah—there was no way I was asking. ‘Hey Barren, do you think we’re in the *thrall* together? Because I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but sometimes I get the urge to climb you like a tree.’

Having two mates already complicated things. Adding Barren to the mix? Yeah, that wouldn’t be awkward for Leander and Kai. Not at all.

At this rate, they might never let me talk to another merman again in fear that I might try to drag them into the group as well.

Trying to keep my cool, I walked over to Barren and inspected his cup of coffee. “Did Gram make that?” I asked, appreciating the view from my standing position. From here, I had a close-up glance of his curly hair and the strong muscles running along the back of his neck.

As I came nearer, Barren seemed to shrink, his posture becoming more and more rigid. Even though his hand was massive compared to the mug, he ran a gentle finger around the rim, his eyes fixated on the steam rising from it. “That and the bacon.” He cleared his throat. “Before she left. Errands, she said.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Although I was sad that I’d missed Gram before she left, I breathed out a sigh of relief. “You don’t want to drink the coffee when Dad makes it. If you can even call it that.” I scrunched my nose, thinking back to the last time I’d accidentally drank some of Dad’s brew. I hadn’t been able to tell then if I’d swallowed coffee grounds or stuffed a handful of sand into my mouth.

Barren braced his hand on the coffee table, and I took a step back to give him space to stand. As he rose to his full height, my chin tilted up, up, up with him. With his hair mussed from sleep, I couldn’t help but think of him as a towering tree...

*Simmer down, Clair*a, I scolded. There would be no climbing. Especially not right in the middle of the living room.

Though, we *were* alone.

“Where is everyone else, by the way?” I scoped out the area, even peeking in the open door to Gram’s room—not that I expected to find Kai or

Leander in there.

“Training.” He gestured toward the window with a nod.

“Training?” I repeated, my heart starting to race.

Without waiting for Barren to elaborate, I hurried to the window. The couch was in my way, pushed up against it, but I didn’t care. I dropped onto the middle cushion and pulled back the window’s delicate lace curtains to look outside.

And there they were, on the lawn. Two figures locked in a fierce struggle, moving quickly in alternating directions, forward, then back.

But why? They were both still recovering. They needed to be resting, not doing whatever this was.

I leaned close enough for my breath to fog the glass, squinting. Then I gasped, my eyes re-widening in horror. “Are those harpoons?”

“Mmh,” Barren grunted in agreement. “They asked your father for weapons.”

“So Dad gave them *harpoons*?” I sighed, feeling a mixture of irritation and amusement. Muttering under my breath, I shook my head. “Gee, thanks, Dad.”

Sure, he’d always tried hard to be the *cool dad*, but handing out weapons to his daughter’s love interests was taking things a bit far. If I hadn’t known him any better, I would have thought he was trying to kill one of them off.

But, no—he was definitely trying to get them to think he was cool.

“How can Leander move like that in his condition?” My hands curved around the edge of the window frame, grasping the wood. “He needs to rest. To recover his strength,” I went on, talking mostly to myself.

Amazingly enough, Leander didn’t seem to be struggling.

He was a force to be reckoned with, every move he made with his harpoon calculated and precise, like a quick burst of lightning. The gold in his hair flashed with each advance he made on Kai, but despite the intensity of the lesson, he had the careful movements of a teacher training a student rather than someone simply lashing out in anger.

Meanwhile, Kai was the one having difficulty. His harpoon sliced through the air as he fought to fend off Leander’s unrelenting barrage of blows. His footing was unsteady, and he looked so worn out, it was amazing he was still standing.

My anxiety was about to reach its peak when Barren’s voice came from behind me. “Coffee?”

“Uh, sure,” I agreed without really listening to the question. After a few more moments of watching their fight, Barren held out a steaming mug of coffee beside me.

I stared, puzzled as to why he wasn’t gripping the handle, before it dawned on me that he wanted me to take it.

“Oh, thanks.” Warmth spread through my fingers as I took the mug from him. The aroma was divine, and the light caramel hue looked suspiciously like the amount of creamer I normally added to my cup.

Barren’s dark eyes stayed fixed on my lips while I tried it. Rich, smooth flavor filled my mouth. “Wow, it’s great.” I went back for another sip. As I’d thought, he’d somehow prepared it exactly how I made my coffee. “How did you know how much cream and sugar to use?”

“Watched you make it yesterday,” Barren said simply, his gaze directed downward as if attempting to conceal a faint smile. I took another sip, feeling a strange thrill that he’d paid attention to something so trivial. It made sense, though. Barren did seem to have an eye for details.

Now that I had my coffee, he moved to settle back onto the floor. After taking a gulp from his mug, he picked up his phone, and when he started scrolling through it, I returned my attention to the scene outside, a bit disappointed our conversation had already stopped only moments after it had begun.

Kai and Leander were still sparring, their movements fluid and graceful. Well—Leander’s were, at least. Kai was wobblier than jelly. When I was about to go out there and stick up for him, they separated, and I felt relieved when Leander gestured with his arm, granting Kai a break. Kai was more than willing to take it, and the way he dropped to his knees, sprawling on the grass like a limp rag doll, reminded me of how Laverne looked whenever she dramatically laid out on the sand.

Suddenly curious, I turned back to Barren to ask, “Where’s Laverne?”

He looked up from his phone, setting it back on the coffee table. “With your father.”

Ah—that made sense. If Dad was out on the boat, then Laverne was probably in fish heaven right now. He would naturally let her eat as much as she wanted. We’d probably have to roll her back to shore.

Barren took a sip of his coffee, one eyebrow rising. “Jealous?” he asked.

“No.” I gave a small smile as I stared down at my cup. So, I’d been right. Barren had noticed how I’d reacted to Laverne getting all of Dad’s attention.



“Okay, maybe a little. But mostly, I’m surprised I slept through all of this.” With all the coming and going, the front door must have opened and shut half a dozen times. Usually, once was enough to wake me up.

Barren shrugged. “You needed rest.” His low voice warmed me more than the coffee had.

I blew on my cup, watching the steam rise. I barely started taking another sip when Barren asked, “May I take your picture?”

“What—?” I sputtered, spitting coffee back into my cup.

“Unless you already have a passport,” he added, concern furrowing his brow.

It was a miracle I hadn’t spilled coffee all over myself. “Passport?” I hurriedly swiped an arm over my chin. “No, sorry. So, we’re going to your island by plane?”

Barren nodded, confirming what I’d suspected would be our next move. It wasn’t like we could have swum all the way to... actually, I wasn’t sure exactly where Barren was from. I did know it was an island in the Indian Ocean, but that didn’t narrow it down much.

“I don’t have the required documents, so I never had the chance to get a passport,” I said. There were certain things I’d never be able to do on land, but that was an old wound I’d long come to terms with. I was grateful I could even go to public school given my lack of documents, not that those bullies made my experience phenomenal.

“Mmh.” He got his phone and stood up. Then he walked into the kitchen and gestured over to the fridge. “It won’t take long.”

“Oh, we’re taking it now?” It was a good thing I’d just brushed my hair. I left the window, setting my coffee on the counter as I came into the kitchen and took my place in front of the fridge.

Barren raised his phone, his eyes glued to the display as I stood there, stiff, offering an uncomfortable grin that I hoped looked natural.

“No smiling,” he said, his expression hidden behind his phone.

“No smiling?” I mumbled, my lips falling. *Good luck getting a picture of Kai*, I thought, and I sincerely hoped he’d taken the photo because it was hard to keep a straight face imagining how difficult that would be.

When he finally lowered his phone, he closed in on me, showing me the photo he’d taken. “That’s not bad,” I said, surprised by how well it turned out, considering I wasn’t even smiling. “It’s really good, actually.” Maybe his height gave him an edge? I’d heard that face photos were best taken from

above.

His jaw tensed like he might have had something to say, but he flicked his thumb over the screen instead, bringing up a picture of Leander, stone-faced, standing in front of my fridge.

“Wow, that one, too,” I said, and he swiped again, this time to Kai. I muffled a laugh. “Oh, that’s unfortunate. Poor Kai.”

“I did my best,” Barren rumbled, suppressing a deep laugh.

“He kind of looks like he’s in pain,” I mused, and Barren snorted.

He went to put his phone to sleep when his thumb tapped the screen, swiping over to a picture of a cheesecake slice.

“Wait—” I said, leaning into the image. The dessert was beautifully plated, the creamy, caramel-drizzled slice resting on a delicate white dish. “Gosh, that looks delicious.” My stomach rumbled, and I turned to the stove, swiping some strips of bacon sitting out on a plate next to it.

“It was,” Barren admitted.

“Wait—you ate that?” I took another look at it. There was an ornate silver spoon sitting beside it, giving it a sophisticated look. “I thought it was from an online article or something. It looks staged, like a photographer took it.”

The color in his face deepened. “I made it.” He scrolled to another photo, then handed me his phone.

I took it hesitantly, not really sure if I should scroll through a guy’s pictures. There was no telling what I might discover, right? But Barren hovered beside me so intently, his dark eyes tentatively waiting for me to look.

“T-tell me when I should stop,” I said before turning down to the next photo. This one was of a lightly powdered cannoli, with chocolate chips meticulously spaced out over the creamy filling. Now I was *really* hungry. Every time I scrolled, my eyes grew wider. If Barren had been eating all of these desserts, it was a miracle he didn’t have a gut. “You made these?” I asked, awestruck. “Took the photos, too?”

His chin dipped. “Mmh.”

“Wow.”

His body shifted uncomfortably. “Anything look good?” he asked. After clearing his throat, his voice came a little easier. “I can make it for you when we get to my place.”

My stomach rumbled, eager to accept his offer right away. “Are you kidding me? All of it looks fantastic,” I blurted while my mind backtracked.

Wait—his place?

“It’s going to take a while to get our passports, won’t it?” If that were the case, maybe we were better off going back to the hotel to wait until we worked out our flight. That way, Dad and Gram wouldn’t have to keep paying to feed all of us.

He shrugged. “Not long. Our flight leaves tonight.”

“*Tonight?*” That certainly was sudden. But then again, Barren wasn’t likely employing legal means to acquire these passports.

I scratched at my neck, then picked up another piece of bacon. “I... guess I’d better start packing, then.”

Barren looked down at me, his eyes lingering on my lips for a moment too long as I chewed my bacon.

“I’ll give you a hand,” he replied, his voice low and rough. He slid his phone into his pocket. “If you need it.”

“Help me pack?” I turned the idea around in my head, then realized that would mean him going through my drawers with me. Yikes. They were definitely not up to Barren’s standards of neatness.

“Match your socks for you,” he offered, though his shoulders were stiff with nerves. “Your gray with your black, and your white with your tan.” His curls fell over his eyes as he looked down at me.

I burst out laughing, remembering when I’d told him I went through his luggage and changed all his socks around to annoy him. “Now I’m definitely not letting you help,” I said, taking a few steps backward out of the kitchen. “But maybe next time, okay?”

His lips gave the faintest hint of a smile as he nodded.

I turned around, wondering where Dad would have put the rest of the clothes from yesterday. Maybe I could get away with stashing the magical shell in my luggage. It couldn’t hurt to try, could it?

“Pack a swimsuit,” Barren’s voice called after me.

That got me, and I nearly stumbled a step.

“The one I got you. If you still have it,” he added.

It took a second for me to compose myself before turning around and throwing back, “Why, are you taking me swimming?” I crossed my arms, teasing, “I thought you said your island palace had nude beaches.”

For a moment we just stared at each other, eyes locked, when the front door slammed open and Laverne came right through it, a fish wiggling in her mouth.

“*Ren!*” she said, shuffling right over to Barren. “*I brought you a fish!*”

Barren took it gratefully, holding the writhing thing in his hand like he wasn’t sure what to do with it next. “Thank you,” he said stiffly. Laverne’s head teetered back and forth, pleased.

So much for our brief moment alone.

Laughing at the sight, I turned around, heading for my bedroom. “Well, I better get packing.” At least I’d be able to wear my own clothes for however long we’d be gone.

Plus, the swimsuit Barren had bought me. I couldn’t forget that.



# CLAIRA



“Thanks for taking me to the airport, Gram,” I said, sinking back into the passenger seat of her Buick. The windows were halfway down, letting in a chilly breeze that ruffled my hair and brought the unfamiliar smells of the city with it. Behind us, my suitcase and carry-on balanced atop her golf clubs and caddy.

Although the ride was cramped and Gram had been pushing the speed limit by a good fifteen miles per hour, I was grateful that the guys had agreed to let her drive me.

Okay—maybe ‘agreed to’ was a stretch. Gram hadn’t given them much say in the matter. So when Barren asked later if he could send a car full of his kingdom’s agents to follow us and make sure we arrived at the airport safely, I couldn’t find it in my heart to say no.

It wasn’t that I’d have minded taking the rental car Barren had called back to the house, but I was enjoying this time alone with Gram. As soon as she’d heard which airport we were headed for, she’d used the trip as an excellent excuse to visit her cousin nearby.

“Of course, dear,” Gram said, leaning into the dashboard as she deftly weaved through the thick traffic. Her nose was perilously close to the wheel, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it would survive the ride unscathed.

“I never make trips out this way as much as I mean to. Though it’s a shame John couldn’t come along,” she said, stealing a glance at the rearview mirror. My heart raced as she pressed down on the accelerator to whip around a car that wasn’t quite up to her speed. “But you know how he is. Can’t stand the hustle and bustle of the big city.”

Despite my white-knuckled grip on my armrest, I managed a strangled

laugh. Gram wasn't the worst driver, but she was fearless, and I could never quite guess what maneuver she would pull next.

I chanced a look back at the endless stream of cars behind us. The closer we got to the airport, the more people seemed to be headed in the same direction. "I don't blame him. The traffic here is insane." Plus, Dad coming along with us would have meant he'd miss even more time out on the boat, and I didn't want that. "It's not like we have enough room in here for all the tissues Dad would have needed, anyway."

That got a good laugh out of Gram.

"And the flight was last minute," I added, trying to sound nonchalant. If Dad were here, he would have sensed how nervous I was, and that would have made him nervous, too. This was a big step for me—leaving my hometown and venturing to an unknown island... *somewhere*. Damn, I really needed to figure out where we were going.

I gestured to her golf clubs in the backseat. "And this way, you get to see Auntie Glenda. But isn't it a little cold for golf?"

"It's never too cold for golf," Gram said more adamantly than when she'd bullied three guys double and triple her size into letting her drive me to the airport. "Besides, your auntie and I have a tradition. We always play a round before we settle in for a visit. If we don't, we end up arguing the entire time and forget to enjoy ourselves." She sighed like she was reliving the memories. "Trust me, a little physical exercise is a great way to bond. Especially when you butt heads like two old billy goats otherwise."

I snorted. If that were true, perhaps the guys ought to take up golfing together.

I hunkered back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest as I pictured Kai and Leander struggling to make heads or tails of the array of clubs Gram kept in her bag. "Well, I can't wait to hear who wins," I said, then added, "Assuming they can find the scorecard on one of your frozen bodies."

Gram threw her head back and laughed, the sound a comfort to my nerves. "Oh, don't worry about us." Although she kept her gaze on the road, her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Glenda tops off our golf flasks with Bourbon. We'll be warm enough to play through a blizzard."

I shook my head. Goodness, those two were a disaster together. A fun disaster, sure, but still a disaster. "Isn't it illegal to drive a golf cart under the influence?" I asked, mostly teasing. It was a miracle they managed to hit the ball straight, given how much they drank.

“Only if they catch you,” Gram said, nodding sagely. Now that would be a police chase I’d pay money to see.

When we pulled up to the drop-off zone at the airport, Gram threw the car in park and turned to me, her lips pulling into a stern line. “You better behave yourself, you hear me? With whatever this nonsense is that you’ve gotten yourself into,” she said, wagging a finger.

“You better behave, too,” I said with a chuckle. “So Dad doesn’t have to drive up here with bail money.”

“You’ve been getting into more mischief than I have here lately,” she said, leaning in for a hug, which I gratefully accepted. When she pulled back, her eyes narrowed on me expectantly, giving me one last opportunity to explain what exactly this nonsense was that had me rushing off to an airport in the night.

But as much as I wanted to tell her, I couldn’t. So instead, I cleared my throat and unbuckled my seatbelt, shrugging the strap off. “I’ll be good,” I promised, because I’d planned on trying not to get into any trouble overseas. You know, except for the not-so-legal passport I had a feeling Barren was about to hand me. And the magical seashell switchblade I had rolled up into my clothes and stashed in the middle of my suitcase. Other than those things, I expected to be on my best behavior.

With a grunt, I gave the door the extra nudge it needed to open. “Tell Auntie Glenda I said hi, okay?” I said, biting at my lip as I got out of the car. “Wish I had time to see her, but we’re already cutting things close.”

We’d cut it *very* close, actually. Despite Gram’s lead foot, she had a bladder the size of a cherry pit, and we’d stopped at least ten times over the course of the five-hour drive.

After wrestling my luggage free from the chaotic pile in the back seat, Gram rolled the passenger window the rest of the way down to blow me a kiss.

“Have a safe flight, groupie!” she said so loud that I was certain everyone walking to or from the hectic airport doors had turned a curious eye in our direction. “And if that drummer friend of yours offers to teach you a beat,” she called out with a smirk, “you make sure he wraps his drumstick! No excuses.”

Completely speechless, all I could do was gawk at her. Cackling, Gram turned her attention back to the windshield and sped off. The black car that had followed us from Dad’s house zoomed off after her, and I managed to



pull myself together enough to give them an awkward wave as they passed.

“Claira!” a voice called from behind me, and I spun around to a frenzied Kai hastening through the glass doors, his delight unmistakable. A wide grin spread across his face as he came right up to my side, grabbing my luggage from the curb. “What took you so long?”

“Sorry. Gram makes a lot of pit stops,” I said, heading for the entrance. As soon as we stepped through the doors, a gust of heat hit me. I looked over the crowds of people bustling around, and anxiety crept in as my nerves returned. The airport was busier than I’d imagined.

“Really?” Kai’s voice was heavy with disappointment as he led me into the stream of people. “Barren only let us stop once.” After a moment’s thought, his voice brightened. “Oh! But he let Laverne and me pick out a snack when we did. Anything we wanted. Did you know they make frozen treats that are made to look like things you wouldn’t normally eat?” He shook his head like he found it a hard concept to grasp. “Mine was of a man who was also a spider. I ate his entire face, and—get this—his eyes were *chewy*.”

“Chewy, huh?” I suppressed a laugh, deciding not to inform him he’d likely selected ice cream intended for children. “Did it taste good, at least?” I asked, my nerves easing. It was remarkable how, even though we had a crowd around us, it was easy to tune out everything else when I was with Kai.

“It was so good! Though I might not get a human-hybrid shaped one next time,” he said, winding through people and bringing me along with him like the crowd hadn’t bothered him one bit. “Laverne ate the face of a man who is apparently also a *bat*. Humans are so fascinating, aren’t they? I didn’t know that they had spiderfolk and batfolk here on land. Do you think they make frozen treats in the shape of merfolk, too?”

Before I could answer, a tall figure standing out from the crowd caught my attention—Barren. Towering over the normal-sized humans, he looked more threatening than ever. Everyone else must have thought so too, because the crowd kept a generous distance. Everyone except Leander, who was leaning against the counter beside him, half-heartedly thumbing through a display of brochures.

And Kai dragged me right past them.

I tugged on his arm to get his attention. “Barren and Lee are back there,” I said, throwing a thumb back, although they hadn’t seemed to notice us yet.

“Oh, um,” he muttered, his free hand drumming an erratic beat on his thigh as he walked. Wait—was that sweat beading the back of Kai’s neck? It

was warmer here than outside, sure, but it wasn't *that* warm.

Kai's fingers tightened over mine, solidifying his grip.

"Are we going to see Laverne?" I asked, letting him continue to pull me along. He glanced around, his movements jerky, then yanked me out of the river of people and into a nearby alcove.

Within the span of one breath, we were both tucked away in the cramped space, something hard and flat against my back. Kai was in front of me, chest heaving, his gaze intense and focused on mine.

Not quite understanding what this was about, I looked around, my eyes drawn to the colorful array of snacks and beverages in the vending machines tucked in here with us. "You, uh, wanted a snack before the flight?" I asked, confused at why he was behaving so oddly. Well—more odd than usual, at least.

"No, I..." He hesitated, his eyes jumping up and down my face, then he leaned in, dropping my luggage next to our feet. Before my brain could even process what was happening, his lips landed on mine, kissing me with a mix of shyness and boldness that nearly took me off my feet.

I'd almost forgotten how gentle Kai's kisses could be. His mouth was warm against mine, a slow simmer lurking underneath the surface of his lips that told me he'd been contemplating how and when to do this for some time. Kissing might have been new to him, but he was an eager learner, and now he seemed to be desperate for another taste.

A tentative touch explored my back, and when my spine arched under his palms, he pulled me away from the vending machines and into his arms. My lips parted on a groan as he wrapped around me, and his tongue flicked out to sweep across my mouth. He tasted sugary sweet and addicting like the ice cream he'd described earlier. One taste wasn't enough. My tongue joined his eagerly, and my hands fisted the front of his shirt, grateful for his arms holding me up.

When we finally pulled apart, I groaned, not yet ready for it to be over. Breathing ragged, his eyes sparkled like sapphires as he leaned back in, and the next thing I felt was the soft tickle of his breath on my neck.

"Sorry, Clair," he murmured, then nipped at my ear. It was a quick, teasing bite that sent a thrill running up and down my neck. The gentle caress of his voice against my ear seemed to drown out everything else. "We haven't had much time together, and I wasn't ready to give you up."

"I miss spending time with you, too." My pulse kicked up to a gallop.

“Especially last night. I—I wanted to crawl in between you and Leander, but I was afraid you wouldn’t want to share me.”

*Share me?* It was a good thing Kai knew little about relationships, because *why the heck had I worded it like that?*

His chuckle was warm as he pulled away to look at me, and although his lips curled into his usual smile, exhaustion weighed down his eyes. He looked so tired—how had I not noticed before?

“I would have loved that.” His whisper was full of longing, as if he was voicing a wish that was just beyond his grasp. His hand quivered as he softly touched my cheek. “*We* would have loved it,” he corrected, swallowing hard. Although I wasn’t convinced Leander would agree. “If we hadn’t been out training all night.”

Of course, that was why Kai looked so exhausted. I pursed my lips, remembering standing at the window to watch them train on and off until well into the afternoon. “I don’t understand why you guys stayed up like that,” I said, letting go of his shirt. “Especially since we have a busy night. But I guess you can get some sleep on the plane, right?”

Kai’s smile turned playful, though his gaze seemed to be stuck on my lips. “Doubt it. I had a great time on my last airplane ride. It’s exciting, isn’t it? A thousand times better than swimming.”

“I guess,” I said, shrugging. While part of me was eager to try something new, most of me was nervous. Merfolk weren’t meant to fly, were they? Well, they weren’t meant to be on land for long, either, and I seemed to do that okay.

“This will be my first time on a plane, but I think we might miss it if we don’t hurry.” As I attempted to leave our cozy enclave, Kai intercepted me, deftly pulling me back toward him.

“Wait,” he murmured, his hand delicately cradling the nape of my neck as he leaned in for a final embrace. “One more.” With a gentle urgency, he pressed his lips back to mine.

This time, when he pulled away, I could barely remember what it was we were doing until Kai reached down to pick up my luggage. “Better hurry back,” he said, a light pink cresting over his face. “Barren says we were supposed to get here three hours early.”

“Yeah,” I muttered back, sure that my face was just as pink as his. I let him lead me out of our nook and back into the fray, and my brain was still catching up by the time we made it to the counter where Barren and Leander

were waiting.

“Made it,” I said, giving them a smile and wondering if it was apparent what Kai and I had just done. Barren was as untelling as a stone statue, but a grin spread over Leander’s face.

“Finally.” Leander stole my luggage from Kai to hand off to Barren. “I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

I had to take my carry-on bag away from Barren before he lined us up at the check-in counter. “Of course I’m coming.” I huffed, throwing my bag over my shoulder. Glancing around, I sensed someone was missing. “Where’s Laverne?”

“We already checked her in,” Kai chimed in. “She was *not* happy. They put down a bowl for her, and boy, did she let them have it. Water everywhere, all over their faces.”

“I’m sorry I missed that,” I said, remembering how upset Kai had said she’d been during her last plane ride. It was a wonder they’d agreed to let a sea lion ride on a plane, even if it was in the cargo hold. “Poor girl.”

When it was our group’s turn to check in, I let Barren and Kai go first. “You’re not bringing anything?” I asked, looking over at Leander. He was still wearing the clothes he’d practiced in earlier, and grass stains streaked the front and sides of it where the side of Kai’s harpoon had grazed him. Had he not brought anything else from the warehouse with him?

“Stuffed it in with Kai’s,” he said coolly, moving off to the side of the counter.

“Oh? You’re sharing luggage now?” That was unexpected. I gave Kai a nudge, but he was busy trying to locate his identification for the gentleman behind the counter.

*Wait—identification.* My stomach lurched. I definitely wasn’t carrying anything that could be considered valid identification on me.

The gentleman wrapped a tag around Kai’s duffle bag and put it on the conveyor belt behind him. “Next.”

That was my cue. I opened my mouth to say something, but all that came out was a shaky, “Uh, Barren?”

I looked at him, my pulse pounding as I waited, hoping he would swoop in. My heart soared when he handed over the stack of documents he was holding to me. Hands trembling, I shuffled through the pictures—Leander’s, Kai’s, Barren’s—then got to mine, recognizing the picture Barren had taken of me earlier. “Here,” I said, but before I could hand it over, my eye caught

on something that had me pulling it right back up to my face.

Specifically, the name that was printed on it.

*Claira Arwa.*

I read it over again, this time saying it out loud. It was my face, all right, but that was *not* my name. Arwa sounded familiar though, didn't it? I knew that name, but whose was it?

Kai must have been curious as to why I was stuck standing there like an idiot, because his face closed in over my shoulder to see what I was staring at. "Dude, you gave her *your* name?" His head tilted as he looked up at Barren.

Barren gave me *his* name? Of course—Barren Arwa. How could I have forgotten where I'd heard it?

"There must be a mistake," I whispered. When I looked up at him, his face was a mask, unreadable. It had to be a mistake, right? An error in my passport due to the hurried way it was made?

Well, the only thing I could do now was roll with it.

"S-sorry. Here you go," I said, handing my passport over to the gentleman. His eyebrows were scrunched together as he examined it with doubt, making me question if I'd already ruined everything. "We haven't been married long. Newlyweds. I, uh, sometimes forget." A laugh, as dry as the desert, tore from my throat as I took a side-step closer to Barren.

*Newlyweds?* What the heck was I even saying? It was a terrible lie, but what else could I have said, considering he'd already looked over Barren's identification?

"I see," the man said, turning his gaze down to his computer monitor.

*Married to Barren.* I wasn't—obviously—but my not-so-legal identity was, apparently. My mind buzzed, unable to wrap around the lie. I didn't take another breath until the man's printer spit out the sticker for my luggage. He handed my passport back without another word to me, then dropped my luggage onto the conveyor belt. "Next."

As soon as we were clear of the counter, Leander took the passport from my hand and squared in front of Barren. "The fuck is this?" Ice sharpened in his eyes as he opened the booklet. "Claira Arwa?"

Barren shrugged, his jaw rigid as he said, "She didn't tell me her last name."

Leander planted a foot as he took a step forward. "So you gave her yours?" He growled, and I had to wonder if we were about to get kicked out

of this airport.

“Hey, hey, it’s fine,” I said, cutting in between them. “I probably never said my full name.” I glanced up at Barren, and I could see the muscles in his shoulders and back tightening. “Although you could have asked my last name,” I added. “Or warned me.” My face was so hot.

I wasn’t sure if I could pull off being his fake wife for the duration of this trip. Did I even look mature enough to be settled down and married?

“Let’s forget about it, and just go,” I said, trying to drag them all away. Kai came up beside me, pointing at the signs.

“I think we’re supposed to go that way,” he said, nodding toward security.

Security, right—the final barrier between us and our boarding gate.

At least things would calm down once we got on the plane, right?



# CLAIRA



Getting through security wasn't anywhere near as stressful as I'd feared, but as soon as I looked through our boarding passes, my stomach plunged.

Nope—this wouldn't go smoothly.

"Now boarding group four," a voice chirped over the intercom.

Barren rose to his feet. "That's us," he said, snatching the two tickets with his name on them from the stack he'd asked me to hand out to the group.

He threw my carry-on over his shoulder, positioning it next to the belt bag he'd slung over the top of his arm brace, and turned to me with a gruff, "After you."

"Time to go?" Kai sprang up, pushing his arms over his head in a big stretch. Once he'd worked out his back, he offered Leander a hand up. Prince Golden Grump ignored it, of course, but the rejection didn't seem to affect Kai's mood. "It's about time! My legs were getting all sleepy."

"Just your legs?" I teased, watching as he gave his thighs a good smack. Moments ago, he'd looked close to dozing off, even though the chairs at our gate were horribly uncomfortable. Leander, too.

Kai grinned as I pulled his ticket from the bunch, but before I handed it over, I checked it once more, confirming my fears from earlier. By the time I looked over Leander's, I was frowning. "Actually, you've got to wait here," I said, pointing at the group eight printed on both of their tickets. "Barren and I are in a different boarding group."

Leander let out a hollow laugh as he stood. "Sounds about fucking right." His tone was cutting when he turned to Barren. "No surprise that you're the one who gets to board with her."



Barren gave a shrug, looking completely unconcerned with Leander's comment. "I took the tickets that were available."

Right—that made sense. This was a last-minute flight, after all. It would be difficult for all four of us to board at the same time, though I'd naively assumed we'd be staying together.

"Last call for group four boarding," the voice echoed through the airport terminal. I flinched, scrambling around for my carry-on before remembering Barren had it.

"It's fine. You guys will be right behind us," I said, giving Leander a quick hug he didn't seem to want to let go of. "They'll call you in a few minutes, okay? Group eight," I reminded, hugging Kai next. As soon as I let go, he deflated with an exhausted sigh, melting back into his seat like a wilting marshmallow.

I nudged Leander's ribs. "Don't let him fall asleep, okay?"

He nodded, still grumpy as he'd been since he realized Barren gave me his last name. He folded his arms securely across his chest, and it was hard to ignore the way his fists clenched, his sharp gaze boring into the back of Barren's neck. "Don't worry," he said firmly. "Go on. We'll be with you soon."

With some hesitation, I followed Barren's lead up to the boarding gate. It didn't feel right to leave them, but as Leander said, we'd all be together again soon. By the time it was my turn to show my boarding pass, my nerves had returned in full force.

We were really doing this. Going on an *airplane*.

"You first." Barren steered me with a gentle touch on my hip. A narrow hallway that seemed to have been constructed just to reach the airplane curved in front of us. Despite the wind whistling through the cracks of the walls and the ground shaking with each step Barren made, I felt a sense of comfort having him right behind me.

"Watch your step," his rough voice warned as the ground slanted, and I could definitely see myself stumbling a step—not from the uneven hallway, but from the effect his nearness had on me.

"Thank you," I breathed, my heart rate kicking up faster with each step closer to the plane's entrance.

As I stepped onto the plane and my surroundings opened up, I couldn't help but feel awestruck. "It's huge," I blurted, temporarily holding up the line as I took it all in. Barren closed in on my back, and I quickly glanced at my

boarding pass, committing the seat number to memory before springing down the aisle toward row eighteen.

As we approached our seats, Barren asked, “Are you alright with a window seat? I can try to squeeze in if you prefer the aisle.”

That... would be difficult. He’d have to fold his knees up to his chin. Plus, the row in front of ours was at the beginning of our seating group and comprised only two seats instead of three, which would give him more room if he sat near the aisle.

“No, this is great,” I said, sliding over to the far seat. “I’m sure I’ll be more relaxed if I can see outside.”

Barren moved in next to me as I peered out the window, taking in the view of the tarmac and the flashing lights of the workers scrambling around the plane in the dark.

Wow. We were so high up. Had they already boarded Laverne? I squinted out, imagining the body count she’d racked up with her spit shots on the way to the cargo hold when Barren’s “Mmh” pulled me out of my reverie.

I turned to watch him lift my carry-on into the overhead compartment. “Storing it for takeoff,” he said, unfastening his belt bag next. He took a few items out of it, stuffing them straight into his pockets before stashing the bag overhead as well. When he turned around to sit beside me, it suddenly made sense that he needed two tickets.

Even with the seatbelt extender, it was clear he was too tall and bulky to fit comfortably in just one seat. He adjusted himself, though his broad shoulders and arm still spilled over our shared armrest. At least with one seat in front of us missing, it gave him enough room to stretch out his legs. Had he booked this row on purpose to give himself more room?

In front of me were two TVs built into the seats. I couldn’t help but feel impressed by the modern amenities on the plane. Gram had mentioned her flights on the drive up, but she’d never taken an international one. I’d only just discovered it was touchscreen and was scrolling through the map when Leander and Kai walked by.

“See? That didn’t take long.” I offered a smile to them as they passed.

Or, at least, I’d thought they were going to pass. But when Leander reached our row, he came to a dead stop.

He spun around to grab Kai’s shoulder. “Switch with her.”

“What?” I sputtered. His demand caught me off guard, and I could feel Barren tense up beside me. Kai glanced between the rest of us, his grin fading

as if he could tell the mood was turning.

“No, look.” Kai leaned over to show him his ticket. “You have to match the symbols. Your number is twenty, and your letter is D,” he explained, pointing to what was printed next to Leander’s name.

Leander’s expression darkened, and he snapped back, “I know how to read.” He turned to Barren to repeat his demand. “He’s switching with her.”

Barren inhaled a long breath. “No.”

All the frustration Leander had felt toward Barren in the terminal came back in full force. “No?”

“Excuse me, is there a problem?” a flight attendant called from the neighboring aisle, concern etched on her face.

Leander’s scowl was barely restrained. “There is no problem.”

“Are you sure, sir?” she asked, glancing up and down our aisle and at the crowded line of bodies forming behind Leander and Kai.

Trying to diffuse the situation, I quickly spoke up. “Leander, it’s okay. My bag is already up there.” I stood, leaning over to get a better look at the flight attendant. We didn’t need to get kicked off this flight before it even took off. “It’s all right, we just had a little confusion with our seats,” I said, giving her a reassuring smile. “But everything’s sorted now.”

My eyes slid back to Leander. “Isn’t it?” I said, teeth gritted, silently pleading with my eyes.

“This is what he wanted,” Leander growled. “I hope you can see that.” And although he still seemed agitated, he started stalking down the aisle, Kai trailing behind him. I sighed and crumbled back down into my seat. Even though we hadn’t taken off, a sheen of sweat misted my forehead.

Well, this was a disaster. “I wouldn’t mind switching,” I said, glancing over at Barren. “If it’ll keep us from getting kicked off the plane.”

“No.” Barren’s jaw tensed. “I don’t want you to switch.”

“Oh,” was all I could say. He didn’t want me to? *Why?* Barren seemed to tolerate Kai well enough, but maybe he didn’t want to sit next to him for a seven-hour flight. At any rate, I’d try my best not to bother him too much.

Watching a movie seemed like a safe bet. Even though I didn’t have headphones, I could turn on the subtitles. I was scrolling through various screens, trying to find something that would distract me from the fact that I’d soon be miles up into the sky, when the intercom tinged on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. A storm has formed nearby, and it’s causing some disruptions to our take off plans. Rest assured,

your safety is our top priority, and we're working hard to assess the situation and determine our next steps. Please ensure your seatbelt is securely fastened, and we'll keep you updated. Thank you for your patience."

A... storm?

My eyes snapped to my window where lightning flashed in the not-so-distance.

*Oh no.*

Without thinking, I popped up and practically crawled over Barren's lap. My hand perched on his chest for balance as I peeked back at Leander and Kai.

Kai's hair was the first thing I spotted, two rows back in the middle section. He had a grip on Leander's shoulder, massaging it as he whispered what I assumed was a mix of *you're okay* and *dude, calm down* into his ear.

Leander clenched his armrest with a clawed grip, his whole body drawn and tense. Through gritted teeth, he grumbled something that looked an awful lot like, "I'm trying."

Trying, and not succeeding—obviously.

"He needs to learn how to control his emotions." Barren's warm breath tickled my arm, jolting my attention back to our row of the plane. "The sooner he learns, the less of a strain it will be on his body."

I turned down at him in disbelief. "You did this on purpose?" I whispered, my fingers tightening over the thick brace running across his chest as my eyes searched his.

Wait—what was I doing? My legs tensed to confirm that—yep—I was definitely straddling his leg. His very solid, very warm leg.

"Maybe," Barren rumbled, his deep voice vibrating my palms on his chest. His dark eyes betrayed nothing—not a single emotion. "Or maybe I wanted to sit next to my wife."

"Your... wife." The words seemed to float off my tongue like a leaf trembling along a breeze. I wasn't like him. I wasn't a stone titan whose aura seemed to exude rigid control. Heat rushed right to my face, and if it weren't for Barren's arm coming up behind my back, my spine would have smacked into the row of seats in front of ours.

Nervous laughter was the next noise to spill from my throat as I retreated, sliding off his leg and back into my seat.

His *wife*. Barren teasing me with that stony face of his was more impactful than I'd expected. "Well, you won't be sitting next to me for long

if a thunderstorm cancels our flight,” I said, hiding my embarrassment by looking out the window.

I should have traded places with Kai. At least then I wouldn’t be sitting here worried about Leander, nor would I have ended up on Barren’s lap. “Should I go back and check on him? Try to calm him down before the trident hurts him?”

“You won’t always be there to calm him down.” Barren seemed strangely unaffected by me jumping up on his lap. Which was good, right? Maybe when you were as huge as a tree, you were used to having squirrels accidentally scamper up your trunk.

“That’s true,” I said, buckling my seatbelt to make sure I didn’t accidentally throw myself onto him again.

Sure, I wouldn’t always be there for Leander, but I couldn’t help my pang of longing, wishing that the four of us had been seated together. Although my brain understood the very rational reason we weren’t, my heart disagreed. *Madness*, it told me with every new prodding beat.

My eyes scanned the window for flashes of lightning—any sign that Leander was still calling on the trident’s power—until I couldn’t take it anymore. With a decisive nod, I yanked my seatbelt back off and stood straight up.

“Ma’am, please remain seated with your seatbelt fastened while the light is illuminated,” a flight attendant called to me almost immediately.

“Sorry,” I squeaked, but before I sat back down, I stretched up on my toes, leaning this way and that to catch a glimpse of Leander.

*There he was.* His back was flat against his seat, head thrown back and eyes shut tightly as he drew in long, deep breaths. Kai was right there, his face calm, saying something into Leander’s ear. As soon as Kai finished whatever he was saying, Leander gave a nod, his eyes still screwed shut. Then he took in another deep breath, looking a fraction more relieved.

“Ma’am,” the flight attendant repeated. She was shuffling down the aisle toward me.

“Yes—sorry.” My heart warmed as I slid back down to my seat, and I reached for my lap belt before the attendant made it over.

“Those two are getting kind of close, aren’t they?” I said with a shake of my head. It was utterly baffling. When had this happened? “They have nothing in common.” Well, okay, they were both princes and mermen, but other than that, they were complete opposites.

“They have you in common,” Barren offered.

I snorted. “Me? Yeah, like that’s enough.”

“Seems to be.” Barren shrugged, then stretched out his neck and shoulders. The way his neck hit between the two seats looked painful.

“Here,” I said, throwing back my armrest. “You can lean over on my side if it’s more comfortable. So your head isn’t stuck between the seats.” I pulled his arm in closer, until it fell next to my lap. “Really, I don’t mind.”

“Thank you,” was all he said. I went back to scrolling through my screen, my eyes boring into a map I cared nothing about as I tried to ignore the heat coming from his arm and shoulder. At this angle, at least his head could rest. And honestly, he smelled really nice.

Notes of leather and cedarwood, maybe. Was it from the brace that he wore, or was it him? My curiosity tempted me to lean in and investigate, but I resisted the urge. “Are you going to sleep?” I asked casually, halfheartedly scrolling.

The intercom tinged back on. “Good news, ladies and gentlemen! This is your captain speaking. The storm that caused our delay seems to have been a blip in our radar system that our technicians have resolved, and we have confirmed a smooth path to our destination. Our flight crew is ready to get us in the air, so please ensure that your seatbelt is securely fastened as we prepare for takeoff.”

My tension eased. Leander had gotten control after all. Beside me, Barren nodded. “See?” He shifted, his shoulder settling into the middle seat like he was hunkering down for the flight.

“Trying to get some sleep?” I asked again. Even though he didn’t look as exhausted as Kai and Leander, he’d still driven them all the way to the airport.

“No. But you can.”

“I’m a bit too nervous to sleep,” I admitted, turning my attention back to the screen in front of me. “I thought watching a movie might help me get my mind off of things, but I don’t think it has internet.”

Barren’s hand dug into his pocket and reappeared with earbuds. He popped the Bluetooth jack in and handed me the square, white case. “Here. The internet will turn on once we’re in the air.”

“It’s so we’ll pay attention to the safety brief, isn’t it?” I mumbled, taking the case from him. When I opened it, not a single speck of dust was present inside. In fact, they looked brand new. Knowing Barren, I shouldn’t have

been surprised, but I hadn't expected him to be so prepared.

I must have stared at them for too long, because Barren said gently, "They're clean. My ears are in perfect health."

My lips tilted as I popped the left one out of the case. "You think I'm afraid of your germs, dear husband?" I prodded his elbow as I secured the earbud in my ear. "We're married, after all," I drawled, chuckling to myself at how absurd the entire scenario was.

I went to pull the second earbud out, then paused as I thought better of it. Wearing both seemed too much like isolating myself from Barren, so I flipped the case closed and handed it back to him with the right one still in it. "In case you want to listen."

Barren didn't hesitate to thump open the case and pop the earbud in his right ear. As I debated internally if I should switch to the screen closer to him, I felt his breath on my skin as he leaned in closer. "What are we watching?" he asked, the low gravel of his voice making me shiver. Yeah, I was definitely not switching screens. Nope. No way.

"Haven't decided yet. Guess I'll see what there is when the internet comes on," I said as I went back to scrolling. Then the airplane started moving, and my whole body tensed.

We were moving.

The flight attendants started going through their spiel, and I didn't realize I was frozen, watching them pantomime what to do in case of an emergency, until Barren's wide hand closed over mine, bringing it down off the tv screen. "Claira," he whispered, his voice even and unaffected. "I was nervous my first time, too."

The plane lurched, and my heart jumped into my throat.

"I'm here," he said, this time louder, in that same steady, unshakable tone.

"Right. Yeah—" I choked out, turning to look at the window, then thinking better of it because things were moving *fast* past my window. "Are—are we supposed to be rattling like this?"

He pulled my hand over onto his thigh as his grip tightened over my fingers. "Yes, my wife. Normal and expected."

*Normal, right. Expected, sure.*

A strangled laugh escaped me. "Thank you, dear husband. I don't know why, but *I* didn't expect it," I wheezed out, clutching my seat as the plane ascended. It was an odd sensation, as if the surrounding air was pushing

against me. Like being underwater, only without the protection of magic or the familiar shield of a scaled tail.

Even after the plane leveled and steadied, the reassuring grip of Barren's hand on mine stayed constant. "What do you want to watch?" he asked as soon as I resumed breathing in a normal rhythm. "The internet is on," he said, pointing to the corner.

This wasn't so bad. We were in the air, and that was the worst part of flying, right? Well—there was the landing to worry about, of course. But that was hours away.

"Comedy, maybe?" I said, my voice strained. Yeah, this was fine. I was fine. I cleared my throat and used my other hand to scroll, pressing extra hard with my finger to hide its trembling.

A comedy seemed like a good idea right now—maybe something that could get Barren to laugh as well. I passed by a movie Gram had mentioned enjoying and paused there to look over the details. "This one seem okay?"

"A rom-com." Barren nodded. "This will be my first. I don't watch many movies."

Barren knew what a rom-com was? "Glad to be here to witness your first," I said, selecting it on the screen. "Gram saw this one in theaters with her friends. She said it was hilarious."

The music slowly faded in, and I got comfy in my seat as the movie began. That is, until a groan pierced my earbud and I nearly leapt from my seat.

"Yes. Oh god, *yes!*"

All the blood drained from me as the first scene panned over the tv screen. Legs, long and bare. Rhythmic rutting and the crumpling of bedsheets. Moaning. Lots of moaning.

Why, Gram? *Why?*

The music kept building, rising and falling, as the screen zoomed on manly abs and thighs. A female's well-toned ass. Gritting my teeth, my mind raced. Should I change it? Would he think I was weird if I did? Prudish? Someone who, until very recently, hadn't ever moaned and gyrated on top of a man—er, merman?

Beside me, Barren didn't react. His chest rose and fell with the same slow, measured breaths as it always did, although I could bring myself to check whether he was watching.

"God, *yes. More!*"



It was like staring down an impending train wreck, and I couldn't look away.

Then she tumbled off whoever was giving her "more," falling right over the side of the bed, and both Barren and I winced as it transitioned to the movie's title.

"Breaking your neck," Barren said as the music crescendoed. For once, he barely restrained the amusement in his voice. "Both romantic and humorous."

Somehow, his thick accent made his assessment seem even funnier. "Rom-coms are *not* usually like this," I said with a laugh. There was a time jump in the movie that cut over to a sweeping building in New York City. A woman in red heels, shiny auburn hair, and maybe a bit of a limp, sporting a professional looking dress suit. "Oh. But they are usually like this," I mumbled, and he huffed a laugh beside me.

We carried on like this for the rest of the film—him picking out every cliché that I either cringed at or defended. With the movie almost finished, I was about to ask him to choose the next one when I looked over and saw he had dozed off.

Even in his sleep, his neck was strained, and I wondered if a light touch of my hand on his jaw would ease his features.

*Whoa, now. Better not start touching people while they sleep.*

The seatbelt sign had been off for over an hour now, and although his grip was still firm on mine, I pulled my hand free to creep up in my seat and check on Kai and Leander.

Kai was leaning his head on Leander's shoulder, eyes closed and mouth slightly open. His spiky hair was even more messy than usual. Leander had his head tilted slightly toward Kai, his expression peaceful in his sleep.

I sighed a relieved "aww" before settling back in my seat, grateful that they were all getting some rest. Then I sat there for a moment, soaking in the stillness of the moment.

If only we had more quiet times like this. It almost felt like I might fall asleep myself until unease crept in, slowly gnawing at me.

A new kingdom of merfolk. Another royal hungry for me to help them reclaim their trident.

Yes, I had to take in these quiet moments while I could, because I had a horrible, sinking feeling that once we got to Barren's island, the time for relaxation would be over.



## CLAIRA



“No windows?” I muttered as we stepped into the noisy London airport. Hiking my carry-on over my shoulder, I let out a sigh. I’d hoped to at least catch a glimpse of London before we boarded our next flight. Who knew if I’d ever have another chance?

I turned around to look at Barren. “How long is our layover?”

He tightened the strap on his belt bag as he walked, securing it over his chest. Then he carefully took my carry-on off my shoulder and placed it on his. “No layover,” he said, supplying no further elaboration.

Damn, there went that idea.

“Too bad,” I grumbled. “I wanted to see London.” My eyes scanned over the swarm of people, looking for any sign of gold or lavender among those who had stepped off the plane behind us. If we didn’t have a layover, we needed to hurry to our next terminal—wherever that might be.

“I’ll take you to see London,” Barren said as casually as if he were asking me out to the movie theater. “Not now,” he added. “Obviously.”

“Obviously,” I said back, grinning. I was sure he wasn’t serious. Still, his words made me feel better about leaving London so soon. If nothing else, it was a dream to hold on to, even if it seemed unlikely it would ever come true. “We won’t miss the next flight, will we?” I asked, tucking in closer to his side. Being surrounded by a throng of people somehow felt safer with his imposing size next to me.

Barren’s deep chuckle had me turning up to him. That is—until Kai and Leander materialized from the pressing swarm of people. “That was the longest flight I’ve ever had,” Kai said, bouncing right up to us, his arms draped languidly behind his head in a stretch.

Beside him, Leander rolled out his neck, his honey-blond hair ruffled from where Kai had slept against it for a portion of the flight. “Isn’t this the second time you’ve ever been on a plane?” Leander asked, not sounding very impressed by Kai’s flying prowess.

Kai frowned. “Well, yeah, but —”

“Next one’s longer,” Barren supplied, and the rest of us groaned.

“Longer than *eight hours*?” I said, glimpsing an array of clocks hung up high on the wall across from us. It was currently 10 a.m. London time, but it still felt like the middle of the night to me. I was grateful that the others had managed to sleep, but I’d kept the volume low and watched movies until the plane touched down, too anxious to rest my eyes.

“Eleven hours,” Barren said in a steady, emotionless voice, as if this were business as usual for him. He confidently strode ahead of us through the airport, leaving us to follow the parted path behind him.

“*Eleven*,” Kai groaned, sounding like a part of his soul was leaving his body. Leander grumbled curses under his breath.

*Maybe it won’t be so bad*, I thought, though I found it hard to believe.

Leander recovered from his foul mood long enough to pull up beside me and hook an arm around my waist. “You doing okay, beautiful?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, enjoying his nearness. I’d felt so isolated from him and Kai during the flight, and it was nice to see him with an expression other than a scowl. “So, what was it like?” I asked, and he arched a golden eyebrow. “Surveying your entire kingdom from above, I mean. I bet you never thought you’d fly over it.”

Leander’s mouth curved into a smirk. “It was complete whaleshit. I couldn’t see a thing.”

My cheeks heated. Ah—that’s right. He’d been stuck in the middle aisle. “Maybe on the ride back?” I said, attempting to sound encouraging. But I had a hard time picturing what our return trip might look like. Would Barren return with us, or would he be forced to stay back with his kingdom once his queen’s trident was returned?

My stomach twisted sharply at that thought. So much so that I almost collided with the back of Barren’s legs when he suddenly halted in front of us.

I swung my head around to see why we’d stopped. Two men in dark suits stood in the hall before us, blocking our way. Whoa—they were tall. Dark eyes scanned over each of us, the men’s expressions cold and unyielding.

Were we about to get into a fight or something? Instinctively, I drew nearer to Barren and reached back to pull Kai and Leander in closer behind me.

When the atmosphere became so agitated that I wasn't sure what would happen next, Barren gave a single nod. The two mysterious men spun around, wordlessly leading us through the empty hall.

As we drew further away from the stream of people rushing through the airport, I looked around, baffled. "This is our next terminal?" I asked. No one else was even down here, just us and the two large strangers.

Kai's lips drooped in worry as he jogged up to Barren, placing a hand on his upper arm. "They know to bring Laverne on our next flight, right?" Barren gave a slight nod, and Kai's shoulders sagged in relief.

To deepen the mystery, we walked right past the waiting area. My anticipation built as we approached the boarding area, and the men walked through it without a delay.

Now this was strange. Were they expecting us to board already?

Without waiting for airport staff, one of the men pushed open a door that led to steps going down to the runway.

"We're going outside?" Kai asked as the light from outside streamed in. The men said nothing.

"I guess we are." I shrugged, following in Barren's shadow. Although the morning sun beat down my face as I descended the steps, the air was brisk. It was so frigid, in fact, that I felt the chill from the tarmac seeping through the soles of my shoes as we walked across the runway.

Then my gaze fixed on the impressive aircraft sitting in the distance, and I stopped in my tracks. There was no commercial branding or logo on the plane to be seen. "Barren," I called. "Is this a private jet?"

Barren looked back, and our eyes locked as he nodded. "Mmh."

I knew I shouldn't be surprised, yet I couldn't help shaking my head. "Hotels, an island, and now a private jet. Is there anything your kingdom doesn't have?" I asked until I remembered the two men in suits who were still in front of us. Oops.

I swallowed, leaning over to Barren to ask, "They're, uh..." Only I wasn't sure how to say it. Not without giving even more possible secrets away. Keeping my lips sealed, I made a swishing motion with my hands. One I hoped he'd recognize as the movement of a tail if it worked. "Aren't they?"

"Yes," he said gruffly. "They are subject to my queen's authority."

I exhaled a tremendous breath. *Thank goodness.* It wasn't too surprising,

considering how inhumanely tall they were. Were all Indian Ocean mers tall? Well, I supposed I would soon have my answer.

When we reached the aircraft, the two men halted, dividing to both sides of the stairs that led to its entryway. I gazed upward, marveling at the plane's smooth lines and shiny surface. So it belonged to the Indian Ocean. How bizarre.

Now that we were away from other people, I expected the men to greet their prince with the same reverence the Atlantic Ocean showed to Leander. But the men stood rigid, not speaking a single word or even a nod to Barren as he passed up the stairs. Perhaps customs were different in the Indian Ocean?

When it was my turn to take the stairs, Leander stepped up, positioning himself between me and the bigger of the two men. "After you, beautiful." Although his voice was smooth and casual, I could tell he didn't trust either of them.

My fingertips met the cold metal of the staircase, and the chill spread through my fingers as I clutched the railing. So, this was it. Next stop, some remote island somewhere. "Thanks for coming along, guys." I turned back to give Leander and Kai each a smile. "Really. I know you didn't have to."

Leander chuckled, leaning in to give my forehead a kiss. "No need to thank us."

When he pulled away, I stole one last second to look around, taking in what I could of London before entering the plane. I wasn't prepared for what was waiting for me inside.

The interior opened up to a spacious lounge area filled with plush leather recliners arranged around a polished wooden table. "Dang," I said, clicking my tongue. On the far wall, a television hung, even larger than the one Dad kept in our living room.

Soft lighting and muted colors created a cozy atmosphere, but I only had a moment to appreciate the plane's luxury before a body came barreling toward me.

"*Kai-Kai!*" Laverne shripped, bounding straight for the entrance. Right for *me*. Barren's quick reflexes saved me from being bowled over by the crazed sea lion—a fate that Leander, unfortunately, had no room to escape.

"Lee!" I gasped as he stumbled onto the plane, tripping over Laverne and falling in a heap of golden limbs. She'd lowered her head, flattening her plump body, apparently thinking that would be enough to let her squeeze

between his legs.

It had not.

While Leander's chin smacked against the floor, Laverne didn't bat an eye at the chaos she'd caused. She lunged out of the plane's door, and the next sound I heard was a loud "oof" as she collided with Kai. I froze, stuck between choosing who to tend to first—Leander on the ground or Kai, who had likely been tackled off the stairs and was now possibly writhing down on the runway.

Leander made the choice for me. He sprung back to his feet and swung around, blocking the airplane's entrance, his fists clenched. "The *fuck*," he spat as he swiped the back of his hand across the underside of his chin.

Just outside the door, I could see one of the men in a suit coming up the stairs. Kai was there, too, being crushed between the tall man's chest and Laverne as she leapt up, attempting to land in his arms. "*It was horrible!*" she shrieked, her tail slapping the stairs every time she bounced. "*The most humiliating—*"

Laverne's pupils went wide as Leander's arms wrapped around her. He yanked her back, dragging her off Kai and back into the plane.

"Don't hurt her!" Kai choked out, grappling with the railing as he struggled to stand upright.

"I'm not going to hurt her," Leander growled as he deposited Laverne right back onto the leather chair she'd been sitting in before she'd decided to lunge at us.

Kai stumbled into the doorway, one hand braced on the doorframe. His breath was clearly knocked out of him. "Glad you're... okay," he rasped, toeing steps forward.

Laverne shook off her daze, stretching up on her chair so that her front flippers were on the back of the seat. "*Just look at this place, Kai-Kai!*" she said, all excitement and clearly not reading the room. Her whiskers twitched, her nose pitched high as she scanned the lounge. "*This is more like it!*"

She had a point—the plane was luxurious. Each seat looked wide and comfortable, and I found myself wondering if one of the buttons on the side of their armrests would make them recline.

I must have been ogling the chairs, because Barren came over to guide me to one. Since he was offering, I sank into the buttery soft leather.

I practically moaned, cozying into it, feeling my body truly relax for the first time in what felt like days. "Is this your plane?" My gaze flicked up to

Barren as he turned to the seat next to mine. Leander beat him to it, sliding in sideways before he could sit down. Barren peered at the opposite side of me, but Kai had already claimed that seat.

Barren's jaw clenched as he walked over to the other side of the wooden table, taking the empty seat next to Laverne. Despite the extra space, his hips looked pinched between the armrests. "My queen's plane."

"*She has good taste,*" Laverne said as I eyed the two men in suits. They latched the door, closing themselves in here with us. Did this mean they were going to stay with us the entire flight?

Beside me, Leander looked like he was ready to fall back asleep. "Tired?" I asked, and he tilted his head back, his hair becoming even more artfully disheveled. "I thought you and Kai slept together most of the last flight," I teased.

Laverne shot straight up, her nose pointing like an arrow aimed straight at Leander. "*WHAT!*"

"What?" Kai echoed her sentiments, his head shaking wildly as he turned to me. "W-we didn't," he stammered, but the paleness of his face had me wondering if he truly believed it.

When I turned back to Leander, I was taken aback by the way his lips curled into a sinful smirk. He reclined more in his chair, his voice rough and gravelly from being exhausted. "Jealous?"

Instead of giving a reply, I snorted. I wasn't jealous. No way. Okay, maybe a little—but only because part of me wanted to be there sleeping in between them. Okay, a *big* part of me, but how was that fair? I'd be getting both of them, while they'd have to share me. But then again, if they didn't mind sharing...

The intercom system tinged, and Barren went for his seatbelt. We were leaving already? Stomach twisting, I reached for my seatbelt as the two men disappeared into another section of the plane. By the time I had it clicked, a rogue thought had my heart pumping up into my throat. "The pilot is a human, right?"

Barren's deep chuckle eased my panic. "Of course."

Oh, thank Poseidon—I might have had to convince all of them to abort this mission with me if the pilot was mer. Sure, Barren was a capable driver, which meant that merfolk could learn how to do things on land. But Barren was Barren, and he didn't seem to have trouble doing anything.

The plane started moving, and my fingers sank into the soft leather.



“Claira,” Barren said, making my pulse jump. His eyes were intently on mine. “The takeoff will be rough.”

The takeoff will be *rough*? What kind of reassurance was this? My voice cracked with nervous laughter. “Will it?”

“Mmh.” He nodded in a slow rhythm, perhaps to show me how I had nothing to fear. “It is normal,” he said in that same slow beat. “This plane is smaller.”

“Smaller, right—” I mirrored his nod, struggling to tamp down my anxiety. “Makes sense.”

“Laverne!” Kai shifted in the seat beside mine, and I gasped as I glanced over to see him throwing off his seatbelt. Didn’t he realize we were already moving? “You have to wear your plane leash,” he scolded.

My mouth nearly dropped to the floor when he leapt right over the table. Laverne screeched, clashing with him as he attempted to get a seatbelt around her.

“*Stop!*” she hissed, flippers flapping at his face. He avoided every slap like it was something he was long used to. “*I will not be contained again!*”

Laverne attempted to make a run for it, but the plane bumped, nearly knocking Kai over on top of her. He recovered just in time to wrestle her back into her seat. “You—need—” He gasped between each word. “Your—leash!”

“Hurry up.” My panic rose as the airplane turned. Soon, we’d be speeding down the runway, and at this rate, neither of them would be strapped in. I looked to Barren and Leander for help, but they were mere spectators, leaning back and taking in the mayhem.

Finally, the seatbelt clicked, and with a triumphant roar, Kai sprung away. He landed back into his seat with a bounce. He’d barely pulled his belt over his lap when the plane started down the runway.

Across the coffee table, Laverne glared at Kai, not pleased that he was attempting to protect her from herself. “*I hate flying,*” she proclaimed, her long snout jerking up into the air. “*Next time, I’m swimming.*”

As the plane sped, I released a strangled laugh. “Count me in,” I agreed, momentarily hating everything about this, too. Sure, things weren’t so bad once we were in the air, but I was positive I’d never get used to the takeoffs and landings.

The plane jostled as the landing gear retreated, signaling that we were airborne, and my grip on my seat eased as we leveled out.

I didn't even have time to enjoy my relief before Laverne projected right in my head so loudly, I had to wonder if she was speaking to me alone. "*I'm not dragging you around,*" she seethed, and it hit like a gut punch. "*Useless harlot.*"

I felt my lips twitch. So, we were back to this, were we? I knew I couldn't swim, of course, but I'd only meant that any other means of travel would be better than this. "Fine. Kai will take me." I turned over to him with a smile that I hoped wasn't ruined by the cold sweat I'd worked up during the stress of the last five minutes. "Won't you?"

"Yes," was his immediate response. His words were airy when he added, "Where are we going?"

So, Laverne had spoken her taunt only to me, as I suspected. "Where do you want to go?" I asked, just to get under her skin some more, and Kai's face pinked.

"*Kai is going back to the Pacific with me!*" Laverne cut in. She bared her teeth. "*As soon as we're done here. The two of us are on a mission.*"

Kai's eyes dropped. A pained look crossed over his face, but he didn't say a word. I wondered if the mission was to find his sister, but I didn't dare ask. Not here, in front of everyone.

The thought of him leaving after this made my chest feel numb. I sat back, taking in the array of apps on the television screen. An uneasy quiet filled the plane until the intercom tinged, indicating that we could release our seatbelts.

Not long after, a delightful aroma of fresh coffee wafted about. Coffee—now that sounded heavenly. I was so tired.

One of the men reappeared, this time rolling a cart. "Breakfast," he said in a peculiar accent much like Barren's, and we all sat up a bit straighter. To my horror, my stomach was the first to grumble a reply.

"Gosh, I'm hungry," I said, watching the man's back as he laid the platters on the wooden table and put white mugs of coffee around them.

Before I dug in, the second man came in, pushing a silver cart filled with ice.

"Wine?" he asked, lifting a bottle and pulling a chilled glass from among the ice.

I nervously looked around the room while I waited for someone to answer, when I realized the man was staring directly at me. "We're not old enough to drink." I glanced over at Leander. "At least... Lee and I aren't. I—I

don't actually know how old you two are." The words stuck in my throat, and a wave of embarrassment washed over me for not having ever asked their ages.

Barren unbuckled his seatbelt. "We're still in London." He shifted in his seat to have enough room to stick his hand in his pocket. "Eighteen and older can drink. Plus, here." Standing up, he reached over, passing a stack of plastic to me.

I stared down at the IDs in my hand, my eyes widening as I flipped through them. "Oh, wow," I said, coming to my ID. "Claira Arwa is twenty-one." I stole a quick glance up at Barren as he settled back in his chair. Of course, I was only twenty years old, but how would he have known? I'd never told him my age, either. "And she has her North Carolina driver's license," I added with an appreciative nod. "Nice."

Dad had let me practice driving with him a few times, in case of an emergency, but I never saw much of a point in learning. Driving had been one of those land things I'd long come to terms with never being able to do. Without identification, I'd never been able to get a license.

I flipped through the stack, finding Barren's image next. "And my husband is..." My eyebrows lifted. "Twenty-three?"

Barren's nod was firm. "I am."

"Geez, we married young," I murmured, ignoring Leander's grumpy scowl. Evidently, it would take him a while to get over our fake marriage.

The corners of Barren's mouth hinted at a smile. "We did."

A sudden wave of heat came over my neck, and I quickly looked away, switching to the next ID. Leander also had a North Carolina driver's license—*scary*—and was fake twenty-one as well. Then I moved on to Kai's ID, and my head tilted. He had a California driver's license, which made sense enough, but the rest of it didn't make sense at all.

"That's a funny mistake," I said, doing the math in my head a second time, just to be sure I'd calculated correctly. "Twenty-eight?" I glanced up at Barren. "Why did you make Kai so much older than we are?"

Kai scratched at the back of his head, a mouthful of eggs from the breakfast they'd brought already stuffed into his mouth. It looked painful, how fast he wolfed it down. "What do you mean?" he asked, his smile wobbly. "I am twenty-eight."

"No way." I shot forward, shifting to look straight at him. I studied his smooth face, lavender hair, and the cute slightly reddened tips of his ears.

“*Seriously?*”

His anxiety was clear in his laugh. “Is... Is that a problem?”

Laverne’s whiskers twitched. “*Are you implying that there is something wrong with Big Brother?*”

“No, I—he’s perfect.” I leaned back, not sure what else to say. I’d thought Kai was my age, or at the very least, close to it. An assumption I should have known better than to make, considering how slowly merfolk aged. “How old are you, then, Laverne?” I asked, hoping to steer the conversation away from my blunder.

“*Twenty,*” she said proudly, her chest puffing up.

“I will have some of that wine, yes,” I said, my exasperation evident as I signaled to the man behind the cart. Yeah—there was no way Laverne, *a sea lion*, was the same age as me. As soon as the wine glass was in my hand, I sat the IDs down next to my plate and drank deeply.

By the time I’d downed the glass and dug into my food, I could barely keep my eyes from closing. The last thing I remembered before falling asleep was Barren’s deep chuckle as Leander mashed buttons on the television remote, trying to figure out how to make it work.

When I regained consciousness, Kai was there, his eyes shining and his body hovering above me. “Claira?” He bit at his bottom lip. “I hate to wake you, but we’re here. You slept the whole way.”

I swiped a hand over my face, the leather of my seat warm underneath me. “We’re here?” I asked, trying to stand.

“Wait, your leash.” Kai reached down, and with a click, my seatbelt retreated. “I was sure you would wake up when we landed, but you must have really needed the rest.”

When I got up, Barren was standing at the door. “We’re here,” he said, only his words were gruff, dread resonating through every syllable. His hand clenched around the phone he held in his hand. “Welcome to the Isle of Lakhri.”



## BARREN



Stepping out of the van, I inhaled deeply. The delicate fragrance of frangipani and sea hibiscus hung in the breeze, mingling with the salt of the sea. Despite my frequent travels, that initial breath of island air always reminded me how I longed for this place. For home.

“This is where you live?” Clairra braced a hand against the van’s door. She glanced up at the stretch of luxurious apartment buildings before us.

“Mmh,” was all I could manage. It wasn’t a complete lie.

My molars clenched. I’d wanted to see her face when we landed. To memorize her expression when she took in the white sands and crystal-clear water of the island that I loved. Instead, it had been the dead of night when we touched down, with a van awaiting to transport us to the heart of the island.

And instead of the shores and coconut palms, here Clairra was, surveying what my father’s vanity had created and what my sister now controlled.

I could admit it was a convincing illusion. The apartment complex’s lights shone brightly against the night sky. Thanks to my father’s legacy, this part of the island never slept. Merfolk scattered around us, moving in straight, somber lines, either coming back from work or setting out for the day.

Under my father’s rule, only the Indian Ocean’s most loyal bloodlines had been permitted to follow the crown up on land. Now, everyone my queen wished to keep a watch over lived here. She provided everything they needed and, in return, permitted them the honor of working long hours for the greater good of her kingdom.

Unable to take Clairra’s awe-filled expression any longer, I went to retrieve our luggage. Our driver got out of the van as well, dashing toward

the trunk until he noticed me and stopped abruptly. His pristine white gloves clenched uselessly as he hesitated, keeping a safe distance away.

I didn't need to glimpse into his mind to know that merely driving me had made him anxious. Coming close enough to me to help unload the luggage? Unthinkable. Even if it was his duty as an attendant to do so.

Having adapted to my situation, I couldn't fault him. Superstitions were deeply ingrained in us, intertwined within our very survival instincts. One accidental touch and the photograph he had tucked in the visor of his van would be the only way he could see his family. He wouldn't dare return to them after coming in contact with me. Couldn't. For fear of the misfortune he might bring back with him.

"Here, I'll help." Clair's mood was bright as she came up beside me. When I didn't immediately hand over her suitcase, her rosy lips pursed. "Come on, it has wheels. Despite what Laverne thinks, I'm not *that* useless."

"*What'd you say about me?*" Laverne's voice boomed as she flopped out of the van. She strode toward us, followed closely by a stumbling Kai.

Clair shooed Laverne away with a wave of her hand. "Oh, the usual. You hating me for some unknown reason."

Clair's scent caught in my throat as she edged closer. Sweeter than frangipani, it had been tempting me since the start of our first flight. What I wouldn't give to hoist her up to me and find out what her lips tasted like on land.

Her hands wrapped over mine to take over the strap of her suitcase, and my slacks suddenly felt tighter. "Let me take it."

Laverne hissed. "*I have a reason!*"

"You do? Then, by all means —"

A startled sound erupted from the driver, cutting their conversation off and making Clair jump.

"*An'dhiri nafseve,*" the man blew out under his breath, a curse in the wind. His white glove held firmly to the brim of his driver's hat as his eyes widened, focusing on where Clair's skin rested over mine. Then, as if realizing he had forgotten himself, he jerked out of his daze. Still, he didn't dare move closer.

"Please." Although his English was choppy, urgency shook through his voice. "Step away, miss."

Clair cocked her head in a manner that made me wonder if she understood him. But I understood. Those words had followed me in whispers

since the day I lost the title of crown prince.

*An'dhiri nafseve. The tainted one.*

Although I'd expected his reaction, it did not make the reality of it any easier to face.

I took the step for her, yanking my hand away like maybe I was as tainted as my kingdom believed, but Clairra was reluctant to let go.

"Step away from what?" Irritation weighed down her voice as she stole the strap from me to hoist the suitcase out of the trunk. Her hip leaned right against me without a care. More contact, another startled gasp from our driver. "Seriously. I haul fish for a living. I can carry my own suitcase."

The driver's head shook with desperation. He couldn't understand her, and from the fear in his eyes, he must have realized she couldn't understand him, either. Spinning on his heel, he fled for the van.

I drew in a breath. Of course, she wouldn't have known what he meant. But now that we were here, it was only a matter of time before Clairra learned of my kingdom's beliefs. What would she think of me once she knew I was on the brink of exile, only summoned when my queen found a use for me—an arm to be broken or a mind to be infiltrated?

Leander circled the van, snatching Kai's bag from the back. "Are we going, or what?"

"Which way?" Clairra's eyes glimmered in the dark as she tracked Kai and Laverne toward the softly gurgling fountain in the center of the courtyard.

"Not sure," I said, digging into my pocket for my phone, watching Clairra's legs work as she went over to join them. My chest hammered as I saw the dozens of notifications I'd missed. *Alhey*. My queen would have to wait. Opening up the application that held my confidential information, I scrolled down in search of the note I'd written for myself before leaving the island.

"Not sure?" Clairra cast me a perplexed glance as she clutched tightly onto the back of Kai's shirt, presumably to stop him from tumbling into the water. "You don't know where you live?"

"Mmh." I had no doubt that somewhere in the complex was an empty apartment meant for me. On official records, it was where I lived, but I'd never stepped inside it. Nor would my kingdom welcome me here if I tried. We had been dropped off here simply because my kingdom didn't care where I lived as long as I came running whenever our queen called.

I didn't bother looking at the merfolk around us as I took off down the



least crowded path to the apartments, but the air was thick with their unease. Even in the faint light of the walkway lanterns, I was certain they knew who I was. *An'dhiri nafseve*.

I slid my phone back into my pocket after I reread my note. *Second row, third on the right*. When I crouched down, reaching to dig into a flowerpot, Leander's amusement was evident. "What are you doing?"

I pulled my keyring free from the soft dirt as I offered a shrug. "Getting my keys." I'd barely had time to stash them after my queen ordered me to travel to the Atlantic.

Claira came up to us, rolling her suitcase behind her. She glanced around, undoubtedly thinking about the high volume of merfolk who frequented the courtyard. "You keep your keys hidden in a bush?"

"Flowerpot," I corrected, brushing the dirt from my knees as I stood. "Didn't have time to hide them elsewhere. This isn't where I live."

"It isn't?" she asked, casting another glance up at the apartment buildings. A forlorn look settled over her face, causing my insides to twist. Was she disappointed? I fought the urge to pry into her mind and find out.

"Yeah. You live on the water, right?" Leander threw an arm around her waist, gesturing up at the dwellings with his chin. "Sounds better than this fucking nightmare." He snorted, shaking his head as though he saw right through the illusion of luxury to what these buildings really were. A prison where my queen had full control.

"On the water?" With Leander's support, Claira straightened, an eager look on her face. "That does sound nice. Where is it?"



## CLAIRA



The sight before us was nearly enough to steal my breath away. “When you said you lived on the ocean, I didn’t think you actually meant *on top of the ocean*,” I said, taking in the moonlight casting a shimmering silver glow upon the tranquil water. Barren really lived here? I wasn’t sure how anyone could afford such a place.

In front of us, Barren shrugged. He stepped down a boardwalk leading to a row of overwater bungalows built up on stilts. “It’s a lagoon,” he said as he fished his keys from his pocket. “Ocean tides are too rough to build on.”

A lagoon? I supposed that made sense, considering how calm the water was, gently lapping up the edges of the boardwalk. An Atlantic beach would *never* be this placid. I looked down the pathway and across the wide oval of dwellings. Homes dotted the main boardwalk, each equipped with its own branching entranceway.

“Watch your step,” Barren warned, gesturing to the slivers of moonlight dancing over the water’s surface. It was the only thing marking where the boardwalk ended and the water began. One misstep and you’d fall straight into the ocean.

Despite the danger, I chuckled, crossing the planks with sure steps. “I have excellent night vision.”

“I know.” The confidence in Barren’s deep voice gave my stomach flutters as I passed by him. He stayed behind to watch Kai and Leander, looking ready to grab one of them if they veered too close to the edge.

As I reached the spot where the boardwalk started branching off to different homes, I slowed my steps.

“The one with the shells,” Barren called.

I noticed the rooftop adorned with spirals of seashells right away.

Even in the dark, I could tell that the details of this particular bungalow were meticulous. Polished stones and planters created a beautiful walkway that led to the door, and I had no doubt that Barren had been the one to place every rock. "It's beautiful," I called back to him.

A small wooden sign carved with writing in a language I didn't know hung delicately from the door, and something about the way the symbols curved, the intricate embellishments, seemed to invite me to enter.

"What does it say?" I asked, enchanted by everything about this place. The calm water, the smell of the wood. The endless sweep of the night sky dotted with starlight above us. I wasn't sure what to think when Barren had taken us to his car and driven us to the edge of the island, but this had exceeded my wildest expectations.

After Barren unlocked the door, he tapped the corner of the sign with his key. "No solicitors."

"... Oh."

"Yes, *how beautiful*," Laverne said, not sounding very impressed at all. She nosed the rocks away to make room to dip her snout into the water. "*I'm going for a swim.*"

"Wait, Laverne! We are guests," Kai sputtered. He reached for her, but she slipped right through his fingers, sliding into the water with barely a splash.

"*I'll come knocking when I'm done!*" was the last thing she projected before disappearing altogether.

"That's no way to treat your friends!" Kai called across the water, but she was already gone.

Well, I was okay with it. With any luck, she'd return in a better mood.

Barren was the first to enter his home, and I found my anticipation rising when he turned on the lights.

"Dang," Kai said with a whistle.

Polished wooden floor gleamed under the gentle illumination, reflecting the cleanliness of the spacious living area. Every surface, from the countertop in the kitchenette to the glass-topped dining table next to it, sparkled with a pristine sheen.

The second I stepped inside, my focus was solely on a short beige sofa that sat in front of large windows overlooking the lagoon. "Dang is right," I said as my eyes scanned the back wall.

Then my mouth fell open. “I don’t believe it,” I whispered with a shake of my head. An electric drum kit sat in the back corner, complete with a stool and sound equipment. “You’re actually a drummer.”

“A hobby of mine.” Barren closed the door, and his lips almost formed a smirk as he made his way to the kitchen sink. When he started soaping up his keys to wash, Kai’s exasperated voice drew me to the back of the room.

“What is this thing?” he asked airily, standing next to what seemed to be workout equipment. His hands wrapped around the handle of a pulldown machine. Moving it this way and that, his eyebrows furrowed like he was desperate to figure out how it worked.

“For training, obviously,” Leander said, tossing Kai’s duffle bag down to join him next to the machine. He bent to pick up one of the free weights and said, “*nope*,” almost immediately when he tried to lift it. “Fuck, Barren. You really use these?”

“Only when I’m home long enough.” He dried his keys with a dish towel. I gave him an inquisitive look. “You travel a lot, then?”

Although his face was passive, Barren’s tone was dark when he answered. “More than I’d like.”

It made sense. Even taking Barren’s penchant for cleanliness into consideration, this place didn’t seem very lived in. Nor did it look like it often saw company. The couch was barely big enough to comfortably seat two, and there was only one chair present at the dinner table.

Barren sat his keys up on a tiny silver hook next to the front door before blowing out a breath. “Let me show you where to put your luggage.”

“Oh, okay.” I followed him to the second of two doors connected to the living room.

Kai picked up his duffle bag, preparing to follow as well when Barren turned back. “Just her.”

“Just her?” Annoyance flashed over Leander’s face. He crossed his arms. “Why am I not surprised?”

“I only have one bedroom,” Barren said simply, seeming unbothered by the dangerous look in Leander’s eyes.

Barren flicked on the bedroom light, revealing a carefully made bed standing as the centerpiece of the room. Crisp, white linens draped across what I guessed was a king-sized mattress, devoid of any creases or imperfections. Barren waited for me to enter before easing the door shut behind us.

“This is where you’ll be staying,” he said, his voice low enough for only me to hear.

Where *I’ll* be staying? I looked around the room, almost blinded by its perfection. No—there was no way. Each meticulously tucked corner and precisely aligned edge of the sheets seemed to stand out, mocking me. There was no way I could ever return this bed to Barren’s standards if I dared to touch it.

I took a step back. “No, I-I couldn’t.”

Barren’s dark eyes jumped to mine, and there was something new there. Hurt, perhaps. “No?” His shoulders suddenly didn’t seem so broad. “I see.”

His jaw worked as he turned away, a gloom seeming to settle in the air, as if my rejection of the room was a rejection of *him*.

Wait—no. That wasn’t what I meant at all. “It’s not that I don’t want to,” I blurted, desperate to fix this—whatever *this* was. “It’s just... your sheets.” I gestured to them, not sure what else to say.

“Of course,” he uttered with barely a whisper breath. Was it me, or did he sound even *more* offended?

With a jerky sweep of his arm, he started stripping the bed, yanking up and destroying all those perfect folds. “I will get you new sheets,” he declared, his voice hoarse. “Clean ones. Ones I haven’t touched.”

I stared at him, dazed, as he rolled everything up into a pile. He looked at the blindingly white bedsheets with a curled lip, as if they were the most disgusting thing he’d ever seen.

What had my careless words done to him? This wasn’t what I’d meant at all.

“Barren.” I came up and put my hand on his arm, stopping him before he had a chance to jerk the mattress protector off too. “Stop. *Please*.”

I waited to make sure I had his attention before I continued. “It isn’t that I think your bed isn’t clean. It’s that it’s...” I paused to bite my lip, wondering if he would think I was disgusting. “*Too* clean. I could never keep your room looking like this if I stayed in here.”

His eyes lingered on where my fingers rested on top of his arm, making me think twice about choosing to touch him while admitting what a horrible slob I was. “That’s it?” His throat bobbed as his eyes flicked up to mine. “That’s your reason?”

I nodded, my voice feeling weak as I added, “I’m worried you’ll think I’m disgusting.”

His jaw clenched. “Never.” For a moment, he paused. “I’ll get you new sheets. Ball them up when you’re done with them. Throw them in the ocean,” he said. “I do not care how this room looks as long as you’re comfortable in it, so stay here.”

His shoulders broadened as he straightened back to full height, pulling all the sheets with him. “Stay in my bed.”

“Oh,” I squeaked out. “Okay.”

He nodded, and I watched, stunned, as he left the room, taking the old sheets with him.

He didn’t care how his room looked, as long as I was comfortable in it? Somehow, he’d said exactly what I needed to hear to feel at ease in this place. *His bedroom.*

“*Stay in my bed.*” My skin heated as his gruff words played back in my head. His bed sure looked comfortable, but where would he sleep? Where would *any of them* sleep? It wasn’t like there was enough room on the couch for all three of them, plus Laverne.

My eyes settled on the sizable mattress. I placed my palm on top of it, testing its firmness. It would be a tight fit, sure, but maybe...

No. No. Bad Clair. There was no way the guys would be okay with that, and the bedframe would surely break with all four of us on it.

*Well, what if...*

I grunted, ignoring the warmth pooling in my belly as I tore myself away from the mattress. My eyes fell on the top of Barren’s dresser, and, of course, there wasn’t a single speck of dust on it or its mirror. Then my attention was drawn to a silver chain in a glass bowl on the dresser.

Barren didn’t seem like the type to wear jewelry. I walked over and hesitantly reached out to touch it.

Though it was his room, his belongings, I couldn’t resist picking up the necklace. A delicate silver cage slid to the bottom of the chain, enclosing a small pink pearl within.

*Pink?* How odd.

I glanced around the room. Aside from the one necklace, there were no other personal items in sight.

“Find something you like?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin, backing up right into a wall of muscle. The heat from Barren’s stomach hit my back, and I almost dropped the necklace. “No—I mean, yes. It’s pink—err, beautiful. I was just thinking that

this necklace was beautiful.”

Was I really this much of an idiot? Smooth, Clair. I might as well have come out and said, *it looks like it belongs to a woman*.

Barren’s hand came underneath the chain, and I let it fall into his palm. “It was given to me.”

My face flushed. “Really? That’s, uh, nice,” I said, my stomach knotting. It made sense. I hadn’t known Barren long, and what did I really know about him other than the parts of himself he’d let me see? He could have a girlfriend, for all I knew.

In fact, now that I thought about it, had I ever asked any of them if they were attached? The only one of them I that I knew was for sure single was Laverne.

So, it was given to him. But that didn’t have to mean it was from a significant other, right? Maybe someone from his family had —

His voice was rough when he abruptly added, “By my mate.”

My stomach dropped straight out of me, and my knees? Gone. I had no knees, just jelly that was doing an extraordinarily poor job of keeping me upright. I grasped the front of the dresser, my lungs completely devoid of breath as I tried to force out, “Your *mate*.”

Behind me, Barren’s chest vibrated and erupted into a full-on chuckle. I looked up at the mirror and saw a rare humor in his expression as he watched my reflection. He smiled, and my knees nearly gave out on me again. “Your face,” he said through his laugh.

My face? My hands shot to it. It was an inferno, of course.

“You were... teasing me?” I couldn’t believe it. For a second, I really thought he’d meant that his *mate* had given the necklace to him.

I hadn’t realized how hard I was pressing into him until his phone went off, vibrating against my back. Barren’s chuckle died away, and he dropped the necklace back into the glass. “I know it’s late,” he said, moving away from me. “But I have to leave soon.” With a glum expression, he started spreading the new sheets out over the mattress.

My heart was still racing, but thankfully my legs worked well enough to follow him over to the bed. “You’re leaving?”

“I won’t be gone too long,” he assured me, tucking down one of those crazy straight corners like some sort of fitted sheet wizard. The atmosphere seemed to shift around him when he added, “My queen... She wishes to meet with me.”



That didn't sound good.



## BARREN



As expected, I had no difficulties reaching my sister. Few were privy to the queen's location, but I was among the select few who knew where to find her. Many assumed she was posted on the highest floor, but no. Queen Javalynn chose to remain on ground level, hidden beyond the final door at the end of a labyrinthine hallway reserved for our kingdom's wealthiest guests.

Sounds of liveliness came and went with each open doorway I passed—carefree laughter, flirtatious words dripping with glamour, and clinks of overfull glasses. I continued down the extended hallway, heading toward the most luxurious room of all. Queen Javalynn's office.

The guards posted at her door were two of the Indian Ocean's fastest swimmers. Favored sons from influential families who had been serving the crown for generations, draped in shimmering silk and lace. Here on land, they served as nothing more than my sister's decorations. They remained close to her at all times, preening themselves in anticipation of their queen's call.

The mermen knew better than to stop me, and their quick parting revealed a door adorned with a figure of Poseidon's likeness on the waves etched in gold. The mermen's eyes, darkened with kohl, darted away as I passed, as if they feared revealing their innermost secrets by meeting my gaze.

There were rumors in the kingdom that I pried into every mind I came across, and perhaps that had once been true. To survive under my father's laws, I'd had to sharpen my unique ability. Only the thoughts those around me wished to keep hidden weren't ever pleasant to see.

But that was a different time. A time when I was meant to be a king. In my current position, I rarely used my ability on the merfolk here unless I was

commanded to do so by my queen.

I knocked on the crest of a golden wave—three slow raps—then waited in tense silence as the mermen slid down the hall, further shying away from their post.

Behind me, the beads embellishing one of the guard's outfits rattled as he shook. He must have held a secret he feared would reach his queen.

Only, I had no interest in their minds. My sister's secrets were the only ones I cared about, and she kept them tightly wrapped, carefully hidden under layers of falsehoods and illusions. Had I cared to look, it was likely I would find an intricately woven net of lies waiting for me in the minds of her lovers. Information she'd shared directly or allowed them to overhear, giving them a sense of significance, yet ultimately meant to trap and manipulate.

If only our father could see his successor. It was no secret that he'd resented that Javalynn had been born without his unique affinity for reading those around him. If the trident hadn't stolen his life away, perhaps he'd have lived long enough to realize that his daughter had possessed a unique gift as well. One that she'd honed all on her own.

Although Queen Javalynn couldn't see into minds, I'd learned the hard way that she had a way of manipulating them. The years had taught me she could make those around her believe whatever she wished, as well as cloak her true thoughts with false ones.

I often wondered if our mother had possessed a similar gift. It would explain her rise to queendom, considering the family she had come from and its poor standing in our kingdom. And while I'd never picked up anything other than love for my father in her mind, I'd always found it odd that she hadn't feared his gift.

Everyone feared it.

But if our mother could cloak her mind, she would have no need for fear, would she? If that were the case, I assumed Javalynn was aware of it. Either way, I would never know the truth. My sister regularly taunted me to explore her mind for the answers I sought. But I'd allowed her misleading thoughts to manipulate me for too long to fall for it again.

From inside her office, her voice was sharp and direct. "Come in."

Pushing through the gilded door, I found my queen sitting at her marble desk, papers scattered and her pen hovering over them. While her collection of paintings and the ancient books lining her bookshelves were impressive, it was the giant circular sand feature hanging high on the wall behind her chair

that commanded the most attention.

Above Javalynn's crowned head, a slow trickle of gray and white grains fell, creating ever-changing patterns of dunes. With each second that passed, the sand swirled, building higher. At times, when she commanded me to do something unthinkable, it felt like I was drowning in that sand.

"My queen," I said, my voice rough as I bowed to her. Upon lifting my head, my eyes settled past her. Better that than looking directly at her.

Despite the intricate silver circlet woven into her black hair, Queen Javalynn still resembled the sister of my memories. My Lynn, who would seek me out to talk and laugh back when no one else in my kingdom dared to speak in my presence.

But Lynn hadn't cared about my father's "*stupid law*," as she'd called it. The law he'd set in place to force me to hone my skill. No one could speak to the crown prince. Not even my mother. So, I'd done what I had to do—pry into the minds around me so that I might learn my lessons and be brought my meals.

Until my father's death, he was the only one in our kingdom permitted to converse with me outside of a mental link. And that was only because it disgusted him to think of me probing his mind as he did with mine.

But Lynn had never cared about the law.

Once, I'd thought I'd known everything about her. She'd helped me learn to speak using my real voice—not the one I was forced to project into the minds of those around me. But that Lynn had never been real.

And now, as an adult, it was painfully clear that I'd never known her at all.

All of her laughter, her worrying, her love for me. Like everything else in our kingdom, it was all an illusion.

"You've kept me waiting, Barren." My queen spoke in our native tongue. She slid a group of papers over to clear a space on her desk. Her grand chair didn't make a single sound as she sat back in it.

"Well, go on," she commanded with a roll of her wrist. "Speak."

There was something dark and tense about her posture. An impatience she would never let anyone in the kingdom who mattered see.

To her, I did not matter.

I cleared my throat, yet it still felt as parched as the dunes forming on the wall before me. "I have the mermaid."

"And?" Despite me following her exact command, her tone lacked any

hint of appreciation. “Where is she?”

For once, I let my eyes drop to hers. Although my queen didn’t flinch, her long nails curled over her desk.

“First, tell me what you plan to do with her,” I said, deliberately withholding the answer she sought.

This time, she flinched. She punctuated her syllables with a lip-curling hiss. “And when have I ever shared my plans with you?” Even if she had, I knew better than to believe her. Dark maroon eyes—our mother’s eyes—glared up at me. “Have you forgotten which of us is in charge?”

I took a step forward and observed her chair rolling back, moved by instinct.

I hadn’t forgotten who was in charge, but at this moment, I found that I didn’t care.

“Let it be known,” I said, my voice carrying through the room with an authority I had no right to. For once, it didn’t matter that she was the one I was sworn to obey. “I will not let any harm come to the mermaid.”

My sister’s eyebrows lifted in a perfect depiction of surprise. Not once had I ever challenged her, even when my title and future had been stripped away from me.

Composing herself, she inclined forward, setting her elbows upon her desk. “Tell me, Barren. Do you know how Father came to be fused with his trident?”

I stood like a statue. This was a diversion—neither of us could have known, for it had happened before either of us had been born. The kingdom had only become aware when the trident vanished, and their king had gained the ability to manipulate dreams and create illusions.

“Mother turned his own weapon on him.” With a cruel glint in her eye, she curled her fingers into a tight fist that she slashed through the air. “Stabbed him right through his heart.”

“Our mother loved our father,” I said, unaffected. I’d grown used to my sister’s lies, and never once had I caught a single glimpse of cruelty in my mother’s actions or mind.

“Is that so?” Javalynn’s eyes narrowed, blazing with enough confident humor to cause a flicker of uncertainty to spark within me.

I’d never glimpsed the cruelty hidden inside my sister until she let it show readily on her face, as she did now.

“You would be wise to beware the wrath of a mermaid scorned,” she said

with a barking laugh, like she thought perhaps her point had been made. “So, tell me, Barren. Which of us did our kingdom permit to pull the trident from his sorry corpse?” she seethed. “Me, or you?”

I let my lips form into perhaps the first smile she had seen from me since our childhood. This wasn’t about authority or control. This was about protecting the one thing that mattered to me.

I bent forward, leaning over her desk. “If any harm comes to the mermaid,” I said plainly, smooth marble cooling my hand as I braced it in front of her, “our kingdom will have another corpse on its throne to pick through.” She knew me well enough to know I refused to entertain empty threats. “That is a promise.”

My sister’s eyes bore into me as I waited for her response. It must have caught her off guard because she immediately changed tactics. “Harm her?” She canted her chair, inspecting her nails as if she thought me hardly a threat. “Well, of course we need her alive and well if we wish to *use* her.”

As much as I wished to believe those words, I couldn’t. Although it made little sense to harm her, I’d had a feeling that the uncursed mermaid was in danger even before I ventured to the Atlantic.

“Naturally, she will be safe here. Under *your* protection,” she continued. Her eyes flicked up to mine. “Unless, of course, you happen to be the one to harm her.”

“That won’t happen.”

“Mmm.” Her circlet glinted as she smirked. Rising from her seat, she turned her back to me, one hand rising to the sand feature.

“Since we’ve settled that,” she said with a hum. “Your order was to bring her to me.” With a gentle twist of her wrist, she reversed the heavy glass circle, and the sand sculpture began anew. “Now, *fetch*.”





## CLAIRA



**D**espite it being almost bedtime back home, the sun was about to rise in this place. So, when Barren left to meet with his queen, I had taken time to freshen up for the day.

I almost moaned with appreciation when I first found a bathroom connected to his room. Although the narrow shower stall had me questioning if Barren could even fit in it, it was fully stocked with soap, shampoo, and fresh towels neatly folded on shelves within reach.

After my shower, I refolded my clothes in my suitcase, arranging them into neat stacks before choosing my outfit for the day. The bathing suit Barren had gotten for me sat at the very top, calling to me. I bit my lip, wondering if the hot tub I'd spotted out on the patio had anything to do with his request for me to bring it.

Idly separating my damp hair into sections, I made my way to the double doors leading to the patio situated outside his bedroom. A whole patio connected to his bedroom; I could hardly believe it. While I braided, I looked through the inset windows, admiring the different plants outside. I wasn't sure what I'd expected Barren's place to be like, but it wasn't this. Was gardening one of his hobbies, too?

Now that the sun was rising, I could tell that the plants were potted—which made infinitely more sense, considering Barren's home was built over water. Greenery sat in clusters of differing heights, their long fronds and delicate flowers caught up in the breeze. A covered hot tub sat in the patio's corner—at least, I was pretty sure it was a hot tub.

"Watch it be a water softener or something," I mumbled with a shake of my head. Now that would be a letdown. Not that I expected to have enough

downtime to use a hot tub, but just knowing it was there felt like a possibility of its own.

When I got to the end of my braid, I secured it and walked over to the dresser mirror to take stock of my handiwork.

Yeah—not great.

*Maybe Kai can fix it for me?* The thought of him playing with my hair caused my stomach to flutter.

My hair was becoming increasingly unmanageable every time we went in and out of the water. So much so that I was beginning to dread looking at my reflection at the end of the day.

But would a braid even survive the water? Good question. I added a third hair tie, just in case Barren’s queen expected us to head right into the ocean in search of her trident when my gaze landed on the necklace atop Barren’s dresser. The single pink pearl, trapped in a cage.

*“It was given to me,”* he’d said. Had that truly only been a tease?

I tossed my damp braid over my shoulder and came out of Barren’s bedroom with a sigh. “I really hope he doesn’t mind us using up all the hot water.”

Leander glanced back at me from where he sat in front of the back windows. “Done already?” he asked, his head flopping back on the couch. Although he’d been the first to shower, his hair was still wet, and it spilled over his forehead in loose waves.

“Oh, damn,” I said, my breath catching as my eyes drew past him. Outside, pastel pinks and oranges spread across the horizon, highlighting where the endless expanse of the Indian Ocean met the sky.

I’d initially wondered why Barren’s couch was facing the window. Now that the sun was rising, I was sure there wasn’t anything worth seeing more.

That is, until Leander flashed me a grin laced with merman charm, doing his best to rival the view. “Care to watch the sunrise with me?”

My feet had me moving toward the couch even before my mind had decided on my answer. Then his bare shoulders came into view, and I paused. “You’re not wearing a shirt?” My eyes narrowed. Why wasn’t that surprising? “You’re not naked, are you?”

Readying my lecture, I made quick steps toward him. “You know Barren has a thing for cleanliness. He wouldn’t want your bare ass all over his couch.”

Leander stretched his legs out as I came around the front of the couch.

“Oh,” I said, staring down at his bare ankles, puzzled. He was wearing pajama pants. The ill-fitting ones I’d given him months ago, turquoise and black.

“Disappointed?” Leander laughed, leisurely rolling his head along the back of the couch like he was really enjoying getting under my skin. His eyes were as clear as the ocean water outside.

“No. Not at all.” I shot him a glare before settling on the unoccupied cushion on the other end of the couch. “It’s just that I know how itchy those pants are. It’s hard to believe anyone would choose to wear them on purpose.”

Leander shrugged, pulling his legs back in and causing them to hike up even higher over his calves. *Ridiculous*. “I don’t have a lot of clothes,” he said simply. “But even if I did, I’d still wear these.” Back to that charming smirk of his. He slid closer, throwing a well-toned arm over the back of my side of the couch. “They make me think of you.”

“Nice to know I’m synonymous with something that makes you itchy.” Regrettably, my comeback lost some of its bite about halfway through when the warmth of his arm wrapped around my shoulders.

Behind us, the door connecting the bathroom to the main room opened, and I wasn’t sure whether to jump up or dive in between the cushions.

“Whoa,” Kai gasped. He zoomed past us in a blur, almost pressing his face against the window. “Look at that sky,” he said, a hand brushing through his wet spikes of hair, flinging droplets on the glass. “The water... it’s *amazing*.”

“It’s great, isn’t it?” I said, scooting out from under Leander’s shadow now that it wasn’t just the two of us. I was quickly running out of room, but I wasn’t against sitting on the armrest if I had to.

“Did Barren ever tell you about this view, Lee?” I asked casually, though I kept my eyes on Kai’s back. His hair looked a few shades darker when wet, and his fresh button-down clung to the back of his shoulder blades where he hadn’t completely dried off from his shower.

Did these guys just not care about comfort, or what?

“Which view are you referring to, beautiful?” Leander’s voice, smooth and calming like a melody, filled my ear. Before I could turn to him on my own, a finger came under my chin, tilting me in his direction. Ice-blue eyes glittered with mischief. “Well?”

“Uh...” My brain blanked, completely stalling over the question.

The corner of Leander's eyes crinkled with amusement, showing off that cute freckle of his. "You were staring at Kai." As he spoke, his hand brushed back the weight of my braid off my shoulder. "Or were you talking about the sunrise?"

It was hard to think while his hand lingered next to my neck, and when his thumb traced along the ridge of my ear, I decided to rise to his challenge.

I licked my lips. "So what if I was talking about Kai?"

As I turned to look at Kai, unexpectedly, Leander leaned with me. He pulled me close, capturing my lips in a kiss.

I should have seen it coming. Leander's possessiveness. But here it was, and I wasn't ready for it. That first brush of skin left me momentarily breathless, and my head buzzed as he deepened the kiss. His arms cradled around me, pulling me off the edge of the couch and into his embrace.

When he finally let up, Leander's breathing was ragged. "You'll have plenty of time to look at him," he rasped and—okay, I wasn't sure what he meant by that. But when his tongue returned, sweeping back over mine, my eyelids fluttered shut, and I found I wasn't looking at anything at all.

"I hope Laverne's having fun," Kai's cheerful voice said from... somewhere. With Leander all around me, the entire room seemed off-kilter. "Do you think she'll remember which—" All the excitement seemed to knock out of him at once, a punch to the gut I felt as well. "—*Oh.*"

What the heck was I doing?

My heart raced with adrenaline as I pried off Leander. "S'wait!" I gasped out, a jumbled mixture of *sorry* and *wait*, as soon as my lips were free.

In front of me, a look of smug satisfaction came over Leander's face. Like he was proud that his lips had caused my brain to melt. *Damn pretty boy.*

Kai was right beside us, yet he didn't seem to care about him at all. But then again, why had I expected him to? He was Prince Leander, after all.

With his hand on the back of my neck, Leander drew me in for another kiss.

"Whoa, wait!" I slipped a hand up between us, effectively blocking his lips. "We can't do this." Even if I *did* want it.

A chuckle vibrated against my skin as he gave my palm a kiss. Looking at me from above my hand, lust sat heavy in his eyes.

He backed away, lowering my hand. His full lips parted in a way that made my lust-melted mind practically scream for me to kiss them. "Why not?"

Kai doesn't mind."

Kai *doesn't mind*? Of course Leander would think that. But I knew Kai, and he for sure —

"He can join us."

And there my head went, sputtering and stalling out again.

I couldn't even get words out, but it was okay because Kai got the words out for me.

"Join you?" he stuttered, wasting no time coming right over to the couch. Pink flushed his face as he awkwardly stood over us. "*Really?* You—you wouldn't mind?"

My stomach flipped. That... wasn't how I'd thought that would go.

Kai was really considering joining us? Sure, they were both my mates, and that... that would be... *wow*.

But surely Leander wasn't serious. He was far too possessive for that.

Wasn't he?

Kai's face was full of tentative hope, and I stared up at him briefly before turning back to Leander. He was locked on my lips, not picking up the importance of this moment at all. As he leaned back in like he was about to kiss me again, I pushed him away.

"This is Barren's couch," I declared. My eyes snapped back and forth between the two of them.

"So?" Leander said, though he stayed as far back as I'd pushed him this time, giving me space. "He knows you're our mate. It's only natural we —"

"You don't understand!" The words fell out of me. My heart fluttered, pumping so, so fast. "This is *Barren's* couch," I said again.

"Why does that matter?" Leander said, still not getting it.

I swallowed slowly, not sure if I was ready to admit it. But if not now, then when? I pressed my eyes shut briefly, finding the words. "It matters because his voice has called to me, too."

Above us, Kai scratched at the nape of his neck. "All three of us?" he whispered, like he was thinking over the probability of all three of them being my mates. My face burned with fire.

Yeah, it didn't make sense. I really was a harlot, falling for every merman who happened to speak to me. But what could I say? I hadn't asked for this. I couldn't help it. This was who I was, apparently.

It finally made sense why Poseidon had held out on my other gifts. He'd clearly given me a few too many extra doses of *the thrall*.

With uncertainty, Leander reached his hand out to mine. When I let him take it, he rested our joined hands on the couch between us. He took a deep, steadying breath before saying, “Good.”

“Good?” I scoffed. “Really, Lee?”

Leander breathed in deeply again, his eyes briefly closing while his thumb skimmed over the back of my hand. Outside, the ocean was as calm as ever. Was he truly not upset?

When his eyes reopened, he broke into a smirk. “All the more reason for us to use his couch.”

I shot him a glance, because *seriously*? But then he was on me, lips brushing over mine again. Beside us, Kai bit back a whimper that had me wondering if he was disappointed that Leander had been the one to reach my mouth first.

I pressed against Leander’s chest again, breaking the kiss. He chuckled, letting me push him away. This was apparently becoming a fun game for him.

“Wait a second,” I said. “Barren doesn’t even know that we might be mates.”

Cue more chuckling. “Sure he doesn’t, beautiful.”

Kai’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean, might be? You said his voice called to you, right?”

I bit my lip, thinking back on it. “Well, yeah, but...”

“You’re mates.” Leander shrugged. “As I’ve said, mermen can’t glamour their voices.”

My eyes rolled. “I know that, of course. But he’s never mentioned my voice doing anything to him.”

Leander didn’t hesitate. “I never mentioned it, remember?” He shot Kai an annoyed glance. “I was waiting for the right fucking time until someone opened his damn mouth.”

He had a point. Could it be that Barren also thought we were under *the thrall* but was waiting for the right time to tell me? We hadn’t had a lot of time alone, except for the time he carried me back to his hotel room. Then there was the time in the kitchen when he made me coffee.

And the plane ride. And less than an hour ago, when he had me alone in his bedroom.

Okay, he’d had the time, so maybe we weren’t mates at all.

“Your face is so red.” With a soft voice, Leander approached me again,

carefully cradling my cheek in his palm. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I lied. Goodness, I must have been blushing hard because his hand felt so soothing to my heated skin. “You guys aren’t upset?” My eyes bounced between the two of them as I held my breath.

“Well, Barren’s cool,” Kai said finally, his smile small yet genuine. “Honestly, hanging out with you guys is the most fun I’ve had. Hanging out like this forever?” His smile grew. “I’m down. As long as we aren’t constantly swimming into danger.”

Leander appeared to be carefully considering his words. “I know I told you to trust Barren. And at the time, I meant it.” He held in a deep breath before turning to me fully. “Do you trust him?”

Sure, I had doubted Barren. He had his secrets, but until he gave me a reason not to, I wanted to trust him. “I do,” I said with a nod. That protective feeling I had whenever Barren held me couldn’t have been a fluke. It felt like magic. Maybe fate.

Okay—I was getting way, way ahead of myself. “It’s not like it’s official or anything, though,” I said, backpedaling. “Like I said, he hasn’t even mentioned it to me. So, can we keep this between us three? Please?” I glanced over at Kai. “Laverne might murder me if she knew.”

Gosh, like she needed another reason to hate me.

“Keep it between your *official* mates?” Leander teased, and I rolled my eyes. “Of course, beautiful.”

“I won’t say a thing,” Kai said with a firm nod. The top of his ears pinked. “But I’m curious why he wouldn’t tell you. I could barely keep it in when I realized you were my mate.” After a moment more of thought, he snapped his fingers. “Maybe Barren doesn’t want to share?”

The words hit hard enough for my chest to go numb. What if he didn’t want to share me with them? I could never abandon Kai and Leander for Barren.

“Fair point,” I said, sounding suddenly weak. “Damn, this is a mess. You guys don’t even want to share. Adding Barren to the mix?”

Kai dropped to his knees in front of us, his gentle hand going to rest on my thigh. Our eyes met, and he merely smiled—a quiet reassurance that brought comfort to my heart in a way that only he could.

“Well,” Leander spoke up, his wide palm closing in on my other thigh. “Who said we aren’t willing to share?”

Kai’s face colored fiercely as he glanced over at Leander, and my breath

caught as they seemed to come to an understanding I was suddenly more than okay with.





## KAI



I wasn't sure what was going on.

All I knew was that Clairra's distress had been clear when she told us about Barren's voice calling to her. So, I'd done the only thing I could do—I'd reached out and taken her hand, hoping to offer my comfort.

And now Leander's piercing eyes were on me, and unspoken words seemed to hang heavily around us. What those words were... I had no clue.

Clairra's lips tilted as she looked up. A lovely coral hue crested over her nose as she stared at me as well. Both of them were waiting. Expectant.

Then Leander's impatience showed as his hand flexed over Clairra's thigh, his eyes darkening as he leaned in closer. "You don't mind sharing," he said in a sharp, commanding voice reminiscent of a king. "Do you, Kaius?"

Clairra's grip tightened around my fingers, and her eyes shone with hope as she nervously bit her lower lip, searching my face.

"Oh! Um, of course not." My gaze flicked between the two of them. "I love it," I said with complete conviction. Absolutely believable. "I'm a great sharer."

It only took the span of my next breath for my conscience to tug at me, and I cleared my throat. "Okay, well, maybe I haven't really had a lot of opportunities to share. But I'm definitely open to it," I said, backtracking. "With my brothers, it's mostly a take, take, take. And Laverne, well, you know how she —"

Leander cut me off with a hard sigh. "Come here," he said, making room by sitting back on the couch. I snapped up, letting Clairra's hand slip free from mine.

"Okay?" Scratching the back of my head, I turned around to take a seat

on the couch between them.

“Not *you*,” Leander growled out before I could sit.

When I swung back around, he was already pulling Clairra onto his lap.

... Oh. That was my bad, I supposed.

When he had her knees settled across him, his voice roughened into a deep tone I could never imitate. “You don’t mind if we share you, do you, beautiful?” He nuzzled her neck, nostrils flaring as he breathed deep, inhaling the scent of her hair. I found my fists tightening at my sides.

This... didn’t feel like sharing.

Just when I thought they’d forgotten me altogether, Leander whispered my name into her hair. “Kaius told me you taught him about foreplay.” His lips brushed over her ear in a kiss before he pulled away, smirking. “Will you show me?”

Clairra’s eyes drifted up to me. She was still in a daze from the attention Leander was giving her. Moisture coated her lips, and maybe it was the blush rapidly flaring over her face or the mention of foreplay, but I felt an awkward pull in the front of my pants.

As I shifted on my feet, trying to get comfortable, a question swirled in Clairra’s eyes. “You told him about the time we spent together?” The crack in her voice was like a physical blow to my heart.

“W-we couldn’t sleep,” I explained, my words stumbling. “And I—well, um...”

Had I done something wrong? I hadn’t thought I needed to keep it a secret. We were all mates, right? And although I didn’t know any of the details between her and Leander, it seemed natural that all of us should know what happened between each other.

“Yeah,” I said finally, my shoulders slumping in defeat. “I told him. I didn’t think it mattered if he knew, because, well, we’re supposed to be a team, aren’t we?”

“A team?” Clairra’s eyes glazed with confusion. Had she thought she would keep all her relationships with us separated?

“He’s right,” Leander cut in, his voice heavy with emotion as he held her even closer. “I thought I didn’t want to know, at first. But now I can’t stop fucking thinking about it.” A barely restrained growl came from the back of his throat. “What you did, how you looked. I want to see it. I want you to show me.”

Clairra choked on a gasp, her hands coming up to the sides of her face.

“See it? Like, right now?”

Leander hooked the rope of her woven hair with a finger and pressed his lips against it. “Yes. Right now,” he murmured. Then, releasing the long weave, he helped her stand.

My heart all but stopped. I stood there, paralyzed, as he led her right up to me.

“Show me,” he commanded softly, his eyes glinting in anticipation as he looked between us.

Claira must have been as nervous as I was, because she stumbled forward, catching herself on my chest. Gray eyes met mine with an adorable mixture of guilt and confusion as her hands pressed against me for support.

“Just so we’re clear,” she said, her panicked gaze flicking to Leander, searching for his approval, “you want us to show you exactly what we did?”

Leander’s savage half-lidded eyes followed my every twitch of movement as he stepped back, crossing his arms over his bare chest. “Everything.”

“Well... Okay.” With that, Claira’s attention shifted to my not-so-bare chest. Her eyes lingered on the line of buttons, and my stomach twisted. Unlike Leander, I wasn’t used to going around with my chest and back uncovered. Especially not in front of others. Sure, I’d tried to loosen up, but my father had taught us at a young age that our torsos were meant to be covered. Unlike the sharks that our tails shared similarities with, we were civilized. The proud merfolk of the Pacific Kingdom.

And even though Leander and Barren hadn’t reacted to seeing me naked, I didn’t expect fan-tailed mers to understand my kingdom’s customs. It was well recorded that fan-tailed mers looked down on my kind. They had even gone so far as to compare us to mindless sharks.

But Claira didn’t hold any of those prejudices. No, with the way her lips parted as she toyed with one of my buttons—not undoing it, but flicking her fingers against it like she was imagining what was underneath—she enjoyed seeing me bare.

“What do you think?” There was a touch of shy humor in her voice. Her rosy lips spread into a slow smile. “Up for some foreplay?”

“Yes,” I blew out immediately. I was too mesmerized by each teasing movement of her slender fingers to deny her anything she wanted of me.

In all honesty, I hadn’t been able to let go of the time we’d spent together after I’d awoken from my injury. It pervaded my thoughts, ever present, and

even as our journey continued, I'd found myself wondering if that moment would forever be imprinted in my mind.

Now that I had a chance to return to that bliss again, how could I say no?

"I love foreplay," I said airily, my voice sounding a hundred leagues away as the adrenaline built. When Clairra hesitated over her next move, I undid the top button for her, and my fingers trembled as I dropped to undo the next.

As much as I loved this, it was bizarre. I'd expected Leander to be the first to share an intimate moment with her, leaving me to watch as they worked themselves up to a state of blissful relaxation.

Never would I have imagined that *I* would be first.

After one final look back at Leander, Clairra finally popped open the button she'd been fiddling with. She inhaled a sharp breath, and the way her teeth raked over her bottom lip when she saw a peek of what was underneath had every part of me straining.

Maybe I was as savage and uncivilized as a shark. Because the thought of those teeth on me again, biting and pulling, was a thrill I couldn't wait to relive.

Clairra went for the next button, and I whimpered, not even caring that Leander was here to hear it.

I reached out, threading a hand through the back of hair as she worked her way down the line. When the final button popped free, I pressed my eyes shut and shrugged the fabric back off my shoulders.

Even though we weren't alone and the windows were open to the entire ocean, when my shirt dropped to the floor and my vision refocused, I decided I didn't care that my torso was bare. Not while it had Clairra's complete attention, her eyes carefully examining its every detail.

I released a slow breath, my skin heating under her gaze as her eyes dipped over every contour of my stomach, down to where my pants rested low around my waist.

This was fine, right? Completely fine.

Leander huffed, looking unamused by my display. The muscles in his shoulders bunched. "I don't understand why spike-tails get so worked up over some fucking skin."

"Hush, Lee." Clairra's hands tentatively hovered over my ribs like she wasn't sure if I would jump away if she dared to touch them. That made two of us. Leander was right—I was already so worked up I wasn't sure what I

might do when I finally felt her.

“And I suppose there’s not a single part of you that you are hesitant to let others see?” Clairra challenged, glancing back at Leander. She pulled off her shirt and tossed it down beside mine. The whole room seemed to shift, the air electrifying.

“No part of my body.” Leander’s chuckle was followed by a dark, lingering look that trailed down the curve of her back. I couldn’t blame him. Seeing the front of her bathed in the light of the sunrise... wow. She was so irresistible I wondered if Leander might change his mind and pull her away from me. But even as the muscles in his folded arms tensed, he maintained his distance.

Would he really not interfere if I touched her? If she touched me? Time to find out.

The next time her hands came between us, I pressed forward so that she might brush over my ribs.

The breathy “*Oh*” she gave was worth it. Her fingers skimmed down my torso with a tenderness that was almost unbearable.

“Clairra?” I rasped, my focus drawing up to her lips. All I could think about was kissing her again, the way we had at the airport. But first... “You’re forgetting something.”

Her lips moved slowly. “Am I?” She seemed too caught up in those slow strokes over my chest, up and down, across the dips.

“Yes, you are.” I tipped up her chin. Although she looked reluctant to turn her attention away from what she was doing, focusing on my mouth seemed to pull her back to the moment. I wasn’t smiling, not quite. That would have to wait until after her lips were on me.

“This,” I said, drawing around the lacy band of fabric wrapping around her chest. It surprised me to find this one didn’t have strings like the ones she wore in the water. Metallic clasps held it together like gnashed teeth, and the mood was nearly ruined as I struggled to pry them apart and free her.

Her laugh was so incredibly warm, as playful as fire. “I’ve got it, I’ve got it,” she said, her hands intervening.

The wrap fell to the floor, and my skin seemed to ripple with heat as I leaned into her, my body overly conscious of every point where we touched. My arms encircled her waist, one hand dipping down her bare skin. It settled at the small of her back as my lips met hers, devouring their softness in a series of slow, shivery kisses.

Her body fluttered, her arms bracing on my chest like she trusted me to have the strength to hold her upright. That thought was another shot of adrenaline, like when the stingray you bet everything on was the first across the finish line. A feeling I could become addicted to.

I felt my head tilt, my lips hardening as instinct drove me to take even more of her mouth. Clairra gave a pleading groan, giving me everything I wanted, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

My mouth snapped at hers as I drew her even closer, up into my arms. My teeth slid, grazing over her sweet lips, and the way she shuddered when I nipped and tugged on them made my senses reel.

The moment her teeth took swift revenge and snapped back, a delightful pain ran through my entire body, down to the pit of my stomach. Her teeth sank further into my bottom lip as glorious flashes of white crowded my vision.

She pulled off me with a gasp. Madness was in her eyes the moment our mouths parted. "On the couch." With her insistent push against my chest, compliance was my only option, though it was a command I could never have resisted.

I was sure I'd never smiled so wide, and when I sat down on the couch, I nearly choked on my tongue as Clairra crashed right on top of me, her mouth going right back to mine in a gnashing of lips and teeth. Impatient fingers found my hair, her nails digging into my scalp, and each little prickle of pain was wonderful torment.

Pushing against my chest, Clairra shifted forward until suddenly I was on my back. "Oof," I said through our joined lips, but somehow, it wasn't enough to pry us apart. Her lips pressed into mine, snuffing out the noise. She settled on top of me, her warmth and weight against my body, just as it was during our last round of foreplay.

I hissed through our kiss as she scooted back, landing on my aching, swollen human dick. For months, I had mourned the loss of my claspers. But now that I knew humans had their own equipment, I was beyond thankful to have a dick, even if I only had one. Her legs settled on either side of my hips, and my thoughts scattered like frags of crushed coral.

My dick pulsed against her, and the answering shiver of her hips... My mate liked the way it felt. The way *I* felt.

My desire for her was already overwhelming, but I couldn't help pressing against her, desperate to feel more of her body's response to mine. It might

have been too much, because she broke our kiss and sat back.

I groaned, not ready to part when—Oh. Now *that* felt amazing.

Claira's hips canted and swayed as she found her balance on top of me, sending my eyes rolling back into my head. "Behold, my prince," she said aloud—to Leander, I assumed. She gave a little jut of her hips that had me whimpering for more. "Foreplay."

Her hands settled on my chest as she started to move with purpose. With a sudden, urgent need, I grasped her hips, but the intensity was already almost overwhelming.

Leander's scowl showed his lack of amusement. "That's it?" One eyebrow rose as he looked us over. Claira rocked against me again, and I couldn't contain my enjoyment, groaning long and loud. Even through our layers, foreplay felt incredible.

Leander took a step forward, and his head tilted in clinical observation. "This is what humans call foreplay?" Although he didn't sound impressed, it didn't escape me that he ran a hand down the front of his pants.

"Well, this isn't *exactly* how we were," Claira said, a slight catch in her breath. Leander's expression rose with renewed interest as Claira leaned back, falling off me.

"*Wait.*" I gasped out the word. But my displeasure quickly died away when she started shimmying off the rest of her clothing from her legs.

"There. Happy now?" She flung her clothes at Leander with a kick of her leg.

The garments hit him with a soft thud, sliding right off and landing next to the couch as he chuckled. "Getting there." He stalked closer, palming the front of his pants.

"Do you... want Kai's pants off, too?" Claira asked, her face alight with a sudden shyness as she looked over at Leander.

Leander nodded, a smirk prominent on his face. For whatever reason, even though his body wasn't directly involved, he seemed to be enjoying this, too.

"We can't have you being the only one with their naked ass on Barren's couch," he said.

Claira's lips pinched. Though, from this angle, it was a wonder I even noticed something other than the bareness of her legs. *Wow.*

Claira shifted on her elbows, reaching down to pick up her pants from the floor like maybe she'd thought better of what we were doing, but Leander



was there to block her.

“I was teasing, beautiful.” His laugh softened as he gave her forehead a kiss. “I’m sure Barren won’t mind us using his couch.”

Would he really not mind, though? I didn’t have time to dwell on it, because all that softness vanished when Leander turned his attention to me.

“Pants off, Kaius,” he prompted, rising back up into that authoritative stance of his. “Before I take them off for you.”

Although I bristled at Leander’s use of my name, my hands snapped right to my pants to obey him.

He was using my formal name more frequently, but I no longer felt like it was a negative thing. In fact, I was beginning to think it was his way of showing his respect. As if we were equals.

I felt Clair’s breath on my stomach as she scooted closer, her hands joining mine at the top of my pants. “Here. Let me do it.” With a craving burning in her eyes, she deftly flicked the button open.

Before she pulled them down, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. “But only if you’re okay with it, Kai,” she said softly. Then she gave Leander a sidelong glance. Her nervousness was apparent, as if she feared he might use this against me later.

I was so eager for her to continue that all I managed was a strangled, “I’m okay.” I didn’t need to think about it. All of me was hers, and that wouldn’t change, even if another one of her mates was present. There wasn’t anything Leander could do to me that would be worth missing out on this moment. “Go ahead.”

A playful spark ignited in her eyes. She slid my pants down without ceremony, humming to herself as I lifted my hips to help. As she cast them away, her face broke into the most beautiful smile. “No underwear, of course,” she said, glancing over at Leander. But before I realized it, my hand was cradling the side of her neck, bringing her attention back to me.

It might have been silly, but I loved the slender curve of her neck. The last marks I’d left there were already fading, but soon there would be more. So many more.

A rush of saliva invaded my mouth, and my tongue brushed over my teeth as I swallowed it back. My focus on her neck didn’t go unnoticed, and in response, she crawled up the line of my body, arching her head and presenting it to me like an offering. Her legs fell on either side of my hips again, and as my mouth closed in on that delicate curve, her body lowered,

pressing back down on my dick. Hot skin to hot skin. This time, there was nothing between us.

My breath crackled like fire, a hiss against her neck. She was so slick with warmth. I tasted the sensitive spot below her ear as she pressed into me.

“*Kai.*” The column of her throat vibrated with my name, and I drank down that breathless whisper, my teeth raking, my tongue scorching a path down to the dip of her collarbone.

I was about to work my way back up again when she shifted, and that blissful heat between her legs moved over me. Over and over, she slid, grinding against my dick until my head tossed back, my arms tense, fisting the sides of the couch.

Yes, this was the foreplay I remembered. There was absolutely nothing better. Each slide of her against me was —

Claira’s rocking stopped as Leander captured her chin, pulling her attention away from me and this moment. “You were right, Kaius,” he said evenly, not even looking my way. A ravenous hunger filled his sharp gaze as he looked at her. “She hasn’t taught me about foreplay.”

*What?*

Leander’s thumb swiped over Claira’s mouth, parting her lips. Although her blown pupils were evidence that she’d been enjoying this moment as much as I was, her hazy eyes slowly lifted to meet him.

His mouth tilted into a smirk. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you, beautiful?” The edge of his thumb rimmed her bottom lip.

“Time to move,” he said in a hard tone I knew was directed at me. My human dick throbbed, swollen and pulsing between Claira’s human legs. I was so close to something—both of us were. We just needed —

Leander’s eyes, like shards of ice, finally cut to me. “Move,” he said again. It wasn’t a suggestion.

Claira was the first to find her voice. “W-what the heck, Lee?” she asked in a breathless pout that Leander answered with a deep, rumbling chuckle. With one quick movement, he effortlessly lifted her off of me and into his embrace.

“Dude!” I cried out, my throat straining with the urge to... I wasn’t even sure. Red crept into my vision as my pulse surged. My body was so tense I was trembling.

With a frustrated groan, I hopped off the couch, frantically grasping at my human dick, hoping to ease the uncomfortable ache. Even as I stood, Leander

was already settling back down on the spot where I'd been, bringing Clairra onto his lap like he was the only one of her mates that mattered.

The hostile glare Clairra gave him as she freed herself from his grasp seemed to steady my heart. "Why are you so cruel?" she said, her frustration evident. After pulling away, she placed a hand on the middle of my chest. "First, you ask us to show you, and then you—you..."

Leander's shoulders rolled with amusement as he sat back, making himself comfortable on the couch.

Clairra seethed. "This is funny to you?"

"I was doing him a favor," he said coolly, working his pants off and folding them into a halfway-neat square before setting them aside. "He needed to take a moment."

With a look of disapproval, he motioned at my dick. "At the rate things were going, he was going to spend himself before you did."

"I..." Heat flared over my face as my head dropped to regard my dick. There might have been some truth to that. The way Clairra moved over me just felt so good. Too good, almost. But Leander was in no position to criticize. His dick was also standing thick and ready, its swollen tip red with the desire to feel its mate, just as mine was.

Now that he was naked, Leander made himself comfortable on the couch, his legs splaying wide again. "Come here," he said, opening his arms in invitation.

This time, I knew the gesture was meant for Clairra, not me.

She huffed like she might not follow, but I placed my hand over hers on my chest and squeezed. "It's okay. He's right," I said, managing a small smile. "I want to make sure you have a good time before I have mine."

Clairra worried at her lip, her gaze shifting between Leander and me. Whether she wanted to admit it, it was obvious she wanted him, too. "You don't mind? What Lee did was unnecessary." Her eyes narrowed on Leander. "And pretty damn mean."

"Honestly, I expect no less from him," I said, ignoring his deep laughter in the background. "But I'm sure. I want all of us to enjoy this."

Clairra bit at her lip. "If you're sure..." She moved back over to the couch, but with Leander's dick in the way, she didn't seem to know where to sit. "I'm not sure I forgive you," she murmured down at him.

"I've been told I don't have manners," he answered smoothly. He took the lead by welcoming her right in the center of his lap, spinning her around

so that her back was to his chest.

She looked up at me through fluttering eyelashes, as if she was trying to hide her guilt, as I stood there, not sure what to do with myself now.

Her spine straightened as Leander's hands came around her sides, causing her to inhale sharply. "Relax," he said, a simple command as he reclined her naked body back against his chest.

Brushing her long rope of hair aside, I watched her shiver as his breath beat down her neck, exactly where my mouth had just been. Her breasts were so beautiful, their tips erect and alluring. Some shameless part of me hoped he would tend to them next.

"You like feeling me underneath you, beautiful?"

Heavy-lidded eyes seemed to stare past me as she nodded. Her head fell back, resting on his shoulder.

"Spread your legs," Leander urged, a deep, coaxing whisper.

Suddenly, everything became still. Even Clair's breathing seemed to stop until Leander pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "Spread them, beautiful. You don't want to show him how slick and open you are?"

*Whoa.*

I could tell the exact moment the slow spell of his words took hold of her. The eyes that stared into emptiness came back into focus on me.

Longing shone on her face as her chin moved in a slow nod. My breath caught as her knees gave way, falling as open as Leander's legs were underneath her.

And just as Leander said, her slickness was there. Had that really all been because of me?

"That's it," he rumbled, helping her by using his arms to spread her legs wider. As she yielded to his commands, his smirk grew. "Give him a good look. You like showing him, don't you, beautiful?"

His hand swiped between her legs, finding that slickness, and Clair keened her answer. "Yes."

Leander's fingers swirled, but when her knees tried to clamp back together, he held her open, giving me a full view of the attention he was giving her. I stood there, mesmerized, as his hand played over that part of her that remained such a mystery to me.

"Lee," she gasped, her head tossing and rocking against his shoulder. He chuckled through every little plea, like he knew he was already giving her exactly what she wanted.

“Tell me,” he whispered into her neck even while she squirmed in his embrace. His hand seemed to slow its pace just enough to give her a moment to think. “What do you like about Kaius?”

Panting, Clairra’s head rolled forward. “Kai?” she asked, her eyes finding me even through the haze of pleasure. It took a moment for her to find enough breath to answer. “He’s... sweet.”

My heart swelled. She thought I was sweet?

“No,” Leander said, punishing her with a tap directly between her legs. Her groan for more had my dick aching for me to be the one to give it to her. “I want to know,” he started, his voice smooth and insistent, “what it is about him that has gotten you so wet and needy.”

When her head rolled forward to regard me again, she licked her lips. “His mouth.”

“His mouth,” Leander repeated, and Clairra whimpered as his fingers played a leisurely circle around her again. “That mouth of his never stops moving, does it?” he murmured, and when he looked at me, a knot formed in my stomach at the wicked tilt in his smirk. “Maybe we can find a use for it.”

Clairra moaned out her frustrations as Leander’s hand retreated, moving up to the smooth skin at the apex of her legs.

His eyes were still locked on me when he said, “Lick her.”

“What?” I choked out, finally finding my voice.

“Our mate says she likes your mouth.” Using two fingers, Leander spread her wide, showing off all those slick, delicate folds he had been teasing. “So let’s give her what she likes.”



## CLAIRA



“Lick her?” Kai whispered, echoing Leander’s command. A mix of anticipation and nervousness flooded my senses as Kai’s normally innocent gaze fixated on the spot where Leander held me spread. There was nothing innocent about his gaze now, though.

My throat went dry as I mustered the courage to speak. “Kai, really. You don’t... You don’t have to just because he told you to.” Each word came out raspier than the last, betraying the desperation I hoped to keep hidden. Inside, every thought was a silent plea, begging him to go ahead.

The picture Leander had painted with his words had been so tempting. How could I not yearn for it?

I wanted to whimper, to urge Kai to sink between my legs and put his mouth exactly on the place Leander had instructed. But deep down, I knew it wouldn’t be right. Kai was new to this experience. And honestly, so was I.

Yet here was my golden prince again, seducing me with calculated words smoothly muttered in my ear. “Don’t you want to feel his mouth on you, beautiful?”

*Uh, yes, please.* I whimpered, even more frustrated.

He knew how much I wanted it. How much I ached for it now that he’d put the thought into my head. But only if Kai truly wanted it, too. And right now, I wasn’t sure he did.

However, I had no doubt that Leander was eager for this. His hips shifted, ensuring I felt his presence beneath me. *Damn that sea cucumber.* He must have been enjoying this domineering, power play thing, because his body was taut with arousal. Even though I was still frustrated he’d pulled me away from Kai, it was insane how much I wanted him—how much I wanted both

of them. The three of us, here, together.

Leander's hard length pressed into my backside, making me crave to feel it elsewhere.

"Or perhaps you'd prefer me instead?" His voice was a warm, cocky whisper that washed over the back of my neck. "Well?" His touch as he adjusted himself beneath me only served to heighten my arousal. I almost hated how easily he could read my desire.

I wet my lips. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I challenged, my voice sounding tighter than I liked. "Me choosing your cock over Kai's mouth? Yeah... Not going to happen."

With a single smooth jutting of his hips, Leander's thick cockhead slipped high, teasing against my slit. "Oh, beautiful," he murmured, his lips searing a path, skirting the edge of my ear as he pressed into my back. "I won't make you choose."

With a grunt, he pushed against me, sliding inside with minimal resistance.

*Shit.*

I hadn't expected it, and the moment he slipped inside, a moan escaped. Despite my desire to push back, to challenge him more, I rocked into him, relishing the delicious stretch.

"That's it." Powerful arms encircled me, pinning me on his lap. His hum of satisfaction when he seated himself in me all the way had goose bumps forming where his breath skated over my neck. "Look at that, beautiful. We've barely touched you, and you're already so open, so needy for us."

"Shit, Lee..." Now that I was filled completely, I groaned for more. The thought of Kai's mouth on me was a wonderful fantasy, but he'd hesitated and Leander had taken action. Only, instead of giving me what I wanted, Leander held himself still inside me, not moving an inch. I tried to take control, but he held my hips in place.

Oh, now I was *really* frustrated.

Prince or not, if Leander didn't stop dangling delicious carrots in front of me only to snatch them away with a smirk and an infuriating chuckle, I... I wasn't sure what I would do. Pull a knife and start chopping carrots sounded like a good plan. Barren was a chef. I was sure he kept knives handy, so I wouldn't even have to look that hard.

Ugh—what the *heck* was he waiting for?

Desire strained Leander's voice as he pried my legs open again. "On your



knees, Kaius.”

My heartbeat shot into overdrive as Kai obediently sank, his knees spreading as he settled on the floor at our feet. His gaze fixed on the spot where Leander and I were linked, and inside me, Leander’s cock swelled. It was the most tantalizing sensation—a sure giveaway that he was enjoying watching Kai give in to his commands.

I squirmed impatiently, needing to feel that delicious hardness sinking in and out of me. One smooth thrust. Something, anything. But Leander held strong to my thighs, denying me that pleasure. “Not yet,” he said, and his smooth laugh kicked up more rebellion in me, igniting a stronger urge to move.

Maybe Kai was quick to comply, but I wouldn’t mindlessly follow every one of Leander’s commands.

“You want to experience both of us, don’t you?” Leander rasped, and I froze on his lap.

Both of them? So, he hadn’t just ordered Kai on his knees to make him watch?

On the floor before us, Kai repositioned himself on his knees, leaning closer. “You really like my mouth?” he whispered, vulnerability etched across his face. Between his legs, his dick stood proud, looking even more engorged than it had when I’d ground myself against it while demonstrating foreplay for Leander.

Kai must have caught me looking, because color seemed to flare all over him. Goodness, was there a single part of him that didn’t turn pink?

I nodded, feeling his bashfulness resonate within me. “A lot.”

A hint of that smile I loved so much swept over the corners of Kai’s mouth. His head tilted as he brought his jaw to the side of my knee, and time seemed to slow as the corner of his mouth brushed over my skin. When he wet his lips, his tongue finished with a sweep over the edges of his teeth. A fluid movement that had me shivering.

“I promise I’ll be gentle,” he said, not quite a whisper, his hot breath blanketing my skin at his cautious approach. He placed a light kiss on the inside of my thigh, then another, working his way down, each brush of his lips much too delicate to fully satisfy.

*Gentle?* No, I didn’t want gentle. Thanks to Leander and his damn dangling carrots, my body burned with a heat far beyond wanting to take things slow.

Another kiss, and I let out an involuntary whine. Kai's mouth was so close to me. His lips, his teeth, that delicious prickling pain I could only get from him. "Kai... Please."

Leander's cock twitched inside me, intensifying my frustration, yet that jerk still refused to move. I squirmed, hating that one arm was all it took to restrain me. "Please."

"Right here," Leander instructed, and my stomach flipped when he spread me, exposing the desired spot again. "This is where she enjoys it the most."

This time, Kai complied without hesitation. He licked the area between Leander's fingers, one quick swipe, causing my body to jolt and the world to shudder around me. "Holy..." I groaned, every muscle tensing as his warm mouth brushed against me. Kai tested another leisurely lap over and around that delicate spot, causing my spine to contort while two golden arms held me down and kept me open.

"Mmm..." Leander moaned against my neck as I writhed, struggling half-heartedly, testing his hold. I didn't want to get away, no, but Kai was an eager learner, and it wasn't long before he turned me into a just as eager, panting mess. "See, I knew all the teasing would be worth it."

Leander was right. It had been worth it.

Every time Kai's tongue curled, my insides clenched, squeezing around Leander's cock in the most perfect way.

I couldn't resist—I reached for Kai's hair, gripping the soft, lavender spikes, urging him to continue. Hunger flickered in his clear, gemstone gaze as he looked up at me. His tongue swirled, and the room spun again.

Leander's grip on me loosened, allowing me the privilege to squirm over his lap. "Is he making you feel good, beautiful?"

My response was a breathless, "Yes," as I rocked against Kai's mouth. "It feels... so good." The words slurred, but I didn't care. Although it had been embarrassing at first, having both of them here with me, against me, felt undeniably right.

Leander chuckled softly as his hand moved to the other side of Kai's head. He gripped his hair, and I let out a whine as Kai's mouth tore from me. Leander tilted Kai's neck back until his lips, glistening with moisture, parted.

"Good boy," Leander praised, holding him there by the short spikes of his hair.

Kai's chest rose and fell rapidly, sweat forming over his brow. There was no smile on his face, no indication he'd even heard Leander's praise. Kai

fixated on me with an intense hunger, like a shark interrupted during a feeding frenzy.

“Kaius,” Leander uttered with a low hum, demanding his attention. “Do you enjoy pleasing our mate?”

Kai’s pupils seemed to darken. His tongue slashed across his bottom lip. “Yes.”

Beneath me, Leander relaxed his posture. As soon as he released Kai, that lavender head dipped, preparing to resume, until Leander intervened with a blunt, “Wait.”

Kai’s hesitation was clear as he pulled back, shifting uncomfortably on his knees. His nostrils flared, and for a moment, I wasn’t sure if he would accept Leander’s order, but he waited.

Leander pressed a kiss on my neck and started slow, shallow movements of his hips. *Oh shit, yes*—this was what I wanted. To feel him sinking in and out of me. I groaned in appreciation, savoring the feeling. “Your mate is waiting to please you,” Leander murmured against my ear. “Tell him what you want, beautiful.”

My throat constricted. *Me, tell him?* My lips parted as my body swayed, moving along with Leander’s slow pace, enjoyable but too languid to fully satisfy.

Kai’s knees bore the bulk of his weight as he leaned forward. His throat bobbed. “Tell me,” he said, eager but clearly abashed. Gemstone eyes dropped to where Leander’s hardness stretched me wide, steadily rocking in and out. “My mouth is yours.”

“I want...” I began, and Kai’s chin snapped up like he was ready to listen to my request. “I want your mouth on me.” My voice trailed off, tinged with nerves. “Y-you don’t have to be gentle.”

“You don’t have to be gentle?” Leander nuzzled my neck, his hand sweeping through the top of my braid. “I think what you actually meant to say was, *I want it rough*. Is that right, beautiful?”

I whimpered, his words making my insides pulse. “Fine, yes. Rough,” I pushed out through gnashed teeth while Leander’s deep laugh vibrated against my ear.

“I think we can do rough,” Leander murmured, and a second later, Kai’s breath was beating against my slit. After taking a moment to watch Leander’s hips in motion, he joined in. But instead of his tongue swiping, he nipped the inside of my thigh, just as Leander drove into me again.

The prick of Kai's teeth immediately had me panting, twisting, clawing at whoever's body my hands could find first.

My muscles clenched around Leander's length, clamping and refusing to release as Kai moved to my other thigh. His teeth connected, and I cried out.

The licking was incredible, but this—I adored this. The danger, the sparks of heat, those confusing signals in my brain where pleasure and pain mixed and became something more, something *better*.

I focused solely on that sensation until Kai had his fill of my thighs and moved to my center. His lips closed around my sensitive bud, and the danger of his teeth being so close to such a defenseless place had molten heat coursing through me. His teeth grazed it, and if it weren't for Leander's sturdy chest behind me, my spine might have cracked in half. "Oh, fuck," I all but screamed, not even caring if the neighboring bungalows could hear it.

"Good girl," Leander rasped, rewarding me with a deeper thrust. "I love it when you curse while riding my cock."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I repeated, nearly in hysterics, my body constricting, yearning for more. Leander obliged, and his hand found its way to my breast. He tweaked my nipple as Kai's tongue flicked high over my slit, his lips enveloping me. The sharp sting of his teeth followed, and the next time Leander bottomed out inside me, I came apart, throwing my head back against his shoulder.

Kai must not have known what had happened, because his mouth was relentless, and it took shutting my legs on the sides of his face for him to pull away.

*Poseidon help me*—I'd come so hard that the lights flickered, and I briefly wondered if I was experiencing some sort of hallucination.

My breath came in quick gasps as Leander's growl vibrated against my scalp. "Fuck." His body was still tense underneath me, and I was sure he was close to finding his own release. Pleasure rippled through me, delightful aftershocks, as he worked in and out, but his thrusts were getting faster, more erratic.

The lights flickered again—*wait*. When had it gotten so dark out?

My eyes snapped to the window where the once-beautiful purple sunrise had all but vanished. Instead, black clouds loomed in the distance, and angry ocean waves were lapping up the side of Barren's house. "Shit, Lee! The water." I struggled to get off him, but my legs were like limp seaweed.

Behind me, Leander's chest rose and fell with deep, concentrated breaths.

“It’s okay,” he said, every muscle, even his neck, straining. His face reddened, his eyebrows furrowing in concentration. “I can—I can control it.”

My eyes slid back to the window, where seawater sprayed against the glass. If this continued, there was a good chance Barren’s place would end up as an underwater bungalow rather than an overwater one.

Leander’s cock pulsed inside me, and for a horrifying second, I thought he might risk the entire neighborhood. But with a mighty inhale, he lifted me from his body, growling as if it caused him physical discomfort to separate from me. “FUCK!”

He cast me on the couch beside him, flipping me onto my back and cradling my head down to the cushion. His hand went right to his cock, still slick from our combined arousal, and the back of the couch creaked from where his other fist closed in on it. He pumped two more times, a dangerous desire contorting his face into something feral, before he ripped his hand away, leaving his cock unspent.

Leander spun around to face Kai, snarling like a rabid animal. “Fuck it. *You* take her.”

“What?” Kai said, popping up off his knees. I caught his eye, and his face twisted in shock, seemingly oblivious to the chaos unfolding out the window behind him. “*Me?*”

Leander growled—apparently, animal noises were his only way of communicating now. But how could I blame him? Every part of him was red with frustration, overly strained with arousal. He ran the back of his hand across his chin, his dangerous eyes glinting down at me. Deep breaths only seemed to work him up more. “One of us needs to fuck her.”

“I better figure this trident whaleshit out,” he spat, his voice tightening. His hand clenched into another fist. “Because, *fuck.*”

“You will,” I said, emphasizing each word. He had to—because, well, the alternative was unthinkable.

With a forceful grip on Kai’s shoulder, Leander pushed him down onto the couch. Kai’s stiff and jutting dick loomed over me as he fell, his hands bracing on either side of my shoulders. A blush crept over my face as he stared down at me, his shock evident.

On top of me, Kai was... *wow.*

His portions were surprising, considering his compact frame. And although slender, his length might have surpassed even Leander’s. The tip was the same pink as his nipples and made me want to draw my mouth

around it to find out if he would taste different from Leander as well.

“Do I need to tell you how to fuck her, too?” Leander snapped, impatient. “I assume spike-tails do fuck, don’t they?” His hand cradled the underside of his cock as he spoke, moving in slow strokes. His thumb swiped over the tip like he was trying to do whatever he could to take the edge off. It must have been working, because outside, the sky was clearing, the dark clouds dissipating as if carried away by the ocean breeze.

Churning up the ocean and controlling the weather? Damn, I had to admit that Leander’s new powers were frighteningly amazing, even if his actions were involuntary.

Hovering over me, Kai cleared his throat. “No, we—we fuck.” His knees sank down, and I spread my legs, giving him room to land between them. His blush seemed like a mirror of my own. “Well, not me, but I *can*. I think.” He was stuttering, his eyes skimming over my bare body in a panic, as if not sure where to land. Then they settled on my lips. “That is, if Clairra wants me to.”

Leander came up to the side of the couch, brushing the thumb that was just running over the head of his cock across my lip. I licked at it, tasting the both of us, as he leaned over the couch. “Oh, she wants it. Don’t you, beautiful?”

I nodded, first to Leander and then to Kai. “Yes. But maybe... maybe I should be on top? If you don’t mind me having some of the control.”

After earlier, I wanted to straddle Kai again. To make him whimper and moan underneath me even more.

Above me, I could practically see Kai’s heart beating against the wall of his chest. He brought his hand under his dick as he fell back, easing down to sit on the couch. “Like this?” he asked, his voice a broken whisper.

“Yes,” I said, scooting over to meet him. “Just like that.” But before I swung my leg over him, I paused, feeling the urge to do something daring instead. “You don’t mind if I take some control?” I asked, mimicking Leander’s smooth, lilting voice.

“Take it,” he whispered without hesitation. “Take whatever you want from me.” Whatever I wanted? My lips curled as I dipped down, meeting his dick with a kiss. “*Whoa.*” The couch cushions shifted as Kai’s hands dug into them, his body tensing beneath me.

“So you wouldn’t mind if I tasted you?”

His answer was more of a whine than anything else, but I took it as a yes and wrapped my lips around him.

“Oh—” One of his hands jumped, and I could feel his hesitation as it hovered over the back of my head. I sank down, testing how far I could take him. Not far enough. Switching tactics, I focused on the fleshy area just under the head of his length, delighting in the breathy sound of his reaction. Goodness, I loved making Kai whimper.

When I let go, he looked at me with wide eyes, his mind seemingly in disarray. Had that little bit of teasing literally blown his mind?

“How was that?” I asked through gasps for air, hoping I sounded sexier to him than I did to me. “Better than a water jet?”

Kai made a choked noise like he didn’t quite have control of his tongue. Leander scoffed, yet his hand still moved slow strokes over his own cock.

Grinning, I got up and threw a leg over Kai so that we were face to face. Sure, reclining on Leander’s chest had been nice, but there was no way I was giving up access to Kai’s mouth. Kai’s smooth chest served as my anchor as I used my other hand to grip his slick, saliva-coated dick.

“You ready?” I asked, hovering over him on one knee as I positioned myself over his length. His sharp inhale when his hardness skimmed my wetness was a delicious sound.

Gosh, my heart was pounding fast.

“Almost,” he mumbled, and as soon as I glanced up to question what he meant, his lips were on mine, claiming mine with a hungry kiss.

Kai’s arms came around me, easing me down on top of him, and the moment he entered me, he used my gasp to deepen his attention on my lips. His tongue stroked mine, and I could taste the groan building in the back of his throat as we slid against each other, uniting.

As soon as we came apart for a breath, a hand came under my chin, diverting my attention away. Tilting my head up, Leander pressed into my back. “Does he feel good?”

“So good,” I said immediately, and Kai stiffened inside of me.

Leander’s smirk stretched as he leaned in, and when he gave my soaked lips a kiss, I wondered if he could taste Kai’s mouth on me, too. “I bet you feel fucking amazing,” he said, voice husky as he pulled away. “Doesn’t she, Kaius?”

“She does,” Kai breathed out with a nod as Leander’s hand dipped, sliding down my stomach. When he boldly cupped my sex, I jolted. His fingers strummed, easily finding the spot that made my insides clamp around Kai.

“She likes this spot here,” Leander confided as I leaned into him, my body going weak. As I reclined against Leander, the angle between Kai and me shifted, eliciting a simultaneous groan.

“*Whoa.*” Kai’s hands clenched my thighs. His voice was strained when he said, “I—I see why you made me do that now.”

Leander chuckled as he worked another round of tight circles around me. Then he gave me one last teasing tap and eased me forward, giving my weight back over to Kai.

His voice lingered as he retreated, brushing against my ear. “Okay, beautiful. You said you wanted control.” Stepping away from us, he moved beside the couch. Although his erection had started to soften, he still seemed eager to watch. “Let’s see how long a spike-tail can last.”

I scoffed, perching my hands on Kai’s chest as I recovered my balance. “Longer than you, I bet,” I said as I started moving my hips. Though the way Kai’s thighs shuddered beneath me had me wondering if he would last long at all.

“Yeah, okay,” Leander said, chuckling and crossing his arms. “Whatever you say.”

I smiled and turned to Kai, speaking just loud enough for him to hear. “Let’s show him.”

The answering snap of Kai’s teeth against my lips sent a wave of hunger through me. “Oh, really?” I said before seizing his bottom lip, tugging it between my teeth as I moved my hips in a smooth rhythm. Kai hissed, I wasn’t sure which sensation caused it, so I increased both until I was drawing out even more heated groans from him. When my teeth finally snapped off of him, I gave a sheepish smile. “Too hard?” I asked, and his eyes darkened.

“Never,” he spoke the word as if it burned him, tongue lashing over his teeth as he brought me in for another kiss. His hands found their way up my hips, grasping there, holding me steady as we moved in sync. What started as a simple rhythm quickly spiraled into a frenzy, urgency propelling each subsequent move of our hips.

When I was bouncing too much for our lips to stay together, Kai pulled me in closer, moving to my neck. With each movement, his teeth roamed over every inch of that sensitive skin, leaving a trail of marks behind them. But I didn’t care. I’d happily wear his marks for the rest of my life.

“If we were in the water,” he choked out, his teeth scraping over my neck between words. “My claspers would fight over which one got to open up



inside you, locking us together.”

“Oh, yeah?” was my eloquent response to that. I... wasn’t sure how to process that information, but color me curious, because it definitely sounded like something was open to figuring out. Preferably soon. “Lee, get the window,” I begged, throwing a desperate glance his way as I bounced over Kai’s lap. “Splash some saltwater in. Please.”

“Fucking spike-tails,” Leander mumbled. He did not move.

My lips pulled together in annoyance until Kai’s ragged breath brought me back over to him. “And after my first clasper mates you, I’ll take you with the next,” he whispered, a heated promise, his face flushing even pinker. “If—if you wanted.”

“Want, yes,” I panted out, picking up the pace. Gosh, if his claspers were anything like his dick, I would enjoy taking them twice, though I wasn’t too sure what he meant by *locking* together.

“I—I think—” Kai groaned, and I felt his legs strain, tightening underneath me. His fingers gripped, sinking into my hips. The next thing I knew, Leander was behind me, his hands coming up, cupping my breasts.

Oh, so *now* he moved.

“You want to come for him again, beautiful?” Despite the energy of our movements, Leander’s fingers worked lazy circles, plucking and edging my nipples until both were taut. “Feel him come inside you?”

“Yes,” I moaned, letting them take over my weight as I leaned back into Leander. Hands were everywhere. Lips toyed with my neck, soothing the marks Kai’s teeth had made in a tender way that made my eyes roll back, fluttering shut.

Leander’s wicked hand ventured down, playing a smooth circle, and that was all it took to set me off again. My body clenched, coiling so tight I thought I might actually erupt, when Kai hit high with one final thrust, pulsing his release inside me with a strangled groan.

By the time my vision returned, my spine had completely disintegrated. I was a boneless mess that Leander had to drag off of Kai. I grunted a round of breathless “*thank yous*” and flashed Kai a weak smile as Leander settled down on the other side of the couch, bringing half of me with him. As he reclined, he pulled me close, placing my head in his lap and leaving Kai to take hold of my legs.

“Enjoying the sunrise?” Leander asked, and I would have laughed if I still had any breath or energy in me.

It took a minute of lying there before I recovered enough to say, “Would have — if you — came too.” I gestured up at him vaguely.

Leander’s lips tilted, though there was a darkness there, too. “No need to worry about me, beautiful.”

As his hands played through my hair, I felt the strands cascading around my face, unbound from their braid. *Oh well.* I’d have to ask Kai to redo it after he recovered. For now, he was still catching his breath, reclined back on the couch, his body flushed all the way to the tips of his ears. Gosh, he was adorable.

I let myself relax, too, relishing the feel of their bare skin against mine. For once, my heart seemed so full that nothing could possibly —

Across the living room, the door lock jingled, and my heart raced.

“Barren’s back?” Kai asked, finally finding his breath. He looked back, and, forget racing, my heart definitely *stopped*.

Because Barren was back. And here I was, on his couch. Naked. Surrounded by both of my mates that he possibly didn’t want to share with.



## CLAIRA



A lengthy creak signaled the door was, in fact, opening, and the one thought in my mind was that Barren could *not* see us like this.

With a sudden jolt of panic, I rolled off Leander and Kai's laps and hit the floor in front of the couch with a heavy *thunk*.

Leander was the first to his feet. "Fuck, are you okay?" he asked, and I answered with frantic hand gestures, desperate to silence him before Barren overheard.

"*Hide!*" I mouthed as Kai stood from the couch. Staring wide-eyed up at both of them, I mimed for them to zip their mouths and drop to the floor with me.

*Please, please, please let them understand.*

Even though my stomach was empty, it churned at the thought of Barren's stony expression if he caught us. How repulsed he would have been after realizing what we'd done in his living room. On his *couch*, of all places.

Why, oh why, had I gone along with it?

The delightful aftershocks still tingling through my legs served as one reminder. Okay—maybe it had been worth it. Maybe. But then again, it was possible Barren wasn't the one at the door at all, right? Laverne could be back. Maybe Barren had given her a key when he left. Maybe —

"Oh, hey there, big guy," Kai said the moment he whirled around, and my spiral of panic strengthened into a full-blown tornado.

I waited for the inevitable, but nothing happened. Why wasn't anyone saying anything?

As the silence stretched, I slowly realized what kind of scene Barren had walked in on. Sure, he couldn't see me, but he could see Kai and Leander.

Standing nearly shoulder to shoulder. Naked.

“How’d it go?” Kai asked finally, his tone pitched at least an octave too high.

The sound of Barren’s deep voice caused a fresh wave of anxiety. “You’ve become close.”

I covered my face with my hands, wishing I was anywhere but here. If there had been space under the couch, I might have crawled underneath it.

“Uh... Yeah,” Kai said, and I peeked between fingers to see his shoulder brushing against Leander’s arm as he spun back around. My heart skipped a beat, thinking he might turn down to me, but he only glanced at Leander.

Apparently, there was something about this situation that pretty boy found incredibly hilarious. And although Leander didn’t utter a sound, he was hunched forward, his chest shaking with laughter.

“The best of friends,” Kai added, somewhat mechanically, an eyebrow rising at Leander.

That’s when I noticed what it was Leander found so funny—the one detail I’d overlooked. All my breath left me as I stared at my scattered clothes sitting well away from the couch where I was supposedly hiding.

... *Shit.*

“Mmh,” Barren mumbled, and I stifled a yelp as the floor shifted with one of his heavy footsteps. “Getting a shower,” he declared, and I nearly cried out in relief as his footsteps moved further away. “Think about what you want for breakfast.”

Then his steps hesitated. “Mind if I grab clothes from my bedroom, Clair?” he asked, and my stomach plunged.

“Uh...” Kai looked straight down at me, and I covered my eyes with my hands, utterly mortified.

Leander’s amusement only escalated. “I think you’re good, man.”

The floor creaked with Barren’s departure, and when I heard the bedroom door ease shut, I was sure that my spirit had left my body. *Ugh.* Of course, he’d known I was down here. Why had I tossed my clothes around so carelessly? And most importantly, how would I ever look him in the eyes again?

Now that Barren was gone, Leander collected my garments from the center of the floor, his smirk growing as I scrambled to my knees. “Should I open a window so you can jump out of it?” he teased.

I ripped my clothes from his hand and huffed as I started working them

back on. “Oh, so *now* you’ll open a damn window.”

“Why were you hiding?” Kai cut in, his eyebrows knitting together.

“It isn’t you guys, it’s just...” With my pants halfway up, I paused to collect my thoughts. “I didn’t want him to have to see us like this, you know?”

Leander shrugged. “There’s no point in trying to hide anything from Barren.” He waited until my pants were up my hips to toss me my bra and shirt.

“I know that. I know I shouldn’t be trying to hide anything from any of you,” I threw back, frowning as Leander vented another chuckle.

“No, I mean, you *can’t* hide anything from Barren. None of us can.” Leaning against the side of the couch, Leander crossed his arms. “Trust me, he already knows everything that happened here.”

Well, that sure was ominous.

“Hidden cameras?” I whispered, quickly fastening my bra. I pulled myself up on the couch, my eyes darting around the room. Every surface was nearly bare, making it difficult to imagine where a camera could be concealed. The wall decor, maybe? But why would Barren even need cameras, and why would Leander know about them?

“Forget it,” Leander said, moving my hair out of the way so I could pull my arms through my shirt. And although it was sweet of him to help me, my eyes narrowed at him as soon as my head was through the hole.

“What do you mean, forget it? You can’t just tell me Barren knows everything that happens and then —”

The bedroom door swung open, and I sank down, shrinking onto the couch cushions. Barren’s massive shoulders filled the doorway as he moved out of the bedroom, but instead of coming out into the living room, he went directly to the bathroom Leander and Kai had used for their showers. The door closed, and I released a breath.

When I looked back up at Leander, his smirk was prevalent as ever. “You’re beautiful when you’re flustered,” he said, his icy eyes warming as he leaned in to press his lips against my forehead. He twirled an errant strand of my hair, and I swatted him away, remembering what a mess my braid must be.

“I’m glad this is amusing to you.” My nose pinched as I got to my feet. “I’m going to go get cleaned up.” Even though I’d just put them back on, I could already feel that a panty change was in order.

I crept toward Barren's bedroom and realized Kai was trailing behind me. Spinning around, I pressed my hand against his chest. His eyes to widened.

"Putting your clothes back on might be a good idea," I said with a smile that he immediately returned. He looked so adorable, like he might follow me anywhere I asked. "Though I'm a fan of this look."

"Oh—" Kai's laughter caught in his throat. He turned down to look at himself as if only now realizing he was naked. "Okay, yeah. Thanks."

I gave Kai's cheek a quick kiss before pulling away. "You, too, Lee."

"Uh-huh," he said, not looking bothered to collect his pants.

Barren must not have cared about having my things lying around his bedroom, because the room appeared exactly as I'd left it, my brush sitting askew on the dresser and all. After rummaging through my suitcase for some new panties, I headed to the bathroom attached to Barren's room to get cleaned up.

*Maybe Barren is too big for you,* I thought, halfway stuck in a daydream while I stared at the bathroom's narrow shower stall. Or maybe he knew I'd want somewhere else to hide and was giving me some space? That made sense. His place was pretty much the definition of open concept living except for the one bedroom.

I glanced in the bathroom mirror before heading out and cringed at how disheveled my hair was. "Dammit, Lee. This is your fault," I mumbled. My mind brought back to how he'd massaged through my hair while kissing me. I shivered, pressing my knees together to settle down the growing ache, and rolled the hair-ties out of the end of my hair.

As I combed more of the braid out with my fingers, I wondered if this was something we'd be doing more often. Kai, Leander, and me.

I could hardly contain my smile as I walked across the bedroom and poked my head out of the door. Kai was absently working over his shirt's buttons, staring out of the window as he did it, but he was off by at least two holes. Goodness, he was cute.

Leander, on the other hand, still hadn't found his way to his pajama pants. Figured.

The sound of running water from the other bathroom told me Barren had started his shower. "Hey, Kai," I called, and he spun around, shaking off his daze. "Would you mind lending me a hand?"

"Use my hands," Leander said, immediately pushing off the side of the couch.

My eyebrows lifted. “You can braid?” I held up the ends of my hair. He turned right back around.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” I said with a snicker as Kai came to the bedroom door.

His pink lips tilted. “I know how to braid.”

“Great.” Stepping aside, I let him through the door. “I was hoping you did. But first, let me help you.” Undoing his buttons, I lined up the sides of his shirt and started all over.

“Oh, thanks.” His voice warmed as he looked down, watching my hands work over his shirt. “My brain’s a bit scattered right now, if you can’t tell.”

“Only a little,” I said, offering him a grin.

But instead of returning it, his body language shifted, his face growing serious. “Claira, I—That was...” Face flushing, he cast his gaze to the floor. “Did you enjoy it?”

Our hands met, and I could feel the roughness of the calluses as his fingers brushed over the backs of my knuckles.

“So much,” I said, then I gave him a wide smile, so he knew I meant it. “But did you enjoy it?” I asked. “Even with Lee, well, being himself?”

Kai’s face flared red, but he nodded. “I never thought I could enjoy anything as much as I enjoyed that.”

Relief flooded over me like a wave. Leander could be mean, but maybe Kai could take it. “Then I hope the three of us can keep getting to know each other... in that way.”

Kai’s face lifted. “Really?”

“Really.” I turned around to grab my brush from the dresser and offered it to him. “Now, do you think you can fix my hair like I had it before?”

“I can try,” he said with a hum. As Kai worked on detangling my hair, my shoulders relaxed under his gentle touch. “Though I’ve never seen a braid look like that one.”

“That’s because I suck at doing hair,” I said, rolling out the rest of the tension between my shoulder blades. “Whatever you think looks good is fine. I just want it out of my way in case we go into the ocean later.”

Glancing in the mirror, I watched the way Kai’s fingers moved deftly as he worked, his face set in concentration. Already, it looked way better than what I’d done. I had no doubt he’d been an amazing brother to his younger sister.

“Almost done. Hair binds?” he asked, and I handed them back. Just as he



finished securing it, there was a scratch at the door. The *patio* door.

“That’s odd. Think it’s Laverne?” I asked. I waited for Kai’s hands to release my hair before I moved over to investigate.

The scratching continued, growing even louder and more persistent.

“Doubt it.” Kai sprang past me, going to the door first. “Sea lions don’t have claws. Seals do, but not—” As soon as the door opened, a streak of gray bounded through it, darting right under the bed.

The back of my legs went flat against the dresser as I gasped. “Was that a *raccoon*?”

Oh great. First, we soiled Barren’s couch with our nakedness, and now we let a wild animal into his bedroom. At this rate, Barren would never trust us to be alone in his place again.

“I’ll—I’ll catch it.” Kai dropped like he was about to dive under the bed after it.

“Wait, hold on! Don’t —”

Kai had barely reached underneath the bed when the creature sprang out from the other side of it. Green eyes flashed up at me as the creature landed right on top of my suitcase.

“Oh,” I blew out, bracing a hand over my chest as I pulled away from the dresser. “It’s a cat.”

The gray tabby’s ears, tufted and alert, seemed to twitch with my every movement. Its tail flicked sporadically as Kai got back to his feet. “A cat?” he asked, scratching at the back of his neck.

“Yeah, and a very pretty kitty, too.” My heart nearly melted as I took in its sleek paws and striped markings.

From its position on top of my suitcase, the tabby seemed to observe me with curiosity and a touch of aloofness. I approached slowly, leaving enough distance for the cat to flee if it chose, and extended an open palm. “Hey there, pretty kitty. What’s your name?”

Cats were rarely chatty, but I still cleared my mind, just in case. I’d always had a soft spot for cats, but Dad’s allergies meant we could never have one in the house.

Clover green eyes pressed into a slow blink. “*Sprout*,” the cat projected, and I had to fight to hold back my grin. It was a boy cat, from the tight rasp in its voice.

Sprout touched his nose to my palm, only briefly, his tail flicking as he pulled away. My heart swelled.

“I bet you got that name because of your beautiful green eyes,” I said, watching his whiskers twitch. “Are you lost?”

I was almost certain he wouldn't answer when a rush of loneliness seeped into me, a heavy blow to the chest. The cat jumped onto the bed and prowled a slow circle while I rubbed over my breastbone to recover.

“*Dude*. This is the fluffiest thing I've ever seen,” Kai said, eyeing Sprout like he'd never seen a cat before in his life. Maybe he hadn't. “Can we touch it?”

“Oh, um...” I hesitated, unsure if that was a good idea. I leaned in, hovering over the bed. “Can we pet you?”

Sprout's mouth opened up in an adorable yawn that showed off all his tiny, sharp-tipped teeth. “*Try it and see.*”

“Yeah, better not,” I said, coming around the bed to pull Kai away before he experienced his first cat claw to the face. “Let's wait until Barren's done with his shower and see what he says. Maybe he knows the owner.”

My stomach twisted because, *ugh*, that meant I would actually have to look at and speak to Barren. Well, this was important, wasn't it? Maybe this was the best thing that could have happened, and Kai letting a cat into Barren's bedroom would be the perfect distraction from acknowledging the scene he'd walked in on earlier.

Before I dragged Kai out of the bedroom, I planted a firm kiss on his lips.

“What was that for?” he asked, panting a breath when I pulled away.

I grinned as I led him back to the living room. “Just for being you.”

Kai must have liked that answer, because laughter bubbled freely from his throat. As I stood near the bathroom door, Leander approached from behind, throwing his arms around me. And yep—he had still neglected to retrieve his pants.

“What's this?” Leander asked, his voice going smooth as his arms closed around me. “Are we planning to pounce on Barren as soon as he's done with his shower?”

The way his length stiffened against me had me wondering if a hurricane was imminent. He was clearly still sexually frustrated.

“Am I going to have to have you drag me out into the middle of the ocean just so you can get some relief?” I muttered, and his cock pulsed against my back. “Seriously, Lee, let's not sink the island.”

“I think I like that idea... The dragging you into the ocean part,” he murmured, his voice deepening just as the bathroom door pulled open.

Steam emerged along with Barren, and he was still tightening his brace over his shoulder when he noticed all of us standing there at the door.

A million thoughts poured through my head in a panic. Did coming home to find us all naked in his living room really not bother him at all? Was he not bothered by the sight of Leander holding me now? As his eyes slid over to me, his face was as unreadable as ever.

“Barren—hi,” I blurted, and Leander chuckled in my ear as I fought to free myself from his grip. “Sorry to bother you.”

Barren’s jaw tensed, and I swallowed back a gulp. Was he upset? Disappointed? Did he feel anything at all? “We heard scratching and, well...” My voice tailed just as Kai chimed in.

“Dude. You won’t believe it—there’s a raccoon in your bedroom,” he said, causing Barren’s stoic demeanor to break with a rise of his eyebrows.

*Uh, what?*

I swerved to look at Kai. “No, no, not a raccoon.”

“I thought you called it a raccoon?” he said, bouncing on his toes like he already wanted to go back and see it. “A pretty kitty raccoon, I think, is what you said.”

“A *cat*,” I corrected, then focused back on Barren. “We let a cat inside by mistake, and it jumped on your bed.”

Without a word, Barren headed straight to his bedroom.

“Have you really never seen a cat before?” I whispered as soon as Barren was out of earshot. “Or a raccoon?”

As Kai shook his head, I realized how much these guys had been missing out on land. “You’ve seen a dog, though, right?”

His face brightened. “Oh, yeah! Back in California, humans hang out with dogs on the beach all the time.”

Barren came back into the living room, and it surprised me to see him cradling the gray tabby in his arm. The cat rubbed his head against the leather strap of his brace like it had been coated in catnip.

“Is this... your cat?” I asked, blinking at the two of them. Was the cat purring?

Barren nodded, and I couldn’t help but feel relieved. At least we hadn’t let a stranger’s cat into the house. “He missed you,” I said, eyeing the cat and resisting the urge to pet him. Now that he was in Barren’s arm, he seemed so much friendlier. “Didn’t you, Sprout?”

Barren shifted on his feet, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “Who told

you his name?" he said stiffly while Sprout continued to purr and rub against his chest.

"Uh, he did, of course." I blinked. "I think he was upset when he came inside and you weren't there, because he also sent over a taste of how much he missed you." I rubbed at my chest, where remnants of loneliness still lingered.

Barren's only reaction was silence, his gaze steadily fixed on me. With the exception of Sprout, the entire room seemed eerily tense.

Then Leander's sharp tone had me questioning everything. "This creature told you its name?"

"Yes?" I stared at him, noticing the way his muscles were bunched, and then shifted my gaze back over to Barren. "I know cats aren't usually talkative, but this one is extra friendly. Right, Barren?"

I looked up at him, hopeful, but his dark eyes offered no reassurance. "Barren?" I said again, weaker this time, unsure of what was happening.

"This cat spoke to you," Barren said carefully, and I gave a slow nod. He winced as if the simple gesture had scorched him. "Merfolk can only communicate with creatures who hold Poseidon's favor. Sea-dwelling creatures."

"I... was *not* aware of that," I said sheepishly. For once, the way they were staring at me made me want to disappear. "Sprout wouldn't happen to be some sort of water cat, would he?" A single laugh clawed its way up my throat. "A catfish, maybe?"

Barren's jaw tensed as he swallowed. "No. He is only a cat."

In my daze, the words seemed to fall out. "But I don't understand. I've always been able to talk to cats."

"First sharks and now land creatures," Leander mumbled, running a hand through his hair as if my very existence puzzled him.

"Wait, why are sharks weird?" I pressed, desperate to wrap my mind around all of this. "They're sea dwellers."

Kai's shoulders slumped. "Technically, yes. But sharks don't hold Poseidon's favor."

"Because they're too stupid," Leander added, causing Kai to wince.

"Sharks aren't stupid." There was a trace of irritation in my tone, but I didn't care. "That shark we saved tossed me a knife when I needed to stab a bitch, Lee. And it saved my boots for me, too."

"That's right," Kai said, his grin nearly renewed. "It was the coolest thing

I've ever seen."

I threw my hands up in the air with a shrug, knowing I'd made my point.

"Okay, fine. *Most* sharks are stupid." Leander chuckled, and my tension eased now that they weren't looking at me like I was some sort of merfreak.

Barren bent down, letting Sprout jump from his arms. "Have we decided on breakfast?" he asked as Sprout circled around to nuzzle his feet.

"I'll eat anything you want to make," I said, wondering if this was really the end of that conversation.

Barren nodded. "I'll need to get groceries. Then after breakfast, we need to rest."

"Rest?" Kai asked, glancing back at the rows of windows. The sun had barely risen.

"We've been summoned to meet with my queen tonight." Barren pulled his phone from his pocket, his eyes scanning over the screen. "It's best to be prepared for a long evening."



AFTER BREAKFAST, Barren insisted that we get some rest. So here I was, lying in his bed. *Alone.*

According to him, the island came alive at night, which had me wondering what kind of business his kingdom conducted here.

Kai had been the most resistant, saying that he had a duty to go find Laverne first. Luckily, she'd resurfaced as soon as he left, popping up with a lionfish she'd supposedly made friends with. Unfortunately, that friendship came to an abrupt end when Barren mentioned they were highly venomous, and Kai had to lure her onto the deck to wrestle it out of her mouth.

I chuckled to myself, remembering the shocked '*how dare you*' face Laverne had made when Kai threw it back into the ocean.

After the commotion had settled, we'd agreed to try to rest, so here I was. Compared to the workout mats Barren had set out for everyone else in the living room, relaxing on this massive bed should have been easy. Yeah, well... it wasn't.

I never felt lonely back in my bed at home, so why was I feeling so lonely now?

As if sensing my loneliness, Sprout slunk through the pet door Barren had mounted in the window earlier. The gray tabby jumped up on the bed, and I fought to temper my excitement. He played coy for a minute, taking light steps down the perimeter of the bed before coming over to settle down on the center of my chest.

“You know, your owner is very thoughtful,” I murmured as Sprout stared at me with sleepy eyes. His paws kneaded my chest in a slow, careful beat. “He fed us breakfast and even gave up his bed for me.” I pulled a hand out from under the feathery comforter and offered it to him, smiling when Sprout bunted against it. “Though I bet you wish he was the one sleeping in here, not me, huh?”

“*I am owned by no one,*” Sprout projected with an airy yawn. “*I am a traveler, and he is my friend. Here, I am Sprout. Elsewhere, I have other names.*”

“So, you take turns visiting your friends?” I asked, petting Sprout’s silky ears while I glanced out the window. “I hear Barren’s a traveler, too. I get the impression he’s always busy with something.”

Despite telling us to rest, Barren hadn’t sat down once. Even now, he was outside on his patio, tending to his plants.

Apparently, a neighbor came by to care for them while he was away, but that hadn’t stopped him from going out there with a watering can to check on them himself.

“Does he talk to the plants?” I asked, noticing the slight movement of Barren’s lips as he moved between planters.

“*Sometimes he sings.*”

My eyes narrowed. “He *sings*... Are you sure?”

Sprout offered no more elaboration than a soft, rolling purr. Barren, singing? I couldn’t imagine it. But with such a deep voice, I was definitely curious how it might sound.

The window flap rustled, and Sprout’s ears twitched.

“*Spraut eve,*” Barren called from the window, and my face heated. Had he noticed me staring? “*Dhurah dhaasheve,*” he continued, and Sprout’s ears shifted sideways, clearly choosing to ignore whatever it was Barren was saying to him.

Barren released a heavy sigh. “He’s keeping you awake. I apologize,” he said, and I shivered. His accent was thicker than usual when slipping back from his native tongue.

“*Spraut?* Is that how you say his name in your language?” I asked, wondering for the first time the intricacies of our power to send thoughts and feelings to certain animals. The fact that we could communicate seamlessly across languages meant our magic had to have some kind of built-in translator, right?

Barren hunched over the window. “*Spraut*, yes. Or *Spraut eve* when I really need his attention.” As he spoke, the corner of his mouth curved.

“Seems to work well. You’ve got his full attention.” I gestured to Sprout, who was looking in the exact opposite direction, doing everything in his kitty-cat power to ignore him. Barren’s grin grew.

The way he was holding the watering can and the window flap open at the same time looked so uncomfortable.

“I left the door unlocked,” I said, glancing over at the patio doors. “You should come inside.” I gave Sprout’s head another pat. “You told us we should get rest, but I notice you haven’t sat down once since you got home.”

Barren’s body rocked against the window, a sudden tension forming in the air that even Sprout seemed to sense. His striped tail thrashed, beating side to side against the comforter as if he did *not* like the direction this conversation was heading.

Which was understandable. I’d practically given Barren permission to join me in bed, hadn’t I? A thrill shot through me.

“Better not.” Barren’s carefully spoken words caused my heart to ache.

Right—of course. I mean, I had just had a threesome on his couch. What the heck was I thinking, inviting him to rest in his room with me?

My hand curled over Sprout’s head, and he headbutted it just as numbness began spreading through my chest.

The window ledge creaked, but I kept my eyes on Sprout. *Such a cute kitty*. The bed wouldn’t feel lonely since he was here with me, purring.

“I’m... nervous,” Barren said suddenly, and there was a strange, hard emotion in his voice that gave me pause.

*Nervous?* I tossed a look over at him in question, but he was staring down at the patio.

He sat the watering can down at his feet, then opened the flap again to say, “I’m nervous about tonight.”

“About meeting your queen?”

When he nodded, it was like my heart had started beating again.

“Trust me when I say that I won’t let anything happen to you. But I

cannot promise that my queen doesn't wish you harm."

That... sounded ominous. But despite feeling unsettled, I believed Barren when he said he wouldn't let anything happen to me.

Barren cleared his throat. "After our meeting, I will be much more relaxed." He sank down, looking up at me through the open flap from under his dark fringe of curls. "May I come to you then?"

"Barren," I said, my throat nearly catching on his name. The hopeful way his dark eyes searched my face for an answer made me feel like I hadn't had water in days. "Are you propositioning me through a cat flap?"

"Mmmh." The barest smile pulled at his mouth. "There's something I've been curious about." He wet his lips. "Did you remember to bring the swimsuit?"

"I brought it," I said, feeling my body heat. The one he'd bought me was still sitting on the very top of my suitcase. Was this the real reason he'd insisted on rest before tonight?

"Good." Barren nodded before easing the flap back down.

"C-can't wait," I called before it closed completely, hoping to see another hint of a smile. I wasn't disappointed. When Barren straightened up, his hand curled in a brief wave at me through the glass. Goodness, I was thankful I'd kept that bikini.

When I turned back to Sprout, his eyes were half-closed. "You weren't paying attention to that, were you?" I mumbled, and he yawned.

*"Paying attention to what?"*

I rewarded him with another pat. "Exactly. You might not want to come around tonight," I whispered, and his tail whipped. "Just a polite heads up."

*"As long as I get a nap now."*

"Deal," I said, cozying up under the covers. The peaceful way his eyes closed made me feel sleepy, too. Maybe a nap wasn't a bad idea. Because if Barren was right and his queen did wish me harm, I would need my energy for what was to come.

My heart fluttered.

Plus, some energy in reserve for what was to come after.





# CLAIRA



I wasn't sure what I'd expected, but this wasn't it. Barren had brought us to meet with his queen, but the building looming before us could only be described as an underwater palace. Only we were very much on land.

Orbs of light danced over the great dome and its towering pillars, creating a glowing, golden aura against the dark night sky. Every inch, from top to bottom, was gold. Even the twin statues guarding the palace's entrance were cast in the gleaming metal.

"Is that...?" My voice trailed, the statues' dark, soulless eyes causing me to shiver. The two figures brandished glittering tridents, their fish tails sweeping in opposing directions. Hair that should have belonged on the cover of a romance novel flowed over their shoulders, merging into the golden waves that covered the front of the palace behind them.

"Poseidon," Barren rumbled, standing well away from our group. "Subtlety is not my kingdom's strong suit."

Leander ran a hand through his hair. "Well, I like it."

"Of course you would," I mumbled. Leander blended in so well with the architecture it was possible he could pass as a living extension of the building. Had he transformed into his merman form, his glistening tail might have outshone even the statues.

"Trident's Treasure," Kai read aloud, his eyes fixed on the golden arch beneath the great dome's crest. The bold lettering loomed above the entrance, dwarfing the sea of bodies below it.

Laverne shuffled to the front of the group, her nose lifting like she was taking in all the lights. "*There's treasure inside?*"

"Mmh," Barren grunted. Zero elaboration.

Did his kingdom truly spend half of the year in this palace? Before I could ask, Barren headed for the entrance. I took a final glance at the shimmering streaks of light dancing across the night sky before following behind him.

It had been a long walk to the palace, but I'd managed to keep myself calm and relaxed through it. Now that we were here, my hands fidgeted, clutching to the strap of my satchel I'd prepared in case Barren's queen sent us straight to the ocean.

The atmosphere pulsed with energy, driving me to press in closer to Barren, but he was determined to stay well ahead of us. Was he expecting us to sprint to keep up?

"Is there anything special I should know about? Like something you should or shouldn't do when meeting with a queen?" I asked aloud to no one in particular.

"Remember, you don't have to do anything Queen Javalynn asks you to do," Kai said, keeping up with my increasingly frantic pace. "She knows you're a free mermaid. If she tries anything, don't be afraid to remind her, okay?" With a wide grin, he clenched a fist and pounded it in his other palm.

"Thanks, Kai. I'll try not to forget." Gosh, I loved how well he put me at ease. His face lit with intrigue when I gave his fist a bump.

The thought of meeting Barren's queen made me nervous, but it wasn't the queen herself that scared me—it was the hold she had over Barren.

Barren had nearly gone against her orders, delaying taking me back to his kingdom when she'd ordered him to steal me away. She was bound to be upset by his disobedience, right? And if she was anything like King Eamon, she was more than upset. King Eamon didn't get upset. He got enraged, and Poseidon help anyone who crossed him.

My thoughts were in a whirl as we merged with the crowd. Wait—was that English I was hearing? I looked around. Up close, the crowd seemed unremarkable. Strangely normal.

"Humans?" I whispered, trying to brush closer to Barren, but his long strides carried him at a speed that was hard to replicate. "All right," I mumbled, directing the words at his freakishly large back. "Sprinting, it is."

Laverne shrieked her annoyance as I took off after Barren, but I ignored her, catching up to him as he passed underneath the golden archway.

"What is this place?" I asked as soon as I stepped inside, but my voice was lost in the lively hum of commotion. Around us, the air was vibrant with

the sounds of laughter and the clinking of chips.

The soft ripple of overhead light caused me to glance upward where a breathtaking mural covered the dome ceiling—an ethereal underwater world where golden-hued merfolk and majestic sea creatures swam amidst a vibrant coral reef.

It was dizzying. Taking in the colors and the lights was like being underwater, and my legs had almost lost their balance when Barren’s deep voice cut through the chaos. “A casino.”

“A casino?” Now that he wasn’t running away from us, I circled around him, hoping to stop him with a hand to the chest.

He took an immediate step back, but my mind was elsewhere. I hadn’t noticed when we’d walked inside, but behind us, massive tanks filled with water ran from polished floor to ceiling. Within them, merfolk gracefully swam, their colorful tails shimmering under the golden glow of the lights. Elaborate nets made of gilded chains adorned their bodies, flowing in the water as they dove and twisted.

I pointed at the great tanks, large enough for dolphins to swim through, my mouth bone dry, as the merfolk waved and blew kisses to patrons as they passed. “Mer—mer—” I was still stuttering when the others caught up to us.

“Whoa!” Kai gasped, rushing up to put his palms flat on the glass.

“The curse is broken, or is this one of your kingdom’s mirages?” Leander asked as soon as his eyes landed on the tanks.

Barren didn’t bother turning around to gawk at the merfolk. “Part of the show,” he said with a hint of bitterness. “No mirages. They are wearing fake tails and holding their breath.”

“They’re fake?” I said, scrutinizing every detail. They were convincing fakes, if they were. Each tail was intricately frilled, flowing through the water the same way Barren’s did under the waves.

“Before the curse, we pumped salt water into them,” Barren admitted with a shrug. “Not anymore.”

“Your kingdom doesn’t care if humans know the truth about what we are?” I couldn’t believe it—how had news not spread from the island? Was it mermaid glamour willing humans to forget or forcing them to keep their mouths shut? What a sickening thought.

Barren shook his head. “They believe that the money and the alcohol is real, but everything else is all a part of the show.”

My chest loosened a bit. Maybe he was right. Despite the presence of the

tanks, the people seemed preoccupied with other things, like the tables draped in plush velvet set up further into the dome.

I was still looking over the crowd when I noticed two men wearing barely more than strips of lace approaching. Their eyes, heavily lined with eyeliner, seemed to scrutinize me up and down before they shared a look.

One man with feathery white hair stepped forward. "You have arrived," he said, his accent heavy and lilting. "Our queen will be pleased."

I glanced over at Barren, expecting him to say something, but he stood as stiff as the columns that held up the palace's entrance.

"Come, come," the other man said, his arms jangling with oversized jewelry. He gestured to me like he was offering me a dance while his white-haired companion gave Laverne a peculiar look. Perhaps the Indian Ocean didn't see many sea lions in their casino.

"That's our cue, I guess," I said.

Leander was the first to make a move when the man with dancer-like movements blocked him with a bejeweled finger.

"No, no. You misunderstand," the man said, his finger wagging. "Outsiders are not permitted. We will take one guest to our queen."

I planted a hand on my hip. "Outsiders? Well, I guess this meeting is over, then, because I'm not going anywhere if all of us aren't welcome."

While the man with white hair bunched his eyebrows, the one with the jangly jewelry clapped his hands. "Another misunderstanding," he trilled, waving a woman over who carried red velvet bags in her arms. "It is with great pleasure that we welcome the esteemed royalty from other kingdoms into our establishment."

He gestured to Kai, and the woman shuffled over, handing him the first of the bags. "For you, the least of the Pacific's princes, a token of our gratitude for your visit." He mocked with every word, his accent making it all the more obvious. With a twirl, he turned to Leander. "And for you, the Atlantic's crowned deserter, a token."

The woman attempted to pass the second bag to Leander, but he let it slip right to the floor, his jaw set as a variety of chips and tokens scattered about the gleaming marble at his feet.

The dancer smiled like he hadn't noticed, spreading his arms with flair. "Our establishment may be humble, but we welcome you with open arms."

"*And what about me?*" Laverne demanded, and the way the duo's eyes flicked over to her confirmed they were both mermen. Her chest heaved with

a huff. “*Maybe I am royalty as well. You have no proof that I’m not.*”

The man with white hair hummed with doubt, and the glare she gave him was sharp enough to cut through glass. “*Sea lion royalty.*”

“Our mistake,” he said, his hand flicking through his feathery hair. “Feel free to help yourself to the deserter’s share.”

“*Hmph.*” Laverne scoffed, wrinkling her nose at the merman like she thought gathering up tokens and chips was far beneath her. Okay, she definitely thought that.

“Go, now. Treasures await you in these halls.” Jewelry glistening, the quick-tongued man gestured for me like it was his turn to collect me. “Now come, come. We must not keep our queen waiting.”

Leander’s arms folded around my shoulders. “Like she said, we’re coming with her, or she isn’t going at all.”

The men’s combined laughter bubbled over the noise of the crowd as I glanced up at Barren, wondering if he had anything to say about this. These were his people, his kingdom, after all.

“Ah! The tainted one may follow along, if you wish,” one of the men added. “Now excuse us...”

“The *tainted one*?” I repeated. It was possible I’d misheard him due to his accent, because what could he have meant by that?

Barren flinched. He gave Leander a hard look, every muscle in his neck tensing as he nodded. “No harm will come to her. I will make sure of it.”

Leander’s grip over my shoulders changed, and for a second, I wasn’t sure he would let me go.

“It’s fine, Lee, look around,” I said, shooing him off me. “We’re in a casino surrounded by people. What’s the worst that could happen?” I cringed as soon as the last word left my lips. Saying it aloud sure felt a lot like asking for trouble.

“Do not trust a word Queen Javalynn says,” Leander murmured, leaning in for only my ears to hear. He released my shoulders and gave Barren a nod. “Don’t fuck this up, Barren. We’ll be around if you need us. Right, Kaius?”

When Leander turned back, Kai was on the floor, scrambling for tokens and chips. “Uh, what?” Kai said, stuffing them into the velvet bag while Laverne held it open with its string.

“Come now,” one of the mermen said, impatience sharpening his melodic voice as he took a step forward.

“Fine,” I muttered. I was lightheaded from standing amid the flashing

lights, anyway. As I reached out to steady myself on Barren's arm, he pulled away from me as if my touch was as toxic as the lionfish Laverne had found earlier.

"Barren?" I asked, a sharp pain stabbing through my heart.

The white-haired mermen gasped, taking exaggerated steps backward.

"You mustn't," the adorned one said, his jewelry slapping him in the face as he brought a hand to his mouth.

But my attention was solely focused on Barren, leaving me nearly oblivious to everything else. He didn't want me touching him now? What was it about his kingdom that had him acting so strangely?

Though he turned away from me, Barren's deep voice carried. "Touching me is forbidden."

My jaw fell open. "What? *Why?*" It was forbidden? I'd been touching him, well, not all the time, but I'd done it a lot. Was it because he was a prince, or...

"My kingdom is superstitious. They believe that certain things can be passed on by touch." Barren's voice was as hard as stone, and I stared at the muscled back of his neck as he spoke. "I should have warned you, but I..." His voice trailed off, and somewhere, deep in the cracks of this stoic statue of a titan, I could hear all the pain he held within him. This was why he was walking so fast, why he was standing apart from us.

"Why would they think that?" I asked, sure that my voice was too weak to be heard over the commotion of the casino.

Barren didn't answer, but I had every intention of asking him about it later. As soon as I could.

The two mermen seemed to have pulled themselves back together, tempering their unease. "Step away from him, miss. As he said, it's forbidden."

"Forbidden?" My voice cracked with a bitter laugh. In five minutes, these assholes had managed to insult everyone that I cared about, and I found that I cared little about propriety or adhering to their kingdom's customs. "I'm a free mermaid," I said, seizing Barren by his arm. Only, instead of yanking him over to me like I'd planned, I only managed to lose my footing. *Freaking titan.*

The moment I regained my balance, my lip curled. "I have the freedom to disregard your customs and your superstitions." At least, I thought I did. Maybe. Whether it was legally true or not, there was no point in second-

guessing myself now.

Barren's muscles were solid, unmoving, but I clung to them like a remora to a leopard shark. "Come on, Barren," I said, nudging his side, hoping to spark something in him that would get him to move.

Was he mad? Disappointed? No—my gut told me this was the right thing to do. Even if my voice never called to him, his voice had called to me, and I wanted him to feel just as protected as he made me feel. Whatever it took.

I looked up, offering him my best smile. "Let's go meet with your queen."

Despite clenching his teeth, he nodded. My heart raced when he didn't pull away.

The two mermen appeared confused, but I maintained my composure even as rage built inside me. Why would a kingdom treat their prince like this? Rocci had mentioned a 'scandal with Barren's impairment,' and if that was the reason... I wasn't sure what I would do.

My heart shattered, thinking of the injustices Barren had endured at the hands of his own kingdom. It seemed the Indian Ocean was no better than the Atlantic.

"This way, please." With a twist, the mermen took off, leading the way through the casino.

Fury burned all the way up my throat, but I followed, clutching tight to Barren's arm.

"My sister is not going to like you," Barren said finally, his deep voice breaking through my thoughts. My stomach knotted until I noticed the hint of humor playing over his otherwise tense expression.

"Wait—the queen, she's... your *sister*?"

He nodded. "Mmh."

How had I not realized? It made sense, of course, but I couldn't recall him ever referring to her as anything other than 'his queen.'

I pursed my lips. Even though she was Barren's sister, was it terrible that I didn't care if she disliked me? Especially if it was because of something as ridiculous as not heeding their superstitions.

As we passed through the sea of gaming tables, my eyes lingered on the crowd. Here, deeper into the casino, alcohol seemed to flow as freely as the chips that were being thrown onto the tables. Workers I suspected to be merfolk slid through the throng, making sure the patrons were well distracted, whether by drink or their flitty outfits of gossamer and gold.



We descended a path leading to a secluded seating area recessed in the back of the dome, and with each new step, the lights dimmed and the noises muted. It was a much-needed respite from the overstimulation of the casino floor above.

A woman sat on a black leather couch, the centerpiece of the extravagant lounge. *Wow*. The dark hair cascading past her shoulders looked as if it had been strategically placed there for a painting. Except there was no canvas, no painter. Only her and us.

“Ah. You’re here.” She held a glass filled with a pale liquid, staring disinterestedly at its rim. “Better late than never, I suppose.”

An elegant sweep of gold crowned her head, and when her focus lifted from her glass, it struck me how much her dark eyes resembled Barren’s.

It was my first time seeing a queen, and she did not disappoint.

“My darlings.” The queen stretched out like a graceful pantheress, extending a gloved arm that both mermen took. I shifted uncomfortably, leaning into Barren as they doused her long black glove with dueling lines of passionate kisses.

She didn’t bother glancing our way before saying, “Sit.”

There were four of us here, yet somehow, I knew the command was meant for me. Only, just as I wouldn’t pull up a seat beside King Eamon, instinct told me I had no business sitting next to this woman.

Her gaze lifted from her devotees, catching on where I clung to Barren’s arm, and her dark eyes seemed to hollow. “Come,” she said sharply.

With one look, I knew Barren’s prediction had been right—the queen already didn’t like me. My nerves rising, I tried to take Barren with me, but he stood fixed on the stairs.

“Just you,” the woman said, her voice growing tight with impatience. “You are currently looking at our VIP area. Entry is restricted to those whom I have authorized as my guests.”

I was about to ask why a prince wasn’t considered a VIP when Barren’s arm pulled free from my grip. “Barren...?” I questioned as he started backing up the steps.

He shook his head, though his intense eyes seemed to hold his promise from earlier. *‘I won’t let anything happen to you.’*

With a forced gulp, I nodded up at him. I felt it deep in my chest—a promise that I trusted completely.

When I stepped into the lounge, Barren’s sister gave me a twisted smile.

She gestured to the seat beside her. “Sit with me.”

Reluctantly, I took a seat, though I kept my eyes on where Barren stood on the steps above. Even if this queen wished me harm, as long as he was nearby, everything would be okay.

She shooed the two men away with a flick of her gloved hand. “Leave us.”

“Yes, my queen,” they answered in unison. They bowed low, and I reminded myself that it was okay that I hadn’t greeted her with a bow. I was a free mermaid, and after all, even Barren hadn’t —

“My queen.” Barren bowed just as low as the other two mermen had, his arm flat against his side as he did it. My mouth fell open as all three of them left us, retreating up the steps. When Barren finally settled, he was standing all the way next to the gaming tables. Close enough to wave over but well out of earshot.

“Mmmh,” the queen hummed, and I bristled at the sound of it. *So similar to Barren.* “What do you think?” she asked, and when I turned to her, her dark eyes were lingering on where her two mermen attendants stood well away from her brother.

“Excuse me?” I asked, trying my best to read this woman. Her body language conveyed a sense of ownership, as if she thought she possessed everyone and everything in her vicinity. Including me.

The tip of her tongue toyed with the corner of her mouth, reminding me of a sea snake contemplating which prey to strike. “I’m to marry one of them.” She didn’t look particularly thrilled by the notion. “Which do you think I should choose?”

Was a queen truly seeking my counsel on two mermen I had scarcely encountered? I didn’t even know their names—not that I cared to know them. They both seemed terrible, and I had no doubt they would make awful kings.

When I didn’t immediately answer, she tutted. “I hate the thought of splitting them. They complement each other so perfectly, don’t you think?”

Was she serious? I went to eye the strangers when movement behind them caught my eye as a man in a black suit stood from a card table. The back of his broad shoulders flexed when he ran a hand over his dark hair, slicking it back.

Beside me, the queen laughed. “Ah. It seems you won’t be much help.” She swirled her glass before throwing back the drink, draining it down to the ice. “You have quite the wandering eye.”

I squirmed in my seat, my body tensing in response to her accusation. “If you’re so concerned over splitting them, why not marry both?” I said with a shrug. “You are the queen, aren’t you?”

She laughed even harder, the grating sound so different from Barren. Each of his hard-won laughs was throaty and genuine, nothing like the noisy crowing of his sister.

“And miss out on crushing one of their hearts?” She tutted again, going for another sip of her drink and scowled when she realized it was empty. “A queen must seek her amusement somewhere.”

With the swish of a hand, she summoned one of the mermen back over. The man’s jewelry bounced as he rushed down the steps.

“My darling,” she said, drawing out the words.

“My queen,” he replied, his eyes revealing a desire so deep it was uncomfortable to look at. She brought him close enough to toy with his dangling earrings. When he seemed a hair’s breadth from crawling onto her lap, I tuned them out by shifting my attention up to Barren.

Despite the distance, his unwavering gaze was on me. Had he even blinked once since leaving my side?

“My brother seems very taken by you.”

Startled by the queen’s words, I sat up even straighter. How long had I been staring at Barren? I hadn’t even noticed that the queen had sent the merman away. “R-really?”

Her eyes gleamed as her attendant returned with fresh drinks, though when he went to hand me mine, his hand swerved away at the last possible moment. Gasping, he twirled around and chose to sit the drink down on the low table in front of me before taking his leave.

*Strange.* Was I included in the superstition surrounding Barren now that I’d openly touched him?

The queen took a long sip from her fresh glass. “My brother’s conduct has been rather unusual as of late. It appears his attention is focused solely on you.”

I shrugged, though my eyes found Barren again, and sure enough, he was looking right at me.

When I glanced back at the queen, her eyes had narrowed. “It makes one wonder if he intends to betray his queen.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Barren brought me here, didn’t he? You’re the one who asked him to take me, right? Well, here I am.”

The queen sighed. “That, I did. But he was... hesitant.” She swirled her new glass, as if pondering. “Hesitancy is not something I tolerate. It leaves me no choice but to question his allegiance.”

“No, I—I guarantee Barren wouldn’t—” An abrupt slam cut me off, her glass against the table in front of us.

“And what do you know about Barren?” Rage flickered in her eyes as she leaned in, her voice compressing to a hiss. “My brother is broken, more worthless and pathetic than a bullray who’s lost its spine. He was only good for one thing—following my orders. Now tell me, why is it that Barren is looking at *you* when his loyalty is supposed to belong to *me*?”

The word ‘*broken*’ reverberated within me, penetrating my thoughts as if determined to stay. Barren, *broken*? I didn’t believe it. Even so, the word gripped me, boring into every corner of my being, willing my mind to accept it as fact.

The queen’s eyes flashed with a dangerous glint.

I clutched my head as tension built in my temples.

What kind of mermaid magic was this?

My knees almost gave out underneath me as I shot to my feet. “Barren is not broken,” I said, gasping out the words. “He’s not worthless. If this is you trying to get me to help you...”

My chest heaved—my heart was beating so, so fast. If Laverne were here, she would have seized the glass on the table and dumped it on top of the queen’s perfect, shiny head of hair.

Accompanied by a smirk, the queen’s magic seared me again, branding my insides with her lies. No—Barren was *not* broken. *Not* worthless. My fingers tangled in my hair, pressing against my scalp as if maybe I could claw the magic back out.

“Well, aren’t you resilient? Impressive,” the queen said, though her laughter was far too cruel. “But let me be blunt. I did not bring you here to play fetch. In fact, I believe it would be a challenge for you to even locate my trident.”

With my hands still muffling my ears, I stared down at her in disbelief as she continued, “Do I strike you as the type of ruler who would leave her most valuable possessions lying around?”

Leaning forward, she smoothed out the front of her black dress. “Here’s what I do want. I want you to continue living here on my island without a care in the world.”

“Right,” I said stiffly, lowering my hands as the effects of her magic seemed to wane. “I believe that.”

“As you should. You were unable to locate that fool of a king’s trident. What is his name?” She tsked, faking disappointment in herself. “Oh. King Eamon, perhaps.” I held my breath, going rigid, not wanting to reveal that we had been successful in locating the trident. “So, what would make me confident that you could find mine if I sent you down to look for it?”

“I don’t understand. If you don’t want me to get your trident, then why am I here?”

“Ah, now there’s the question I’ve been waiting for. I do not wish for you to collect *any* of the tridents. What I want is for you to live up here. Wait out the curse on land like the rest of us.” She waved a gloved arm, dismissive. “I care little about what it is you do as long as your legs remain dry. Those are my terms—stay here on land. Disobey them, and I order my brother to execute you.”

“*Execute me?*” Well, that sure was an abrupt and unexpected turn.

She shrugged. “And if he refuses, I’ll have him executed as well.”

My heart plummeted, rattling all of my organs on its way down. As much as I desperately wanted to dismiss her threat as empty, the ruthless, unyielding look in her eyes made it impossible not to believe her.

*Shit.*

“I cannot risk losing all that my kingdom has worked for here amongst humans. As you may have realized, the other kingdoms are naïve, desperate. There is no telling what one of those fools might do with a trident if you were to bring one up here on land.”

I stiffened. The logic was there, but I couldn’t bring myself to agree with someone who casually threatened our lives. “And what if another kingdom steals me away again? What then?”

“This island is under my complete control,” she said with a smirk. “Nothing happens without my knowledge, so do not think of pursuing the trident for Barren’s sake.” Picking up her glass, she took an annoyingly long sip before adding, “Even if you gave him my trident, he could never be ruler. This kingdom had the opportunity to welcome him as its king once already, and, well, you know how that turned out.”

“What...?” I whispered.

“They chose me, of course.” Her self-satisfied sneer was like a punch to the gut. “In their eyes, even a six-year-old merfry was more desirable than

him.” Her lashes lifted, as if maybe she finally spared him the briefest of glances. “Although I can’t blame them for wanting someone *clean*. Untainted.” She sighed as if reliving a fond memory. “No matter how much Barren wants power, this kingdom has already declared him unworthy.”

“It’s a shame,” I said flatly, causing the queen’s gaze to snap up from her glass.

Her expression turned cold. “Excuse me?”

“That you don’t know your brother at all,” I said, even as her eyes sharpened with what looked like murderous intent. Maybe my execution would come sooner rather than later. “It’s a shame for you, because Barren is worth getting to know.”

I glanced up at where Barren stood and felt my lips tug into a smile when our eyes met. “Although I can see why he might want to keep his distance from you.”

Turning back to her, I threw my hands up in an exaggerated shrug. “But what do I know? I’m just a free mermaid caught up in all this trident drama and undersea politics. You want me to stay dry on land? I’ll stay dry. Because, honestly, I don’t believe you’re worthy of wielding a trident. But just so your teeny crown feels a bit more secure there on your teeny head, I’ll let you in on something you obviously don’t know about Barren.” I leaned in, just to be sure she could hear me. “He doesn’t want your trident. He detests them. So, if you’ve got nothing else to say to me, I think we’re done here.”

Had I lost my mind? Probably. Here I was in her kingdom, surrounded by her followers, running my mouth like she hadn’t just threatened to use one of my mates to end my life. Sure, Barren had promised to protect me from harm, but I doubted he had considered the possibility of me starting a fight.

Wait—*my mate*. Barren hadn’t even confirmed that he was drawn to me, but I felt it. The undeniable bond between us, maybe even before the first time his voice called to me.

With my hands balled into fists, I lifted my chin high. “Well?”

Without a word, the queen set her glass down on the table. She sat back for a moment, assessing me. “For the lowly offspring of one of King Eamon’s dogs, you are quite bold.”

Then she stood, and I wasn’t ready for the sudden change in perspective when she rose to her full height. *Damn*. She looked like a bronzed statue of a goddess draped in black and gold. Their parents really must have been titans.

“You are free to take your leave,” she said, formal and stiff. “Dive for the

trident, if you wish. I will enjoy watching the light fade from your eyes as I order Barren to strangle your neck. Or perhaps a better punishment would be to have you watch him get strangled first. As I said earlier, a queen must seek amusement somewhere.”

Poseidon help me. This woman knew how to piss me off. “I wonder how you plan on doing anything to Barren when it appears that your entire kingdom is too afraid to even go near him.”

She scoffed. “My brother is not someone to get close to, yet you seem naïve of that fact. Why is that?”

I blinked at her, and the way her smirk grew had ice slithering down my back. “Ah. It seems he hasn’t told you. How interesting.” Reclaiming her glass, she lifted it to her lips, throwing her head back and draining the pale liquid down in one gulp. She slammed it back on the table. “Please, do come and have a chat with me once he tells you. Or, better yet, I could tell you right now what makes him such a *dirty, worthless* —”

I grunted as I covered my ears, tearing myself away from her presence by sprinting up the stairs. Her vile magic seemed to follow behind me, clawing at the back of my mind, desperate to leave its mark. *Dirty. Worthless.*

When I made it over to Barren, I could barely think.

“Are you okay?” It was Barren’s deep, gentle voice, but I couldn’t even look at him. Not yet. Not with his sister’s magic filling my head.

“No,” I whispered, my voice shaky. I wasn’t okay. I knew mermaids were monsters, but she was something else. Something worse.

“I need a minute,” I said, fighting against the magic invading my mind. I needed someplace far away, someplace quiet. “Where’s the—the restroom?”

“This way,” Barren said, and although he tried to keep his distance, I wrapped my arms around his.

*Dirty.* My mind screamed the word, but I fought against it by holding on to him even tighter. Barren *wasn’t* dirty. I knew that more than I knew anything.

“Sorry, Barren. I know she’s your sister, but she’s pretty terrible,” I said, wanting nothing more than to curse her.

Barren stifled a chuckle, but not before the sound managed to melt away some of his sister’s magic. “It might be better to hold off on disparaging my queen until a time when we aren’t surrounded by hundreds of her loyal followers.”

Oh—right.

“It’s fine. No one is close enough to hear us, anyway,” I mumbled, fastening myself to his side. If his kingdom was going to consider him dirty and tainted, then I was determined to be dirty and tainted, too. It seemed to work, and bodies readily parted for us as we made our way to a hallway tucked behind a pleated velvet curtain.

“I’ll wait for you here,” Barren said, and I gave him the best smile I could manage while his sister’s magic still loomed.

“Thanks. I’ll be quick.” I said, ready to do whatever it took to pull myself together.

I pushed my way through the crowd and finally arrived at the bathroom, where a mirror lined in an excessive number of lightbulbs awaited me.

Staring at my reflection, I took a deep breath. “So, Barren’s sister is a psychotic queen,” I mumbled, noting how one of my eyes was twitching. I hunched over an obnoxiously golden sink to splash water on my face, then pressed my eyes shut in concentration.

*Barren’s not dirty, not broken, not worthless.* Minutes passed, but I kept reciting the words, desperate to override what the queen had done to my brain. *Barren is amazing. He’s kind. He cooks for me. He cares for me—he cares for all of us.*

I kept it up until my tight muscles eased, and I was certain the last of her magic had drained away. With a final deep breath, I straightened, ready to face him again without fear of his sister’s lies coming back. Hopefully.

Was it glamour that she’d used on me, or something else? I didn’t think mermaids could be affected by glamour, but what did I know? I was an ex-mermaid with only the knowledge I’d picked up in passing from the palace maids.

Despite all the negatives, there was one good thing that came out of our meeting. The queen didn’t expect me to retrieve her trident. And although I didn’t trust the motives of a murderous tyrant, she was right about the chaos a trident could bring on land. Leander had proven that already.

When I reentered the hallway, I was scanning the crowd for Barren when a rush of something cold swept over my back.

“The heck...?”

With no further warning, black smoke flooded my peripherals. Coiling wisps wrapped around the hallway, and I bit back the urge to scream. The hallway was being consumed by shadows, but the people around us were laughing and talking, seemingly unaware. Frantic, my eyes raced to find



Barren among the crowd. Where... where was he?

*Barren—*

An arm wrapped in a black suit jacket encircled my waist. I stared down at it, too stunned to react as a forceful presence snuck up behind me, pressing into my back.

A voice invaded my ears, as smooth and all-consuming as the dark smoke that spread through the hallway. “Can’t stay out of trouble, can you?” The hand that had been gliding over my hip extended its reach, securing its hold around me. “It seems destroying the portal was a wasted effort.”

I shivered. Every part of the unseen man seemed to toy with my senses. His voice. The smoke.

This was magic, I was certain. Not like the queen’s magic, no. But dark magic. Familiar.

A cool breath brushed past my ear. “Did you miss me, little captive?”

Without giving me a chance to answer, my captor’s body crackled with an electrifying surge of magic, and the floor seemed to drop from underneath my feet.

With a final puff of black smoke, the magic consumed us, pulling us down into a shadowy abyss.



# CLAIRA



The very fabric of the universe seemed to shatter around me. I plunged into a realm suspended in shadows. Darkness assaulted my senses, infiltrating my lungs with its all-consuming embrace. The husky voice in my ear soothed, “Easy now.”

*Easy now?* Like I was some wild animal for him to snatch up and expect to tame? I started to thrash, but the unyielding pressure of his body against my back served as a reminder of which of us was in control.

*Dammit.*

I reared my head back to headbutt him just as shreds of the universe bled through the darkness, weaving back together around us. My feet found solid ground, and I took advantage of the loosening arm around my waist by throwing myself forward.

“*Miss you?*” I yelled, my voice breaking. My hand dove deep into my satchel, and with a clumsy slash of my arm, I twisted, brandishing my shell in front of me, ready to slice him up. “What are you even doing here?” Each word was a struggle, forced out through the smoky magic still lingering in my lungs. I was half gasping, half pleading, my emotions rising. “Why here? Why on the Indian Ocean’s island, of all places?”

A thick eyebrow, black as pitch, arched at me.

“My kind hail from these waters,” he said, casually slipping the hand that had just been around me into the front pocket of a pair of dress pants. He stood straight, his tall frame clothed in a tailored black suit, every slick line and dark contour underlining his fearsome presence.

“Dammit,” I muttered. The memory was hazy, but it felt like Leander had mentioned something about cecaelia living in the Indian Ocean.

And here one of them was—the sea wizard. A man of undeniable power.

Darkness seemed to embrace him, highlighting the otherworldly white of his eyes that gave away what he truly was, even in human form.

“Okay, you come from these waters, but we’re on *land*,” I threw back, my mind grappling with my next move. If Barren’s sister knew everything that happened on this island, had she known of the sea wizard? Did she have something to do with him taking me?

“Oh, I’m well aware.” Completely calm, he straightened the front of his suit like he hadn’t just used magic to rip through the universe. An unseen wind streamed around us, ruffling his hair.

“What are you doing?” I scrambled back a step, shuddering as black seeped into his irises. It was as if his eyes were absorbing the dark magic pooled around us, soaking up every last drop. “Stop it,” I warned, holding up my shell as the last of the magic faded from the air.

His white eyes had been the only thing that gave away his true nature, but now that they were black, he looked like a different creature entirely. Human, almost.

I wasn’t sure I liked it.

A bitter smirk formed over his pale lips. “I see you kept my *gift*.”

My eyes snapped to the shell I was clinging to, and—*shit*.

Heat flushed over my face, but I continued clutching the shell’s ribbed surface. It was the only weapon I had. “And I see you don’t look so tough without all your extra limbs and your trident,” I lied, my lips curling. “Where the hell are we?”

The air was damp, heavy with the distinct smell of salt water. I glanced around the room with a feverish intensity, taking in every detail. Only there wasn’t much to see. Abstract art, a fish tank that sat on a decorative console table. Travel worn carpet and textured burgundy wallpaper that made the narrow hallway feel even more cramped.

Where the heck had he taken us?

Wait—my eyes caught on the decorative sconces lining the walls. They looked perfect for bashing my sea wizard captor over the head with if it turned out my magical seashell knife had no effect on him.

The dark clothed man stood there, not giving up anything. I edged closer, my instincts teetering between fight and flight. “We aren’t in the casino, are we?”

While his gaze remained cold and unmoving, a grimace twisted his

mouth. “Your ability to solve riddles remains as impressive as ever, I see.”

His face seemed so different now that his eyes shared the same black as his hair. Sharp and chiseled angles that gave him an almost sculpted appearance. With a swift and confident glide of his hand, he slicked back his hair. “We’re not in the casino, no.” He took a step forward, and I raised the shell. The threat didn’t deter him. “Far from it, in fact.”

Fury flashed in his dark eyes, but what right did *he* have to be angry? “So good at riddles,” he said, his voice dropping to barely more than a hiss. “Yet you couldn’t decipher the meaning of a decimated portal and a clear warning of the dangers you’d be facing here.”

My mind flooded with images of the shattered portal fragments. The anguish on Leander’s face. “*You* destroyed the portal? Then, the eel...”

He touched the tip of a long finger to his lips, signaling me to keep the conversation quiet. “Guilty,” he mouthed.

“Why... why would you do that?” I all but yelled. He wanted quiet? Well, screw that. He might have had magic, but he didn’t have all the power here. “I was looking forward to teleporting, you *creep*.”

Maybe it was stupid of me to goad the man wearing a black suit that looked like it could have easily belonged to a mobster, but I didn’t care. I’d wasted so much time mulling over the sea wizard. Contemplating his true intentions.

Now, it was official. From here on out, I was considering him a threat.

“And teleported, you have,” he said, a black strand of hair falling over his eyes as his jaw lifted. Smirking like a true villain, he placed a hand high on his chest, a gesture to himself. “You’re welcome.”

Was he serious?

“You know that’s not the same,” I snapped back, my teeth grating. My hand twisted around my weapon as I imagined what would happen if the shell came in contact with his pale flesh. The Rook’s face had ripped apart effortlessly, but the sea wizard’s wide jaw was so solid, so distinguished. It was hard to imagine a knife sharp enough to leave a mark on it.

“It’s not?” His dark laugh lingered in the air like smoke. “And how many times have you teleported?”

“Well...” I gnawed at my bottom lip, attempting to formulate an answer.

“Well, while you think on that, I must inform the crown of your arrival.” He straightened his suit. “I’ll only be a moment.”

The *crown*? Shit.

I seemed to be popular with royalty today. Only, if this was cecaelia royalty I was about to meet, there was a good chance this meeting would turn into an execution.

In my mind, I could still see the Rook. His wails as I dragged my shell through his flesh.

I was still holding the shell in the air when the sea wizard turned, heading for a set of wooden doors behind him.

A shudder racked me. Even on land, he moved like a shadow. And when he slipped through the doors, leaving me alone in the hallway, a strangled sob tore up my throat.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

I whipped around and could have cried with joy. The doors behind me weren't barred.

*Time to make a run for it.*

But when I opened one of the doors, the bulky backs of two towering men blocked my only path to freedom. I closed that door so fast.

Okay—new plan.

I was stuck in the hallway, unable to move forward or backward, confined between two sets of doors. Stuffing my shell back into my bag, I whirled around, searching for an oversized air duct or some other equally unlikely escape route to present itself.

Nothing.

When I reached for a painting, imagining the possibility of a hidden window just waiting to be discovered underneath it, I knew I was really in trouble.

“Dammit!” I dropped the painting back in place, and my eyes widened as I noticed the fish tank below it.

In the center of the glass, a tiny sky blue and white speckled fish hovered. Its head lifted, its beady black eyes staring right at me.

A betta fish.

The longer I stared back at it, the more certain I was that the fish was, in fact, looking right at me. Tiny, intelligent eyes probing deep into my soul.

My stomach coiled.

*... Could it really be?*

“Shit,” I muttered, my panic rising. It seemed I wasn't the only one held captive here.

I plunged my hand into the tank without hesitation, and as my fingers

closed around the helpless fish, a hum vibrated next to me.

“Well, this is interesting,” a smoky voice said, wafting into my ear.

And instead of popping into the form of a magnificent merman, the fish in my hand bolted, its slick scales slipping through my fingers as my head turned to where the sea wizard peered over my shoulder.

“I, uh...” Embarrassment hit me like a wave as I held my hand down in the water. Despite the heavy smell of salt in the air, it seemed to be freshwater. The betta swam to the tank’s pebbled bottom, hiding from the psycho trying to snatch it up.

An ordinary fish in an ordinary fish tank.

“I was... hungry,” I said, the words surprising even me.

One of the sea wizard’s dark eyebrows lifted. “Hungry?”

“Um. Yeah.” Looking down into the tank, I plucked up a plant from the bottom. “Thought this was star grass,” I said, each word sounding more wooden than the last. “It’s... my favorite.”

Deafening silence.

The sea wizard moved behind me, a shadow shifting in the light. I shuddered as his arm grazed my back, reminding me he was very much real. He leaned in, surveying the plant. “It’s plastic.”

Water dripped from the decoration’s many stiff, neon green points as I held it up over the water. “So it is.” Could I have felt any more foolish? “My mistake.”

The cool vapor of his laugh brushed over my shoulder as I stuffed the plastic plant back into the bottom of the tank. I pinched my mouth shut, hating that the sound of his laugh wasn’t entirely unpleasant. “Come,” he said, moving back to the doors. “The crown is awaiting your arrival.”

“Of course they are.” I rolled of my eyes, wiping the tank water on the front of my pants. So much for my great escape. Barren had been right—it seemed the island really did come to life at night.

But before opening the door, the sea wizard seized my arm. “You keep playing right into our hands.” He threw the words at me like stones, his expression bordering on mockery. “So easy to manipulate.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” I jerked my arm away and was surprised when he readily let go.

The way his lips thinned as he reached for the door only pissed me off more. “Nothing,” he said dryly.

“No—please, do tell me what you wanted me to do differently,” I

snapped right back. “You’re the one who grabbed me out of thin air. Or do you consider me needing to use the restroom ‘playing into your hand’?”

The sea wizard turned to me fully, and the raw fury in his retort made my throat tighten. “Oh, we’re *far beyond* what I wanted, little captive.”

I glared back at him, my anger mounting. “So, that’s it? More cryptic words for me to decipher?” Was he incapable of speaking plainly? “And for the last time—I am *not* your captive.”

“No, you’re not,” he agreed, his anger rivaling my own. Then he took a deep breath, collecting himself. With a cold glare, he edged the doors open. “Now you’re hers.”

The doors opened, and a puff of humid air slapped me right in the face.

“Come in, come in.” A gentle, rippling voice, like delicate seashells rolling in the surf. “I’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival, dear child.”

Driven by an indescribable feeling, my feet carried me past the sea wizard and into the stuffy room. An unremarkable desk sat in the center of a dimly lit space, its surface covered in chaotic piles of papers and worn-out trinkets. Yet the room held a surprising addition—a hot tub tucked away in the corner.

Even more surprising was the woman lounging within its depths, a prominent smile spreading over her maroon lips as she regarded me. My eyes widened when I spotted a tentacle languidly caressing the water’s surface.

*Salt water.*

The water bubbled up around her curves, and steam rose in excessive amounts as she waded to the front of the tub. Emerald eyes dazzling in the dim light, she draped her thick arms over the hot tub’s edge. “Come closer, child,” she beckoned, a gentle command I found myself following.

It was strange how brittle her voice sounded compared to the smoothness of her plump face.

With a long fingernail, she lazily swirled a strand of deep burgundy hair sticking out of an overly messy bun atop her head. Despite her ageless features, thin lines of silver streaked through her hair, and when the matted strands shifted, it revealed a tarnished black crown hidden within the mass.

The knots looked so complicated that I had to wonder how long the crown had been stuck in there and if taking it off would require the use of a pair of shears.

It was at that moment I felt it—the weight of eyes on my back. I spun around to a couch hosting an assembly of striking young men.

*Oh. My. Goodness.*



There was no clothing between them, not even a strip.

They sat there, six in total, their eyes darkened and brooding. Every type of hair seemed to be present, ranging from jet-black locks cascading like a waterfall to shorter, tousled waves of sandy blonde.

Laverne would have gone rabid, foaming at the mouth to either jump on the couch with them or call them all shameless.

I whipped back around, but not before catching one of the men flexing, curling his spine as if stretching out his back. The others seemed to be wiping sweat from their brows, their chests rising and falling in subtle pants.

What exactly had I interrupted?

A playful cunning lit in the woman's emerald eyes. Two of her tentacles reared up, pulling her up the side of the hot tub. "I've been waiting to meet you, child. I am Queen Sagari, ruler of the Undersea." One of her back tentacles gave a wide flourish that sent sizzling drops of salt water spraying about.

"Queen Sagari," I repeated. A queen in a sheer black bathing suit. This sure didn't seem like a room fit for royalty to relax in. I glanced around the space with its torn wallpaper, dim lights, and molding ceiling tiles. A complete contrast to the luxurious casino I'd been stolen away from.

Her friendliness bordered on excessive, her focus fixed on me with an intense passion that left me stricken. My stomach rolled as I thought of the Rook again. In the queen's mind, I'd murdered not one, but two of her subordinates.

Emotion pulled at my vocal cords. "I assume you didn't bring me here for a friendly chat."

"Indeed, I have not," she said, pointing a sharp-tipped fingernail, still very much lounging in her hot tub. "Do you know how thoroughly we've searched for you, my child? Combing through both land and seas?"

I shifted uncomfortably, not sure how to answer that. My eyes caught movement, and I glanced over, catching the sea wizard slinking into the room. He quietly stood beside the men on the couch, blending into the room's shadows.

If he hadn't been out stealing me away from the merfolk, would he have spent his evening on the queen's couch, draped in nothing but the limbs of the men beside him?

My mind slipped into an image that I immediately regretted.

The queen chuckled, her voice becoming rough with amusement. "Sorry,

child. My pawns can be quite distracting.”

*Pawns?*

One of her tentacles curled, a come-hither motion, and my heart froze in my chest as the couch behind me creaked. The men passed me by, sending further chills through me as they formed a circle around the hot tub. A blindingly pale, very naked circle.

The queen caressed the underside of the man with the longest hair’s jaw, and I spun around, finding myself sinking in the sea wizard’s dark stare. He stood still in the shadows, seemingly oblivious to the queen’s call.

“Let me cut to the chase,” Queen Sagari said over the sound of water sloshing behind me. “I have been informed of an incident that recently occurred deep within the Atlantic.”

A wave of panic hit, leaving me dizzy. I moved a trembling hand to my bag, feeling for the comforting bulk of the shell hidden inside it. The sea wizard knew it was there, but the others didn’t.

“Figured that was why,” I mumbled, turning to see four of the men helping Queen Sagari out of the tub. This might have been the strangest execution trial ever.

Her tentacles hit the ground with a wet slap that caused three of her men to transform, exploding into writhing knots of black limbs that they were quick to tame.

I couldn’t help but gawk, amazed to see that, unlike merfolk, they were not helpless after transforming on land. The queen’s sheer bathing suit fell past her hips, stopping where her dark limbs held her perfectly upright on the ground. Eight legs in seamless movement.

Now that she had her balance, she took a smooth glide forward, leaving the support of her men behind to venture over to the desk. “This is my office,” she said, digging through one of the desk’s overfilled drawers.

“*Your* office?” My eyes caught on the speckles of mold working their way up the walls. “But why would a queen—?” When I noticed she had stopped her rummaging to glance up at me, a gasp caught in my throat. For a moment, it was as if her round features had sharpened, her skin taking on a monstrosly gray hue, but when she looked all the way up, her smile was perfectly kind.

“Why, for leasing out rentals, of course.” As she spoke, one of her tentacles shuffled over the desk top before picking up a length of paper it stretched out for me to take.

I took it, and the tip of the tentacle curled to give me a little wave, leaving me wondering if it had moved of its own accord as I scanned over what it had passed into my hands. Lush tropical blooms accentuated the corners of the glossy paper.

“Luxury condominiums,” the queen said, her voice going husky. “It’s quite the booming business.”

I forced myself to swallow before nodding in agreement, hoping to avoid any more insults. “It looks beautiful,” I said, thumbing through the brochure.

The tentacle snatched it away with a forceful jerk that belied the queen’s pleasant smile. “Indeed, it is. *Ah-ha.*” She pulled out something flat and silver from the desk’s drawer, and my insides clenched.

“But before we talk business, child, there is a minor matter we must first attend to.” Her voice dropped, hitting a dramatic note I wasn’t ready for. “Your *silence.*”

She slapped the object on the top of the table—a silver dagger.

My throat constricted, a lump forming as I took in the weapon’s sharp, honed edges.

“Puppet,” Queen Sagari shrieked, ice forming over the word as she tossed the dagger toward the sea wizard with a flick of a tentacle. He stood still, letting it ricochet off the wall above the couch beside him with a dull clank before he retrieved it.

The sea wizard straightened, squaring his shoulders. Then he stepped up to me, dagger in hand. I could barely think—barely move. His face was a hard plaster mask, completely unreadable. He looked every bit the threat I’d wondered him to be.

Queen Sagari’s laughter boiled over the roar of the hot tub. “Look at you, trembling like a stalk. My puppet is perfectly tame.”

*Tame?* The sea wizard was unpredictable chaos and riddles. The complete opposite of tame.

I clenched my bag, taking backward steps until my back pressed against the doors, hating how my fingers shook. Was I really going to have to fight him? The sea wizard, with his imposing height and dark magic, against *me*? I wasn’t even sure if my weapon would be useful.

“Now, don’t be dramatic,” the queen said, tentacles curving as she eased down into a chair behind her desk. “It’s just a prick, child. One insignificant drop of blood. You won’t even miss it.”

“My blood?” I squeaked, and with a *pop*, the queen was seated, propping

two thick legs up on her desk. That friendly smile was far gone, replaced with something sinister. Bordering predatory.

“Yes, yes. One drop to ensure your silence. Can’t let the merfolk know we’re hiding right under their noses, now, can we?”

So Barren’s sister hadn’t known the sea wizard was going to take me, after all. My stomach tightened—then there was no way of Barren finding out where I was or even that I’d been taken. “You want my blood?” I asked again. “You mean you’re... not going to kill me?”

“Kill you?” The queen howled a brittle laugh. “You’re worth so much more to me alive, dear child.”

I wasn’t sure I liked the sound of that. “I don’t understand. Your Rook...” I let the name slip without thinking it through, and the queen shifted, throwing her legs down to the floor.

“Ah, my Rook. You must forgive me, child. I put little thought into those I put in charge.” She held up a sharp finger, her crown knocking around its cage of knots as she shook her head. “A flaw of mine, I recognize, but I judge the men I surround myself with on a strict set of qualities that do not always account for intelligence.” Then she shrugged, tossing some scraggly strands of wet hair that had fallen from her bun back behind her shoulder. “You understand.”

I struggled to hold back a gag. I wasn’t sure what quality she’d seen in the Rook worth keeping nearby.

“So, you’re saying you didn’t abduct me for revenge?” I asked, eyeing the sea wizard for answers. Although he held out the dagger, his face was a cold, blank canvas. I narrowed my eyes.

All of his personality seemed to be missing, leaving him a vacant shell of the powerful man that had wrapped his arms around my back, whisking me into the shadows.

No wonder everyone called him the queen’s shadow puppet—he was playing the part well.

“Now, a drop of your blood, please,” Queen Sagari crooned. “A simple spell to keep our presence hidden. It’s just good business, you see.”

My hands clenched. “And if I refuse?”

“Then I cannot let you leave. But that would make this business transaction quite messy. Trust me, dear child, we do not want that.”

The sea wizard’s sudden, probing voice startled me. “Your finger.” He held a hand out to me, the dagger in the other.

Only moments ago, he'd blamed me for playing into their hands, but when I searched his eyes for a hint of what he expected me to do, his expression remained neutral.

"I—" Now I was really panicking.

"Ah, my puppet scares you. Adorable." The queen rose to her feet. When her pawns came up beside her for support, she shooed them away. "There's nothing to fear. As I said, he is perfectly tame."

Queen Sagari came around her desk with a cautious gait, the wood creaking under her weight as she leaned against it for support. "My authority over him is absolute, you see. He cannot do a single thing against my command."

"A common belief among royals," I said bitterly, thinking of Barren's sister and her need for control. I lifted my chin. "They can't stand to think that those underneath them have minds and wills of their own."

"Ah—but this is different." Queen Sagari clapped her hands, and a quake worked through the sea wizard's body. "It seems a demonstration is in order."

His lips parted, letting slip a shuddering gasp for breath.

As the queen leaned back, her gaze fixed on the sea wizard, the glint in her eye making my insides twist. "I require your blood, puppet." The sweetness in her voice only made the horrifying command more chilling. "Show it to our guest, so she might know she has nothing to fear from you."

Suffocating magic seemed to fill the room, draining the air. The sea wizard's teeth grit, and the hand holding the dagger trembled as he turned it in on himself. But more shocking than that was the black halo of magic forming over Queen Sagari's head, emanating from her tarnished crown.

"*Mmph.*" I could just make out the sound of the sea wizard's resistance as he lifted the edge of the blade flush with the side of his neck.

Tension gripped his body as dark magic slithered toward him, sinister tentacles that coiled around his shoulders. Veins bulged along his neck with the effort of his struggle, yet an otherworldly force seemed to manipulate his hand, guiding his actions. As the first drops of crimson stained the blade, a mocking laughter echoed through the room with twisted delight.

"See! There's nothing to fear, dear child," Queen Sagari said as the sea wizard held the dagger to his neck, fighting against it but somehow driving the blade in deeper. "He is under my complete control."

The sea wizard's eyes flickered with white. I stared in horror, realizing

that he was attempting to call on his magic to stop it, but the wound only widened.

“Stop,” I said, a feeble plea. A thick stream of blood flooded down his neck, soaking his black suit and making my stomach weak. “I get it, so *please*.” When she did nothing, my panic built.

Pain etched over his face, his cheeks sunken and hollowed out, but it didn’t stop. It couldn’t stop. Not without the queen saying so first. “Stop it! *Please!*”

“That will do, puppet,” the queen said finally, and when the dagger fell to the ground with the sea wizard’s gasp, I felt my own breath catch in my throat.

Poseidon help him, I’d never seen so much blood.

He fell forward, retrieving the dagger with a grunt, inadvertently smearing blood over the floor as he did it.

The queen *tsked*. “I suppose we can’t use that now, can we?” She went back around her desk, rummaging through a new drawer. “Here we are. Puppet,” she said before tossing him something new across the room. This time, he caught it.

When he turned back to me, a fountain pen was clenched in his fist.

“Your finger,” he said, an uncharacteristic rasp in his voice. Blood seeped freely from his wound, saturating the front of his suit, but he didn’t bother applying pressure to the gash.

My heart felt wrung out, warped from conflicting emotions. It’d been my fault, hadn’t it? My doubt in his queen’s control had been the reason for the pain the sea wizard had to endure.

I stared down at the fountain pen, noting the remnants of ink left behind from previous use. The tip was sharp enough to prick a finger. But before I held out my hand, I asked, “What will the spell do?”

I didn’t expect the sea wizard to be the one to answer. “Our location and this meeting are to be kept hidden.”

The queen slammed a desk drawer shut. “Come now. I’m a busy woman. We do not have all night.”

I swallowed. Neither did I. And while I didn’t like the thought of being under a spell, a finger prick seemed far better than an execution.

“Fine,” I whispered, holding out a finger. Leaning forward, the sea wizard’s cold hand closed around mine. When he looked down at me with his darkening eyes, it was like the rest of the room had disappeared.

“One poke,” he said, the rasped words only meant for me. I winced at the bite of the pen’s tip as it punctured my skin. A dot of blood formed over the tip of my pointer finger, and he swiped over it with the press of his thumb.

His eyes flashed white, and the air thinned as my blood was eaten up by a rush of magic smoke. And then he was gone, turning from me, returning to his corner of shadows.

Queen Sagari’s smile curled. “Excellent,” she said, her hips swaying as she moved toward me. “Now, dear child... Let’s talk business.”





## CLAIRA



**M**y gaze followed the drips of blood over to the sea wizard when the queen seized my chin, angling it up in the light. I swallowed nervously, watching her smile deepen as she studied my face.

Crisp wrinkles, as delicately thin as tissue paper, feathered out from the corners of her eyes, making me wonder how old she truly was.

“What business do you have with me?” I asked.

The sheer delight in her grin made me question if I was ready for her answer. Her covetous gaze roamed over me like I was already one of her trinkets. A fanciful bauble or a toy collected for her amusement. One she seemed eager to put to good use.

But what purpose could I serve here? My one strength was worthless to them. The cecaelia weren’t cursed. They could go underwater as they pleased.

Wait—

A knot of dread tightened in my gut. “If this is about the tridents...”

Queen Sagari cut me off with a laugh. “Poseidon’s relics?” Then she scoffed. “What good are they to me?”

“I overheard your soldiers. They were searching for the other kingdoms. Why, if not for the tridents?”

“The oceans were empty, not a single shimmery mer in sight,” the queen said with a shrug. “Can you blame us for exploring territories that had once been beyond our reach?”

She was lying—the tridents were the most useful objects in the entire ocean, and the Rook had proven that cecaelia could use their magic. It would be foolish of her not to want a trident’s power.

My teeth grit as I remembered the way King Eamon's trident had looked wrapped in the Rook's tentacles. The cecaelia's presence had left the palace in utter ruin. "You were doing more than exploring," I accused. "The gems, the corals. Your soldiers, they stripped the palace walls down to nothing. And your Rook, he..." My voice broke away as she waved a hand, as if to clear the air of all my grievances.

"Believe me when I say that our actions were not motivated by ill will, child. We were searching, yes. Can you imagine how frightened and confused we were to wake one morning and find the oceans empty? We scoured the waters for a sign of what happened to our dear neighbors, those glittery merfolk. You see, it was vital to determine whether their misfortune might one day drift down to the Undersea. And do you know what we found?" She released my chin with a flourish and spun around, her swimsuit slapping against her wet thighs as she swayed back over to her desk. "Turns out, they hadn't vanished. They'd simply abandoned their place in the sea."

She grabbed a trinket—a brass globe that rotated on its axis—and ran a long nail over its tarnished surface, causing it to spin. "So, did I permit my soldiers to salvage anything they deemed valuable from the merfolk's former riches? Yes. Indeed, I did. But is scavenging really so terrible, child? The merfolk had abandoned it, after all."

"You know they didn't mean to leave those things behind. Those kingdoms were their homes," I cut in, but my retort seemed to bounce right off her neatly shrugged shoulders.

"Did I know that?" She drew out the question, her eyebrows soundly raised. "As you may have observed, our kingdoms are not currently on speaking terms."

Sighing, she dropped the globe back on her desk. "Sure, here on land, we work merely a tentacle's curl away from the merfolk. Hidden right underneath their upturned noses," she said, bitterness punctuating every word. "But only for as long as they believe us to be nothing more than pathetic humans entranced by their glamour. If they knew of our true nature, child, they would not permit us to stay on this island, which I might add, was inhabited by our kind well before the merfolk came to use it."

"Poseidon's little followers think they're so clever," one of the queen's pawns spat out, his voice as abrasive as a shard of sea glass. The rest of the men around the hot tub jeered along with him.

*Ugh.* I would have really appreciated it if they'd found some clothes

before calling my attention over to them again.

Instead of reprimanding them for their outburst, a shrewd look passed over Queen Sagari's face. "Clever enough to get themselves cursed," she added, causing them to howl with laughter. "And what a pity that was. But some good did come from this dreadful curse."

She fixed her excited gaze on me. "An opportunity to gain the merfolk's trust."

"Do you really believe King Eamon would ever trust you?" I asked dryly. "Or did you forget you gave the order that destroyed his palace?"

"Once we cure the merfolk's blight," she sang back to me, "they will trust us without hesitation."

The cecaelia wanted to *cure* the merfolk? Nope. I wasn't buying it.

"And now our long search for a cure has finally found its end." Her smile seemed almost crazed as she returned to seize my chin again. "A day of glory awaits. Soon they will acknowledge us."

This time, I jerked away from her touch. "I'm failing to see how you think you've found a cure or what I have to do with any of this."

"Dear child..." Unconcerned by my rejection, she raked a long nail across my cheekbone. "You are unaffected by their blight, are you not?" A thread of terror slithered through me when she sauntered over to the hot tub to swirl that same nail over the water's bubbling surface. "Shall we test it and see?"

Was she going to make me transform in front of everyone here to prove it? *Dammit*. In my panic, my eyes snapped over to the sea wizard.

"There's no need," he spoke up almost immediately. Although he stood tall, his voice was strained with pain, revealing the extent of his injury.

Rather than showing remorse for his condition, the queen's eyes narrowed. Her pawn's earlier interjection might have been well-received, but the sea wizard's disruption was not. "I do not recall giving you permission to speak freely, *puppet*."

His eyes were growing increasingly hollow as blood continued to seep down the front of his suit. "I reported all that I saw of her tail. She remains unaffected by the merfolk's curse. You have my word."

Slinging the salt water from her fingers, the queen moved back over to me to further scrutinize my legs. "How fortunate for us that the blight spared her," she mumbled.

"You think I could somehow... help with a cure?" My head shook—sure,

my touch had an effect on the curse, but that didn't mean I could break it for good.

... Could I?

"It's not possible," I asserted. The cecaelia didn't know me—didn't know how I lacked the magic normal mermaids possessed. Once they found out, they would realize I was no use to them at all.

"Oh, but it is." Queen Sagari's crown knocked around as she threw her head back to laugh. "Anything is possible with magic, child. Up until now, the merfolk have treated us as a threat. Pushed us down deeper into the sea's forgotten hollows. For centuries, we've remained hidden in the cramped darkness while the merfolk frolic in the open waters. Now, once we have a cure, that will change."

Her resolve was unwavering, as if she had complete faith in her prediction. But would the merfolk truly be grateful?

Yeah—not likely.

The queen tutted. "You could not imagine how degrading it is, being treated as if you are not meant to live in the very ocean you were born into."

A wave of emotion caused my throat to constrict, but I stayed silent.

"Consider yourself lucky for not having to endure the anguish that we cecaelia face every day," she continued, a gleam in the depths of her emerald eyes. "You, my dear, shall bring an end to this blight. And once it's cured, there will be no more hatred, no more fear. Only equality between merfolk and cecaelia."

My head was spinning—no, she couldn't be right. "You make it sound so simple, but I—I don't have magic. I can't be the cure," I said, but her face lit up like I'd already agreed to the entire scheme.

"You will barely have to do anything. Allow us to examine you, your innate abilities. Let us discover that special something that makes you so resistant to the blight. Then, we will simply replicate it and hand the spell over to the kingdoms. We won't take all the credit, of course," she said with a wry grin. "I'm certain the merfolk will be quite pleased with your valuable contribution. Maybe even revere you as a hero. A real savior. How exciting."

Revere me as a *hero*?

Queen Sagari knew little about the nature of merfolk, it seemed. King Eamon was more likely to imprison me than he was to praise me, even if I broke the curse for his entire kingdom. "So, the reason you abducted me, brought me all the way here, was to use me to break the curse?"

Now why did this situation seem familiar?

“Necessary, I assure you. As I said, the merfolk are unaware of the business we conduct here on this charming little island.” She snapped her fingers. “Now that you’ve heard my proposal, I shall give you time to think it over. My puppet will return you to your dear companions. Don’t forget to watch what you say, dear, or the magic will do it for you.” She dismissed me with a wave of her long fingernails.

“Oh. And puppet,” she called. “Ensure our guest has the means to contact us if she decides to take advantage of this fabulous opportunity.”

While I struggled to comprehend all that was happening, the sea wizard appeared next to me, leading me toward the exit with a gentle but firm hold.

“Wait—you’re giving me a choice?” I called back, noting the dark cloud of magic emanating from deep within her hair.

The queen shrugged, her regal posture relaxing as she ambled back to her corner hot tub. “I’m a busy woman. I have no interest in coercion; my time is too precious.” Her voice melted into a purr as she met up with the closest of her men.

I couldn’t believe it—she was really letting me go. Giving me a choice. The merfolk hadn’t granted me that luxury.

The sea wizard opened the doors and escorted me out, leaving the queen and her unusual office behind us.

The moment we were through the doors, he slipped something hard into my hand. Looking down, I found a small shell—a delicate abalone with a smooth, pearly cream finish—resting in my palm.

“Use it to contact us,” he said, clearing his throat to cover the lingering rasp in his voice. If cecaelia were anything like merfolk, it would take a day or two for his wound to fully heal.

The hot tub noises ceased once the doors closed, and already, the air felt easier to breathe in.

Doubt lingered as I turned the shell around in my hand. “To use? How?” It looked ordinary enough. Pretty, even. Curious, I held it up to my ear, wondering if maybe it worked as some sort of shell phone, when an impatient hand plucked it straight from my grip.

When I looked up, the sea wizard’s eyes were narrowed. “You crush it. When you’re ready to contact us,” he instructed, though I didn’t appreciate his condescending tone.

It was a freaking *shell*. How was I supposed to know how to use it?

He let out a frustrated sigh and loosened his tie. “And make sure you’re alone when you use it,” he added, undoing the top of his suit with angry jerks, as if it had been suffocating him.

“Crush the shell when I’m alone. Got it. You’ll take me back to the casino now, right?” I asked, holding a hand out for the shell. Not that it mattered—I had no intention of ever using it.

My eyes were drawn to the gash on his neck as he placed the pearly shell back into my hand. Now that the top of his suit was undone, I could see the full extent of his wound.

*Damn.* How was he still standing?

“It needs pressure,” I said, opening my bag to slip the dainty shell inside it.

I hadn’t thought it possible for him to look any more irritated with me, but he managed. “Pressure is normally what one uses to crush things, yes,” he said with a scowl. “I polished it thin. Trust me, it won’t take much.”

My lips pursed as I began searching through my bag. “I’m not an idiot. I was talking about your neck.”

There had to be some way to stop the bleeding, but unless I wanted to peel down wallpaper or ask him to strip his shirt all the way off, our options were limited. Sighing, I dug through the bottom of my bag.

I pulled out the swim wrap I’d packed and took a deep breath, mentally bidding it farewell, before leaning up to reach his neck.

He took a startled half-step back at my approach but didn’t stop me when I pressed my wrap against his wound. Warm blood pooled under the fabric. Although it wasn’t very absorbent, I knew I could never wear it again. *Oh well.*

The sea wizard’s lips tightened as I added additional pressure, and my great sacrifice was met with only a stiff, “Oh.”

“*Oh?* That’s it?” With a sharp glare, I applied perhaps a bit too much pressure. “I think what you meant to say was *thank you.*”

But instead of expressing gratitude, he stood rigid before me, his lips firmly shut. Figured.

“I’m not sure why I’m even helping you,” I grumbled, but as I spoke, my stomach twisted with the unwanted burden of guilt.

Queen Sagari may have had a sweet smile, but she was just as cruel as any other king or queen of the sea. A blade to the neck, just to prove to me his loyalty? Had I not provoked his queen, maybe he might not have —

I nearly lost my footing as the sea wizard leaned into my hand. He cracked a grim smirk, an expression as darkly bitter as he was. "I don't recall asking for your help, little captive."

Instead of moving away, I kept the pressure steady by resting my forearm on his shoulder. "I don't enjoy seeing anyone get hurt," I said, matching his bitterness. "Why stay loyal to someone who would use your pain to prove a point?"

I felt the warmth of blood trickling down my arm and soon realized that my clothes were also dotted and smeared. *Shit.* Was it from when he'd ushered me out of the queen's office?

His porcelain throat bobbed underneath the weight of my hand. "Why stay loyal to those who never cared for you until they found a use for you?" he asked, the words devoid of any warmth.

"Put pressure on your own damn wound," I spat out. But before I let go of his neck, my eyes fixated on a black streak that was nearly hidden under the blood oozing down the open flap of his collar.

*What the heck?*

Before I could think better of it, I'd lifted the flap. My hand brushed over the top of his chest, smearing away blood to expose more of the pattern etched on his skin.

My breath caught.

Crimson streaks nearly concealed it, but there it was. The dark, ominous tip of a trident.

I held back the layers of his suit to stare at the marks. My pulse hammered, a fierce gallop in my ears that distracted me from how the sea wizard's face loomed ever closer to my own.

His square jaw tilted, an enticing rumble in his smoky voice as he murmured, "See something you like?"

My palm, sticky and smeared in his blood, froze over his bare chest.

I raised my chin up to discover his eyes were far from empty. They pulled me right in, their alluring darkness so captivating I couldn't summon the strength to move away. "No," I whispered, my voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart.

He took a sharp breath, his nostrils flaring.

"Careful," he said, a smooth warning I felt all the way in the pit of my stomach. His mouth hitched into a smirk, a roguish flash of straight, white teeth. "Or I might be tempted to keep you."

“What? No.” Flustered, I slid my hand free from his suit. Was it possible cecaelian men possessed the same charm as mermen? It would explain why my skin was so hot, my face so flushed. “I was... admiring your tattoo,” I said, cringing. As far as lies went, it wasn’t a smooth one.

The sea wizard’s chin tilted, and for a moment, I wasn’t sure he would accept my lie. “Ah. No tattoos.” He gave a short, bitter laugh. “Just a lot of blood.”

My heartbeat quickened. “Oh. My mistake.” Was this another one of his tricks, or could he truly not see the mark on his skin? I was certain it was a trident—the same one he’d held underwater, by the steep curve of its tip.

Did that mean he’d stabbed himself with it since the last time I’d seen him?

But before I had the chance to straighten out my thoughts, his voice rumbled. “Time to go.”

“Wait, my clothes,” I said, panic rising. I was smeared with blood, looking like I’d disappeared to go on a damned stabbing spree. “I can’t go back like this.”

“I’m sure you can figure out a solution.” His arm slid low, hooking around my waist and pulling me up against him. Fantastic—even more blood. His searing gaze followed the deep red stains dotting the top of my shirt. My insides turned to liquid, the heat from it rising up my face. “If not,” he said slowly, like his tongue was toying with the words. “Allow me to assist.”

My lips parted. His eyebrows quirked as he awaited my answer, but I couldn’t find the words. Now that he’d shed his docile puppet persona, he was too close, too bold for me to properly gauge.

“No?” he asked with a deep hum that brought me back to when he’d bound me to the walls of King Eamon’s dungeon cavern. I couldn’t help but arch my back as his thumb stroked over the column of my spine. “You wish to return covered in my blood?”

I shook my head. “Please, I...” The words tore out of me, but what I was pleading for, I wasn’t sure.

With that, he chuckled. Darkness drained from his eyes, leaving a stark white that matched his smirk. With a sudden lash of dark magic, the air pulsed with energy. The floor vanished in a haze of smoke. Only this time, when the new surroundings materialized around us, my feet did not find the ground.

Off-balance, I jerked forward. I seized a desperate hold of the sea



wizard's shoulders, but his arm hooked around me kept me from falling.

We'd materialized, suspended in the middle of the air. Well, *I* had. The sea wizard was perfectly balanced, the end of his black shoes expertly braced against a smooth edge of glass. He held his other arm far above his head, grasping the long pole of a skylight that ran parallel to the ceiling.

Lights and finery glittered overhead, and I looked up, instantly dizzied by the circular mural that sprawled above us.

He'd teleported us next to the *damned ceiling*.

Which meant the glass he was standing on was...

I glanced back down, and immediately regretted it, my stomach rolling.

Yep. A giant freaking tank of water.

The sea wizard held me there, dangling me over the ledge, his white eyes more piercing than the surrounding lights. When his lips finally parted, his voice was steeped in dark humor. "Not the solution you were hoping for?"

And then, he let go. I fell straight down, a cold rush hitting as I splashed into the enormous tank of water below.



## CLAIRA



When I resurfaced, a long string of curses accompanied the water that shot out of my mouth. Rage boiled inside me. *This* was how the sea wizard planned to take care of my blood-splattered clothes?

Pulling me close, toying with me with smooth words... It seemed so obvious now that I should have seen something like this coming.

“Fucking *creep*,” I spat out as I tossed the wet hair back from my face.

Wait—where was my bag? Had I lost it when he dropped me? Treading water, I searched around me, dreading the long way down to the bottom of the tank. I was a passable swimmer with legs, sure, but I’d never dived in water deeper than a standard backyard pool.

“Quite the foul tongue you have,” a smooth voice called from above, and my lips immediately drew together.

Of course, the sea wizard hadn’t vanished yet. Why wouldn’t he want to watch me flounder?

“Stick around, and I’ll show you a foul tongue,” I threw back up at him. It was far from a clever retort, but I was still recovering from the initial shock of the fall. For a casino on an island, this water was freaking *cold*.

Black wisps of magic rippled off the sea wizard’s shoulders as he leisurely braced on the skylight above me. “Forget about this?” he asked.

My eyes widened. Amidst the haze of magic smoke, a long, black trident came into view, my bag’s strap looped over one of its lengthy prongs. “Thought I’d keep it dry for you,” he admitted, extending the weapon out over the water for me to take.

My mind whirled, and my bag was suddenly the last thing on my mind.

Was he really holding the same trident I'd seen concealed within his body only moments ago?

"But, I—you—" It didn't make sense. I'd seen the marks on him. How was this possible?

One of the sea wizard's eyebrows arched, and his trident sagged until the bottom of my bag dipped into the water. "Not interested in your things?" And as abruptly as the black trident had appeared, it vanished into threads of smoke. My bag dropped, and I barely had the sense to grab it before it could sink.

When I looked back up, the sea wizard had a hand over the wrap I'd put against his neck. "Thank you for this," he said in a tone bordering on sarcastic, making it impossible to tell if he was thanking me for the wrap or because he'd gotten the wound in the first place.

"Wait, but—your trident." As I spoke, the air grew colder. Streams of dark magic flowed from the tips of his fingers, and all at once, it hit me—he was about to teleport.

"Shit, wait!" I shouted, desperate for him to stay. If he could remove the trident from his body freely, I needed to know *how*. If there was a way to get the trident out of Leander, break the ties, then he wouldn't have to suffer, would he?

"Don't go." I was practically begging. I couldn't let him leave. Not yet.

The left side of the sea wizard's lips tilted, somewhere between a smirk and a snarl. "Afraid you'll miss me, little captive?"

My heart pounded so hard I could barely breathe. "No, I —"

"I'd warn against using the shell to call on us, but you seem to have a habit of disregarding my warnings," he said, cutting me off. Magic swelled around him, causing his white eyes to flash in the darkness. His smirk grew. "Always a delight."

"No! *Wizard!*"

But he was already gone, swallowed up in a cloud of black smoke. "Poseidon's balls!" I yelled, slapping the surface of the water as the smoke dispersed. My heart still hammered. I tried my best to calm down before searching for my way out. Even if the sea wizard had knowledge that could save Leander, that didn't mean he would tell me.

"Dammit!"

A random head popped up beside me, causing me to startle. It was a merman with a heart-shaped face and eyelashes long enough to cradle heavy

beads of water. His long, dark hair flowed around him as he held a transparent tube between his lips.

When he removed it from his mouth, his accent surprised me as much as his arrival had. “Miss? How did you get here?”

“I... got lost,” I stammered, knowing full well how idiotic that must have sounded. The elevator or stairs that led to the top of this tank were probably closed to patrons.

But instead of questioning me, the merman nodded and pointed with the hand holding the tube over to the far side of the tank. “There’s a rope, miss.”

I looked over, and sure enough, a knotted rope hung over the corner of the tank. “Thank you,” I said, having flashbacks of gym class as I secured my bag over a shoulder.

When I reached the rope, my arms welcomed the exercise. It wasn’t hard to lift myself out of the tank and onto the narrow platform beside it. It ran along the side of the tank, with a mesh bottom that made my stomach queasy.

“That’s lovely,” I mumbled, noticing how the metal bowed underneath the weight of the oxygen tanks sitting beside me. It was obvious the casino’s construction didn’t factor in the possibility of the merfolk getting cursed.

A pile of towels and an assortment of clothing piles were also present, and although I was soaked, I let them be. It wasn’t the merfolk’s fault that I’d dropped into the middle of their performance.

But before I took off, I checked my bag and was thankful to discover that both shells were still inside it. “Damn sea wizard,” I grumbled, feeling dizzy from the height. Maybe showing up covered in blood would have been the better option. Despite his grand plan, my shirt was still somewhat stained, but at least it looked more like a tie-dye effect and less like I’d gone on a murdering spree.

Crawling on my knees, I tried to ignore the light seeping through the mesh as I followed the length of the platform. “Stairs. Thank Poseidon,” I breathed out when I reached the end. But my relief was short-lived when I got to my feet and realized the stairs were as shoddily built as the platform.

Also, they seemed to be... vibrating?

*Nope.* I didn’t like that at all.

I stepped down between walls that were insanely narrow, painted a dark shade that rivaled the sea wizard’s hair.

Ugh. Why was I still thinking of *him*?

“Freaking magic. Freaking cecaelia,” I grumbled, bracing my hands on

the walls, metal rattling underneath my feet as I went. Maybe the cecaelia weren't the only ones at fault here. "Who the heck built this place? Merfolk?" It all suddenly made sense to me, and although I hastened my steps, I tried to keep my footing light.

I turned a sharp corner that clearly violated building code and gasped. "Laverne?"

"*You—*" She froze halfway up a step. She was hassling like a dog from booking it up the stairs, her tongue rolling out as she craned her neck. "*I was coming to save you.*"

Even her projected words sounded winded. Then her eyes narrowed, and she hissed like seeing me soaked and tiptoeing down a staircase had somehow insulted her. "*I thought you couldn't swim!*"

"You... were going to save me?" I feigned a sniffle, feeling touched she cared that much. "Aww. Thanks, Laverne."

A streak of lavender was next up the stairs. "Whoa!" Kai said, catching himself on the walls before he could topple over Laverne. "Why'd you stop? Clair needs —"

Laverne cut Kai off, her neck jerking in a zigzag motion as she spoke. "*That harlot doesn't NEED anything.*"

When Kai looked up, his eyes went wide. Although his face was full of worry, there was a flicker of relief as he looked me over. "Claira," he said, but was interrupted by Laverne spinning around to shoot between his legs.

She slid down the stairs on her belly, snorting as she went. "*Apparently, she CAN swim.*"

Kai took a breath, his eyebrows arching. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, thankful that they'd found me so fast. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"We've been searching for the last hour. Barren almost leveled the place."

"Barren did?" My throat tightened. Although this hadn't been my fault, guilt and panic gripped me. I'd rarely seen Barren lose his composure, but how could I blame him? I'd disappeared on his watch.

"Between him and Leander, I was sure this whole place was going down," Kai said, restlessly scratching the nape of his neck.

My heart dropped. "I'm so sorry I worried you guys."

"I'm sure you had a good reason." Kai held out a hand, offering the best smile he could. "Let's let the others know you're okay before all the lights go out again."

“The lights went out? The casino lost power?” I whispered, dread filling me as I took hold of Kai’s hand. “It was Leander, wasn’t it? He lost control again.”

“I know we’re pretty far from the water,” Kai said grimly. “But I was getting worried he might summon a tidal wave or something if we didn’t find you soon.”

Kai’s fingers wrapped around mine, a desperate grip that caused my heart to ache. He was *shaking*. Even though he sounded calm, he was just as upset as it sounded like the rest of them were.

When we got down to the bottom of the stairs, Kai pulled back a heavy curtain that revealed the casino’s domed entrance. “Laverne found it,” he said, letting me through first. “She was the first to spot you in the water. I know she’d never admit it, but she was really worried after Barren told us you were gone.”

“Oh,” I whispered, not sure what else to say to that. Earlier today, I would have doubted that Laverne cared for me at all. Of course, it was possible that she only wanted to save me for Kai’s sake, but either way. She cared.

As soon as I was under the dome, Leander’s arms were around me.

“Lee,” I squeaked, the breath squeezing out of me as he gathered me up against his chest. “I’m soaked!”

But he didn’t seem to care. He held me tighter, his chest heaving in breaths. He growled something incoherent against my shoulder, and I could sense his utter exhaustion as his body slumped over mine.

“I’m fine, Lee,” I said, wrapping my arms around him for added support.

He grumbled something else, something that might have been a heartbreaking, “*Don’t leave us again,*” but I couldn’t be sure.

“I was only gone for an hour,” I whispered back to him, frowning. And I hadn’t even wanted to leave at all.

As Leander pulled back, his bloodshot eyes and red face gave away how upset he’d been while I was gone. “Are you hurt?” he asked, his eyes jumping not only over me, but over our surroundings, too. He was still on edge, looking for an outlet for his anger. Who to blame for my disappearance.

“I’m not hurt. I’m fine, really,” I said as sincerely as I could. Barren caught in my peripheral, but he stopped short of coming over to us.

“What happened?” Leander asked, drawing back my attention.

“Yeah, Clair,” Kai said, coming up beside us. “Why were you up there?”

I opened my mouth, wanting to tell them about the abduction and my

meeting with Queen Sagari, but my tongue seemed to widen, gagging me like a wad of smoke had caught in the back of my mouth.

Another gag worked up my throat, and I forced the words back down as Queen Sagari's voice rang in my mind.

*Don't forget to watch what you say, dear, or the magic will do it for you.*

So this was the spell. It even had a smell to it. Charred wood, rich and mysterious, reminiscent of the sea wizard who'd cast it. I turned down to my finger and saw the dot of black ink where the fountain pen had pricked me. *Damn.*

Did this count as my first tattoo?

"She isn't okay," Barren said, coming a few measured steps closer. Then he turned away before I had a chance to deny it.

"No, I—I'm fine," I called out to his back. "Barren?"

He seemed... hurt. And not just his pride. Had my disappearance actually *hurt* him? "Barren, please." My voice wavered, but he didn't turn back around.

Kai and Leander were still staring at me—waiting for my explanation for all of this. I had to tell them something.

"I—" A gag cut me off. It seemed saying *I didn't leave on purpose* wasn't allowed.

"I, *eurgh*—" Another gag. *I can't tell you what happened* was also a no.

"Dammit!" I blurted, wringing my hands in the air. I *hated* magic. *Freaking sea wizard.*

The aroma of his magic was an unexpected taunt, teasing me for being so foolish as to get captured in the first place.

"Ugh!" I said, trying to scrape the taste of him from my tongue.

Leander and Kai must have thought I was having some sort of a fit, and it was all *his* fault. The horrible feeling in my throat grew as I fought to curse the sea wizard's name aloud, but the spell wouldn't let me. Ugh—there was that taste and smell again. Apparently, from now on, I could only curse him in private. "Freaking, ugh!"

Kai's hand landed on my shoulder with a gentle squeeze meant to soothe me. "Are... you okay?"

"Totally fine. Why wouldn't I be fine?" My voice cracked into a totally not-fine laugh.

"Yeah, you say that..." Kai's frown deepened. "But you don't *seem* fine."

"I got lost," I said, finally giving up trying to say anything else. "That's



all that happened. Sorry that I worried everyone.”

“*You got lost?*” Laverne’s nose twitched as she waddled back over. “*And you happened to get lost swimming next to the first merman you set eyes on when we got here, huh? Don’t think I don’t see right through you. Trollop!*”

“Laverne,” Kai said sharply, holding a firm hand out to her. “Don’t —”

“*No!*” She snorted. “*Look at her. She doesn’t even care about your feelings, Kai-Kai!*”

“I care,” I said, my voice coming out rawer than I’d expected. There wasn’t any truth to her words, but why did they hit so hard?

The sea wizard came to mind, his sly laugh, his smoky words. Although he’d long vanished, his scent still lingered in the magic, impossible for me to shake off. “Really, I —”

“Fuck that. A merman? You know that’s not why she was up there,” Leander said, planting his hands on my forearms. “Claira, it’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it.”

His unwavering faith in me pulled at my heartstrings, and I held back a snuffle. “Thanks, Lee.”

When he smirked back at me, it was almost as if he’d calmed down completely. Like maybe, despite the spell, all of this would be okay. “Once you’re safe back at Barren’s place, then you can let us know who’s to blame and we can come back and rip their fucking throat out.”

“Rip their throat?” Kai choked out, looking suddenly pale. His voice dropped to a whisper. “Dude, we’re going to *kill* someone? Um. I’m not sure Queen Javalynn will be okay with that.”

That hit hard, and my mood dropped like a rock. “There will be no killing,” I said, thankful that the spell let me get out that much.

Leander chuckled darkly. “Yeah. We’ll see.”

Barren stood near the door, his face a stony mask. When we walked over, he flinched away when I went for his arm.

*Ouch.*

“I... didn’t see you in the hallway,” I said, an excuse that wasn’t a total lie. I really had searched for him when the shadows appeared.

Barren’s jaw tensed. “Mmh.”

He didn’t believe me. But then again, why would he? He’d likely stood in the exact same spot where I’d parted from him, and I just couldn’t see it, thanks to the sea wizard’s magic. Now I was really starting to panic.

“Believe me,” I said, pleading with him to trust me. “I did. I looked for

you.”

I couldn't let this spell take everything from me. Even if Kai and Leander would never understand, I needed to believe Barren could pick up on the words I couldn't say.

“Barren, look at me.” Although his eyes initially averted, they slowly found their way to mine. “Lee says you're good at reading people,” I started to say, but the words crumbled away in my mouth as Barren turned.

“I can't,” he called over his shoulder. Two gruff syllables that impaled deep into my heart. He stalked through the doors with the same speed as when he'd first brought us to the casino, leaving Leander and Kai as the only two by my side.

Kai rubbed across the back of my shoulder. “Sorry, Clair. He was really upset. We thought someone had taken you.”

Magic buzzed in the back of my throat. A tingling over my tongue tempted me to speak my thoughts aloud just so it could silence me again.

“We're losing Barren,” was all I could manage to say. Leander nodded, wrapping an arm around me to lead me out of the casino.

“Yeah, we better catch up. We'll talk more after we're sure you're somewhere safe,” he said, and although he kept his voice casual, I knew he would expect answers. Answers I couldn't give. I really hated magic.

“*Harlot.*” Laverne slung the insult my way as she followed beside us. “*I can't believe I was going to save you.*”

If only she knew the tank wasn't what I needed saving from.

It was this.



IT TOOK a shower and a fresh change of clothes for me to stop obsessing over how the trip back to Barren's place had gone. I'd gagged so much during the drive that Kai thought I had water trapped in my lungs from my swim at the casino.

But no. Water wasn't the problem. The magical hairball preventing me from answering any of Leander's persistent questions was.

He'd followed me right into the shower, and if it weren't for Barren dragging him out, he'd still be in here now. Pressing me for answers I would

have loved to give but couldn't.

And Barren... He wouldn't even look at me. Although he'd helped get Leander off my back, he kept shutting down, closing himself off from the rest of us.

Frowning, I attempted to comb the tangles from my damp hair. Okay—maybe I was still obsessing.

Magic had to fade eventually, though, right? And then one day, when we were all in our eighties, I could clear this whole mess up.

Setting the comb down on the dresser, I huffed.

No. I couldn't let this damned spell win. I'd get my point across somehow—even if I had to resort to heavy hinting or playing charades to do it. Between three mermen and a sea lion, someone was bound to pick up on something, right?

I gave my cheeks a firm slap to psych myself up before heading for the door. As I reached it, the conversation from the living room seeped through.

"She'll stay with me half the time." It was Leander's voice, his words spoken as casually as if they were a fact.

*Huh?* I paused, doorknob in hand, my head tilting as Kai chimed in.

"Do you think she'd like that? I could probably stay in the Atlantic if that would be easier." Kai gave a weak laugh. "My father wouldn't notice. The Pacific... doesn't really need me."

There was a loud scoff. "Fucking King Darias. After I'm done with you, he'll be begging us to give you back to the Pacific."

"Pssh. Yeah, right," Kai said, and although he was denying it, his voice sounded lighter. The lull in the conversation that followed gave me the perfect opportunity to come into the living room.

But as soon as I was through the door, the conversation picked up again.

"Are you sure she'll even want to live in the, uh..." Kai's voice trailed when Leander cleared his throat, acknowledging me with a jerk of his chin.

Kai's mouth snapped shut.

"Don't mind me," I said, choosing to lean against the kitchen counter instead of joining them in the living room. After the things we'd done on that couch earlier, looking at them sitting there was difficult enough without my mind wandering to inappropriate places. "Please, go on. What were we talking about?"

"Claira." Kai's face pinked as if he were having a similar inappropriate thought. "Hey."

“Hey,” I returned, my lips curling. I was ready to tease him some more when a knock from inside the bathroom distracted me. “Is that Barren?” I asked, and Kai shook his head.

“Laverne. She’s really eager to make a new friend.”

There was another knock, followed by a strange sound, like a flipper slapping against tile.

“A new friend?” I asked, curious as I wandered closer to the bathroom door. He couldn’t mean... “Oh, no—Sprout!”

I scrambled to the door, and sure enough, when I threw it open, Sprout’s reflection was waiting for me in the mirror. Perched on the topmost shelf in the bathroom, he sat atop a stack of folded towels, grooming a paw with slow, deliberate licks.

“*Have you no shame?*” Laverne shrieked. Her long body was contorted half on the seat of the toilet and the other half in the sink like she’d been trying to get high enough to reach him. “*Barging in here like that. What if I was using the latrine?*”

Laverne using the latrine. Now that was a phrase I never thought would come to mind.

“So, what? You’re a—” I stopped myself before I could say *sea lion*, because surely, she’d find a way to take offense to that. “I mean, Barren wouldn’t be happy if he knew you were bothering his cat.”

Oh, the way Laverne’s eyes widened. *Whoops*—that wasn’t the right thing to say, either.

“*BOTHERING?*” With a swift movement of her head, Laverne turned on the faucet. The next thing I knew, cold water was spraying my face. “*OUT!*” she shrilled as I shielded myself with my hands. “*Be gone, harlot!*”

With a gasp, I backed up out of there to Leander confiding, “Think about it like this—if all of us were down there, why wouldn’t Clairra want to live in the ocean?”

Despite the water dripping down my face, I turned to meet Leander’s intense gaze.

“Fuck.” He let the curse slip from under his breath and slowly leaned away from Kai. Apparently, he hadn’t expected me to hear that.

But I had heard it, and now they were both looking at me, waiting for my input on how our future would unfold.

“The ocean?” I repeated, thinking through all that would mean for me. Yeah, I was nowhere near ready to commit myself to a life of letting them

carry me around underwater.

This wasn't what I'd come out here to do at all.

Wiping water from my eyes, I threw out a careful, nonchalant, "Cecaelia... live in the ocean," just to see if I could.

*Whoa.* I was surprised the spell let that one through. Maybe I wouldn't have to resort to charades.

Judging by their expressions, that response was far from the one they were hoping for.

"Naturally," Leander said, gesturing for me to come sit between them on the couch. Hard pass—especially since I wasn't sure where Barren was and when he'd come back inside. Leander raised an eyebrow. "What about them?"

I cracked my knuckles as I stepped closer. This was going to be easy. "What, uh, what do you think about them?" I asked innocently enough. My pulse thrilled. My eyes jumped between Leander and Kai. One of them would surely make the connection.

It was then that I realized how worn-out Leander looked. Just how much magic had his emotions caused him to use while I was gone?

"Cecaelia?" Leander's face twisted into a scowl, but Kai cut in before he could say more.

"I despise them," Kai said, and was it me, or had his teeth looked extra savage when he'd said it?

"Really?" I asked, surprised by the intensity of his words. It was a shock to hear that Kai despised anything, though one of their weapons *had* almost killed him.

"They're sickening." His hands clenched tightly over the top of his pants. "Our oceans would be better off without them."

Okay, that... wasn't what I'd expected. From Leander, yes, but from Kai?

"Where else would they live?" A tingle on my tongue warned me to be careful with my words.

Kai's answer was cold and unfeeling, almost unrecognizable. "Maybe they shouldn't be living at all," he mumbled.

"What...?"

"Fuck, Kaius." Leander swiped a hand through his hair as he shook his head. "You would think they murdered your family or something. Damn. I thought the Pacific didn't have to worry about cecaelia."

A blush spread across Kai's face. He turned down to his lap as if

suddenly embarrassed. “Sorry, I—well, I’ve heard a lot about them.”

“We don’t deal with them much in the Atlantic.” Leander flexed his jaw. “Thank Poseidon for that. That’s one good thing about this fucking curse. They’re down *there*, and we’re up *here*.”

Before I even thought about opening my mouth, magic choked up the back of my throat. I turned abruptly, hoping to hide my gagging, but my attempt only alerted Kai.

“Claira? Where are you going?” he asked, his voice low with worry.

“Cat,” I croaked, half expecting smoke to billow out of my mouth. I headed back to the bathroom before either of them could protest, but when I got to the door, both Sprout and Laverne were gone.

I spun around. “Did you see...?”

Leander pointed down to Barren’s bedroom. “That way, beautiful.” The heart-melting smirk he gave was almost bright enough to distract from how drained he looked.

“Thanks,” I said, his endearment making my face heat. Sure, they hadn’t figured out what I was trying to tell them yet, but even with them knowing I was hiding something from them, they still cared for me. Enough to discuss where all of us would live one day. *The three of us, together.*

In the deepest part of my heart, I couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like if all *four* of us were together.

Now my cheeks were really on fire, and I felt them with the back of my hand as I went into Barren’s room. “Get ahold of yourself,” I mumbled. “He’s not even talking to—*Laverne*?” I gasped, not believing what I was seeing.

Laverne’s head was stuck in the cat flap. Her body bulged around its opening as if she’d been delusional enough to think she was small enough to fit through it.

Her tail sulked, her whole body drooped and listless. “*It ran away,*” she said with a dramatic snuffle. “*And it is all your fault.*”

*My fault?* Yeah, that tracked. I seemed to be getting the blame for everything today.

Sighing, I came around the bed to get to her. “It’s no one’s fault, Laverne. Running away is just something cats do.”

She sniffled loud enough to give me some idea of the size of the snot bubbles she must have been blowing out on the patio. Carefully, I gripped around her shoulders. “Come on. Let’s get you out of there.”

But with a wiggle of her neck, her body slid right through my arms, and she was free. “*I suppose you’re an expert on running,*” she said with a glare, tears and strings of snot caught all over her whiskers. Then she threw her head high, and with a snort and an unusual bend in her neck, she strutted away. “*Like when Ren ran from you earlier. I bet that stung.*”

By the time her tail was through the door, my jaw had set.

She was right, of course. It had stung. It more than stung. And suddenly, that blush I’d felt only moments ago felt so naïve, so foolish.

Because what future did we have when Barren could barely look at me and a trident was destroying Leander from the inside out?

As things stood now, there was no future for us.

Not unless I started fighting for it.

Laverne was right—I was an expert on running, but now was a time to take a risk. To grab Barren by the shoulders and tell him how I felt. To fight for the knowledge that could save Leander.

My gaze landed on where I hung my bag out to dry, a delicate abalone shell tucked safely inside it, and I let out a slow, shaky breath.

What were the odds of the sea wizard being the one to greet me if I broke it?

While I waited for Barren to come around, I’d have to find the right moment to slip away unnoticed and —

What the heck was I thinking? Run away and use the shell? Clearly, not being able to tell the guys what was happening was getting to me. I was starting to crack. Frustrated, I sank to the bed to bury my head in a pillow.

How could I possibly hope to fix this mess all on my own?

*Things won’t always be like this,* I reminded myself. Plus, magic couldn’t last forever... right?





## BARREN



**A**s soon as I finished sweeping and hosing down the pier, the front door swung open.

*“Ren! Where have you been?”* Laverne hopped out, slapping down on the wet walkway. *“Kai-Kai asked me to find you.”*

Crouching down, I flipped an overturned rock, returning it to its rightful spot along the path leading to my front door. “Been around,” I mumbled as Laverne slid over to me. I winced when her tail hit the rocks, knocking more out of place.

*“You’d better get in there. I think they want to talk to you.”*

I was aware. I had a habit of tuning into the thoughts and emotions in a room before deciding whether to go in it. It was how I knew Laverne considered *Spraut* the most adorably intriguing creature she’d encountered on land. And it was how I knew Kai was getting more anxious every minute Clairra remained closed off in my bedroom.

Additionally, I knew exactly what Leander was going to ask of me, which was the reason I couldn’t go back inside.

*“Come on, Ren.”* Laverne nudged my hand. *“You can’t mope out here forever. So what if that harlot went swimming with another merman? It wasn’t your fault she acted out and got everyone upset.”*

My jaw clenched. “Clairra didn’t act out.”

Laverne’s eyes rolled as she threw back her neck, exasperated. *“I don’t understand why you’re all so obsessed with her. What has she even done for you? I’m the one who brings you fish, Ren! Remember?”*

“You do bring me fish,” I said, chuckling to myself as I stood up. I gave her head a firm pat. “Thank you, Laverne.”

Claira had done a lot for each of us, but I knew Laverne wouldn't understand it. One day she would. When she recognized her soulmate. Until then, I had to hope she would soon stop giving Claira such a hard time on her own.

"Let's go in," I said, brushing off my knees. I'd hoped to wait until everyone was asleep. But that would only prolong the inevitable. And I needed to wash my hands after the work I'd done outside.

I was barely able to step through the door before Leander was in front of me, straightening up to try to get into my face.

"Where the fuck have you been?" He clasped me by my shoulders, rage simmering just below the surface of his eyes.

"We tried, man. She still won't tell us what happened," Kai said, his voice thick with emotion. "I don't think she trusts us..."

Leander dug into my shoulders with a desperate grip as he threw the words behind him. "Barren knows. He fucking knows, and he won't tell us."

I shook my head, but Leander's eyes narrowed.

"Don't fuck with us. I know you know. You *have to* know."

"No," I said with a grunt. "I can't do it."

His grip intensified as he snarled the question, "You can't, or you won't?"

The pain was minimal, but my shoulders involuntarily stiffened. "Won't."

"This was your kingdom's whaleshit!" Leander released my shoulders with an unsuccessful shove. "If we were ever friends, Barren, you will go in there and read her mind. Find out who fucking did this. Who made her so scared she couldn't even tell her fucking *mates* what happened to her. The mates that are *supposed to* protect her."

His hands clenched into tightly wound fists, his knuckles turning white with the force of his grip. I didn't need to read his thoughts to know his attention was fixated on my jaw. But before he could swing, Kai wrapped around him, holding him back.

"Whoa—deep breaths. Barren isn't the problem here." Although Kai tried to hide it, I could detect a hint of apprehension when he looked up at me. "He cares about Claira as much as we do, and if he won't do it, he must have a reason."

This was exactly what I knew would happen. *Alhey*. Turning, I went to the sink and could hear Leander's teeth grinding together with a fierce growl behind me.

“Shhhh. Dude, calm down,” Kai whispered. Leander’s breaths were loud and exaggerated as I washed my hands.

Then Leander let out one last deep breath, and his shoulders relaxed. “Fine. If you won’t read her mind, then try fucking talking to her,” he pressed. “Do something, because from here it looks like you don’t give a damn about her at all.”

My jaw was so tight, my teeth were on the verge of shattering. “Mmh.” I cared. I cared about her enough to keep my distance.

“Don’t give me that, Barren. Fucking go!”

She didn’t want me talking to her. She didn’t want me near her. But Leander wouldn’t give up until I tried. “I will talk to her,” I murmured tensely, and both of them looked visibly relieved.

“Great,” Laverne said as he flopped up onto the couch. “*Can we talk about something else now?*” Unease tightened my stomach—I still hadn’t had the opportunity to clean the cushions.

Pushing that thought away for later, I said carefully, “I’ll go, but I won’t read her mind.” Even now I sensed it, Clair’s mind brushing against the corners of my consciousness, yet I resisted. No knowledge was worth the risk I’d take by reading it, and there were less painful ways to rip out my heart than to learn what she thought of me after her meeting with my sister.

“Fix this,” Leander said, and despite his attempt to push me toward my bedroom, I walked to the front door. “The fuck are you going?”

“To the patio,” I said, sweat already coating my palm at the thought of talking to Clair.

“Barren—!” Kai called as I shut the door behind me.

“*Alhey,*” I cursed under my breath. What was I doing? Clair wouldn’t want to talk to me. I already knew what had happened to her.

I’d thought someone had taken her at first. I’d stalked up and down the hallway, even barged into the restroom to look for her, before I understood what had happened.

She’d run from me.

And I’d always known it would happen. The things my sister told her had terrified her, and she had done what everyone did. Clair hadn’t seemed superstitious, but Javalynn had a way of convincing others, and I couldn’t blame Clair for getting as far away from me as she could.

I paused to brace against a post, my insides in turmoil. How much had Javalynn told her? I’d barely slept, worried about their meeting. And as I’d

feared, the worst had happened.

And now I'd lost her forever.

It was laughable how my knees shook underneath me. Some thought me a fierce warrior, and here I stood, crumbling apart in the face of losing all that I'd held on to for so long.

I'd been content to let Leander have her once. But that hadn't meant I wouldn't hold on to her in secret—a pearl locked away in the cage of my heart. Now things were different, and once I called out to her and saw her fear and disgust, I would have to let her go.

Opening the patio latch meant there was no going back. But like a soldier following orders, I did it. After all, I was used to being alone. I still had *Spraut*, my plants, and this home I'd built for myself.

Steeling my emotions, I tapped on the edge of the cat door. “Mmh, Clair?”

The returned “B-Barren?” was a blow to my chest. She sounded flustered, borderline panicked.

I shouldn't have come.

One of the patio doors pulled open so quickly that I tensed, straightened up in surprise. Shadows played over her face as she stepped out on the patio, her sweet voice trailing in the night air. “You're back?”

I swallowed, every hair on my body rising in keen awareness of her presence. She would never know what her voice did to me. The deep connection that resonated through my bones whenever she was near.

Leander had sent me to speak with her, but now that she was here, coherent words escaped me.

“Oh! The bikini,” she burst out, quickly covering her mouth with her hands. She whirled around, her hair bouncing behind her as she retreated into my bedroom. I blinked, watching her hastily turn around to knock the door shut with an ankle while she called, “One... one second!”

The door shut, and I was left gasping for air. I stumbled a step, turning myself around.

This was a mistake. I knew I should have kept my distance. Should have stayed away, so I wouldn't put her in the position where she felt the need to run from me again.

Metal groaned, bending under the pressure of my hand as I forced the patio gate open, but I didn't care. Nice things were never meant to last for me.

“Barren?” Clairra called as the patio door slammed back shut. “Where are you going?”

I stood frozen, still clutching the bent gate. “I made you uncomfortable,” I mumbled, unsure of why she’d bothered coming back outside at all. “My apologies.”

Her gentle whisper caught me off guard. “You never make me uncomfortable.”

I turned around to her standing in the darkness behind me, arms wrapped around her middle, toeing the deck with a bare foot.

My body reacted to the sight of her, my heart clenching with bittersweet agony.

She was wearing the swimsuit. The black one I’d picked out for her when I accompanied Kai to get the things that the Atlantic had failed to provide her with.

Although there wasn’t much to it, it fit her perfectly, a cruel reminder that it was the first and only thing I would give to her. But why had she changed into it?

Then it dawned on me—I’d asked to come to her after her meeting with my sister.

“Well?” she asked, a nervous laugh escaping her. “What do you think?” She adjusted her posture, pushing her shoulders back in a shy pose.

My blood pooled low, a physical response that I hoped the darkness would conceal. I lacked experience in talking to people without knowing what they wanted to hear, so I averted my eyes, keeping my voice low and unaffected. “It suits you.”

My indifference faltered, and I stole another glance. The smile touching at the corners of her lips was a confusing torment.

Clairra stepped forward, her hair flowing smoothly over her nearly bare shoulders. “You know, I always wondered why you picked this out for me, Barren, when you let Kai choose everything else.”

The hopeful look in her eyes made my throat go dry.

When I didn’t say anything, her lips fell into a pout. “You’re not going to tell me?”

What did she expect me to say?

That I chose it because black was the color of my armor? Because red and black together were the colors of my kingdom, and while Kai had looked upon swimsuits with brightly patterned hearts and flowers, I’d had the urge to

dress her in my colors?

That I thought, if I had to give her up, I could at least give myself that much?

“I thought black would complement your hair.”

I was left feeling raw and exposed under her gaze as she stared wordlessly, her head tilting. My eyes shifted, focusing on a cluster of potted pandan plants. What I’d said had been too honest, too close to the truth, the exact wrong thing to say. I should have known by now that no one appreciated honesty.

Claira collected a bundle of hair from over her shoulder and held it next to the strap of her swimsuit. Biting her lip, she twirled the strands, letting some of them fall from her fingers before looking back up at me. “And?” she asked quietly. “Does it?”

She swayed a slow step forward, and I heaved in a breath. “Mmmh,” I forced out, my heart rate increasing every time she came closer.

“Yeah?” Her delicate eyelashes fluttered as she gazed up at me. “You think it looks nice?” Soft laughter escaped her lips as she hooked her finger onto the thin string holding the swimsuit bottom to her curved hips.

I stood there, rooted in silence. The sight of her in that swimsuit, looking so alluring and unattainable, only intensified my ache.

“There’s not a lot to it,” she said and then gave the string a pluck. Her teeth tugged at her bottom lip briefly, and then she reached out to me, her warm palm finding my arm. “Did you do that on purpose, Barren?”

All the blood drained from my face. “*Nuvisney*. I—I don’t understand,” I murmured, the memory of my anxiety and impatience as I waited for her return from the restroom still a fresh wound. My entire life, I’d longed to be as strong in her eyes as I had been when we were both merfry, but we could never return to that time. I could never return to what I once was. “You ran from me.”

Her hand sprang away from my arm. “I *what?*” she whispered, and I tensed when she went for my hand, grasping it with her delicate fingers. “Look at me, Barren.” She leaned forward, going on her toes, but I could only focus on where our hands met, joined together. “I didn’t run from you,” she said slowly, a tender serenade that built on itself, swimming through the air around me, heating my body. “You believe me, don’t you?”

It was like a heavy stone had lifted from my chest. I nodded, unsure of what to say. Because if she hadn’t run from me, then something had actually

happened to her. The same panic that Leander and Kai were experiencing coursed through me, filling me with questions and the intense desire to protect.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, my voice coming out rougher than intended.

Her eyelashes fell, and she looked down while fidgeting with her fingertips. “No. I’m not hurt.”

The answer gave no relief, and I fought against the urge to look inside her mind to find out for myself what had —

“Barren?” Clairia said quietly, her gentle voice pulling me out of my dangerous spiral. One of her feet toed at the deck. “Didn’t you come here to proposition me?”

*Proposition her?*

“Mmh.” After all that happened, I’d almost forgotten the reason I wanted to meet with her alone. “You aren’t wearing your—” Unsure of its name, I gestured around her hips. The covering she usually wore was missing.

For a moment, she stared up at me, her lips parted in wonder. “Oh, my wrap?” she said, snapping out of it. “It, uh... n-nope. I figured I wouldn’t need it in the hot tub.”

Confusion settled over me as she pulled away. She walked over to my storage box and placed a hand on its cover, giving me an eager look. “Unless it’s filled with salt water, of course. Then I guess I’ll have to change,” she added with a light laugh.

“Sorry, I—” Unsure of what to say, I went over to flip the cover up and show her the gardening tools and bags of soil inside it. “It was here when I moved in. I never had a reason to use it.”

“Oh. Oh, I see,” she said. I couldn’t stand how disappointed she looked.

“So, why the bikini? Are we just going to...” Her eyes widened a moment before she gave a small nod. “Well, okay. You did say it goes with my hair,” she murmured, barely loud enough for me to hear. Then her arms folded over her chest. “But it’s not fair that I’m the only one standing around half-naked.”

“Mmh.” I nodded, going for my belt, and cleared my throat to take some of the gruffness from my voice. “I’ve wondered about something,” I said, letting my slacks drop. Removing my briefs could wait until we were both ready, so I unbuckled my brace and sat it on top of the storage box so I could take off my shirt. “Been thinking about it since...”

I paused, confused by the sudden shift in Clairia’s expression. The light

from my bedroom cast a glow on her face, revealing the deep red of her complexion and the quick, shallow rise and fall of her chest.

“I’ve been wondering, too,” she drawled, her tide-gray eyes darkening as she watched my fingers move to unbutton my shirt. Her tongue flicked out, wetting her lips. “What it... would be like.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I pulled off my shirt. I knew it might not have been a pleasant smile, for it lacked the friendliness and charm of Kai’s and Leander’s, but I didn’t care.

“Mmh. I’ve wanted to show you,” I confessed as I secured my brace back into place. Once I had it adjusted, I took hold of her hand, stepping out of my slacks. “Since the plane landed.”

“Really?” she said with a squeak as I led her over to the edge of the deck. I turned around to remove my briefs, giving her privacy to remove hers.

“No need to worry,” I said, peering down at how apparent my desire for her was. It wouldn’t matter as long as she took hold of me quickly. “Nothing will hurt you down —”

As I turned around, Clairra was pulling the top of her swimsuit away from her breasts.

“*Maaiy fok.*” The words slipped from me as the black swimsuit top dropped to the deck.

“*Maaiy fok,*” she repeated, carefully mimicking how I’d spoken each syllable. She swayed closer, her arms pulling around me, and I couldn’t speak, couldn’t think. I was nothing more than a statue. “What does it mean?” she asked airily, leaning in until an untamed part of me brushed against her and she startled back a step with a gasp.

“*Alhey,*” I cursed and turned away, not wanting to frighten her. “Sorry,” I grunted through gritted teeth. My size had always been intimidating, but I’d thought she was ready. I hadn’t expected... whatever this was.

I stood still for a moment, trying to wrap my head around this new development. Clairra wanted to go into the ocean with me topless? Had she swum topless with the others when they were alone? No. I would have picked up on their thoughts if —

Every part of me tensed as arms slid around my waist, Clairra’s warm body pressing against my back. “I’m ready,” she whispered, her breath heating my spine and making my lower half throb with arousal. It made sense, now, how the others had found it so easy to get close to her.

The urge to turn around, take her up in my arm, and pin her to the deck



was almost unbearable. If we weren't in front of my plants, I might have asked if she thought she might like it if I did.

"Barren?" Clairra's face nuzzled my back, and I took it as a sign that she was ready.

*Right.* I took a deep breath to compose myself and ground out a grunt of affirmation. Then I jumped off the deck and into the water, only to realize too late that she... wasn't as ready as she'd claimed she was.

Instead of holding around my waist as she normally would, her grip came right off me. I snagged her arm and tugged her close, our connection still intact. When I pulled her up against my chest and got a good look at her face, I knew I'd made a mistake.

Clairra was struggling with her transition, coughing and sputtering air mixed with water like she hadn't remembered to empty her lungs before we'd dropped into the water.

"Clairra?" I held her close, feeling her shaking in my arms, knowing there was nothing I could do to help. Her lungs would have to complete the transition on their own.

On cue, the darkness was cut when the first glowing speck appeared next to my tail. The effect spread around us as more popped up, dotting the ocean with a calming blue light.

But Clairra wasn't as taken by the beauty of the lights as I thought she would be. Her arms wrapped tightly around me, and a blood-curdling scream pierced the water, causing my tail to thrash, propelling us both back up to the deck.

"What—*why?*" she gasped out, panting and sputtering as I helped her pull her tail from the water. I'd only just finished draping it next to mine back on the patio when she turned to me, her eyes wide with shock and her voice filled with outrage. "I... I felt *safe* with you," she said, the accusation in her words a spear to my chest. *Felt safe.* Once, but not anymore. Her teeth ground. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"*Tharithakuge kan'deve*—the sea of stars," I said, unsure of how the lights had frightened her. "It has always been a source of fascination for both humans and merfolk." And I'd hoped she would enjoy them, too.

"Not that, Barren. I—" She wrung her hands out in front of her, her eyes filling with disgust as she looked down at her tail. "Why didn't you warn me before dragging me into the water?"

*Dragging her?*

“I... do not understand,” I said, my jaw nearly refusing to move. “I thought you were ready to go to my kingdom.”

Her eyes widened. “Your kingdom? The part that’s underwater?” she said, then her arms snapped around her chest, covering her breasts. “That’s why we...” Her whisper trailed off with a gasp. “You said you were *propositioning me!* What the hell, Barren?”

“I was agreeing to a plan, yes,” I said, choosing my words carefully. I was no good at this—conversations and connections. It wasn’t surprising she’d misinterpreted my intentions. “For us to meet.”

“And go to your kingdom, of course. You never told me that part,” she mumbled, tossing back her wet hair.

“I’d thought asking you to wear a swimsuit made it clear,” I said, not sure what else to say.

It seemed clearing up the misunderstanding hadn’t made her any less upset. “Well, I’ve now lost half of the bikini you got for me.” She huffed, blowing back more wet hair. “So, sorry about that.”

It made sense now. Why she hadn’t taken the bottom half off when I’d taken off mine. “It doesn’t matter,” I said with a shrug.

“It matters to *me*,” she threw back. “You gave it to me. I wanted to keep it.”

Although she was upset, it was difficult to conceal my smile.

She would keep the swimsuit simply because I gave it to her? *Mmmh*. That was one thing we had in common.

“Barren—are you *laughing?*”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said again, leaning over to pick the swimsuit top off the deck. “Because this half was the one I picked out.” Her scowl broke as I offered it to her. Shrugging, I mumbled, “Didn’t know it came as a set.”

“Oh, really?” she said as she snatched it from me.

I turned my gaze away so she could put it on. “Really.”

“You mermen really couldn’t care less about the bottom half of clothing, could you?” Her quiet laughter seemed to smooth out all my rough edges, and I stared out at the water’s dying blue glow. It was impossible to ignore the way her tail draped over mine and the thought of how our legs might be once they returned.

“For a moment, I thought you might have swum topless with the others,” I said before thinking better of it. “What did you think we would be doing?”

She paused halfway through tying the strings behind her back to say,

“Enjoying the scenery. Somebody promised me nude beaches.”

A deep, rumbling laugh escaped me. She was incredible. “Mmmh. I’m not sure I ever confirmed that.”

“Well, it’s fine.” She sighed, and I was caught off guard when she reached into the front of her swimsuit to readjust her breasts, hiking them up.

Clearing my throat, I turned away to give her more privacy. “I’m sorry my intentions weren’t clear. I struggle with... this.” Without looking back, I made a gesture between us. “Conversations.”

“That’s not true,” she said, and I could hear the frown in her voice. “Maybe you don’t always say the words, but your actions say enough. You’re always helping Lee and Kai out. Taking care of us.” She laughed lightly, leaning over to place a hand on my tail. “Plus, Lee says you’re good at reading people. That’s got to help with conversations.”

Apprehension filled me, and I forced myself to swallow, trying to ignore the sensation her touch had caused in my tail. “It isn’t difficult for me. Reading people.”

“Oh?” She leaned in further. “Care to share your secrets? I won’t tell anyone. Not even Sprout.”

She was so close. Dangerously close. The only time we’d ever been closer was the moment underwater where I’d kissed her on impulse.

“But I can’t promise I won’t tell your plants,” she added slyly, breaking my focus on her lips. “Maybe I’ll even *sing them a song.*”

A wave of heat burned my face. “No.” I shook my head, but her smile remained firmly in place. I—had she heard me singing to my plants? For once, it felt like someone could see into my mind, uncover my deepest thoughts. “How do you know that?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Her shoulders rolled in an exaggerated shrug. “Maybe I’ll share my secrets if you share yours.”

*Share my secrets?*

Feeling bold, I nodded. “Come to my kingdom, and I’ll share one of them.”



## CLAIRA



This was exactly what Queen Javalynn had explicitly warned me not to do.

But as I watched Barren slip into the water a second time—much more gracefully now that he had a tail instead of legs—I couldn’t help but want to let him carry me away.

My breath caught as the ocean lights flickered back to life around him, washing him in a soft blue light.

When we’d fallen into the water, I’d thought of the lights as a hundred tiny eyes watching us in the darkness. I’d screamed, reminded of the queen’s threat of what would happen if I dared to leave land, and the next thing I knew, Barren had pulled us back onto the deck.

From up here, the lights really did look like stars, or something even more enchanting. Miniature sprites, perhaps, suspended in liquid darkness.

“They’re beautiful,” I whispered into the night air. *The sea of stars*, I believed he’d called them.

It occurred to me now why there were so many tales of merfolk luring sailors to their demise. A mythical titan in the flesh, bathed in magic light. No one could have denied Barren’s invitation to join him in the water.

“We have no use for lanterns here,” he said with a nod. “The lights follow us into the deepest water.”

I reached down to dip a hand into the calm ocean. “Is it... magic?” I asked, cupping underneath a glowing dot, separating it from the rest. I pulled it close with great care, studying the cold blue light swirling lazily in the water trapped in my palm.

It was certainly unlike anything I’d ever seen in the Atlantic.

Barren leaned against the edge of the dock as if studying the light, too. “Humans call it bioluminescence.” He gestured out to the coast with his chin. “Many travel from far away, hoping to glimpse the glowing trails along our shores.” Then he cleared his throat. “In truth, the plankton in these waters react to our magic.”

“So the lights follow you as you swim?” I asked, releasing the glowing speck back into the ocean. It certainly seemed easier than the manual method the Atlantic relied on to make organic matter glow. “That’s amazing.”

“The trails they leave behind are works of art.” Blue light glittered in Barren’s eyes as he adjusted his grip on my hand. “I would show you, if I could.”

The corner of my mouth lifted. “Well, you’ll just have to make it up to me by telling me this secret of yours.”

“Mmh.” His hand tugged at mine, and I let him use his strength to pull me into the water. This time, I was prepared, and the first salty breath went down smoothly.

We started descending, and my stomach fluttered as Barren pulled me close.

His long frills swished underneath us, knocking against my useless tail as he held me tight to his chest. “Nothing will harm you,” he assured me, his deep voice penetrating the water. Even without the words, his arm around me was enough to make me feel safe and reassured.

Just as Barren had said, bioluminescent plankton lit, dancing around us. Even the tiniest disturbances in the water seemed to produce breathtaking effects, and I watched in awe as the stars twirled, illuminating our surroundings with their soft light.

“Sorry that I screamed,” I whispered, pulling myself higher on Barren’s chest. “I probably should have mentioned this earlier, but your sister threatened to order you to execute me if I went into the ocean.”

I’d expected Barren to tense at that, but a deep laugh rocked through him instead. “Did she?”

“Yep.” I met his laughter with a nervous one of my own. “And if you refuse, she said she’ll execute both of us. So, that’s fun.”

It hadn’t seemed like such a terrible threat earlier, because how would she have known if I were to go into the water? Now that I realized we were to be followed by hundreds of tiny beacons...

“Don’t worry,” Barren chuckled, as if he’d read my concerns plainly on

my face. “My sister doesn’t know where I live.”

“I’m not worried,” I said, feeling all the strength in Barren’s chest as he moved us deeper into the ocean. “I’m not an expert at reading people like you are, but I think she’s afraid of you going after her trident. She didn’t believe me when I told her you’re not interested in wielding magic.”

I thought Barren would laugh again, but instead his jaw tightened, his lips compressing.

*Strange.* He wasn’t interested in the trident, was he?

We stayed silent for a moment as a school of fish cut through the lights in front of us, leaving a shimmering trail in their wake. They scattered around a mountain of plate coral forming over the sand as Barren pulled out of a dive.

“Barren?” I waited for his *mmmh* before asking, “How far away is your kingdom?”

We passed a circle of coral and Barren dipped low, bringing us close enough to the seafloor to make out the vibrant tapestry of shapes and colors in the light. I was about to ask if he was deliberately ignoring my question when he took a deep breath of salt water.

“I believe I owe you a secret.”

... He was definitely ignoring the question.

Still, I was curious. “You’ve kept me waiting, so it better be a good one,” I teased, my lips curling.

The strokes of his tail slowed as he hummed a deep note, setting us drifting above the reef.

“I have an ability passed down through my father’s blood,” he said carefully. With a solemn expression, his hand loosened its grip like he might let go altogether, and I felt a wave of unease. “It often scares those around me.”

*An ability?*

“Like how I can see in the dark?” I asked, barely realizing we’d stopped moving.

His chest filled slowly. “Although it’s frightening, it’s a part of who I am. Do you remember when I tried to teach you to swim?”

“Yes,” I whispered, my throat feeling tight at the memory. I’d barely known him then. The Barren that had placed a hand on my neck seemed as good as a stranger to me now.

I looked into his eyes, desperately searching for a glimmer of the reassurance he’d shown me earlier, but there was nothing. Only sadness.

“Remember how you realized I’d seen into your thoughts?” A look of anguish settled over him. “That is my gift,” he whispered, his eyes averting. “Or maybe, my curse.”

I felt the force of his heart thudding against his chest as I tried to process his words.

My head swarmed with more thoughts than even a seasoned mind reader could pull apart. “You... know my thoughts?” I whispered, and Barren’s wince told me it was true.

His mouth hung open a moment, as if he were collecting the right words to say. “If I cared to listen, yes,” he said finally, and my heart sank.

I barely believed it—Barren could read minds?

And Leander knew. He had to, with the way he always started to mention how Barren had a knack for reading people before quickly changing the topic. Why hadn’t he told me? Was it their friendship?

This whole time, had Barren really known these silly thoughts I had whenever he held me in his arm?

Was he listening *now*?

The moment was tense, heavy with unspoken words. Barren’s eyes fixed on mine. It was as if we both knew something was about to happen, something inevitable.

He hesitated for a moment before he spoke, his voice low and strained. “Claira, I...” he trailed off, a mix of emotions flickering in his eyes.

“You what?” I rasped.

“I didn’t want... you to look at me like this,” he said, his desperation clear in the broken tone of his voice.

“Like *this*? Like what, Barren? Confused? Shocked?”

“Afraid,” he said gruffly, his face crumbling as if he were coming apart inside. “You’re afraid of me.”

*Afraid of him?*

I stared up at him in disbelief, my mind suddenly clear.

“I’m not afraid of you, Barren! It’s just—I’m *embarrassed*.” I resisted the urge to hide my face against his brace. “You knew what I was trying to do when—when I...”

*Poseidon help me.* Barren must have known what I’d set out to do when I’d put the bikini on for him. How I’d planned to straddle him in the hot tub—back when I thought there would be a hot tub—and tell him that his voice called to me.



Nausea hit. It wasn't my fault his dick was so big that I couldn't help but think about it when it had brushed against me. Did he know how intimidated I'd felt, yet oddly curious if I'd be able to take it?

"Oh, no—I can't control it. Why would my mind go *there*?" I groaned, pressing my forehead to the leather spanning his chest. "Please tell me you're not in there now. *Please, Barren.* I might die if you are."

Without saying a word, Barren's tail coiled, encircling me in a full body embrace I wasn't ready for. When I looked up, an odd smile had broken through his previously solemn expression.

*Poseidon's balls*—he'd heard all of it. Barren was aware of every dirty thought I'd had about his titan cock.

"Dammit," I yelled, my face really on fire. I couldn't stop myself. "Just drop me off somewhere. Let me wither away down here."

Barren shook his head. "I've given you the wrong impression," he said, his arm hooking around me like he wasn't about to humor my dramatics and let me go. "I can look into minds, but more times than not, I choose not to."

"Wait—why?" I gawked up at him, my eyes narrowing. "If I could read minds, I'd do it all the time."

The thought of being one step ahead of Laverne was too tempting to ignore.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place, and it was like I was looking at Barren in a new light. This was why everyone in his kingdom looked at him like they did. Was it also why they'd chosen his sister as their ruler, for fear of his ability?

"I'm not fond of my gift." The pressure of Barren's tail slowly fell from around me, and moments later, we were drifting through the water again. "When I was a merfry, my father wished to develop my ability," he said, his eyes on the light in front of us. "So, he forbade those around me to speak."

There was a catch in his voice, and he paused for a moment, letting a ray pass across the sand before propelling us through the water again. "It's a difficult gift, one that he never truly mastered himself, so he did all he could to... encourage me to use it."

I didn't know what to say. "No one spoke to you?" I asked softly, and the heartbreaking way Barren's mouth fell made me wish I hadn't asked it at all.

"No," he said, his eyes never leaving the open sea ahead. "Not with spoken words, at least."

"That's horrible," I managed, wondering what it must have been like for a

merfry. The maids often ignored me, but I still had Papa, Leander, and the occasional other merfry.

“Mmh.” We fell back into silence until I noticed Barren’s tail strokes getting faster. “We’re almost there. Do you see the gates?” he asked, and I focused ahead.

Dark seafloor spread before us, dotted with clusters of flat coral. Even in the blue glow, the sand... didn’t look right. I shuddered, my body squirming against Barren’s.

“What is this place?” Even though I was typically immune to the cold while in the ocean, a shiver worked through me, all the way to the frills at the end of my tail. “A graveyard?” I asked, squinting out at the black sand. There were no bones, but there was an ominous dip in the seabed, like it was waiting to swallow up any who dared swim too close. “It doesn’t feel right.”

Although I wanted nothing more than for Barren to turn back, his tail shifted, sending us even closer to the dangerous dip. The water thickened, clinging to my lungs like soot laden with the harsh brine of death and decay.

“Barren,” I pleaded, and my panic eased when he halted completely.

“Hold on to me,” he said, a gentle request that I complied with. He released me carefully, and when he reached out, I gasped as his hand vanished to his wrist.

Completely gone.

Before I could react, he pulled back, revealing his hand was still whole. “What the heck?” I mumbled, reaching out to try out the illusion for myself. Only whatever force had caused his hand to disappear didn’t seem to work for me, and I waved my hand in vain.

Soon, the weight of my tail caused me to slip, and Barren’s arm yanked around me. “I told you to hold on,” he mumbled, settling me back against his chest. His jaw worked as he looked out at the water. “I take it you don’t see the gates.”

*Gates?*

Weariness settled over me as I looked out, taking in the strange seascape. “Uh, no. No gates. Just a bunch of dark sand and a creepy atmosphere. Even more unnerving than the ocean usually is.”

Barren nodded, his eyes scanning the area with a strange intensity. Like maybe *he* saw gates. Or something out there other than a sand trap. Then he whipped us back around, and my unease abated as he started swimming back in the direction we came from.

“Wait—that’s it?” I asked, turning back to the lights trailing our tails. “You asked me if I see gates, I say no, and now we’re leaving the creepy sand graveyard?”

I paused, a sudden thought hitting me. “That’s not some gateway to the underworld, is it?” I whispered.

Barren muttered something to himself with a hum. “Sorry, I’m thinking.”

“Oh. Well, okay,” I mumbled, holding tight around his waist as he swam with his thoughts. “I’ll be here when you’re done thinking. Stuck to your chest like a whalesucking remora.”

A *titan-sucking remora*, my mind corrected, and just as my thoughts wandered to a place they ought not to, Barren’s voice rumbled against my ear.

“Those were the gates to Malkeevo,” he said gruffly, not bothering to look back at them. “It appears the illusion hiding the kingdom away is still intact.”

Illusion? Then I realized—Malkeevo. That was the kingdom the cecaelian soldiers had complained of searching for, to no avail, wasn’t it?

“That’s a good thing, though, right?” I asked, surveying the sea behind us, but the knowledge that his kingdom was still safe only seemed to trouble Barren further.

“The illusion needs refreshing,” he said with a grunt. “Much like your lanterns do in the Atlantic.”

“Let me guess—the trident’s power is the only way to refresh it?” I asked, and he nodded grimly.

“I had a suspicion she kept it hidden on land. Now I’m certain.”

*Damn.* It made sense now why Barren’s sister hadn’t wanted me to go into the water. It seemed she didn’t want the other kingdoms to know that her trident had always been in her possession.

“Well, that’s good, right? There’s no point for us to go looking for it when it was never lost,” I offered, and Barren’s jaw tensed.

“No. It means my fears are correct.” He swallowed, his tail falling into impossibly long strokes. “You’re in danger no matter where you go. At sea and on land.”

“Well,” I mumbled, my unease quickly compounding. “As long as your sister doesn’t find out about this trip, maybe I’ll be able to stay safe on land.”

“She won’t,” he said immediately. “No one will know what we saw. Not Leander, not Kai.”

He wanted me to keep this a secret from the others? Now that seemed a bit extreme. They were my mates, after all. What harm would there be in them knowing that Barren's sister still had her trident? "But —"

"No one can know," Barren said firmly, the desperation in his tone hinting that there may be more danger in the knowledge than I first thought.

I relented with a sigh. My secrets sure were mounting. "All right, I suppose we can keep one secret," I said, my eyes narrowing on the underside of his jaw. "But only because you're my fake husband, and I'm trying to be a good fake wife."

The tension broke as the corner of Barren's lips cracked into a smile. Yeah—I thought that would get him. "I wasn't sure you still wanted to be my fake wife," he said, his voice husky with amusement.

"Of course." A smile of my own crept over my lips. "I plan on traveling all over the world with that passport."

Then my face flushed, because while he probably thought we were innocently flirting, I meant it. I wanted to see the world, and traveling as *Claira Arwa* was my first and only opportunity to make it happen.

The ocean grew increasingly shallow as we neared the bungalow. Barren took a slow breath of salt water, and I felt it to—the disappointment we both shared that we'd already returned, and our outing together would soon be over. The movement of his tail came to a stop, and the water grew more serene around us as we drifted closer to the surface.

Barren turned down to me, one eyebrow arched in inquiry. "Do you have a companion in mind for these trips?"

I bit my lip, trying to hide my eagerness. "Actually, I was hoping one of my mates would want to go with me," I said, feeling my cheeks flush with a mix of embarrassment and anticipation.

Barren's gaze darted away, his throat working in a nervous bob. "I see," he muttered, his tail flicking back into motion, bringing us over to the side of the dock.

Refusing to let the moment slip away, I reached up to turn his jaw back to me. Our eyes met, and my heart fluttered as I mustered the courage to ask the question that had lingered between us for far too long.

"Tell me, Barren," I said softly, my fingers grazing his cheek as he positioned himself to lift me back up to the dock, "Does my voice... ever call to you?"

For a moment, his dark eyes held mine, a mixture of surprise and

something else, something that set my heart pounding even faster.

Then shock overtook his expression, and I must have really surprised him because he seemed to have lost all control of his strength as he hoisted me up. And instead of lifting me onto the dock, he missed the surface completely, and a thunderous crack reverberated through the water as my head met the wood with a solid *thud*.

A hundred glowing sprites twinkled in my vision, and when my head lolled forward, everything turned dark.



# CLAIRA



The abrupt shock of icy water jolted me awake. A presence loomed above me, muttering impassioned words in an unfamiliar language.

*Barren?*

Slowly, I opened my eyes, only to be greeted by a blinding stream of water cold enough to make me gasp. My arms dangled at my sides, my legs twisting in an awkward position. *What the heck happened to me?*

Memories flooded in as I tried to piece everything together—the lights beneath the water’s surface, the invisible gates, the nervousness that gripped me when I held Barren’s wide jaw between my hands...

Breaking through the barrage of foreign words, the deep voice let slip my name. “Claira?”

“Barren,” I groaned back, a sharp throb shooting through my head at the movement. That’s right—I’d asked him a question that had caught him so off guard he ended up fumbling me into the underside of his bungalow. *Ouch.*

I blinked rapidly, my vision clearing to reveal Barren’s panicked eyes gazing down at me. Water weighed heavily on his curly hair, dripping down his face and shoulders in unrelenting streams. His lips parted, his face etched with sorrow, as if he’d thought he’d been clutching to a corpse.

But I wasn’t a corpse—clearly. I was alive and well, except for this numbing coldness and the painful throb in my head.

Still, he hovered above me, muscles tense, holding me securely within the stream of water. Why was it so *freaking cold?*

“You’re quite strong,” I mumbled, my tongue sluggish and my head still buzzing from the impact.

My comment only seemed to darken Barren’s expression further. “I—”

His lips pressed shut, pain and regret showing all over his face.

“Where are we?” I asked, my eyes extra roly as I surveyed around us.

“I had to wake you.”

*Wake me?* I stared straight up, focusing on the showerhead looming above us.

Hold on—was this Barren’s shower stall?

I winced, noticing how his brace was flattened against the stall’s wall. As suspected, his shoulders didn’t fit. Still, he’d somehow managed to cram both of us inside it—mostly. But with the way he’d pulled the curtain back, water rushed over his back and shoulders, spilling onto the bathroom floor.

And goodness, there was a lot of water.

“How long... how long was I out?” The tender lump on the top of my head stung as soon as I touched it. I withdrew my hand, bracing for the sight of blood, and sighed, relieved to find my fingers were clean. “At least it’s not serious.”

Muscles ticked in Barren’s jaw as he stared down at me, and I realized then that if it weren’t for his arm holding me, I’d be laid out on the bottom of the stall in a tangled heap of limbs.

His hand cradled the back of my neck, and it wasn’t a terrible sensation. In fact, it was kind of perfect. *Safe*.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation while I felt out the crown of my head some more.

But then Barren’s arm jerked, jostling me back and forth. “No,” he asserted, loud enough to shock my eyes open. “No sleep.”

I gawked up at him, only to find terror darkening his eyes.

“I’m not trying to *sleep*. I’m trying to figure out what...” My voice trailed. I knew exactly what had happened. I’d asked him an important question, and in doing so, accidentally short-circuited his brain. Or something.

Did that mean my voice *had* called to him? Despite the cold, that thought had warmth spreading through me. “Did you carry me here from the water?”

I stared down at my legs, confirming that they were, in fact, legs. *Oh no*. They were *bare* legs. And not just mine.

The sound of my pounding heart drowned out all else as I took in Barren’s muscled legs, thick as tree trunks, braced on either side of me. Not to mention the—well, let’s call it a banana leaf—dangling between them.

*Whoa*.



“I hurt you.” Unaware of my revelation, Barren’s words fell like a hushed confession. “I—” He started to speak, but his voice caught, and I looked up to see him struggling to compose himself. His searching gaze made it clear he was grappling with the words he needed to say.

Maybe it was the way my body was heating or Barren’s close proximity, but already the ache in my head was beginning to ease. “I know,” I whispered, pulling my arms around his neck to let him know I understood. “You didn’t mean to.”

As if in a daze, he murmured softly, “It was not my intention.”

I straightened my feet beneath me, but Barren’s grip tightened as if he feared I might fall. “It’s okay. I’m fine now, really.” I patted the back of his shoulders, hoping he’d realize I could hold my own weight. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been knocked out.”

In fact, it seemed to be a new trend for me. An unexpected consequence of hanging around mermen.

Barren’s eyebrows dipped. “One concussion is too many.”

“Concussion?” I snorted, tapping at the lump on my head. “Can merfolk even get concussions? As long as my head can handle the pressure of deep-sea diving, I’m pretty sure I can survive a tiny bump.”

The logic seemed sound enough to me, but Barren’s serious expression had me wondering if I’d managed to slur every word.

He scooped me up without warning, collecting me in his arm. “Wait, hey—Barren!” But he wasn’t listening, and I scrambled to turn off the shower before he left with the water still running. “Hey.” I thumped him on the shoulder, pouting. “I can walk, you know.”

But then I noticed the floor, slick with water. It was a wonder he hadn’t slipped. “You know, before you guys came along, I never once flooded a bathroom.”

Barren’s sullen expression only broke long enough to stifle a chuckle. “Towel,” he said, turning me to the rows of shelves.

“Oh, right,” I mumbled. But instead of only grabbing one, I grabbed two, holding them close as he carried us into his bedroom.

“Hey, Barren,” I whispered, leaning into his neck. “Most people dry off in the bathroom.”

“Too cramped,” he said, and I had to grab hold of his shoulders to keep myself steady as he shrugged.

“What’s it like, being a titan?” I asked, keeping my tone playful as he sat

me down next to his bed. Wow, I was feeling surprisingly good, all things considered. Who knew a smack to the head could produce such a rush? I handed him a towel, which he took with a nod. But instead of unfolding it, he simply held it, his gaze fixated on the top of my head.

“I don’t know. What’s it like to be a fisherman?” he said, his tone unreadable.

My lips pursed. He really wanted to talk about *fish guts* right now? Obviously, my sex appeal wasn’t working like it should.

I stared up at him a moment, half naked and dripping with water, waiting to see if his gaze would stray. If maybe he would look at the rest of me, considering how he’d admitted to liking the bikini top earlier.

But he couldn’t seem to draw his attention away from my injury, his eyes dark and haunted, as if his mistake underwater was still replaying in his mind.

Well, if he couldn’t break his focus away from my head, I’d break it for him. Twirling around, I bent forward, flipping my hair over so I could towel dry the ends. “Sometimes it’s interesting,” I said coyly. “I once caught a merman in my net.”

Behind me, the floorboards creaked.

*There.* Focus broken.

“Lucky merman,” Barren said, the deep rasp in his voice causing the corner of my lips to lift.

I stole a glance back, half-expecting him to have turned around to give me privacy, but no. He’d taken a step closer.

“Barren?” I straightened up, my face flushing. His eyes moved up my body, taking in every inch of me before finally meeting my gaze. “What are you doing?”

He remained still as a statue, his chiseled neck thickly corded with tension. “Watching you.”

I dropped the towel from my hair and wrapped it around me, half-heartedly drying my back. “Is that right?”

“Mmh,” he mumbled his usual grunt, not even bothering to pretend to care about toweling himself off. He breathed in heavily, his chest expanding. “Someone will have to watch you for the rest of the night.”

My flush crept down my neck.

“Really, now?” I ambled a step closer, perhaps a bit more unsteady than my usual gait. My fingers moved to the hem of my towel, letting it fall to the ground with a soft rustle.

A small, almost imperceptible smile played at the corner of Barren's lips, a silent approval that set my pulse racing even faster. I moved to his towel, and he let it go without protest, watching my hands as I unfolded it. "And why's that?" I asked, reaching up in an offer to dry his hair.

For a moment, I wasn't sure if he would let me. But Barren's neck bowed forward, his throat bobbing as he mumbled, "For signs of a concussion."

"... Oh, right." Was it wrong that I wasn't entirely upset about possibly having a concussion?

I patted down his hair, surprised by how much water had soaked into the curls. After I finished, I waited for him to look back up at me before grinning. "Are you volunteering?"

"That depends," he murmured. To my surprise, he took the towel from me, moving it aside to close the space between us.

Now I was really curious. I gazed up at him, my breath bated.

The disarray of the room was clearly not a concern, because the hand that came up under my chin wasn't holding a towel. Barren tilted my chin up, much like I'd done to him. He swallowed, his jaw tensing before his eyes settled on my lips. "Has my voice ever called to you?"

A shiver washed over me, because in that moment, it was like his voice had struck a chord so deep that it resonated through my bones.

"Yes," I breathed out, feeling the weight of his gaze on my lips. "It has."

The touch of his thumb grazing my cheek, the warmth radiating from his bare body. It was like basking in the comforting heat of sun-scorched sand.

Barren took a step closer, his towering frame making me feel small and delicate in comparison. His thumb traced my lower lip, the look in his eyes almost as if he were bidding goodbye to what we had been, readying for what we were to become.

"Claira," he rumbled, and my body came to life under the new way he spoke my name.

As he leaned in, I couldn't help but rise to him until our breaths melded—the bite of salt blending with a robust, woodsy aroma, like steeping herbal tea. *Barren*. My heart raced as my stoic titan's gaze bore down at me, every nerve in my body on edge.

I thanked every star I'd ever seen that his bed was beside us. Because I knew with certainty if he kissed me like he had when he abruptly took my lips underwater, I would need it there to keep myself standing.

Like most things between us, Barren didn't bother with the words. His

hand slid from my chin to the nape of my neck, his solid muscles pressing against me as his lips descended, a searing collision that left me breathless.

Barren's actions spoke louder than words ever could, and his kiss was no different—precise, deliberate, yet exquisitely tender. With my eyes closed, I surrendered to the sensation, reveling in his strength, his presence.

His hand drifted down the small of my back, drawing me closer to him, and I went willingly. Our bodies pressed against each other, the heat of his skin seeping into mine. My fingers strayed to the strap of his brace, tracing its ridges before curling around it, coaxing a surge of energy from him.

The kiss deepened, and in Barren's satisfied groan, I felt a rush of longing for the unspoken connection we had been denying ourselves for too long.

Barren gently nudged me toward the edge of the bed, and before I knew it, I was lying down, my back flush against the mattress. Cool fabric clung to my back, my wet hair scattering around me, likely sullyng the sheets I'd spent so much time perfectly smoothing out earlier. Had our ice shower been enough to wash away the nasty ocean brine?

When Barren came back into view, I realized I didn't care—and it seemed he didn't either.

He towered over me, his chest rising and falling with ragged breaths, his swollen lips a testament to the intensity of our kiss.

Desire darkened his eyes. "I was going to let Leander have you," he said, his tongue washing over his bottom lip as he looked me over.

My breath hitched, heat blooming deep in my belly at the way his eyes raked over every inch of me. Like he was readying to pin me to his bed.

*Yes, please.*

He sank down, propping up on his forearm, and I was barely prepared for the rush of desire that coursed through me as his mouth reclaimed mine.

Yes. This felt right. The passion in his kiss was more than welcome, and my arms encircled his neck. I wrapped around him, my fingers playing with the muscles lining the back of his bare shoulders, the tension between us building with every brush of his lips. His hips canted just enough for his extensive erection to nudge against my thigh, and *damn*, he was hard.

I scooted up, needing to feel even more, and Barren followed suit, his legs straddling mine, creating deep grooves where he leaned into the edge of the mattress. Heat from his satin-smooth skin burned right into the sides of my legs, his arousal hot and branding against my inner thigh. But I didn't mind it. No, I loved it. *Needed* it. More heat, more of him.

“Barren,” I groaned against his lips when we both came up for air. I tugged on his shoulders, fighting to drag him on top of me, but my statuesque titan wouldn’t budge. The bulk of his massive body hovered well above me, as if he were afraid I might break underneath him.

Okay, he would definitely crush me—but I was okay with it.

*Break me*, I thought as his relentless tongue dipped, sweeping over mine. *Shatter me into pieces.*

Because I knew he would reassemble every fragment of me with utmost care. That was who he was.

Barren’s lips cinched, breaking this moment of bliss, and his chest rumbled with humor as he pulled away. “I wasn’t sure you’d want to kiss me,” he murmured, a handsome flush tinting his face.

Desire was a good look for him. He rarely looked his age, and this confident, playful look was something that I could easily get used to.

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked with a breathless smile.

He adjusted his position, making sure not to put any pressure on me. “You already have Leander, Kai. Why would you want someone like me?”

I shook my head, my fingers tracing over his strong jaw, hating the way his confidence seemed to dissolve away. “*Someone like you?*” It was hard for me to even repeat it. I hated this—hated that he thought he was somehow less. “Barren...”

He looked away, but I caught him before he could drift too far. My heart ached at the thought of how much pain he’d been through, and I wanted to show him that, despite what his kingdom had told him, he was more than worthy of being loved.

“You’re wonderful,” I whispered, leaning up to press my forehead against his. “No one has ever made me feel as safe and protected as you do.”

“Protected?” His chest shook with a suppressed laugh. He kissed me again with a slow and tender touch that felt both new and familiar all at once. Then he pressed a soft kiss against the bump on the top of my head. “I hurt you.”

I huffed, squirming underneath him. “You know that was an accident. And honestly, I should have waited for a time when we weren’t moving to ask you...” My voice trailed off as I remembered how he’d mentioned Leander only moments ago. “You... you said you were going to let Leander *have* me? I’m not sure I understand.”

Barren’s hard features softened as he looked down at me. He answered

my question with a simple nod, and I felt an unexpected pang when he didn't elaborate.

"What do you mean by that?"

He moved above me, causing my arms to slip from around his neck as he rose from the bed with a grunt. "Barren!" I called out, my brows furrowing as I propped myself up on my elbows.

Barren walked over to his dresser, then paused, and when he turned around, a long, glittering chain dangled from his fingers. He retraced his path back to the bed with hesitant steps, his mouth pitched in uncertainty as he extended his hand, offering me the chain.

The pink pearl in its silver cage glimmered as I reached for it.

"You don't remember," he said, taking a seat beside me on the bed.

"No, I remember." The mattress shifted under his weight, and I let myself rest against him. "You teased me that your mate had given it to you." Just the memory of it was enough to make my stomach churn.

"Mmh." A forceful swallow worked his throat. "Only, I wasn't teasing you. My mate gave this to me."

"Oh. I—I see," I sputtered. There went my insides. My heart disintegrated. My lungs collapsed, my life force shriveling away to nothing.

I could feel the bed shift as Barren turned to face me, but I couldn't look up at him, couldn't do anything but gasp and fight for my next breath.

"You gave it to me."

*I—what?*

"You don't remember," he went on as his hand met the bump on the top of my head, soothing it with a tender brush of his thumb. "I traveled to the Atlantic once, as a merfry. For a banquet Leander's father arranged in celebration of the expected death of my father."

That... Well, that did sound like something King Eamon would do. But a banquet? Papa hadn't allowed me to attend banquets, except for —

*Wait.*

My eyes widened as I turned the silver cage around in my palm. "Holy crap," I whispered, staring down at the perfect pink pearl.

I'd kept one just like it tucked in the seagrass where I slept, too valuable to store in the bag with my other pearls. Most of them ended up scuffed or lost from playing rounds of Shooters, but not that pearl—that pearl I'd wanted to keep safe.

Because I knew that somewhere out there, it had a twin. *Doubles*, Papa

used to call them. I'd opened hundreds of oysters, but only ever found one pair.

My hand tightened around the necklace. He'd kept his safe, after all this time. "That was you?" I said weakly.

I stared at him, awestruck, my mind replaying what I could remember of the banquet and of the merfry with the red tail who'd helped me open the oyster Papa had brought me.

That shy young merfry seemed so different from the Barren before me now.

It had been so long since I'd thought of that banquet—it was one of the last happy memories I'd had from my life under the waves. I hadn't wanted to think about the bad times, and I'd wanted to think of the good times even less. Once, I'd done everything in my power to leave that life behind me. But now...

Barren's hand cupped my jaw, bringing me over to him. "We were young, yes. But I knew." His warm palm found its way to my chest, resting over my heart before he pressed it against his own. "Right here. I knew."

He'd known *then* that we were mates? "Did you read my mind or something?" I leaned in closer to whisper, "You can't see all of my mates in there, can you?"

A chuckle rattled through him. "No," he said, retrieving the necklace from my hand. "I didn't read your mind that day."

"Why not?" I frowned at his bare back as he got up to put the pearl safely away.

"I didn't need to." After setting it back in its glass container, he shrugged. "You spoke to me. No one ever spoke to me."

That's right—his father had forbidden it. I pressed a hand to my chest, where his palm had been, almost feeling the weight of his loneliness upon my heart.

"That day, Leander told me you were going to be a king," I murmured, working through the memory. Why hadn't I made the connection sooner? Queen Javalynn had even said Barren's kingdom had passed over him in favor of her.

*Ugh*—that thought was infuriating. Barren would have made a great king. Better than his sister by far.

"I thought I'd never get to speak with you again," I said as he walked back over. "They never let me speak with royalty. Well, except for Lee," I

added with a snort.

Saying nothing, Barren's hand fell over the buckle of his brace, and I wasn't sure what to think when he began undoing the strap. He peeled off the leather, revealing angry imprints on his skin from how tightly he'd had it fastened.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen the scars underneath his brace. But it was the first time I felt Barren intentionally wanted me to look at the deep hollow where his arm had once been.

Pain registered in his eyes as he scrubbed his palm over the angry skin. Not the physical kind, no, but shame. "My father had raised me to replace him, yes. But that was before I became—" His mouth struggled to form the word, and he cast his eyes to the floor before saying, "—tainted."

"You're not tainted," I said forcefully, my heart pounding as I lifted to my feet. The scars looked rough, sure, the skin shiny and thick, but those scars didn't define him. Barren wasn't tainted. "May I?" I whispered, my hand shaking with rage as it hovered over his chest.

I wasn't sure if he wanted me to touch his scars, but I needed him to know that he was whole and perfect as he was.

Barren's jaw clenched, and a flicker of doubt lanced through me, uncertain if I'd crossed an invisible line. But then, his chin dipped in a terse nod, and a quiet "mmh" vibrated his lips.

With a delicate touch, I traced over the ridge of a scar with the pad of my thumb, my voice softer when I repeated, "You're not tainted." The skin was slightly raised, but strength still surged underneath it. It was still Barren.

His chest rose and fell slowly as he watched me, his warm breath washing over my face with each exhale. "What did my sister tell you about my arm?"

I pressed closer to him, keeping my thumb on the scar I was following, and glanced up. "Nothing, really. She seemed surprised you hadn't already told me."

Though I understood why he hadn't. He'd been treated so unfairly. It wasn't right. "Losing an arm doesn't make you any less of a merman, or a king."

"My father took it," Barren said suddenly, his voice low and heavy.

"Your *father*?" I whispered. I—I hadn't expected that.

The lines of his throat tightened. "Once, I thought my sister cared for me. Lynn. She would come to me against my father's orders. Speak to me."

He slumped down to the bed with a deep sigh, and I followed, sitting



down beside him. “She couldn’t read minds, and because of that, our father had no interest in her. But as I am sure you noticed, she does have a gift.”

I nodded, placing a hand over his. “She can put thoughts in people’s minds, can’t she?”

“Mmh. Even mine,” he murmured, his wide hand curling around mine. “In her mind, I saw everything she wanted me to see. Love for me. Caring. I heard her thoughts of swimming down to the Undersea, and of course, I wanted to stop her. To protect her.”

I could practically feel the weight bearing down on his words, aching with the scars of a past that refused to fade. “The only thing waiting there for me was dark spawn. One caught me by my right arm, wound around it. I cut myself free, but I’d already lost more in that moment than a young merfry could imagine.”

His voice faltered, his façade of composure cracking with a weak laugh. “Lynn had sent guards to follow me. Our father was dying, and at six years old, she’d made her move for his crown. In this ocean, mer and cecaelian magic doesn’t mix. It is believed that their dark magic can seep in, tainting us down to our bones.”

His face hardened as if he truly was carved from stone. “I don’t blame my father for taking it,” he said gruffly. “It was a dying king’s desperate attempt to fix his chosen heir. He gave me a choice—the arm or the crown. But the damage had been done. Lynn made sure of it. I knew before my wound had healed that I’d lost them both.”

I—I couldn’t even imagine the pain he’d gone through. I knew mermaids could be monstrous, but a six-year-old doing such things? And to her own brother?

“Does your kingdom really hate cecaelia that much?” I asked, my throat going painfully hoarse. “Even enough to...” I stared at the place where Barren’s arm had once been, unable to say it. The scars ran deep. So, so deep. And his own father had done it to him.

I swallowed, remembering how dark cecaelian magic had been all over me, too. Only days earlier, tentacles had wrapped over every one of my limbs, even around my waist. If Barren shared the same beliefs...

“They do,” he said solemnly. “For as long as my kingdom has lived in these waters.”

“That’s insane. Cecaelia are—are—” My tongue tied together, a gag working up my throat. *They’re right here, hiding out on this island, I*

screamed in my head.

“Dangerous,” Barren completed the sentence for me, and I stared at him, confused. “While I don’t share their superstitions, I understand why my kingdom believes as they do.” He leaned forward, tucking a strand of hair back behind my ear. “Dark spawn don’t think twice about taking a life. Even their own kind.”

I clasped my hands together, trying to steady my shaking fingers as I thought about the abalone shell sitting in my bag across the bedroom. Sure, cecaelia seemed dangerous, but were merfolk any better?

Barren leaned back, his shoulders slumping in relief. “I was worried my sister’s gift might affect you, too,” he admitted, his chin tilting back so he could look up at the ceiling. “That you might—might fear me. Not want to touch me. I’m relieved that’s not the case.”

Oh, she’d tried it. *That bitch*. Forgotten anger welled up in me like it had been waiting for me to remember just how much I disliked Barren’s sister. “Fear you? Not want to touch you?” I almost growled the words, my insides seething. “Barren...” I climbed on top of him, placing my hands on his chest as I straddled his lap. His eyes opened wide, and I could feel his heart thumping, a steady drumbeat under my palms.

“I *do* want to touch you,” I said softly, brushing my lips against his. “I want to keep touching you. If I’m afraid of anything, it’s that I’ll never want to *stop* touching you.”

The corner of his lips curved under mine. His arm swept low around my back, pulling me further onto his lap. “Really?” he asked, his breath tickling my lips.

I tried to think of a clever response, but the hot pulse of his erection coming to life underneath me proved to be quite the distraction. The way Barren’s body responded to mine was a heady sensation—the warmth of his skin, the way his muscles tensed with my every move.

“I’m going to touch you, Barren,” I murmured, my hands sliding down his chest to his abdomen. I didn’t know why I said it, but it felt right, and the way the words made him shudder had me thinking he enjoyed hearing me say it.

“But I want you to touch me, too,” I whispered, flashing a heated grin up at him. His hand wasted no time, dropping low enough to cup the swell of my ass. I groaned, loving the strength of his grip. His lips were suddenly on mine again. This time, there was no holding back the heat that coursed through us

both.

Barren slid his tongue against my lips, tempting me to open my mouth for him, and I obliged, letting his tongue tangle with mine. My hands found his shoulders—goodness, I loved his shoulders—and my body moved of its own accord to further straddle his lap. I felt his cock, hot and heavy, rub against my inner thigh. That part of him had been teasing me all night, and I wasn't sure if Barren even knew it.

Now it was my turn to do the teasing.

He let out a low grunt when I dipped between us, taking his cock into my hands. He was impossibly stiff, and I feathered my fingertips over the tip, marveling at the silken feel of him.

“Damn, that’s huge,” I said, the words spilling out against his lips. Sure, I knew he was massive, but it wasn't until I held him that I understood the true scope of his size.

I must have forgotten myself, because the way Barren stopped to chuckle told me I hadn't whispered that thought as quietly as I'd intended.

I continued stroking him from base to tip, letting my fingers ghost over the plump head, fascinated by the way his muscles tensed at my touch.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asked, his tone amused, almost cocky.

I nodded, the only response I could manage while clasping his erection in my hands. I was enjoying myself. *A lot.*

“Mmh,” he rumbled, and before I knew what was happening, he'd rolled us over. My back went flat on the bed, and I stared up at him, his cock still in my hand.

I felt Barren's scorching gaze as he stared down at my nearly bare body. His every movement seemed to radiate desire, sending a shiver of anticipation running through my center.

But then he spoke, and his words were like a splash of cold water doused over my senses. “Your head hit the dock hard,” he muttered, his voice. “I'm supposed to be watching you.”

Was he really still worried about that? “What? It's fine—I barely even feel it,” I assured him, but his concern was written all over his face.

“Barren. I'd still want to touch your dick, even if my head hadn't hit your dock,” I said evenly, giving his cock a firm squeeze that made his jaw clench and eyes roll upward.

He shook off the sensation with a groan before leaning down to press another kiss next to the bump on my head. “All right. How about this?” he

muttered. “After you recover, if you still want to touch me, I’ll be yours to do whatever you want.”

I stared over at him, my eyebrows raising in curiosity. “*Anything* I want?”

He nodded, letting himself fall on the bed beside me with a tired sigh. I realized then how exhausted he looked. He’d stayed up doing chores earlier while all of us rested in preparation for meeting with his sister.

Frustrated in a multitude of ways, I blinked up at the ceiling for a moment before jerking over to my side. Barren was watching me, of course, his arm perched on the side of his hip.

As if my eyes were magnets drawn to another, my gaze slid down to his erection. Swollen and red, it looked like he was almost as frustrated as I was.

“You’re really worried that I’m not of sound mind?” I asked with a frown.

His chest rocked with a steadying breath. “I’d rather not remember tonight as the night I hurt you and then acted on my desires.”

Oh—well, when he put it like that, he had a point. A lot had happened today. Maybe tomorrow would be a better day all around.

“Are you sleeping in here with me, then?” Nestling closer, I tilted my chin up to meet his gaze. “I’ll have to lie next to you if you’re going to watch me, right?” I asked teasingly, giving his chest a nudge.

“Mmh. I’ve missed this.” His head rolled back to find one of his pillows. “Although I usually sleep underneath the sheets,” he said flatly.

“And do you usually sleep naked?” I asked, feigning surprise as I crawled out of the bed. “Because I know this might be shocking, but I don’t usually sleep dressed in one solitary bikini top.”

“Shirtless, usually,” he said as he pulled back the sheets. Crawling back in first, he looked like he couldn’t wait to get back to his pillow.

Well, if he was going in naked, I was going in naked, too.

Although he didn’t lift his head, one of Barren’s eyebrows rose as I slipped off my bikini top. Then I crawled in, settling in close enough that my breasts brushed against his chest. He let out a grunt, but then bent down to meet my lips in a tender kiss.

“I’m not sure you should be sleeping,” he said as my fingers trailed down his stomach, lightly tracing over his muscles.

“Well, how about I promise to stay awake?” I whispered, my hands fully settling against his warm skin. “You need sleep, Barren. You look exhausted.”

“Mmh. I am tired,” he said with a yawn. “We should both stay awake.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I chuckled. He wouldn’t last five minutes. “Good luck.”

We lay there, still and quiet, our bodies pressed together as I listened to the steady rhythm of his heart. My eyes fell to his scars, and a wave of nausea hit.

I hated his sister. Maybe his kingdom, too, for so easily tossing Barren aside. Their hatred for cecaelia made them blind to his suffering, or perhaps they never cared to begin with.

But as I watched his steady breaths, my heart filled with admiration. Despite everything, Barren had risen above it. Even living as an outsider on this island, he’d found joy in walking his own path.

“Are you still watching me?” I asked, but when I glanced up, Barren’s eyes were closed, his body at ease.

“Barren?” I whispered, but he didn’t stir. He really had been tired.

Silently, I crept out of bed, careful to tuck the sheets back in around him. The only thing on my mind when I pulled on fresh clothes was Barren’s kingdom and their tumultuous relationship with the cecaelia.

If only there was a way for the merfolk to let go of their superstitions, then maybe, just maybe, it would spare Barren from more pain.

There was... one way.

Usually, when it came to the affairs of merfolk, I was reluctant. But not this time.

I felt it deep in my bones. I knew what I had to do.

Sneaking around the bed, I opened my suitcase, digging out a notebook and pen from the bottom. Flipping to a blank page, I thought a moment before putting my pen to the paper. I only managed to write the words *don’t worry, I’ll be* before pain seared through my hand.

*What the heck?*

Irritated, I cut to the chase, attempting to write the letter *c*, when another jolt caused me to scratch a rogue line over the paper. “Dammit,” I muttered. It appeared there was more to this silencing spell than just saying words.

I tried drawing a picture next, but only managed to scrawl one tentacle before my hand jerked, ruining what I’d done with a scribble. Hunching over the paper, I took a deep breath, deciding I would try something else entirely.

Circling the words *Don’t worry*, I drew a new picture in the space underneath them. Four hearts. Perfect. Only my conscience wouldn’t let me

set it down until I drew a tiny sea lion next to them.

Okay, now it was really perfect. Or at least, as perfect as it was ever going to get when I wasn't allowed to drop any clues as to where I was going.

Sighing, I sat the note down and then went over to my bag, fishing the shells out from its bottom. My fingers curled around the smooth surface of the abalone shell as I gripped it in one hand, my magical switchblade in the other.

This was my chance. To help Leander free himself from his trident, and maybe help how Barren's kingdom saw cecaelia, as well.

Knowing the guys would try to stop me, I did the only thing I could do.  
I snuck out the patio door.



# CLAIRA



So much for secretly leaving under the cover of darkness. I dragged my boots through the sand, watching purple and orange seep into the clouds above the ocean's horizon. It was morning already. Fantastic.

"Maybe I should have waited," I mumbled, shielding my eyes from a glint reflecting off the water's surface. Chosen a time when it would actually *stay* dark. But now that I'd disappeared on them once already at the casino, there was no telling when or if the guys would ever leave me alone again.

No—this was my best chance, and I had to take it.

"You've got this, Clair," I whispered to the wind and took in a long breath, letting the island air fill me. The ocean here was nothing like it was back home. Even the air smelled different, with a sweetness akin to vanilla hanging in the breeze.

Well, with any luck, I wouldn't be gone long. And if I was, at least I'd left a note—a strange note, sure, but enough to let the guys know I'd be back with them soon.

And magic worked quickly, didn't it? Like lighting a pearl, it could change things in an instant. Perhaps it wouldn't take long for the cecaelia to discover why the betta fish curse hadn't affected me and why my touch seemed to break it. Then, maybe, once they figured out how to use that knowledge to help the merfolk, the narrow mindset of Barren's kingdom might begin to shift.

Even a slight improvement—just a hint of gratitude toward the cecaelia—would be better than how things were now, wouldn't it?

My heart seemed to drag me down with every step across the beach as I



thought of Barren's peacefully sleeping face back at the bungalow. I hated leaving him like this. Especially after I'd lulled him to sleep with my promise to stay awake. I guess I hadn't lied, had I? But now that I knew the idiotic reason behind all the injustices he'd endured, how could I sit around knowing my strange gift might be able to help him?

I'd been checking over my shoulder constantly since I'd left, making sure no one had noticed me leaving. Laverne was my leading concern. I cast the ocean a weary glance, half-expecting her to pop up with a jaw full of spit and insults, ready to stop me.

But so far—thank Poseidon—the beach had been empty.

“Just me and the sand crabs,” I said with a sigh, watching a generously sized crab dig out a burrow. It seemed just as upset about the sun coming up as I was, and its willowy legs worked furiously, fighting to make a place to retreat for the day.

“*Ghost crab*,” a tiny, jittery voice squeaked into my head. The suddenness of it nearly knocked me off my boots.

“Ghost crab, right, sorry.” In its defense, it was paler than the ghost crabs back home. Perhaps I should have known. I gave it an appraising glance and tipped my chin. “Very spooky.”

While the crab's legs kept working, its beady black eye stalks swiveled, following me as I passed. Okay—maybe it was more unnerving than spooky. “Uh, please excuse me,” I muttered, kicking up into a jog as I scurried off down the beach.

That was just one more witness for Laverne and the guys to question if they did go looking for me. Hopefully, it would be long tucked away in its burrow by then.

Switching my focus, I eyed the palm trees further up the shore. They'd been my target for the past ten minutes or so, and now I was getting close.

I rubbed my thumb over the abalone's pearly finish as I jogged, wondering where the cecaelia had expected me to use it. Under the cover of palm fronds seemed as good a place as any. It wasn't like I knew of a more secretive location—or *any* other location on the island.

Shadows cast over me as I slipped between two leaning trees. Centering the abalone in my hand, I steadied myself with a breath. “Here goes nothing.”

The abalone was almost too pretty to break. Almost.

My fist clenched, and the shell snapped, splintering in my hand with the structural integrity of an off-brand potato chip. Black smoke streamed out

from between my fingers, and when I opened them, I discovered that the shell had dissolved away. The black wisps of magic thinned, curling up around my arm, and my heart raced with anticipation.

I knew this magic. Dark and cold, like the sea wizard it belonged to.

“Using the shell already,” a smoky voice called from behind me.

As usual, he had excellent timing.

I whirled around, expecting him to have materialized at my back. But there he was, at the edge of the ocean, all dark limbs and pale skin. The perfect depiction of a treacherous sea demon emerging from the waves.

A resounding *tsk* surfaced from his lips as he rose from the water, his tentacles hauling him up to where the waves rippled against the shoreline. I must have caught him while he was underwater—maybe even asleep, by the state of his face. Disheveled black hair obscured it, and when he slicked it back to its usual style, his irritation at being summoned was clear.

“Oh. I—I was hoping you wouldn’t be in the water,” I called out to him, huddling with the palm fronds.

“No?” Wet sand squelched with every movement of his tentacles. His pale skin glistened with salt water as he dragged closer, no markings visible on his bare arms or chest. I surveyed his sprawling limbs, and sure enough, a front tentacle secured his trident—a fact that distracted me from noticing just how high one of his dark eyebrows had lifted.

“You wished for me to appear before you in the nude?”

*Uh, what?*

I came out from underneath the palm trees sputtering. “N-no! I wanted you *clothed*, under these palm fronds,” I asserted, pointing back at the bowed trees behind me.

The way his pale lips slid into a suggestive smirk had me tripping over my boots. “Well, you caught me while I was trying to sleep,” he said, rolling out his neck. “So unless you have the desire to become familiar with my human flesh, you’ll have me in the water, or not at all.”

“Absolutely *zero* desire. It’s just”—My eyes cut to the left, then to the right—“if anyone saw you here. Like *this*,” I said, motioning to his tentacles. My voice grew quiet, the thought of Barren’s painful past causing a lump to form in my throat. “I realize now how much your kind... isn’t trusted.”

*Is hated*, had been what I wanted to say. But even if it was the truth, it somehow seemed cruel to say it aloud.

The sea wizard’s shoulders straightened. Every lithe muscle, every curved

limb went stiff, as if my chosen words had offended him regardless.

“My *kind*,” he repeated through tight lips pitched so different from the smirk he’d shown me only moments before.

Now he looked awake, with wet hair dripping down his neck and sharp eyes filled with irritation fixed on me. “You know this, and yet, here you are.”

With a sudden lash, his tentacles worked around him. The lump in my throat only grew with his approach. Out of the water, the height added on by his lower half seemed to amplify his already imposing stature. I understood now why a child might have believed he was Poseidon. His height, his trident—those inhumanly white irises that looked like they belonged to a nightmare.

One deep purple tendril came close, curling just below my chin, and I shuddered, immediately reminded of how Barren had lost his arm.

The sea wizard’s eyes narrowed to perilous slits. “Clearly, my warnings were not enough,” he said, all of his amorous charm long forgotten.

Forget irritated, he looked *furious* that I was standing here before him.

The tentacle lingered, slowly twisting like it was toying with the idea of slipping into the space between my hair and my neck. “You know what they say about curiosity.”

“Something about cats and satisfaction.” I lifted my chin. Regardless of his warnings, this was my only way forward. Something only *I* could do for Barren and Leander. For all of the merfolk. “But I think that saying underestimates mermaids.”

“Mermaids?” The tentacle underneath my chin flicked, and dammit, I flinched. The sea wizard’s scowl dissolved into a deep rumbling laugh. “You look far more like a mouse to me, little captive.”

*Ugh*—this exchange was giving me whiplash. Nothing was turning out how I’d planned it.

“Look, can you just... poof us somewhere?” I asked, trying to mask my annoyance as I glanced up and down the beach. The sun was basically up now, and it felt like sheer luck that someone hadn’t come across us already. “Somewhere far away from here, so we can talk for a minute?”

The sea wizard’s glaring white eyes betrayed no emotion as he crossed his arms over his pale chest. “You want me to ‘*poof*’ us somewhere.”

“Yes, exactly.” I took the end of the tentacle waving closest to me, taking care to touch it as little as possible by grasping the firm flesh between two

fingers. “Let’s go.”

He didn’t move.

His lips remained tightly together as he took a long, hard look at me. “Enlighten me. Where, exactly, do you think we’re going?”

“Somewhere private, I guess. A place where we can talk before you take me to your queen.”

“*Private.*” His sigh was heavy and laced with somehow even more irritation. “My only purpose here is to escort you to a certain location. A location that happens to be underwater.”

“Underwater? But your queen is —”

“Currently holding court deep in the bowels of the Undersea,” he finished for me.

*Bowels of the Undersea.* Now that conjured a lovely image.

“Okay, well, I have one problem with that,” I said, casting a glance back in the direction of the bungalow. Naturally, it and my suitcase were both well out of sight. “I didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

“That hardly seems like a problem to me.” Although his eyes steadily rested on mine, one of his tentacles wrapped around me from behind. Then another. Gentle pressure reeled me closer to him, closer to the water.

“Wait—! Let’s... let’s talk first,” I squeaked. Despite holding my magical switchblade shell out in defense, I couldn’t shake the feeling I might actually look like the small, timid mouse he’d teased me of being.

His pale shoulders rolled with amusement. “Fine. We’ll talk first, if that is what you wish.”

A dark tentacle rose like a whip, and with a smooth motion, he snatched his trident from it. Black smoke exploded, and we were suddenly surrounded by a thick, impenetrable haze. Darkness drew around us like a cloak, letting only the overhead dawn through.

“You can stop worrying about being found,” he said simply. His front tentacles retreated, coiling neatly underneath him while his back ones flicked lazily over the waves. “Nobody can see beyond this veil.”

Mesmerized, I held a palm out to the wall of smoke, surprised by the haze’s icy temperature. “You can make yourself invisible?” Now that seemed like a useful trick.

His eyes were as cold as the magical mist that surrounded us. “My magic can do many things.”

Realizing I was still poking at the veil he’d conjured, I dropped my hand,

trying to play my admiration off as indifference. “So it seems.” I didn’t know why I kept letting him surprise me. *Wizard* was right there in his title. Of course he could do all sorts of strange magic.

“I have a question,” I said, stepping closer to him. The sand squishing under my boots made me anxious, but I couldn’t afford to show any more weakness. “How are you able to remove your trident from inside of you?”

His lips peeled back from his teeth, a deadly blade of a look that raised every hair on the back of my neck. “Excuse me?”

Well... I could already tell this wasn’t going to go well.

Although my intuition was screaming, I persisted. “Don’t deny it.” I pointed a finger right up against his porcelain smooth, freakishly unblemished chest. “I know that trident was inside you.”

“Hm.” His eyes cast down where my finger prodded. With his slicked-back hair and lips canting into a calculating smirk, he looked ready to devour this mouse in one bite.

Wait—why was he suddenly smirking?

“And if I tell you,” he said, each softly spoken word wrapped in velvet, “what will you give me in return?”

“In... return?” Warning bells rang inside me, too loud to ignore. I stumbled back a step, but he was already there, catching me by the waist. His tentacles cinched, sweeping me close enough for far more than just my finger to press against him.

Worst of all, he didn’t seem to care about the magical switchblade I held. The shell’s ribbed ridges pressed against my thigh, caught between us, leading me to believe it somehow hadn’t filleted him.

Damp, suction-cupped flesh brushed against my shoulders and my forehead, teasing back my hair. I shivered when one tendril seemed to find the bump hidden underneath.

To call his look amused would be an understatement. No, he looked thrilled to have caught this little mouse. *Dammit.*

“I cannot give away that kind of knowledge for free, can I?” His white eyes bore into me, a sharp focus that should have made my skin crawl. But instead, my body grew hot, igniting a cascade of flutters that stirred from the depths of my belly.

*Double dammit.*

He leaned in, close enough for me to taste the salt water in his cool breath. “And since you’re such a *curious creature*... You should have no

problem striking a deal with me.”

“I—” My throat choked up.

A deal? What kind of deal?

“Uh...” My brain stalled. This wasn’t what I had in mind. He was too close, his expression all cunning and slyness, his cool skin causing goosebumps to form over my arms.

*Shit.* And my clothes were soaking up enough salt water from off his body there was a good chance I might transform right here and now.

As if to coax me into agreement, his hand holding the trident opened, and the weapon vanished, dissolving into smoke. The tattoo-like mark took shape before my eyes, a dark slash that worked up his arm, branching out over his chest in three broad deadly-tipped lines. “Well?” he asked. The muscles surrounding his neck tightened, as if maybe the bonding hurt him, but he gave no other indication of pain.

*Wait—*

My gaze snapped to his neck, the place where the gash had been only hours before. The skin there was as perfectly smooth as the rest of him. Did cecaelia heal even faster than merfolk, or was this another *thing* his magic could do?

While awaiting my response, he lifted a strand of my hair, toying with it between his fingers. “If you don’t wish to part with more of your blood, there are other ways,” he said gently. “A lock of your hair, perhaps.”

*More blood? My hair?* I took a steadying breath, recognizing I didn’t feel anywhere near as threatened as I should have. While the sea wizard communicated in riddles, he’d yet to hurt me. Well—other than dropping me into a tank of water, but that had hurt my ego more than anything else.

The corner of my mouth tilted. “I’ve watched too many crime shows to ever let you have my hair.”

A chuckle rippled from the base of his chest. “No?” He let my hair slip from his fingers. “There are other things I could take. Your voice. A kiss.”

“A *kiss*?” I breathed out. What the heck kind of deal was this?

He leaned in, the angular slope of his nostrils flaring. His gaze slid to my lips. “So that’s your chosen offering? A kiss?”

“No, I—” It was too late for me to move away; he’d already caught me. “I wasn’t choosing that one,” I threw back, tugging at his tentacles, attempting to untangle them from around me. “It just... surprised me. That’s all.”

He released some of them, but held his ground, leaving me little room to maneuver in his grasp. “Do you wish to know how I control my trident or not?” he asked.

I shifted my focus from his tentacles to shoot him an annoyed look. “Of course I do. Just give me a second,” I snapped. “Let me think.”

Well, I certainly wasn’t going to give up my voice. That left my hair or maybe more blood? Ugh. The most disturbing part was not knowing what he would *do* with any of these things if he got them. Unsettled, my face contorted into a grimace. “What would you even want with my voice?”

“Perhaps I’ll start a business,” he said smoothly, his arms crossing back over his salt-stained chest. “Use that sweet voice of yours to become an erotic audio performer.” A momentary pause, then a smirk crept across his face. “Or maybe I’ll keep it for myself.”

My mouth dropped open, and I—well, I certainly didn’t know what to say to that.

“No?” He looked as if he was trying to stifle a laugh. His eyes crinkled with dark amusement. “Well, how about I counter your request with one of my own?”

This was a bad idea, wasn’t it? I swallowed hard, holding back my uncertainty. “What kind of request?”

His smirk broadened. “While you’re down there, there’s a chance the queen may ask you to look into her mirror.” It was chilling how quickly his tone turned serious. “She’s obscenely fixated on it at the moment. If she does happen to show it to you, I ask for you not to speak of the first thing you see when you look into it. Reveal it to no one—except for me.”

For a moment, I just stared at him, surveying from his white eyes down to the dark mark of his trident. It seemed a simple enough deal—a trade of knowledge—but why would his queen show me her mirror? Then I recalled her desk and how trinkets covered every inch of it. Could she be proud of her collection?

“Accept this deal, and I will enlighten you on all my trident’s many secrets.”

“Is there something special about this mirror?” I asked, thinking over every angle. “Or is it like the other knick-knacks she keeps in her office?”

He gave a small snort. “I’ll let you judge that for yourself. The second thing you notice when you look at it, the third, and so on—those you may speak of if she does inquire about your thoughts.”

“So, you’re seriously going to spend your half of our deal hoping that your queen will show me a *mirror*?”

“You needn’t worry about me, little captive. I’ve never made a deal that wasn’t in my favor.” Slicking back his dark hair, the sea wizard held out a hand. “Do you accept?” he asked, his voice a dark riddle all of its own.

So I just couldn’t mention the first thing I noticed about the mirror to anyone but him? What a strange request. “This sort of feels like I’m signing over my firstborn,” I mumbled, my eyes narrowing on his outstretched hand. “I’m not, am I?”

The corner of his lips twitched. “That sounds like quite the hassle for me. I would much prefer *not* to be hunted down by your ever-increasing assortment of lovers.”

My cheeks flushed, but I refused to be ashamed of the bond I shared with my guys. Most probably wouldn’t understand it, but that was fine with me. Our happiness was the only thing that mattered.

The sea wizard leaned in close, as if sharing a secret. “I’m quite elusive, but with a noisy babe in tow, I worry one of them might succeed in catching me.”

“Not an aspiring father, are we?” I asked with a snort.

“My kind isn’t as paternal as the merfolk, I’m afraid,” he said, straightening back up. “I have no recollection of my father. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

As his long body shifted with the incoming tides, I realized that, despite our banter, I knew nothing about this cecaelian man. Not even his name.

His hand hovered in front of me, an open invitation to accept his bargain.

“Are you sure this isn’t a trap?” I asked.

The sea wizard’s dark eyebrows lifted. “Why would I need to trap someone I’ve already caught?” His tentacles cinched again, pulling me snugly against him.

“Ugh, very funny,” I muttered. “I came to you willingly. You did *not* catch me.”

“Whatever you say.” He chuckled, his grin spreading as I took his hand.

When my fingers wrapped around his, I consciously chose to believe the cunning look in his eyes concealed good intentions. Well, good intentions when it came to *me*, at least. I didn’t care what his intentions were toward his queen, as long as we could all still come up with a cure for the merfolk together.



“Speaking of catching, I never caught your name,” I said, suddenly surprised at how much not knowing it bothered me.

The sea wizard’s piercing gaze aligned with our hands. His lips compressed into a pale line, as if my words had stripped away some of his victory in our deal.

“Names hold little significance in the Undersea. It’s what we are that defines us, be it a pawn or a sea wizard.” His hand unceremoniously dropped from mine. “The deal is struck. We’re tethered to our vows, you and I. Now, it’s time to go.”

Although I felt no different than before, I couldn’t help shaking out my hand.

“Wait, please,” I said, confused by his reluctance to give up his name. “Names might not be important in the Undersea, but they’re important to me. I can’t keep calling you *wizard*. I’m Clairia.”

The sea wizard stared down at me, lips taut, giving me nothing.

I blinked. He blinked. Nothing.

“You’re really not going to tell me?” My mouth fell into a frown. “You do have a name, right?”

“Yes.” One word. That was all he said. A simple *yes*, nothing more.

My molars ground. “Okay... Well, forget the name thing. Tell me about your trident before we go. How you’re able to remove it. That’s your end of our bargain, after all.”

“Ah, that.” Fingers flexing, he looked down at his arm as if perhaps he could see the magic marks there, too. “I didn’t specify *when* I would tell you. Only that I *would* tell you.”

I gawked at him. “You’re joking.”

“Not in the slightest.”

Immediately, I took back wanting to know his name. “So you could just, oh, I don’t know, tell me after I’m dead and buried? And that would still count as you upholding your end of our deal?” My voice rose in pitch as I spoke, my outrage impossible to contain.

The sea wizard laughed. He *laughed*. “I knew it wouldn’t take long for you to catch on, little captive. Regrettably, the vow has been made. There’s no going back on it now.”

I couldn’t believe it—okay, maybe I could. So what if he gave me a magic shell? He was a stranger to me. A *cecaelia*. *Dark spawn*. Someone who didn’t even have the decency to tell me his name.

“You know, you’re right about your name being unimportant. I should just keep referring to you as what you are.” Crossing my arms, I scowled as I asked, “Which do you prefer—puppet or creep?”

Judging by the way his muscles contracted, the comment had hit its mark. “Time to go,” he said coldly, his tentacles closing back around me tighter than they’d ever been. “And watch where you stick that seashell.”

“Why does it matter?” I retorted, frustration boiling within me that he’d made himself immune to the shell’s slicing. “It’s not as though it could cut you.”

“It can and it will.” As he spoke, his tentacles wedged between us, creating a subtle separation between the shell and his chest.

“Earlier, you didn’t seem afraid of it.”

“That knife has been enchanted to sever only that which you intend to sever. One of my more clever fabrications, or so I thought,” he said darkly. “Earlier, you had no intention of harming me. Now, I fear you might carve out my heart.”

“Fine, I’ll watch where I stick it,” I said, and although I tucked the shell safely in my arms, a faint smile played over my lips at my newfound knowledge of its power. “I’ll also enjoy watching it slice through your heart, should the mood strike me.”

“Fair enough,” he said, a shiver running through his tentacles, as if he found a thrill in my threat. “Shall I take you now, or do you wish to remove your clothing first?”

My jaw tightened. “Now I know you’re trying to get me to stab you.”

He chuckled as he shook his head. “I thought that might get you in a carving mood. But no, we’ve already delayed our departure too long.” Leaning down, his fingers grazed the side of my hair. “If you’re worried about me looking, don’t be.”

After everything, there was no way I trusted him enough to believe that. I’d rather have my pants explode off my legs with my transformation than strip in front of him. “Go ahead and drag me.”

He threw his head back, venting a smoky laugh. “As you wish.”



## CLAIRA



The sea wizard could have easily used one of his tentacles to carry me, but he chose to drag me into the water in his arms. My desire to maim him must have faded, because when my legs fused with an earsplitting *pop*, I was less than careful about where I stuck my seashell.

“I seem to be back in your good graces,” he said as soon as our heads slipped under the tide. I looked up from my tail to discover one of my arms wound around his neck and my shell braced against his chest. Ugh. I really hated being carried.

“For now.” I huffed, hating how my tail dangled helplessly while his tentacles writhed and twisted around it.

Amusement flickered in his white eyes, his dark hair lashing over his head much like his tentacles did underneath us. His powerful appendages undulated, and the smooth movement propelled us across the seafloor.

Gradually, the surrounding ocean darkened with our descent, and I glanced around, wondering how long it would take for the bioluminescent algae to react to my magic and start to glow.

My face flushed at the memory of Barren and me drifting through the sea of stars. Him carrying me—now that, I didn’t hate. It had been one of the most romantic sights I’d ever seen. Recreating that magical moment with the sea wizard only hours later? Laverne would be judging me with a spitball to the face if she knew.

“It’s a ways down,” the sea wizard muttered, focusing on the shadowy water ahead.

No—this time, it wasn’t going to be romantic. With any luck, the lights would irritate him and mess with his vision. The perfect start to my revenge

for him tricking me into a bad deal.

We passed into the shadows, and my eyes pricked as the darkness set in. But instead of my magic lighting the algae, my vision switched, and colors drained away.

“What the heck?” My throat constricted as my gaze darted, taking in the many shades of gray in the nearby beds of coral and seagrass. There were no stars. No other magic.

This whole time, I’d thought the bioluminescent lights had been a combined effort—mine and Barren’s magic working together to light up the sea.

Now I knew the truth.

The lights had only glowed for Barren.

It was a realization that left me feeling strangely numb.

“Is there a problem?” The sea wizard’s voice was like a gentle wave, lapping at the shore of my consciousness.

I snapped out of my daze at the realization that we’d stopped moving. The sea wizard’s chin dipped, his inquisitive eyes aimed at me.

“Nope,” I lied, averting my gaze toward the water. With my new vision, the stark whiteness of his eyes stood out even more, making it uncomfortable to look at him for longer than a passing glance. “No problems here.”

His hand unexpectedly touched my face, sweeping my unruly hair aside. “It’s a long way down to the Undersea.” Then his tentacles resumed their work, drawing us into deeper waters.

“Deep in the bowels, so I hear,” I muttered, wondering why he’d even bothered with my hair. It had a mind of its own, both underwater and on land, much like his kind’s tentacles seemed to. Only Kai had ever been able to tame it. “Is there a reason you haven’t just teleported us?”

“The change in depth can be... jarring,” the sea wizard said, his tendrils twirling to yet another stop. “We can try it if you’d like. Although you may end up with a headache.”

More head pain—fantastic. Just what I needed.

I thought over the offer, absentmindedly searching for the bump on my head. Only... where was the bump again? Under my fingertips, my scalp was completely smooth.

My eyes snapped to the sea wizard. “Did you —?”

A smirk was waiting for me. “Did I do what?”

The more my eyes narrowed, the further his mouth seemed to broaden.

Yes, it had definitely been him.

“I didn’t ask you to do that,” I said, pressing into my skull, already missing the soreness. Maybe it was silly, but I kind of *liked* that minor bump. It was a reminder that my voice had called to Barren. He’d been so flustered when I’d finally asked him if it had.

“Oh?” The sea wizard’s look turned puzzled. “Did you enjoy being concussed?”

“Concussed?” Had I really hit my head *that* hard? “No, I—I don’t have a concussion.”

“Not now, no. But you were concussed when I found you,” he said, continuing our descent. “Initially, I wondered if walking on sand was a new experience for you, considering how you kept stumbling over your feet.”

“I wasn’t stumbling,” I said with a huff. Okay, maybe a little, but it wasn’t *that* much. “I’ve had years of experience walking on sand.”

He snorted a laugh, clearly unconvinced. “Of course you have.”

So Barren had been right—I did have a concussion. Damn. Now I felt even worse for leaving. What would he think when he woke up and didn’t find me next to him?

“If you teleport us down there and I get a headache, can your magic cure it?”

“Hm.” Ghostly white eyes veered up in thought. “Yes, I suppose it could.”

I stopped him right there. “But *will* you cure it?”

That seemed to catch his attention. “I’d be delighted to help, but I will require compensation.”

*Ugh.* My teeth ground together. “How about you agree to relieve me of any headaches, and I kindly refrain from impaling you with this seashell?” I pressed the shell’s ridges into his chest, focusing on the tattoo-like marks. “How’s that for compensation?” I murmured, letting the shell scrape along the thickest mark. Yes, they were the perfect lines to trace if I needed to carve him up.

My hand holding the shell wavered because, *damn*, that was a dark thought. I wasn’t quite at the point of wanting to wish him harm—not yet. But I was dangerously close.

I could see the heat rising in his icy stare as my threat sank in. “If you insist.”

All at once, magic erupted around us. I was suddenly crushed against the

sea wizard's chest, the pressure of a humpback whale bearing down on my head and shoulders.

"Easy," he muttered, his hands firm on my shoulders, steadying me. "We're halfway there."

"Halfway?" I croaked. The change in the water was immense, and I could feel it in every bone and scale. My head spun as I fought to collect my bearings. Silt and sediment formed in layers around us, a depressingly desolate seascape void of the coral and grass I was used to. This had to be the bottom of the ocean. "It doesn't get lower than this—does it?"

"There's a reason it's called the Undersea." Despite the strange pressure, the sea wizard's tentacles floated effortlessly, his demeanor unchanged. "You'll acclimate soon enough."

The touch of a tentacle on the back of my head seemed to steady me, and I had the sneaking suspicion he was up to more magic.

"Ready?" he asked, and no, I wasn't ready. But would I ever be?

"Go ahead," I groaned, squeezing his ribs as I braced myself.

The water crackled with dark magic, and the layers of sediment disappeared.

"Careful," he said as I lurched forward, the pressure dragging my head to the stony seafloor. "The feeling will pass." It took a tentacle wrapping around the back of my neck for the dizziness to subside enough for me to crawl my way back upright and get a look around.

*Huh—what do you know?* Bowels was a strangely appropriate assessment.

We'd materialized in the middle of a long channel lined with smooth stone and skeletal streams of kelp, as well as cryptic holes wide enough for a body to pass through. Although I had no idea of the scope of these tunnels, an unshakeable sense lingered that I'd found myself in the heart of a winding labyrinth carved directly into the ocean floor.

There were so many holes leading in different directions, yet there was not a single carved mark or sign telling where exactly they might lead. I was so immersed in trying to work out how someone would navigate through them that the sea wizard's voice barely registered when he asked, "How's your head?"

"No pain so far," I said, although everything down to my eyeballs was feeling the foreignness that was the Undersea. The water here almost felt like a new element entirely. Intensely cold and stagnant, not a current to be felt. "I

guess it's a good thing I've got my night vision," I muttered, craning my neck to see down one of the tunnels. "Does your kind really live here?"

"Indeed," he said, pulling us down the channel. His limber tentacles skillfully guided us through the water, making sure that my tail didn't scrape against the rocks below. The ceiling lowered, and his tentacles stretched to find it, using the grooves between the smooth rock faces to pull us along.

With every movement, the channel narrowed further, until the rocky walls seemed to squeeze around us. "This is where your queen holds court?" I asked, even my water-filled lungs feeling constricted.

"These are the servant's corridors," he muttered softly, his gaze briefly flicking down to my tail. "The crown bid me to keep your arrival... discreet."

"I see." Following his lead, I kept my voice to a whisper. "I take it mermaids aren't frequent visitors?"

"A mermaid wouldn't survive the Undersea," he said coldly. That wasn't surprising, considering the rocky relationship between the merfolk and the cecaelia. My spine shimmied at the thought of coming across the dark spawn I'd faced back in the Atlantic. They'd want me dead, for sure.

"Be still," he hissed, and we turned an abrupt corner. He pulled us into a tight crevice in the rocky wall, our bodies forced together. But before I could question his motives, a shadow emerged, and eyes as dark as obsidian were blinking in my face.

"What did you bring with you, puppet?" a nasally voice asked. "You'll share her, yes?"

Pale, branch-like arms grabbed for me without remorse, and one of the sea wizard's tentacles whipped. It was a remarkably seamless motion, his trident materializing at the tendril's curled end.

The sharp sound of my gasp mixed with the stranger's grunt as the trident pierced his bony chest.

"You..."

"You shouldn't have tried to touch what's not yours," the sea wizard finished for him, much too calmly, considering the dark cloud of blood forming in the water around us.

He'd *impaled* him. Without hesitation or a second thought.

The sea wizard pulled back on his weapon, and I almost felt the crack of the cecaelia's bones as the dark prongs yanked free. The stranger's limbs seemed to shrivel away, his obsidian eyes emptying as he sank to the corridor's bottom.



“You—you just—” I couldn’t even say it. The touch of the cold, bloody water against my skin made my stomach turn with disgust.

The sea wizard held a single finger to his lips. “As I said, we’re to be discreet.”

He drew us out of the crevice, laying dark magic over the stranger’s body as we passed. I watched in horror as both flesh and bones appeared to liquefy into a repulsive, dark substance that penetrated the water. When I turned back to the sea wizard, and it was like looking at him for the first time.

*Holy crap*—Poseidon help me.

Merfolk could do monstrous things, but they couldn’t *melt* people. No, the sea wizard was a monster of a different level. A literal sea demon.

This was why Queen Sagari had made such a show of demonstrating her control over him, saying that he couldn’t harm me.

“It had to be done,” he said. Not a hint of regret.

“Sure,” I croaked, nodding along. Barren had been right—the cecaelia were ruthless, even to their own kind. I was vaguely aware that I was shaking when we descended through a hole that dropped into a much larger corridor below.

My eyes widened as I took in the vastness of this new space. “Whoa.” It made the servant’s corridors look like ant tunnels.

The walls were alive with decorative rock carvings painted over in subtle gray hues. I paused, my eyes catching on the colossal figures. “What the *hell?*”

Yeah, the carvings were something, all right.

Great octopus-like figures spanned floor to ceiling, their tentacles sprawling like unbridled tempests set upon the ocean. Miniature carvings sat under them—architecture suspiciously similar to merfolk dwellings—with each building and its inhabitants crushed underneath a massive appendage.

Five kingdoms, each with an octopus creature set above it, and it was painfully obvious what these carvings were meant to symbolize.

Fuck.

“Um.” My voice quaked. I clutched my shell, realizing with painful clarity it wouldn’t be enough to keep me safe. “About this cure your queen promised for the merfolk...”

The sea wizard’s smoky voice only added to the already eerie atmosphere of the hall. “Quite the deception, wasn’t it?” he said with a sigh. “The queen isn’t usually so clever, but she went to great lengths to bring you here.”

*To bring me here?* I swallowed thickly, failing to steady my trembling hands.

“Take me back.” The words slipped out, but I knew even before the sea wizard’s head shook that it was an impossible request.

“There’s no going back now, little captive.” He spoke with a strained, miserable voice, as if he weren’t enjoying his part in this deception. “The only way now is forward.”

The sea wizard’s magic overtook us, and the next thing I knew, we were at the mouth of a cavernous entryway framed with intricate carvings. Depictions of masked creatures twisted up the rocks, their faces contorted in anguish... or was it ecstasy?

*Shit*—I wasn’t sure which would be worse.

“Now, what do we have here?” Two cecaelian men flanked the entrance, yet I wasn’t certain which of them had spoken. They clung to the rocky sides upside-down, and I gnawed at my lip, waiting to see if the sea wizard would use his magic to melt them, too. To my relief, he disregarded their presence, choosing instead to sweep me into the passage.

My relief did *not* last long.

Because inside of the entrance, men of every size lounged on jagged rocks, and even more seemed to emerge from every crevice we passed by. While some were built like warriors and others had lean frames, they all shared one thing in common: a hunger in their eyes that made my skin crawl.

So, the expressions on the carvings outside had been ones of ecstasy. Fantastic.

The sound of their lewd whispers was like a physical force pushing against me from all sides. Everywhere I looked, more pale chests and mounds of tentacles.

A true den of depravity.

And at its center was Queen Sagari, her thick frame hugged by the lifeless branches of coralline that made up her nest-like throne. Her head tilted back against the brittle mesh, her dark lips parting and closing with each salty inhale and exhale.

Very much asleep.

And although their queen lay idle, the men of her court slithered, twisting and weaving over the rocks surrounding her. Despite them maintaining their distance, tension built inside me as we drew closer to the throne.

The queen looked different underwater. Older, perhaps. Her hair floated

like tattered rags above her head, and her crown sat on the arm of her throne, one tentacle wrapped securely around it. It must have taken scissors the size of hedge clippers to cut it free from her hair.

That's when I noticed what else was beside her—a grand relic framed in barnacle-encrusted bronze. A dark tapestry of semi-translucent kelp draped over the sizable oval, obscuring what was underneath.

Immediately, I recognized it for what it was. A standing mirror. Gram had one similar, although hers was more modern and barnacle-free.

I shot the sea wizard a glare, but he remained expressionless, his puppet-like mask already perfectly in place. Naturally.

Now that we were in his queen's presence, it seemed he wouldn't be of any more help.

"Queen Sagari." As soon as the name left my lips, a hush fell over the throne room.

She didn't rouse.

"*Queen Sagari.*"

"Huh-uh?" She sat up with a snort, her thick fingers fumbling for her crown before her eyes had even opened.

I didn't give her a chance to fully wake before I continued. "I believe you wanted to make a deal with me," I said, my shell digging into my ribs as I folded my arms over my chest. "Only, now that I've seen the manner in which you've decorated your *palace*, I wonder why you bothered bringing me here at all."

Surely, if the destruction of the merfolk was what the cecaelia desired, they could have easily done away with me on land. I wasn't even one of the *good* mermaids. I couldn't swim, couldn't use magic. Apart from the guys, no other mer would miss me, so why bother with these games?

As soon as the queen's eyes focused on me, her dark lips curved into a sleepy smile. "Dear child." She slunk forward, water rippling as she came out of her throne. "I've been eagerly awaiting your arrival. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep," she trilled, disregarding every word I'd said. "Come, come. I simply *must* have you take a look in my mirror."

She beckoned me closer, but even if I could swim, I wouldn't have followed.

My lips were so tight they almost hurt as I glared up at the sea wizard. "*Might happen to show me her mirror, my ass,*" I forced through bared teeth.

Looking into this mirror was the whole reason I was down here, it

seemed. But what some barnacle-infested mirror had to do with anything, I had no clue.

Oh, now I was *pissed* —

“Hands off, puppet,” the queen spat, and the sea wizard’s arms came off me without hesitation. I sunk like an anchor, catching myself with my elbows on the rocks as my tail fell limply beside me, useless as ever.

“My, my—” The queen tutted, her tentacles spinning with her approach. “Poor little thing. So small, so frail.”

“As per my report,” the sea wizard began in a bitter voice. “She is unable to swim.”

After her immediate revulsion at the sea wizard’s outburst, the queen’s hands flew to her mouth. The gasp that followed was nothing less than theatrical. “My dear child... I cannot possibly imagine how you survived so long in such a pitiful state.”

*Pitiful?* Shame flooded me, my heart pounding as if it might jump out of my chest.

The queen floated overhead, circling around me, each judgmental tut hitting like another blow. “Well, child, you do not expect *me* to carry you to my mirror, do you? Can you not crawl?”

My fist clenched tightly around my shell, anger seething inside me. I was acutely aware of the cecaelian men’s mocking whispers.

If this was really what I’d been lured down here for—to be mocked and humiliated—I had no doubt my shell would slice right through the queen if she dared drift close.

“I’ll take her to the mirror.” With a sudden movement, the sea wizard’s tentacles flattened, bringing him down to the rocks beside me. In awe, I watched as his body contorted into a perfect bow he directed at his queen. “If you’ll permit it.”

“Well, isn’t this a surprise? A puppet beseeching its master.” Queen Sagari’s lips puckered in thought, her tentacles toying with her crown as she weighed out his offer. “Fine,” she said, giving him a flippant wave. “Carry her to that dreadful mirror. The sooner it’s out of my sight, the better.”

Wait—*dreadful* mirror?

The sea wizard’s neck lifted. “As you wish.”

His tentacles swept around me, and the next thing I knew, we were hovering in front of the mirror, the sea wizard’s body up against my back.

The queen’s immediate response was to turn away, and I wondered if it

had something to do with her disdain for the mirror. As soon as her back was to us, I leaned over, hissing into his ear. “You said she was obsessed with it.”

His soft chuckle only fueled my anger. “Obsessed with bringing you here to look into it, yes.”

My stomach sank as one of his tentacles reached for the top of the woven kelp veil. But before I could witness the unveiling, his hands fell over my eyes.

“The hell are you —?”

He shushed me with a finger. No, wait—that was definitely a tentacle pressed against my lips. *Freaking sea wizard.*

“Look straight ahead,” he instructed, his calm voice almost too low to register. “Take a breath. Don’t be frightened. The queen won’t risk looking at your reflection for fear of glimpsing what hides underneath her own glammers.”

“This mirror can see underneath glammers?” I whispered. But what did that have to do with me? I was a mermaid who didn’t even know how to glamour.

“Well?” the queen barked from somewhere behind us. “What does she see?”

The hands covering my eyes lifted, and I wasn’t ready for the awaiting vision in front of me.

The eyes staring back from inside the mirror were a bloodcurdling shade of white. A creature’s eyes. There were no irises at all, only haunting white and madness, with two minuscule black dots in their centers that shrank to the size of needlepoints as my eyes focused.

These weren’t even the eyes of the sea wizard; they were far worse. I couldn’t think—couldn’t breathe. Not while I was held captive by the reflection’s maddening glare.

“Well? What is it you see, child?” The queen’s voice was louder now, hysteria hinting at how crisply her tongue enunciated each syllable.

My throat wouldn’t move. There was a weight on the sides of my head, and I realized it was the sea wizard attempting to pull down my gaze, but I wasn’t ready—no, I couldn’t break the stare between me and this... creature.

It wasn’t me. It couldn’t be me. *And yet...*

“She demands an answer,” the smooth voice in my ear insisted. His hands moved, tilting down my chin.

His insistence finally broke my stare, but the horror waiting for me at the

bottom of the mirror was even worse, and a single word ripped through my throat.

“No.”

Forget looking through glamours; this mirror was cursed—it had to be. Because the vision before me was not of me at all.

Sure, it was my shirt, my arms, my hair. But that dark horror—those eight spiraling appendages draped over the rocky floor where my tail should have hung—it *wasn't me*.

Then I realized what I was holding, and the entire room seemed to blur.

My right hand shook as I clutched the object, knowing full well I was holding the shell the sea wizard had given me. Only in the mirror, it wasn't a shell at all.

It was a knife.

I recognized it immediately—the same knife I'd stashed in my bikini top before venturing down to find King Eamon's trident. I'd lost it when one of the cecaelian guards had tossed it down in the prison cell. Only I'd never lost it at all.

Because the sea wizard had shown up and handed my knife right back to me in the form of a magical shell that could cut through anything, and—oh, *Poseidon help me*—the room was spinning.

“Breathe,” the voice in my ear urged. His grip on me tightened as I felt my body go slack in his arms. “*Breathe, Clair.*”

But it wasn't... I wasn't... It...

Just as my head fell back and darkness threatened to engulf me, a dark force lashed out, striking me hard across my face.

I gasped, the shock of it causing me to take in a sharp breath of water, my eyes refocusing.

The queen had... *slapped* me?

A second later, she was pulling me away from the mirror, away from the wizard, a crazed grin spreading across her face like a blight. “Cover it up, puppet,” she barked as one of her tentacles traced over the side of my face she'd just whacked.

Her eyes, which shone like emeralds on land, didn't seem to lose any of their luster in the darkness. But even she wasn't like the monstrous creature I'd seen in the mirror. White eyes like a... like a...

“What did you see?” Given how her nails clawed up my arms, I assumed her patience was running painfully thin.

“Sea—” Magic made my tongue expand, choking me up.

*I ask for you not to speak of the first thing you see when you look into it. Reveal it to no one—except for me.* Those had been the carefully calculated words the sea wizard had chosen for our deal.

A chilling realization sank in—he’d known exactly what I’d see when I looked into the mirror. He’d even urged me to focus straight ahead, guiding the first thing I’d notice.

I searched for him, but Queen Sagari snapped my attention back to her with a jerk of my chin. Anticipation tensed her face, and her eyebrows raised with expectation. “Well?”

“T-tentacles,” I managed, and her face swelled with joy.

“Yes... Yes!” she proclaimed, throwing her head back and jostling me by my shoulders. Then, as if I’d suddenly become something precious and fragile to her, she swept me up, pulling me over to her throne with the tenderness of a mother cradling a newborn.

“I knew you must be one of us,” she cooed, and I stared up at her, totally helpless, as she settled me down onto her throne. “I never doubted it, of course. What other reason could there be for the merfolk’s curse to not affect you?”

When I finally found my voice, it was completely raw. Broken. “I came down here because you said we could break the curse together.”

It had all been a lie.

The queen shrugged, her wild hair bouncing through the water with her movement. “You win some, you lose some,” she said, reaching out to seize my wrist. “This, dear child, is a *victory*. I brought you to the Undersea because this is where you belong.”

“I’m a... cecaelia?” The whispered question sounded like a curse all of its own.

I lowered my head to look at my tail, fighting the urge to claw my way back over to the mirror to check on my reflection again. It didn’t make sense that this tail wasn’t really mine. But then again, nothing about my tail had ever made sense, had it?

Queen Sagari brushed my cheek with her hand, and when I glanced up, pride was waiting for me in her eyes.

“You’re more than a cecaelia,” she said, and I shrunk away from her touch.

Had she seen the white-eyed version of me in the mirror?

While my mind raced, the queen lifted a hand. “*Puppet*,” she snapped. “The vial.”

Black smoke clouded the water, and a tiny, corked bottle appeared in its wake. The queen snatched it up, passing it into my palm for me to inspect.

Curiously, there was only a single dot of dark liquid set inside it. “What is...?”

“Your blood,” the queen said brusquely. “You gave up a drop, if you’ll recall.”

How could I forget? Although the sea wizard was far from the throne, I shot him another glare.

This is, until the queen tutted. “You seem quite distracted by my puppet. That behavior is hardly befitting someone in your position.”

Someone in *my* position?

But before I could ask her to elaborate, her attention shifted to the sea wizard, and for a moment, I feared what she might ask of him. “Go fetch the box that I had you prepare,” she ordered, and he melted away into the shadows.

When the last traces of his magic vanished, the queen held up her crown. “This crown is almost as ancient as the oceans themselves,” she began, her voice carrying the weight of history. “It’s been passed down through generations, from the very first queen of the Undersea.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Forged in magic, it holds the remarkable ability to discern those of royal blood.”

“*Royal* blood?” I scoffed, my fingers curling around the vial. What was she implying?

As if sensing my skepticism, she plucked the vial from my fingers and uncorked it with a sly grin. My gaze remained fixed on the vial as the dark liquid spilled into the water. Then, in one fluid motion, she tossed her crown at it. The instant the dark tarnished metal met the blood, the crown’s surface sizzled, releasing a pulse of magic into the water.

“Good. Very good.” Seeming satisfied with this reaction, she let the crown drift down to the rocky floor. “Careful, child,” she warned as I leaned in closer, inspecting the dark streams of magic. “The crown is thirsty for more of your blood. It will sear all that it touches until its magic falls dormant once more.”

“How do I know that was my blood?” I whispered, still fixated on the smoldering crown. “Everything down here so far has been a deception.”



“Child,” she said, cupping my cheek. I looked up at her and was taken aback by the kindness in her eyes. “Or should I say, my precious grandchild? Doubt is only natural, my dear. But you would do well to heed my words. I never wavered in my hope of finding you. When your mother, my beloved daughter, met her untimely end, and that loathsome merman stole you away from us... I always knew the day would come when we’d be reunited.”

Her smile took on a tender warmth as her fingers caressed my hair. “You bear a striking resemblance to her. My beloved daughter,” she said with a gentle sigh. “May her soul find solace in the depths of the great abyss.”

Although she claimed that we were related and that I was of royal blood, one part of her story struck me the most.

“My mother is... dead?” I turned down to look at my hands. I didn’t know how to feel or if I’d even choose to believe it. I’d always thought she was alive, swimming away somewhere, disregarding the fact that she had a daughter. I wasn’t sure which reality was worse, or if I should let myself care, either way.

I could sense the cecaelia’s eyes on me, their whispers growing as more men emerged from their crevices.

It was foolish to believe them, wasn’t it? They’d done nothing but lie to me. Yet the same thought kept resurfacing...

I was never like the other merfolk, was I?

“You say a merman *stole* me?”

“Ohhh,” she wailed, making a show of snatching up her crown. It must have been done searching for more blood, because the surface hadn’t burned her when she wrapped around it. “It pains me to even remember that day.”

She snapped her fingers, and the sea wizard materialized with a box in his hands. It was a peculiar box, adorned with a latch and gilded filigree that seemed to dance along its edges.

While I was still assessing it, one of the sea wizard’s tentacles snaked under the latch to retrieve what was inside. When a crown with eight sharpened points emerged, the queen squealed, enraptured.

It was a beautiful crown, truly. But when he held it up, I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach as I realized where this was headed.

“I haven’t been this excited since the day we discovered the merfolk were cursed.” With a turn toward the sea wizard, the queen clapped her hands. “Puppet,” she commanded, “I’ll give you one moon cycle from now to break the curse concealing her true nature. Do whatever it takes. Use any means, as

long as you don't hurt our *dear princess*."

Um... what?

Even if I was cursed, did I want it to be broken?

Numbness settled over me as I stared at the crown cradled in the sea wizard's grasp. The queen spun away, her laughter filled with unbridled glee. "We shall celebrate with a grand ball!" she exclaimed. "The depths of the sea shall rejoice at the return of the princess!"

My head shook with the sea wizard's approach. "I—I'm not..." I stuttered, my eyes pleading for his understanding, but it did nothing to stop him.

He held his mouth in a tight grimace as he leaned closer, gingerly placing the crown atop my head. But before he pulled away, his cheek grazed mine as he whispered, "Welcome home, princess."

*Princess.*

No—no. I was a captive, a mouse. Anything to him but *that*.

Already, the crown weighed heavily on my head. Yet, instead of feeling like I was gaining something, a startling clarity washed through me of all the things I'd just lost.

The vision in the mirror had not been that of a princess but of a demoness with white eyes.

There was a reason the sea wizard had wanted me to see my eyes first and why he hadn't wanted his queen to know about them.

'*Are you a sea witch?*' Barren's voice echoed in my memory, and my hands lifted, grappling with the base of my neck.

"Careful with that crown, child. You must never remove it," the queen advised, gliding over to straighten it back on top of my head. "How else will your pawns be able to recognize you while you're under this wretched curse? Wave to them, dearest. Let them know their princess has returned."

But as I looked out at the bodies closing in around me, I could only shudder. Their eyes were filled with a mix of lust and curiosity, but all I felt was revulsion.



# ABYSSAL



“You three! Come here,” the vile queen yapped, and although the command wasn’t directed at me, my insides coiled at the sound of her voice. “Our dear princess requires a respite. Escort her to the chamber we’ve readied for her arrival.”

My little captive squirmed, fighting against the insistent push of Queen Sagari’s foul, clawed hands. “Chamber? I—I don’t think...”

“If it’s permissible, I would like to accompany her,” I cut in, well aware I was speaking out of turn.

“**Stay put, puppet,**” the queen barked, throwing the command over her shoulder. Immediately, my body locked up, leaving me a prisoner beneath my flesh. “I still have words for you.”

The queen handed her granddaughter off to three overly eager pawns, and I could only watch as a mere spectator.

The pawns wrapped around my captive, and I burned the image of each of their faces into my memory. Particularly the one who grabbed her slender wrist with unnecessary force. Ah, yes—and the hapless oaf letting her tail drag. That was an oversight he would soon regret.

“Please, wait! I—” Frightened eyes searched around the pawns to find me, pleading for my intervention, yet bitterness filled me because there was nothing I could do. To me, the crown’s commands were absolute.

***Stay put, puppet.***

Thanks to the trident living inside me, I was at the mercy of that vile woman’s every whim.

“Do not worry, dear child,” Queen Sagari crooned in farewell as the men led their princess away. “The pawns will attend to your every need.”

As much as I disliked her phrasing, I didn't dare speak out of turn again.

*Ha*—it seemed our princess didn't like that phrasing, either. She let profanities fly, struggling fruitlessly against the pawns. Then I noticed she was still holding the weapon I'd fabricated for her, and my mind raced with the possibilities.

Perhaps she would seek retribution all on her own.

"*Aracos.*" I mentally called out to my familiar, and it was an instant comfort when his consciousness connected with mine.

His answering voice was as reassuring as my own heartbeat. "*Master.*"

*Good*—he was already nearby, hidden under a spell of concealment. Clever creature.

*"Keep an eye on our little captive."*

As soon as the thought reached him, there was a shimmy of movement near the rocks above the throne room's entrance. Magic rippled off his long, whiplike body, undetectable by all those not versed in our unique brand of magic. "*Worry not, Master. Aracos will follow.*"

Once her granddaughter was out of sight, Queen Sagari turned her attention back to me.

"You forget your place, puppet," she spat, drifting back over to her throne. Her eyes narrowed, examining me with a critical gaze. "Interrupting your queen, time and again."

I kept my expression carefully guarded. "My apologies. I only wished to offer my services to the princess."

"Services?" She scoffed, and the arms of her throne groaned under her immense weight as she sank back into it. Her eyes were heavy with exhaustion when she threw her head back to stretch her neck. "You are nothing but a tool for me to use as I see fit. **Remember that.**"

"Of course," I said obediently. I was well aware of my role here as a tool and a puppet. But being under her control hadn't stopped me from finding ways to act of my own accord. I'd yet to encounter a tide I couldn't eventually turn in my favor. "Is there something you require of me?"

Her lips distorted into the cruelest of smiles, and I readied my mind for whatever task she was about to assign.

"Actually, there is," she said, lifting a single clawed nail. "I am amending my earlier command: **You shall not hurt the princess unless it is to break her curse. Do whatever is necessary, maim her, inflict pain if you need to. You have one moon cycle to get it done, or I'll have you cut that**

**disgusting tail of hers off.”**

Ah, yes—there it was, the queen’s true nature was finally laid bare. I concentrated deeply, studying every word of the command with great attention.

Curses, by definition, were meant to inflict harm or punishment on an individual, were they not? Considering the spell had served to keep my little captive safe, far from this place until now, who was I to say that it was a curse at all?

Already, I could feel the tension of the magical strings binding me begin to loosen. Yes, that logic was sound enough.

Now that I’d targeted the loophole in my queen’s command, it was time to play the part of her puppet.

“Understood,” I said, masking my growing excitement. “I’ll make sure to break her curse in the most efficient way possible. Even if it means hurting the princess.”

I had no intention of causing more harm to her than I already had. No, my little captive was far too important.

I’d done everything in my power to prevent her from coming here, but fate had intervened. Now that she’d arrived, I’d be smart, cunning, and most of all, careful. The Undersea was a merciless place, after all. Even for a princess with her lineage.

She’d suffer enough without me hurting her as well.

“Good. **Now go and get to work.**”

My tentacles acted on their own, moving me away from the queen. When I reached the entrance, I froze over the threshold as one of the queen’s old commands plucked like a string, holding me back before I could enter the royal hallway.

***You must crawl along the royal hallway, child, to remind you of your lowly existence.***

There was a time when I held out hope that the ‘child’ she’d added to the command would cause it to fall away as I aged. Naïve, wishful thinking.

To a queen well into her second century, nearly everyone was a child, no matter their age.

And even now, twenty years later, the command persisted. But I’d rather give up all of my magic than be forced to crawl along the hall like I’d done when I was a spawnling.

Before I could teleport across it, an annoying grunt sounded through the

hall. Seconds later, a substantial mass flopped down into the royal hallway from above.

“Arghhh!” Fat tentacles flailed haphazardly as the body that landed struggled to roll back upright.

*Ah. The Rook.*

I had no idea how he’d managed to fit through the tunnels above, but it was no surprise that he’d ended up on his backside.

***Always remain respectful in the Rook’s presence.***

*Respectful.* Creatures such as him didn’t deserve respect. Once a hulking brute of a knight and the queen’s former paramour, time had reduced the Rook to nothing more than a geriatric, half-blind octopus.

As expected, it took him reaching the mouth of the throne room to realize I was there at all.

“Puppet,” he grunted, shoving me aside with a tentacle as he lumbered by. “Can’t believe my queen is wasting her time lying with a whelp like you.”

The mere thought of being subjected to the same treatment as one of the queen’s pawns made my tentacles recoil. No, even if I was her puppet, the pawns had always been her playthings. A fact for which I was immeasurably thankful.

I regained my composure in time to assess the silver scar running down his face. Seeing the aftermath of what my magic had done to him once it had finished stitching him back together was always a delight.

It was far from my best work, but the vague command ‘**Bring the Rook back to me alive**’ had provided me with ample room for creativity, letting me wait until the last possible moment to intervene before he bled to death.

How would he feel knowing not only that he had a granddaughter but that he’d attempted to assault her upon their very first meeting?

I knew better than to think that pampered slob would care at all.

My fist clenched around the pole of my trident as the Rook dragged himself past me, but I didn’t let my anger show.

Although the memory of how he’d tried to harm her never ceased making my blood boil.

He’d even ordered me to *throw her* at him, and although I wasn’t normally held to his commands, that vile queen had bid me to follow his every order while he was tasked to collect the spoils of the Atlantic.

Now that he’d failed his queen and his mission, the only command I was

bound to regarding the Rook was to show him *respect*. So instead of teleporting away, I waited for him to drag his bloated body across the hall. Respectfully.

“*Aracos. Where is she?*”

“*Safe, Master.*” Immediately, a vision straight from my familiar’s eyes flashed into my mind—a curtain of finery draped along an arched passageway. The chambers were some of the nicer ones that branched from the royal hall. Despite my aversion to her being here, it brought me satisfaction that she could potentially be comfortable in her assigned chambers if she chose to be.

When the Rook’s grunts ceased, I closed my eyes, envisioning the passageway as I called upon my magic. When my eyes reopened, Aracos slipped through his veil to greet me. With a languid grace, the eel moved through the water, brushing his smooth skin across my shoulder blades.

I let my palm skim over his head in return. “*You did well. Go and rest now.*”

Aracos twisted, flicking my hand with the end of his bony tail. “*You need rest, Master. Not Aracos. Your magic, it thins.*”

That hadn’t stopped him from borrowing even more of my magic to keep himself concealed. No, that was an excuse. “*You’re fond of our princess, aren’t you?*”

He turned another circle around me as if reluctant to leave the door to her chamber. “*Her magic smells like yours, Master.*”

I chuckled because there was a good reason for that. “*Best to keep that thought to yourself, Aracos. I doubt our princess would appreciate the comparison.*”

Speaking of our princess... I parted the drape with the back of my knuckles.

There she was, curled up in the corner, her face resting in her hands. So different from the version of her I’d seen in the mirror.

Although I’d had a suspicion of what she might look like underneath her spells, I hadn’t expected her to be quite so beautiful. The vision I saw when I held her up to the mirror in my arms was bewitching in every sense of the word.

Slender, supple tentacles that fell from her waist like living jewelry. Eyes that were power itself. I’d been unable to look away, and even still, the image had barely flitted from my mind since.



My attraction to her was undeniable, even though I knew that feeling was dangerous. She didn't belong down here. No sea witch did if they valued their life and their freedom.

They'd taken her to a room full of carved walls and luxury, one of the nicest in the entire Undersea, and she'd hidden herself away in the seagrass. My scared little mouse.

The drapes fell back into place as I pulled away.

*"Master?"*

*"Keep an eye on our princess."* My magic stirred, flaring down my arms like cold flames.

Soon, I would go to her. But before that, I had something important to attend to.

With my destination in mind, I closed my eyes and let my magic overtake me.



# CLAIRA



This wasn't happening.

The vision I'd seen—it had been a trick, hadn't it? Some dark magic conjured up by the sea wizard?

That creature I saw in the mirror, its hideous white eyes and tentacles, that *wasn't me*.

But had I ever believed that I was actually a mermaid?

*Ex-mermaid*—that's what I called myself. I'd always known I was different, but it was easy to ignore those feelings back when I was a merfry. Back when Papa used to act like he... like he actually *cared* for me.

Could Papa really have stolen me away from the cecaelia? He'd taken me to see my mother at least once when I was a young merfry—that I was certain of. I could remember the grueling length of the trip and seeing her red hair. At least, I thought I'd been certain. But now...

My body trembled with another wave of fear, because I wasn't sure of anything anymore. Short, ragged gasps wrenched from my throat as I fought to make sense of what was happening to me.

Crowned a princess, then immediately dragged off. Taken to this horrid chamber carved with grim imagery of oceanside cliffs and sunken ships. I was as good as trapped in the Undersea, wasn't I?

"Argh!" Lifting my head from my hands, I threw out my fists. "*Son of a bitch*," I hissed as my left one immediately found a spike hidden in the bed of seagrass.

For a second, I thought it had been from my magical switchblade shell. But no, the spike had been from the crown I'd tossed aside the moment the queen's pawns had thrown me into this damned room.

Oddly enough, the pain was a welcome distraction. A grounding reminder that, at the very least, I was still human enough to feel. To bleed.

I brought my hand close, watching my blood leach from the side of my palm, clouding the water.

*This is all my fault.*

I'd been perfectly happy—the happiest I'd ever been, in fact. And I'd ruined it.

Leander, Kai, and Barren had made me feel so incredible that I bought into the idea that maybe I *was* special. Only, I wasn't special at all. I was as cursed as I'd always known myself to be.

How had things gone so horribly wrong that I might actually be the thing they hated most?

Leander loathed the dark spawn. Kai hated them a shocking amount, considering he loved just about everything. And Barren... The cecaelia had ruined his life. Stripped him of his rightful place as a king. He'd lost his arm just from *touching* one, and—Poseidon, help me—I'd touched him. I'd touched him *a lot*. I couldn't resist touching any of them.

And now I knew with certainty that the cecaelia were as terrible as the merfolk judged them to be. Cold darkness and lies. That's what they were.

My chest constricted, the weight of my guilt and shame almost too suffocating to bear.

If I were one of them, would that mean I could never touch the three of them again? That revolting thought had bile rising in my throat, threatening to choke me.

What if none of us were in the *thrall* at all? What if I'd inherited whatever terrible magic made Queen Sagari able to surround herself with so many doting males?

*Oh—oh, god.*

Sobs were still shaking through me when I heard a rustling at the entrance of the chamber.

“Princess.” The voice was calm and flowy like liquid smoke. “May I come in?”

My stomach plummeted as I stared at the entrance. I wasn't a princess—I was as far from a princess as anyone could get. I was Clairra, a fisherman's daughter. Nothing more and nothing less.

There was a momentary silence before he spoke again. “I'll return later, then.”

“Wait—” I called out, my pitiful voice breaking. What was I wanting, exactly? To be comforted? To be saved? I didn’t know. “Don’t go.”

All I knew was that I couldn’t bear being in here alone, waiting around for the queen’s pawns to return.

There was another beat of silence before he said, “Very well.” Using the prong of his trident, he pushed aside the curtain, and I immediately pulled myself up straighter.

At least the sea wizard was safe.

Safe? No, he wasn’t safe. Why had I even thought that? But he was the only one who might have the answers I needed.

He presented himself to me with a bow, his tentacles rolling in gracefully behind him.

Swallowing hard, I ignored the pain burning in my throat as I gazed up at him. “Please. Don’t call me ‘princess.’”

The side of his mouth quirked. “Regrettably, that is one wish I cannot fulfill.”

As if sensing my unease, he kept his distance, though his eyes never left mine as he said, “You’re trembling, princess. Are your accommodations not to your liking?”

I slumped down in disappointment. “So, you came here to mock me,” I said bitterly, fighting to hold back a sob.

He slid closer. “Not at all. Although I’m surprised to learn that all three pawns survived bringing you here.” With a hint of amusement, he raised an eyebrow. “I fully expected you to carve out their hearts.”

I scoffed. I couldn’t help it.

“They’re lucky I didn’t slice them up,” I mumbled, remembering how hard I’d worked to hold back my rage. “But I didn’t think your queen would be thrilled with me attempting to take out her pawns.”

My heart sped as he leaned in closer. “You should have done it,” he said with a cunning smirk. “Believe me, she has plenty more to take their place.”

*Ugh*—although I didn’t doubt that, it was a sickening thought.

The trident dissolved away, taking its place deep in his chest. “The real reason I’m here,” he began, “is to make sure you’re comfortable. And to give you this.”

Lifting a hand, a puff of magic emerged from his palm.

His tentacles seemed to twitch with restless anticipation as he held his hand out to me. “For you.”

The thing he'd conjured up was limp and lifeless, hanging in his hand like a waterlogged bundle of cords.

"Uh..." I gave whatever it was a skeptical glance, and although I was glad to have the sea wizard here, I realized I wasn't in the mood for his games. "I'll pass."

"Ah." He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, seeming to contemplate his next move. "I suspected you might have been lying about it being your favorite," he muttered. "I suppose it doesn't matter."

Wait—lying to him? My favorite?

I examined the contents of his hand once more, and although my stomach was a tangled mess of nerves, saliva collected in my mouth when I realized what he was holding. "Is that... star grass?"

How had I not recognized the tiny stars lining the stalks?

My eyebrows furrowed as I looked back and forth between the plant and the sea wizard, trying to make sense of it. "You brought me star grass?"

"Indeed," he said, straightening his posture. "As I said, I came here to make sure you're comfortable."

A strange feeling arose in my chest, and I couldn't quite understand why it had. He'd really remembered my lame excuse for sticking my hand in the betta tank outside Queen Sagari's office?

"Oh." My voice was small, barely a whisper. Why was this simple gesture affecting me so much? "That was kind of you to remember."

He offered me the bundle, but I didn't take it. Instead, I reached out to touch the stars. They looked smaller than they did in my memories, but they still looked delicious. Even in the washed-out shade of gray instead of the bright yellow I knew the plant to be.

What *was* this feeling? Gratitude? Something more?

I let my hand fall away from the plant, my voice raw when I asked, "What's the real reason you're giving me this?"

"If you insist on knowing, consider it an apology." His discomfort was palpable, as if he were revealing a secret he never intended to disclose. "One born from guilt."

"Guilt?" I looked up at his cold eyes and chiseled chin, searching for signs of deception—not that I ever seemed able to parse the sea wizard.

Instead of elaborating, he gave the driest laugh imaginable as he sat the star grass down next to my tail. "Indeed."

"Yeah, I'm going to need a little more than that if you expect me to

accept your apology.” My frustration churned like a brewing storm. “Do you feel guilty for... stalking me at the casino? Or for bringing me down here?”

I found the crown in the seagrass, lifting it up. “Or do you feel guilty for putting this crown on my head? Or maybe because you knew what I was going to see in that mirror this entire time, yet you decided not to tell me?”

The sea wizard remained perfectly silent as my anger escalated to where I hurled the crown back down to the rocky floor. “Or do you feel guilty because it was all an illusion? Another one of your deceptions, like that lousy deal you conned me into before bringing me down here. You’re never going to tell me how you remove your trident, are you? *Are you?*”

I knew it wasn’t fair, pinning all of this on him when I’d made the choice to come here, but I was finding it hard to care.

He’d given me the abalone yet advised me not to use it. He’d warned me not to come to the Indian Ocean yet abducted me as soon as he could get his arms around me.

He was hot; he was cold, and I was sick of these games.

My voice cracked, but still, I pleaded. “Tell me it was a lie.” I reached for him, feeling his hand tense up as I latched on to it. “Please, wizard... puppet, whatever you are. Tell me I’m a mermaid. Tell me that I’m nothing like *you*.”

The sea wizard’s lips parted, but no words came. He simply looked at me with an intensity that made my heart thump like a war drum.

When he finally broke the silence, his voice was rough. “I understand that you have no reason to believe me, but I assure you I have no guilt pertaining to our deal.”

That’s it? That’s all that he had to say for everything he’d done?

Then he extended a hand, as if maybe he was going to lay it over my eyes but stopped himself short. “As you have no doubt noticed, my words and actions rarely align. I’m confined by my orders, be it to bind or abduct or to deliver you to the Undersea.” The words came out of his mouth like a bitter poison, and he took a moment before adding, “But you’ll find my words to be the truth if you care to see through to their meaning.”

Another riddle. Why was I not surprised?

I gritted my teeth, pulling away from his hand. “So, what’s the truth, then?” I snapped, my patience fraying like this withered bed of seagrass the cecaelia counted as a luxury beneath me. “What am I? Why can’t you speak plainly for once and come out and tell me?”

“Do you really not know yourself?” There was a chilling emptiness in his

eyes. “If you need me to tell you for you to believe it, then listen closely: the truth is that you never were a mermaid.”

Despite his icy demeanor, his touch was gentle as he closed the distance between us to cradle my chin in his palm. When his thumb grazed the edge of my lower lip, I felt my heart stop completely. “You’re something far greater, Clairia.”

This was the second time he’d called me by name, the two smoky syllables rolling off his tongue like a caress.

“Underneath this tail that you’re clinging to is the potential for power that even I cannot fathom,” he continued, his voice low and husky, like he was visualizing all the possibilities that lay hidden under my curse.

I struggled to remain upright as his words rattled around in my head. So, it was all true? I really wasn’t a mermaid?

My confusion must have shown on my face, because the sea wizard let out a humorless laugh. “Despite my plain and straightforward words, you remain unconvinced. Choose to dismiss the vision of yourself you saw in the mirror, if that’s what you wish. But I’ll warn you that either way, the queen has ordered me to return you to your true self.”

*My true self.*

The shivers rocking through my body seemed to come from deep within, and I jerked my chin free from his hand. “Okay... Say that I do believe you,” I whispered. “What if I don’t want you to break my curse?”

His lips pursed, and he slid close enough for his dark tendrils to ruffle the bed of seagrass underneath me. “Unfortunately, that is no longer an option, princess.” His voice hardened. “One moon cycle from now, Queen Sagari, your grandmother, expects your curse to be broken, whether you want it or not.”

Now I was petrified. Because if what he was saying was true, my fate was already sealed.

This was a recurring theme in my life—being thrust into a position where I had to leave everything familiar behind and become something entirely new. Something I didn’t even fully understand.

Last time, I had to be human. This time, I’d become an actual monster.

“I don’t want to believe it.” I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling exposed and defenseless, trapped in this damned Undersea. “Sea wizard, tell me—my eyes, are they...” My throat choked. It didn’t matter that our deal allowed me to tell him about the first thing I’d seen in the mirror. I still couldn’t find the



courage to say it.

I felt the shadow of his presence closing in, but I wasn't ready to face him. Even when his smoky voice washed against the shell of my ear, I refused to open my eyes. "Are you asking me if, underneath all your illusions, the eyes you saw reflected at you are the eyes of a sea witch?"

In a sudden gasp, my eyes flew open. "I couldn't—" There he was, his face barely an inch from mine.

He finished the thought for me. "Possibly be a sea witch?" His dark hair fell back as his head shook, framing his sharp features. "That, princess, is a secret that will continue to belong only to the two of us."

"But I don't have magic," I croaked, feeling all the more vulnerable. "There's no way. I'm nothing like a sea witch or a cecaelia, no matter what that mirror showed."

"Oh, but you are." His blunt words struck like barbs, and I flinched at the sting of them.

"No—" I shook my head, refusing to accept what he was saying, but his words kept coming.

"Let me ask you this: what mer possesses the ability to see perfectly clear in the dark?"

That's right—my night vision. I supposed that was some sort of magic. Judging by the guys' reaction to it, night vision wasn't typical. But merfolk had a variety of gifts, like Kai and his glowing eyes. "Some Pacific mers can see in the dark," I murmured.

Unimpressed, the sea wizard chuckled darkly. "Correction—Pacific mers create light which they use to cut through the dark." His hand waved, gesturing to our surroundings. "But you, princess, have always been a creature of darkness. You have no need for light."

Admitting it tore me apart, but I couldn't deny he had a point.

"But I don't know anything about cecaelia or... sea witches," I whispered, afraid that if I spoke too loudly, it would become more real in my mind. "And if that woman is my grandmother, why aren't her eyes white? Why haven't I ever seen a creature with eyes like *that*?"

Even now, that haunting version of myself still lingered in my mind. The eyes of a predator, of a creature well versed in its ways and unafraid of the dark. Perhaps darkness was afraid of it.

It wasn't me at all.

"The queen is not a sea witch," he said sharply, as if the thought of her

being among his rank disgusted him. “You’d be lucky to find another in this entire ocean who is. That, I suspect, is the reason for your *curse*.” I could sense his fascination as his gaze shifted to my tail. “Whoever laid it clearly didn’t want others to know who or what you are.”

“But *you* knew what I was.” My voice shook with equal parts anger and fear. “You knew all along, didn’t you? You knew who my grandmother was, what I am.”

“You give me far too much credit, princess,” he said, a hint of amusement dancing over his words. “But if you’re curious,” he murmured, one of his tentacles slithering close enough to flick the end of my tail. “I could feel your magic from the moment I first laid eyes on you. And when I got close enough to wrap you in my knots...” A smirk slowly dragged up the corners of his mouth, and I shivered as his gaze roved over the swell where my tail met my waist.

Abruptly, he turned. “That’s when I was certain you were a sea witch,” he admitted, the smile dropping from his lips. “As for that vile woman being your grandmother, I’m well aware of her search for her lost successor. It’s been a priority of hers ever since the late princess’s untimely passing.”

My hands clenched, tearing up strands of seagrass. “And if you knew, why didn’t you tell me?”

“You honestly think you’d have believed me?” he said, his dark eyebrows lifting. “You barely believe it now.” A casual shrug accompanied his words, his hand sweeping through his obsidian hair. “Although I hoped it would be obvious I was doing everything in my power to keep you away from this place, but no. My curious little mouse seems to be quite enamored with danger.”

There was a pause, and a sly grin crept across his face. It was a look that seemed to dredge up every dark, unexplored thought hidden in the corners of my mind. “Maybe it’s not the danger you’re enamored with,” he mused. He leaned over me, and I felt my face heat. I wanted to turn away, but something about him held me captive. “Could it be that you missed my company?”

He was teasing me like he always did, yet this time there was a distinctive shift. A dangerous edge to his tone letting me know his intentions were far from entirely pure.

“I didn’t come here for your company, wizard,” I said, unable to stop the tremble that ran through me at his proximity. “I came here because I wanted to believe that the cecaelia were willing to help the merfolk break their curse.

Because I need to figure out how you're able to separate yourself from your trident. It had nothing to do with wanting to be near *you*."

The sea wizard huffed a laugh, a low, throaty sound that seemed to vibrate through the entire Undersea. "Well, you're stuck with me now, princess. Now that the queen has found you, she has no intention of letting you go."

It was like a punch to the gut, dizzying me with fear. My intuition had been right, and this chamber was nothing more than a glorified prison cell.

"I should have known better than to think I could trust her," I whispered, already feeling the walls closing in around me. Why hadn't I worried more about coming here all alone? Because now I was stuck.

I fought to keep my panic from showing, but the sea wizard seemed to see straight through me. "You did well," he murmured, and I flinched when his hand grazed the side of my face. "Keeping your eyes a secret."

If that was his way of consoling me, he was doing a terrible job.

"I take it there's a reason you didn't want your queen knowing about my eyes," I bit out, unsure if I was ready to know what that reason might be. "It's not good to be a sea witch, is it?"

My heart froze as I thought back to when Barren tried to teach me to swim. He'd told me executing sea witches was one of his duties.

Had I done something during that time to make him suspicious of me? Is that why he'd wrapped his hand around my neck?

Had... had he known what I was all along?

"To put it simply, sea witches aren't meant to survive." The bluntness of the sea wizard's declaration was unexpected, causing me to flinch. "A sea witch would be safer here, among the cecaelia. But even the queen doesn't have enough power to keep someone safe from the entire ocean."

Had I heard him right? "What do you mean, the entire ocean?"

"Sea witches are hunted by not only the merfolk, but by *every* living thing under Poseidon's control," he explained. "It's written in the very laws he laid over the oceans, and only a few... unfavorable creatures, such as the cecaelia, can act outside Poseidon's control. You see, sea witch magic goes against the natural order of things. To a god like Poseidon, it's a power that shouldn't exist in his waters, and those who wield it, therefore, must cease to exist. You have never seen another with eyes like yours simply because they're killed off as soon as their eyes turn white—the mark of a sea witch."

He paused, studying my face before adding, "If one of your lovers had

seen your eyes in that mirror, they wouldn't have been able to help themselves. Poseidon's laws are part of their very nature."

"Wait, slow down..." I shook my head, not willing to believe what he was getting at. "They would never hurt me."

Closing his eyes, he let out a deep sigh. "You have much to learn, princess. Believe me when I say that even the most powerful merman is nothing more than a slave to Poseidon's will. It's not up to them. The law dictates that sea witches are to be eliminated. They see the mark of the sea witch and, much like I'm bound by the crown's commands, merfolk are forced to act."

"But you have white eyes," I said, my voice straining. "If that were the truth, how had he survived?"

"Ah, but you've seen the difference." When he pointed to his eyes, I understood right away that he was referring to the thin black ring that encircled the white. "I'm the exception. The first and only of my kind."

"So, the title '*sea wizard*'... Did you come up with that?"

His lips pursed. "Indeed, I did," he admitted. "My powers awakened when I was merely a spawnling, and I was tossed out in the ocean to rot." A grinding anger tinged every word as he continued, "Weeks later, when I was found still clinging to life at the mouth of the Undersea, it was determined that my eyes didn't trigger bloodlust in those under Poseidon's control."

He looked away from me with a scoff, his expression darkening. "The queen reveled in this discovery, of course. Even more so when she found a way to harness my magic for her own use."

"They abandoned you?" A sickening feeling came over my stomach as I stared up at the sea wizard. The idea of his own kind turning on him when he was just a child—a spawnling, as he'd called himself—was a hurt I knew all too well. "I'm sorry that happened to you..."

He shrugged as if attempting to project an air of indifference, yet the pain remained unmistakable in his eyes. "It's the way of our world, unfortunately. But enough about that. I hope you realize now why I arranged our deal to keep the nature of your eyes a secret."

I was starting to realize, yes. "Are you afraid the queen would toss me out if she knew?" That didn't seem like a problem at all, actually. In fact...

"I doubt she would let you leave with your life," he said, his head shaking. "I'm sure you've realized that our kind hopes to one day leave the Undersea. A princess with the mark of a sea witch, hunted by all that lives in

the waters above, would be rather useless.”

*Useless.* There was that word again, the one that seemed to follow me wherever I went.

My voice was shaking when I asked, “So what happens to me when you tell her?”

“It has never been my secret to tell.”

So, I’d just have to wait for her to find out on her own, then? Fantastic.

However, there was something else in his story that piqued my interest. “How is the queen able to harness your magic? Why do you have to follow her commands?”

“That knowledge,” he said with a sigh, “I will leave for when I tell you the many secrets of my trident.”

My lips pulled together. “So, after I’m dead, then?”

“You’re not going to die.” His words dripped with charm as he leaned back over me. “Not if I have any say in it.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, feeling a blush rising over my face. “But you said it yourself, your queen—my... *grandmother*—wants you to break my curse whether I want it broken or not.”

“Ah, about that,” he said, looking all the more amused. “She bid me to break your curse, *singular*. As in one.” He settled a hand under his chin as if studying me intently. “From what I gather, your tail and your eyes appear to be two different spells.”

*Two spells?*

He stared a moment longer before muttering, “Your eyes are beautifully crafted magic.”

“They are?” I blinked up at him, not sure what else to say. I’d always thought they were normal, boring eyes. The same shade of gray as my father’s.

“Indeed.” The sea wizard’s head tilted. “Not only do they conceal your sea witch’s mark, but they’re also functional, unlike your tail. I wonder why that is...”

I was just as clueless as he was. It would help if I knew literally anything about magic, but I didn’t.

“In any case,” he continued, “it’s clear to me they are separate pieces of magic, and I’ve decided to only concern myself with breaking the one.”

His simple gesture toward my tail was enough to make me flinch.

It might have been a useless tail, but since meeting my guys, it had

become more than just a tail to me. The thought of losing a part of myself where I could live happily with them underwater if I chose to was absolutely terrifying. And not only that, but life as a cecaelia? As a *princess*?

“I don’t want this,” I said, my head shaking. But I wasn’t foolish enough to believe that what I wanted mattered anymore. Even if I were to beg, the queen wouldn’t let me leave.

Now I had a new curse, spending the rest of my life stuck down here, confined within these horrid, rocky bowels.

I couldn’t help the sob that escaped me.

“Princess,” the sea wizard murmured. His voice carried an unsettling amount of concern, considering he was the one who brought me down here. When I looked up, his lips had fallen into a frown. “Perhaps I should leave you to your rest.”

He waited, but this time I didn’t stop him. As soon as he spun away, disappearing into the darkness, the sound of my sobs broke the silence. It was a known fact that no one could cry underwater, but maybe that rule wasn’t true for cecaelia. Because here I was, doing my damndest.

Even if I managed to escape this place, I would still be a cecaelia. A *dark spawn*.

Fear engulfed me as I recalled the horrid vision that had stared back at me in the mirror, its wicked eyes burning into my soul like a white-hot fire.

Would there be anything left for me to return to once the guys learned the truth?



## LEANDER



“I’m done waiting.” I stormed back toward Barren’s bedroom for the hundredth time. “It’s too damn quiet. We haven’t heard a sound from them since we woke up.”

Kai popped up, letting the weight he’d been lifting clatter down beside him. Sweat streamed down his face as he panted. “Dude, you were the one who said we should give them some space.” He swiped an arm over his forehead. “A little alone time to bond, right?”

I shot him a sharp glare that immediately caused him to back down and resume lifting. “That’s ten more repetitions for arguing with me. Laverne—spot him.” I jabbed a finger in her direction, then pointed firmly to Kai.

Her head popped up off the couch to snort her disapproval. “*What? ME?*”

“You heard me.” It was less about her getting off the couch and more about pushing Kai. If he believed I thought his pet could handle the weight, maybe it would motivate him to work harder.

“It’s fine,” Kai blew out. “I’ve—I’ve got this.”

He was damn right he had this. Kai was surprisingly sturdy for a merman of his size. “All right, I’m heading in,” I said, turning back to Barren’s bedchamber door. “Barren’s had more than enough time to find out what happened to her back at Javalynn’s place.”

I cracked my knuckles, visualizing what I would do to the poor soul when I got my hands on them. Oh—I was going to enjoy it. I couldn’t deny the madness that tinged my voice as I added, “I’m ready to know whose throat we need to rip out.”

Kai wheezed out a nervous laugh as I pushed open the door to the



bedchamber. But I wasn't joking.

"Claira? Barren?" I called, not bothering to knock. My cock strained against the front of my pants as I took a step inside. I was more than ready to handle whatever state I might find them in and unopposed to offering my assistance if needed. With how quiet things had been, it seemed Barren could use the help. "I'm coming in."

Light filtered in from the back window and doors. "The fuck?" I muttered, getting a whiff of the room. Instead of sweat, the heavy scent of salt filled the air.

The next thing that caught my attention was Barren's massive figure, solid and bare, sprawled out over the bed. His breathing was steady, and although I couldn't see his face for the arm he'd thrown over it, what I could see of him was more than enough to have me turning right back around.

*Fuck, he's huge.*

I'd never given much thought to Barren's cock, but now I had to shake my head to rid myself of the image. Maybe he didn't need my assistance after all.

I cleared my throat, trying to make my presence known, when the bed creaked with movement.

Barren's voice, low and hoarse, gave away his confusion. "Leander?"

"Yeah, sorry. I couldn't wait —"

"Where's Clair?" he asked, and I found myself staring blankly at the wall ahead of me.

"What do you mean, where's Clair?" I turned to see Barren's massive frame bursting out of bed with the force of an enraged bull shark.

His eyes darted around the room, and his breath came out in a ragged snarl. "Is she with you?"

"What do you mean, *is she with me?*" I snarled right back. "Don't tell me you fucking lost her again!"

A dazed look came over his eyes, and he stumbled, catching himself with a hand on the bed. "I must have fallen asleep," he grumbled before shaking off his stupor to charge toward the washroom. When he stuck his head inside, I knew something was deeply wrong by the way the wall of his back tensed to stone. "She isn't here."

"Then where is she?" I growled, fighting not to grab hold of him. All this time, I believed she was here, safe with Barren. "You were supposed to be with her!"

But I didn't strike out at him. Instead, I took a step back, clenching my fists until my knuckles ached, as if that might somehow hold back my rage.

I couldn't afford to summon another storm. Not with how things had been going. I was already feeling the effects of the trident wearing on me, draining my energy, and perhaps more. No—this wasn't the time to panic and lash out with anger. Not yet. "She probably stepped outside," I offered, imagining what Kai would say. "To clear her head or something."

"Her *head*." Barren groaned, slumping against the doorframe.

Then, in a sudden switch, his eyes went wild with panic. He charged past me. He headed for the back of his chamber and threw open the doors. I followed after him, nearly tripping over the first fucking plant I came across outside.

The sound of waves crashing against the dock filled the air, and I blew out a breath before calling, "Claira?"

She was nowhere in sight, and it was growing harder by the second to keep my emotions in check. *Fuck*.

With no other options left, I turned back to Barren.

"Tell me what happened," I demanded, but he wouldn't turn around. He kept gazing out at the water, as if he knew so little about Claira, he thought she might have plunged right in it on her own.

I clapped a hand on his shoulder, ready to spin him around myself, but the moment I touched him, he shrunk away. When he finally turned around, his eyes were filled with a deep, unspoken sorrow.

"What the fuck's wrong with you?" This wasn't the Barren I knew. Barren was a warrior. Unmovable. Not this sad, withdrawn version of himself he'd been since taking Claira to see his sister.

"This is my fault," he said, and I knew that tone well—self-blame and regret. "I told her about me. About my arm, and now..." He lurched forward, his body swaying as though the wood beneath him had given way.

"*Barren*." His weight bore down on me as I steadied him by his shoulders. "You know Claira's not that kind of mermaid. She wouldn't care about something like that, so let's take a breath and focus on finding her."

But all he did was shake his head, his eyes glassy and unfocused. "I shouldn't have let her leave my sight. I shouldn't have fallen asleep."

"Barren!" I shook his shoulders, hoping to snap him out of it. "Even if you'd kept an eye on her, Claira has a mind and will of her own. We can't control what she does, believe me—Now, we need to find her. You read her

mind, right? You know which bastard took her last time?”

Barren’s head tilted upward to stare hopelessly up at the sky, the veins in his neck bulging like thick ropes. “No,” he grunted through gritted teeth. “I didn’t read her mind.”

“*What?*” I growled, releasing his shoulders. “Why the fuck not?” Rage churned up inside me like the waves crashing against the dock. “You knew someone was after her, Barren. You knew she wasn’t safe.”

Shame was scrawled all over his face. “I can’t. I won’t. It’s not safe, I could—” Eyes wide, Barren turned down to his palm. His fingers flexed as he stared at his hand like it might betray him. “I could hurt her.”

“*Hurt her?* Fucking hell!” I barked, seizing his shoulders again. “You’d never hurt her. I know you better than that. Once we find her, you have to —”

“I can’t,” he shouted, stumbling steps away from me. “Her mind isn’t safe for me. I can’t risk it. I won’t.”

What in Poseidon’s Deep was wrong with him? He was acting crazed, as disturbed as Clair’s father had been before he’d attacked me during my last trip to the warehouse. Only Clair’s father had been just as worried about me having hurt her as he was about himself hurting her.

I took a deep breath, trying to force my emotions down. It wouldn’t help to lash out now, to sink this whole fucking island down around us. Clair’s safety was the only thing that mattered.

“Hey, guys?” Kai’s voice came from back inside the bedchamber. “What’s this note about?”

I glanced up, and Kai was waving something in the air.

“Just stay here and don’t fall off the damn dock,” I grumbled to Barren before stalking back into the bedroom.

Kai was clutching a square of white parchment in his hand. “I finished my repetitions,” he said, the sweat soaking through his shirt proving it. I could tell from the way his face pinked that he’d spotted Barren stumbling around in his naked daze outside. “Where’s Clair?”

I snatched the note from Kai’s hands, my heart sinking as I read over the scrawled message. “Don’t worry?” If Clair had written this, then too fucking late, beautiful. The words were circled, but what were these other pictograms?

I turned the note around, trying to make sense of them. “Do you think Clair wrote this?” I asked.

“I found it on top of her luggage, so... I think it’s a drawing of Laverne,” Kai proclaimed, pointing at the flipped blob scribbled next to the note’s edge. Then his finger slid over the four identical symbols next to it. “Getting ready to eat four clams.”

“*Sorry, I’m doing what now?*” Laverne waddled into the chamber, a fishtail dangling from the corner of her mouth. However, just as she entered, Barren staggered in as well. Laverne’s jaw dropped, and the fish slid out, plummeting to the floor.

Barren froze, his gaze fixated on the fish as Laverne took in an enormous breath. But before she could release one of her piercing shrieks, Kai leaped forward, swiftly positioning himself in front of her, shielding her eyes from the sight.

“*What’s going on here?*” she demanded, her head weaving down in between Kai’s legs to get another look. “*And why wasn’t I invited?*”

“Laverne!” Kai yelled, pushing her out of the bedchamber while she snarled and snapped at him.

This was fucking chaos.

“Do you know where Clairra is?” I yelled out to Kai’s pet above the noise, holding up the note as Kai fought to shove her out the door.

“*Ew. Do you think I care about that harlot?*”

Kai collapsed in a heap as Laverne swung around, heading back for the main room, her nose pitched high. “*Be a dear, Kai-Kai, and bring me my snack.*”

Go figure that Kai’s pet would be of zero use to us.

I turned to Barren, my heart racing as I passed the note to his chest.

“It seems she really did leave us.” My voice caught in my throat. Outside, a burst of lightning cracked over the horizon, and I tensed, knowing that the storm was only just beginning. “Kai thinks she left a message behind. Laverne and clams. Does that mean anything to you?”

Barren didn’t study the note long. “Those are hearts,” he muttered. “Four hearts and Laverne.”

I could hear Kai’s breathing as he came up behind me to study the note over my shoulder. “Uh, you sure about that, big guy?” He stole the note away, holding it up in the air as if searching for a hidden message within it. “I mean, I’m not a warrior. I’ve never actually seen someone’s heart. But I’ve read a scroll or two about anatomy, and these symbols definitely look more like clams to me.”

Barren didn't react or acknowledge what Kai was arguing.

"Hearts or clams, it doesn't fucking matter," I said, my teeth grinding. "If she really went off somewhere, then we have to find her."

"Wait." Kai's head tilted. "Claira's gone? I thought she was in here, uh, you know..." His face turned bright pink, the color spreading all the way to his ears. "... with you?"

Barren looked like he'd been sucker-punched.

"What?" Kai gasped, his gaze snapping between the two of us. "She wouldn't just leave us."

*Leave us? No—she'd promised she'd always come back to me.*

Still, a sharp panic ripped through me like an old wound reopening, and a burst of lightning lit up the bedchamber.

Kai's voice trembled with similar unease. "Do you think this has something to do with why she disappeared earlier? The thing she didn't want to tell us about?"

"We have to find her," I growled, my voice as turbulent as the growing swell of waves outside. "Now."

Barren had already grabbed clothes and was out the door.

"Right—okay." Kai snatched the fish off the floor and spun, scrambling back out to the main room. "Laverne, catch! Time to go."

"Go? Go where?" she whined, but her voice faded from my mind as I followed Barren out onto the deck.

Wind whipped my hair across my face, and droplets of beating rain stung my skin.

*Fuck.* It was happening already.

I'd thought I'd been doing better. Thought that the breathing exercises were working. But no, here I was, still clinging to the same anger and anxiety that had been a part of me since I was a helpless merfry.

*Dammit.*

No matter how hard I tried to control it, my rage was still there, lurking in the recesses of my mind. An inescapable shadow ready to rear up and take control at any moment.

Now that I had the trident, it was clear I was no different from my father. The same fury that consumed him kept threatening to take me down with it, too. But I couldn't let it. Not yet.

The sound of thunder followed another flash of lightning as the brewing storm drew closer, frothing up the waves. And here I stood at the edge of the

storm, holding on to my last threads of control, my heart rate surging as my mind raced with thoughts of revenge.

Claira was out there somewhere, alone and in danger, haunted by something or someone she hadn't felt comfortable sharing with us.

I'd keep the storm at bay until I knew who was responsible for this. And then I'd make them pay.

She may have left, but there wasn't any place she could go where I wouldn't follow her.

I'd find our girl. Even if it killed me.



# CLAIRA



**M**y mind awoke with a violent force from the vivid nightmare that had just played out before it.

*Darkness. Trapped in the Undersea. The chilling, white eyes of a sea witch.*

Only, it wasn't merely a nightmare. It was real. All of it.

Had I... sobbed myself to sleep, clinging to the star grass the sea wizard had brought me?

"Princess," a voice said, gruff and male, and an icy awareness slid through me.

The nightmare hadn't ended.

Someone loomed over me—their chest heaving, their words a hushed, unintelligible murmur—and I shook all the more. Whoever it was, I didn't recognize them.

My hands flew to my face, and I let out a sharp yelp as calloused hands grabbed hold of me.

"No!" I thrashed and fought, attempting to break free, and the body above me shifted, holding me down. Heavy limbs slid on top of me, one after another, and my heart raced as I struggled against my attacker's unrelenting grip.

"Easy, princess," he said, the low growl of an animal. "Quiet, now. The queen sent me here to look after you."

My shell—where was my shell?

Only, it was useless. My hands were trapped.

"Get... off!" I yelled, preparing to headbutt him, hoping that knocking some of his teeth out would stun him enough that I could get an arm free. But



just as I braced for my attack, he jerked back, howling in pain before I had even struck him.

The rough hands grasping my arms released me momentarily as my attacker swatted at something behind his back.

Then my eyes caught something—a blur of motion. It was an eel, writhing in fury, lashing out at the cecaelia on top of me like an angry whip.

Jaws wide, it struck my attacker's flank with the force of a ship's bow, and the man let out a guttural roar, his back curving like the end of a tentacle. But the eel's attack didn't stop there. No, it was relentless. I could only witness in horror as those needle-like jaws struck again and again.

Finally, the man I assumed to be one of the queen's pawns fell backward, and the weight of his tentacles slid from me.

But before I could celebrate, a dark cloud swelled up, blurring my vision. Magic filled the chamber, and a figure materialized from within the billowing darkness, his face a pale mask of exhaustion and rage.

My throat choked—*the sea wizard*.

His eerily calm voice cut through the chaos of the room. "Excuse my intrusion," he said, and I was sure the scathing glare before me held the power to freeze the blood in the pawn's veins had he turned around to see it. My attacker's screams died down to whimpers when the wizard wrapped around him from behind. A long black prong pressed underneath his jaw, into his neck.

It was pathetic how quickly the pawn turned into a shrunken, trembling blob at the mercy of the sea wizard's trident. His voice rose at least two octaves as he stammered out his purpose. "H-her Majesty sent me here to inquire about a meal for—for the princess!"

Streams of magic rose from the sea wizard's arms, swirling like smoke, and the pawn let out an agonized scream. "Well, princess?" the sea wizard asked with a menacing grin. "Are you hungry?"

I shook my head, my throat too constricted to possibly speak.

"I suspected as much." A deafening crack of magic shook through the water, and the dark, ominous cloud from earlier returned. Its pitch blackness swallowed up both the pawn and the sea wizard, and they vanished, leaving behind only fleeting remnants of fading magic.

Now that we were alone, the eel circled above me, its smooth skin running across my shoulder with every turn. It took me at least a minute to compose myself enough to whisper out a thank you.

Arms trembling, my heart thundered as I pushed myself upright. If the eel hadn't appeared, I didn't know what could have happened to me. "You gave me the warning back at the ruins, didn't you?"

Its voice reached my mind with a rasped "Yes."

So, it really was affiliated with the sea wizard—although I'd thought they'd been one and the same. A pet, perhaps?

The eel brushed past again, rubbing up against me in a way that reminded me of Sprout bunting my hand.

Just when I thought my heart rate was calming, another explosion of smoke appeared before us, and out of it emerged the sea wizard. Alone.

"I offer my apologies." He lowered his head gracefully as the smoke cleared. "I didn't expect the queen to send someone to you so soon, but I swear none shall disturb you again," he said with a hint of formality I was sure I'd never get used to. "Rest easy, princess."

*Rest easy?* I might have found his bold statement amusing if I wasn't so shaken. How could anyone relax after that?

He stood there as if waiting for me to confirm that I would happily sink down into the seagrass and fall back asleep. Like hell that would happen.

I'd only been trapped in the Undersea for a short while, but the constant danger was already wearing on me. I was on the verge of telling him just that when the eel knocked against my shoulder, as if to remind me of its presence.

"Ah, this is Aracos." A peculiar fondness softened the sea wizard's voice. "My familiar. I asked him to keep an eye on you. My apologies, princess, if that makes you uncomfortable."

Did it? Perhaps it should have, but mostly I was just thankful for the eel's intervention.

I tentatively held out a hand, unsure if an eel would even appreciate getting a pat. "Thank you, Aracos," I whispered softly, and to my surprise, he nuzzled my hand. I couldn't help but gulp as I rubbed his head, my eyes fixed on his perilous, needle-tipped teeth. When the eel seemed to have its fill of my affection, I glanced up at the sea wizard. "Your familiar?"

He didn't let the question linger long. "It's a bond that goes beyond loyalty and kinship," he said with a nod. "I share my magic with Aracos, and in return, he lends me his instincts. His keen senses. It's an arrangement that serves us both well."

The eel left me, slithering away to wrap around the sea wizard. Although my pulse was still racing, I managed a smile, grateful for his protection.

The sea wizard's familiar. How interesting.

"I suppose I should thank you, too," I murmured, my gaze drifting back to meet the powerful man before me. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion. Maybe the pawn had disturbed his sleep, too. "For asking your familiar to watch over me."

He inclined his head again, his black hair falling over his face as he said, "My pleasure to be of service. We'll leave you to your rest."

"Wait, I—" My thoughts scattered as his head lifted, one of his dark eyebrows rising.

"Yes, princess?"

"I, um..." I swallowed hard, not sure why I wasn't ready for him to leave. "I want to know what happened to the queen's pawn. What did you do to him?"

The smirk that crept across the sea wizard's face told me everything I needed to know.

"You do not want to know what happened to that brute," he said in a cold, detached voice. "Trust me."

The thought of his ruthlessness made me shudder. Earlier, he'd melted a man for just reaching for me. There was no telling what he'd done this time. "I'll take your word for it," I said, deciding it was best to leave it at that.

"Rest easy." He drew his arms up like he was about to disappear, and my panic reached an unbearable peak.

I didn't want to be alone—not here, trapped in this horrible, cold, unfamiliar place.

"Please," I begged with a desperation that surprised even me. Down here, he'd become like a lifeline that I clutched, unable to let go.

*A lifeline?* Poseidon, help me. I was pathetic underwater. This wasn't like me—not at all. "No, n-never mind," I said, wishing I could take back every moment of weakness and vulnerability I'd displayed since coming to this horrid place, but the sea wizard only drifted closer.

His gaze dropped to my lips with an intensity that left me burning. His face might have been a mask of carefully suppressed emotions, but his eyes spoke volumes, and my heart quickened as he inquired, low and controlled, "Would it ease your mind if I remained close? Right outside your chamber, perhaps?"

A primal instinct clawed its way up my throat, urging me to say yes. My rational thoughts told me it was an unreasonable request to burden him with,

but the fear of being left alone was overwhelming.

My voice quivered as I nodded. “Maybe,” I whispered, and a wave of guilt quickly followed. If only I had magic—power like the sea wizard had—maybe then I would be more confident in such an unfamiliar place.

He paused, his gaze steady upon me.

Had he not expected me to take him up on it? Well, the joke was on him because, at this moment, I was focusing on survival.

Eventually, he bowed. “Very well.” His eyes flickered toward Aracos, as though they were exchanging a final thought before their departure. The eel slid against me once more and was the first to shoot off toward the curtain.

When the sea wizard got to the exit, he paused with his hand on the curtain to cast a glance over his shoulder. “May you rest easy, princess, knowing I’ll be right outside your chamber.”

And then he was gone.

I stared at the curtain long after it had gone completely still, my heart pounding erratically. Was he really on the other side?

Sighing deeply, I curled in on myself among the seagrass, staring up at the monochrome ceiling for what felt like hours. Even if he was there, every inch of me was on edge, just waiting for something to erupt from out of nowhere to grab me.

Rest easy—*ha*. There would be no more rest for me, not anymore.

My tail felt like a leaden burden as I pushed myself to move, dragging and crawling over the jagged rocks toward the curtain. When I finally dared to peek beyond it, my heart leaped into my throat.

There he was, camped out in front of the entryway, immersed in the pages of a scroll. He was guarding my chamber, just as he’d said he would, with a quill poised in his hand and Aracos coiled around his neck like a living, affectionate scarf.

“Seems you don’t trust me to guard you, after all,” he murmured without turning around, interrupting my study of his back.

I froze, caught in the ebb and flow of embarrassment and guilt. “It’s not that,” I rushed to explain. “There’s just too much in my mind right now, and I thought...”

His graceful hand was a distraction, dancing along, etching a series of mysterious glyphs as I spoke, leaving me to wonder what they meant.

“You thought?” he echoed, his hand gliding along.

After swallowing down a gulp, I huffed. “Okay, fine. I didn’t expect

you'd actually be out here. I thought you were trying to appease me as if I were a child, but here you are," I muttered. "What are you working on?"

"You think so little of me, princess," the sea wizard said dryly. He canted his head slightly, his eyes still fixed on the scroll. "Unfortunately, a puppet's work is never complete."

Yeah—that told me nothing.

But before I could press him for more, he rolled up the scroll and tapped the end of Aracos's tail. "Bring me the next. The one on my desk."

The eel snapped the scroll between his jaws, then vanished, fading into a mini puff of smoke.

"Whoa—" That scroll must have had at least a hundred tiny punctures in it now from the eel's teeth.

The sea wizard tilted back to look at me, then closed his eyes, a soft sigh escaping his lips. "Don't worry, princess. Magic scrolls are tougher than you think." His fingers absently clenched and unclenched around his quill, as if he'd endured great discomfort toiling away over the rocks outside my chamber.

*A magic scroll.* It looked like a normal scroll to me, like something I'd see one of King Eamon's scribes carrying around.

"You have a desk where you keep magic scrolls underwater?" I asked, unable to help my curiosity. "How official?"

"Indeed." One of his eyes flickered open, and a faint smirk tugged at his lips. "Since you're having trouble sleeping, would it interest you to see it?"



WHEN THE TELEPORTATION MAGIC FADED, I found myself in a chamber overrun with wrapped scrolls and leather-bound tomes. Despite the space's suffocatingly narrow size, it was meticulously designed, with shelves carved into every available inch.

"Careful," the sea wizard warned, gracefully lowering his head to navigate the jagged ceiling. "I'm afraid this chamber isn't as luxurious as yours," he said with a wry laugh, "but it serves its purpose."

"Is this your office?" I asked as my gaze wandered aimlessly. The sheer volume of reading material was overwhelming, with scrolls and tomes visible

from every conceivable angle.

“I suppose you could say that. I was assigned this chamber when I came under the queen’s service.” Gliding forward, he held me securely against his chest, drawing me toward a secluded desk nestled against the back wall.

*What a mess.* Barren would have lost his mind if he were here to see it.

The desk held an abundance of scrolls, forming enough haphazard stacks to rival an entire wall of bookshelves. A flat stone sat alongside it, the only vacant surface in the entire chamber, leaving me to wonder if it served as his bed.

The sea wizard released me, gently setting me down in front of the desk so he could search through a stack of scrolls. Interesting. It wasn’t just scrolls—there were also shells littered among the piles. All types and sizes; some even decorated the shelves, shoved in the space between scrolls, or sitting on top of tomes.

“Excuse me a moment,” the sea wizard muttered, leaning over the tallest pile. Even his tentacles joined in as he rifled through it. “Feel free to indulge your curiosity and look around.” His tone was laced with dry sarcasm. “I know how curious you can be.”

I snorted, unable to deny it. “Well, if you’re offering,” I muttered back, using the uneven floor to pull myself over to one of the more interesting-looking shelves. But as soon as I perused the first row of tomes, my eyes began to glaze.

There were so many glyphs etched into leather and scrawled over scrolls, none of which I could make any sense out of.

“This is quite the library you have,” I said, selecting a thick tome to examine. “Do you let others come in and use it?”

“Never.” The sea wizard’s voice startled me, and I whipped around to find him back at my side, a new scroll in hand. “I don’t typically entertain guests,” he said stiffly.

“Wonder why that is,” I mumbled, scanning over his lithe, muscular form. He was certainly not unattractive, with his porcelain complexion and toned physique...

Oh, right. He also had the power to melt people, which was terrifying. That alone would be a solid deterrent for most.

The sea wizard shot me a withering look before unrolling the scroll he held. His eyes raced across its contents at such a rapid pace I wondered if he was merely pretending to read it. I leaned over, sliding the tome I’d selected

back on the shelf while simultaneously trying to catch a covert glimpse of the sea wizard's scroll.

"What's on your mind, princess?" he asked abruptly.

"N-nothing in particular."

"Hm." He arched an eyebrow, his penetrating gaze lingering on my face for a moment longer than necessary. A faint hum escaped his lips as he carefully rolled up the scroll. "I can't help but wonder what's occupying your thoughts. You've been away for quite some time."

I bit my lip, shifting uncomfortably under his white-eyed gaze. "Yeah, I guess I have. But I don't remember ever being with the cecaelia." Shrugging, I averted my focus to a delicate seashell sitting on the shelf beside me. It looked small and defenseless, shoved in a corner, waiting around to be crushed by the slightest touch. "Nothing down here seems familiar to me, and I barely even remember my mother."

"No, not that," he said swiftly. "From your lovers. You've been away from them for quite some time now."

*My lovers?* Heat blazed across my face at the mention of them. I ducked my head, trying to hide my presumably pink cheeks, but the sea wizard drew nearer, as if the scroll he held had vanished from his mind entirely.

"I'm curious." His voice seemed to slice through the water like the sharp tines of a trident. "What would you say to them if they were here with you now?"

My pulse rocketed. "What would I say to them?" I repeated, trying to keep my voice steady.

The corner of his mouth lifted, revealing teeth as white as his eyes. "Would you tell them the truth about who you are? The secrets you have hidden underneath your tail?" He spoke those terrible words like they were a seduction. "Do you wish they were here with you now instead of me?"

Of course, I wished they were here with me. My soul was broken, shattered by their absence, like a part of me had been forcefully ripped away and left behind with them.

But the thought of telling them that I was never really a mermaid—that I was actually a cecaelia—was enough to send me spiraling.

"No, I—" How could I tell them? Was I even ready to tell them? I needed time to think, to figure out the right words to say. Because if I didn't think this through, and I messed it all up... Sure, I was in danger down here, but I knew with certainty I wouldn't be able to survive their rejection.

“You keep trembling, little mouse.” The sea wizard’s hand rested on the side of my shoulder, and despite my better judgment, I leaned into it, hungry for whatever comfort I could get.

“I need time to figure out how to tell them.”

“Really?” The surprise on his face seemed genuine. “They need not know that you’re a sea witch—that’s a secret safe for no one. But will you deny them the truth of your origin?”

Shame flushed my skin. “I’m not sure I can ever tell them.”

His chuckle was soft, almost a purr. “And what will you say, years from now, when your first spawn comes out sporting tentacles?” He tsked, his tone all the more teasing when he added, “I look forward to seeing how your relationships built on such a solid foundation work out.”

I knew he was right—of course I knew it. It was only a matter of time before my secret came out, but that didn’t mean I was ready to face it.

Goodness, I was a coward. But I couldn’t—I couldn’t survive their rejection. I wasn’t ready. Maybe if I were more like the vision of myself that I’d seen in the mirror, then...

*No. Anything but that.*

Pressing my eyes shut, I forced out, “I don’t know what I want. I just know that I’m not ready.”

“Don’t you think they’ll be pleased to know you’re a princess?”

I shot him a look. “Does it even matter? You said it yourself, the queen won’t let me leave. I’m stuck down here.”

Hands retreating, he turned with a dark chuckle, grabbing the scroll he’d studied earlier from one of his tentacles. His movements were so fluid that I hadn’t realized he’d passed it off.

“Ah, so true.” Returning to his desk, he unraveled the scroll, and the sound of his laugh became increasingly unhinged. “And if I were to help you escape, the crown would surely have my head on a pike.”

“I’m surprised you’re able to joke about that,” I remarked, watching as he furiously wrote something down on the scroll.

The sea wizard grinned over his shoulder at me, and for a moment, he looked younger—almost boyish. “You’d be surprised by what I get away with,” he mused before going back to his work.

I went back to looking through the tomes when an unbridled question bubbled up inside me. “Hey, wizard?”

“Hm?”



“Do you remember that merfry you helped who was stung by a jellyfish? Why were you hanging out near the shore that day?”

He remained hunched over his scroll while answering. “I was curious. The Atlantic mers rarely visit land.”

That was true, I supposed. It felt strange to have a genuine conversation with the sea wizard—one in which he actually responded to my question.

“And my mother, did you know her?” I casually tossed out, testing the waters to see how much he was willing to share.

His quill scratched over the scroll, his shoulders hunched as he muttered, “I was still quite young when she passed.”

*Young?* How long had it been since my mother had died?

“How old are you?” I asked, giving him a once-over, my eyebrows cocked skeptically. “I thought wizards were supposed to be ancient. That’s kind of their thing, isn’t it?”

He slammed his quill down on his desk, irritation creeping into his voice. “Met many wizards, have you?”

“Well, no. But on land...” I hesitated, realizing I was fumbling my chance to get information out of him. “You know what? Never mind.”

I sighed and returned to perusing the tomes, completely caught off guard when he suddenly supplied, “Twenty-seven.”

“Really?” I asked, eyeing his back. I hadn’t expected to get an answer at all, and now here I was, doing math in my head. “Are you sure that’s not in octopus years? I swear I thought you were in your thirties, at least.”

The sea wizard snapped his head back to glare at me. “If I look old, I assure you it’s the toll of many years of servitude underneath your family.” Anger—or perhaps hurt—simmered in his every word.

My mouth snapped shut as I realized all too late that I’d taken things too far. “Sorry,” I muttered, my gaze averting. “I was just —”

“I have no need for your apology. You weren’t the one who bound me here.” After a lengthy sigh, he leaned back over his scroll. “Although a day in your servitude seems to be wearing on me more than I anticipated.”

The tension between us was palpable, and I desperately wanted to ease it. “Well, if it’s any consolation,” I began, “I appreciate all of your help, even if you are a bit prickly.”

He shot me a sidelong glance, yet his lips curved ever so slightly. “Prickly, am I?”

“Just a little.” Shrugging, I sighed. “But I suppose I’ve been prickly, too.”

Sorry that I teased you about your age—I'm a bit of a mess right now."

His gaze lingered. "You're doing better than most would in this situation, princess."

It was an unexpected compliment, and I turned away, distracting myself from the blush it had caused by thumbing through the tomes. Their leather spines were brittle. What kind of leather was it? Stingray? Whale? Some were so old it seemed as if they would crumble to sand if I dared to touch them.

I slid one out and opened it, disappointment filling me when I couldn't recognize any of the writing inside. After a few more beats of silence, I asked, "What are these books about?"

"Have you not been nosing through them this entire conversation?"

I cringed, feeling caught. "I was looking for one with pictures," I admitted, and a shiver ran through me when he abandoned his desk to move closer.

His eyes were boring into me now, much like mine had moments ago when I was trying to decipher his age.

"Do you not know how to read?" he asked.

"Why would I know how to read a cecaelian language?" I threw back, my embarrassment peaking.

A laugh, smooth and deep, rumbled through the water. "There is only one script of the ocean. Do you truly not recognize any of these glyphs? What did the Atlantic teach you in all this time?" he pressed, retrieving a book from the shelf and opening it under my face. My head shook, but he kept flipping through the pages like he couldn't believe it.

"I never learned how to read, okay?" I mumbled, shoving the book out from under my nose. "I'm not even sure my papa knew."

"What a terrible shame," the sea wizard lamented, a hand going under his chin. "I suppose I could teach you."

"Wait, what?" I stammered, taking another glance at the complicated glyphs. "I had three mermen try to teach me how to swim. No luck there. I think I'll pass."

"There was a good reason for that," he muttered, and I wasn't ready for his hand to brush over the scales on my tail. "Use that excuse if you wish, but your brain hasn't been defiled by a botched-up spell. You can learn if you want to."

I scanned over the books, weighing his offer. "If I did learn, can any of

these books teach me how to use magic?”

With the way his expression opened, he hadn't expected that. “You want to learn magic?”

Of course, I did. I'd always wanted to use magic. To be stronger and more powerful than I was. Or at the very least, not useless. And if there was even a sliver of a chance that I could stumble upon information or a magical solution among these tomes that could help Leander or the merfolk, I couldn't pass it up. Maybe then my time stuck down here wouldn't be a complete waste. “What's the point of being a sea witch if I can't use magic?”

“None of these books will teach you magic,” he said, and there it was—disappointment swiftly raining down upon me. Dammit.

“But knowing the glyphs will help. Some of the most potent spells can only be sealed in the form of a written contract.”

“A contract?” I echoed. For a mysterious sea wizard, he sure had a way of making magic sound boring. “What about that smoke thing that you do? Or when you *poof* us somewhere? Could I learn that type of magic?”

“Ah, you wish to learn how to *poof*. Why am I not surprised?” he said, a sigh escaping him. “You could learn those things, yes. But not from a book.”

My eyes widened. “Then how?”

“Perhaps I'll teach you that as well. But first...” To my surprise, he came closer, his fingers grazing my tail with the lightest of touches. Before I could question him, he returned to his desk, jotting down something that left me all too curious.

“I think I've worked through why your presence affects the merfolk's curse.”

My heart hammered, my hand sweeping over the parts of my tail he'd just touched. “Oh?”

Maybe I'd learn how to help the merfolk sooner rather than later.

“This *curse* laid over your tentacles,” he began, his quill scratching away, “it's terribly done. You seem to feel sensations in their replacement, yet you're unable to make use of it.”

Yes, I was well aware.

He stretched out his hand before continuing. “You see, spells are like the threads of a fisherman's net, and this one happens to be tangled upon itself, strong yet ineffective. There's a disconnect between your tail and your natural state, and I suspect that it's causing interference with the merfolk's curse each time you come into contact with them.”

“Wait, wait,” I stammered, my voice quivering with a mix of disbelief and frustration. “So, you’re telling me that my curse is so messed up that it’s actually messing up their curse too?”

It was almost too much to wrap my head around. If that were the case...

The sea wizard set his quill aside and offered a solemn nod. “In theory, yes.”

So, all this time, my curse-breaking abilities had nothing to do with me being special or some key to helping the merfolk? I was just... messed up? That was the only reason?

“I’ve gathered everything I need from you for now,” he said, casually rolling up the scroll he’d been working on as if he hadn’t just turned my entire world upside down. With a flick of his wrist, the scroll disappeared into a cloud of magic and was replaced by a sizable conch shell.

“For you,” he offered, extending it toward me. “A protective spell to ward off unwanted guests from entering your chamber. Place it at the entrance after I return you.”

But I was barely listening.

My newest realization hit over and over, crashing into me like an unrelenting wave. My touch was only significant because of my curse, not because of any inherent qualities that made me unique or valuable.

Finally, my eyes followed up to meet his, and it was then that I remembered the conch in his grip. “You’re giving me this?” I asked, but wait... “At what cost?”

“You know me so well,” he muttered, a sly smirk playing over his lips. “I already have what I need, so consider us even.”

Well, that sure was ominous, but I accepted the shell, regardless. “You’re sure it will keep the pawns out?” I asked, just to be sure.

His smirk broadened, as if he were remembering what he’d done to the pawn from earlier. “Absolutely certain.”

I gazed down at the shell, sliding my fingers into its spiral. It felt surprisingly sturdy. Reliable. “And what about you?” I whispered. “Will it keep you out?”

His hand gently lifted my chin, tilting it upward, and that smirk of his remained. “I said it would keep out *unwanted* guests,” he murmured, his face dangerously close to mine. “So, princess, I suppose that’s for you to decide.”



# ABYSSAL



**T**each her to read? To use magic? Evidently, I'd lost my mind.

I pressed my head against the rocks outside the princess's chamber and sighed deeply. So, she thought I was prickly. Ha...

Those derisively sweet lips of hers would be the death of me, but I couldn't let my desires get in the way of my mission.

This... feeling I had. It was something she would never reciprocate.

That thought burned in my mind as I forcibly tore myself away from the wall.

With my duty to the crown momentarily fulfilled, it was time to turn my attention to my own plans.

My little captive had fallen into the vile queen's trap far quicker than expected, leaving me with precious little time to prepare. Nevertheless, I'd make do.

"Aracos," my mind called out. It had been a while since I'd last sensed him, having sent him away before taking the princess into my bedchamber.

His answer was swift. "*Master.*"

Good—he was still awake. "*Keep watch over the royal hallway. One eye on the crown, the other on the princess. Inform me of any movement.*"

"*Aracos will be your eyes, Master.*"

Of course, I didn't expect either of them to make a move. The queen, too occupied with her own pleasures, likely had no intention of leaving her throne. As for our princess, she was safely tucked away in her cage. I'd already made sure the spell I'd given her was sitting in the doorway, preventing her from being disturbed.

"*Keep safe. Keep hidden,*" I reminded, then felt the pull of Aracos

draining more of my magic. His interference when one of the queen's pawns slunk into the princess's chamber was commendable, but it had been close. Too close.

Puppet strings be damned, I'd tear the entire Undersea apart, reducing it to mere rubble and silt if any harm ever came to my familiar.

I teleported to my desk and gathered the necessary materials before visualizing my destination—a certain merman-infested bungalow perched atop a calm lagoon.

However, upon opening my eyes, I found myself bobbing over a tumultuous sea. Forked lightning bolts splintered the brooding sky, and thunder rumbled ominously as if delivering a foreboding message intended solely for me.

*How utterly delightful.*

Squinting against the stinging wind, I took stock of the shore. The waves knocked against my tentacles, but I plowed through the surging current. The source of this chaos had to be close.

And there he was, the spitting image of the god of storms himself. His burnished gold hair whipped against the fierce wind carrying sand all around him, his eyes pinched shut.

And although he appeared to be taking in long, measured breaths, the air crackled with his fury.

*Interesting.* He'd probably been out searching for her this entire time.

"Leander Asphaleius," I called out, my voice bellowing across the frothing sea.

The cyclone swelled around him, and one of his eyes popped open, his gaze spearing me where I stood atop the waves.

*Yes—see me and know I'm the source of all your torment.*

"We meet again," I continued, a smirk curling my lips as his shoulders squared in my direction. "You appear to have gained an inch or two since the last time I had the pleasure of basking in the presence of the great heir to the Atlantic."

"So, you know who I am," he growled, anger rippling through his voice like an electric surge. He was a feral creature, all right. Cloaked in sand and poised to rip me apart.

"And what name shall I pass on to your brethren," he forced through increasingly erratic breaths, "when they come to find what little remains of your corpse, dark spawn?"

Ah—

My throat closed as the binding strings of the crown's old command held tight.

***“Do not waste time telling your name to others, puppet. Your identity before becoming my servant holds no significance.”***

“Consider me a messenger,” I said smoothly, recovering with practiced ease.

Just as the tension thickened, a second figure appeared, running through the wall of sand with a hand braced over his face. “Leander! Laverne found a crab who...” It was easy to tell the exact moment recognition hit. Upon seeing me, his eyes bulged as though he were facing a demon, fear freezing him in place. “... *You.*”

Anticipation rose within me, and I felt my smirk stretch wider.

“Kai Corentine,” I mused. Things were unfolding even better than expected. “I didn’t come here to strike a deal with you, I’m afraid.”

Before I’d even finished, the Pacific mer’s face had drained to a sickly pallor.

Ah, yes—it seemed he’d gained some wisdom since our previous dealing.

The prince next to him took a protective step forward, wedging his body between us as if attempting to shield Kai from any harm I might inflict. *Intriguing*. The brotherly bond they shared was palpable. Unfortunately, his attempt at protection had come far too late.

Oh, I was enjoying this little reunion. Enjoying how their fear and anger mingled in the storm building around us. All the better to set the stage for what was to come.

All at once, the fear in Kai’s eyes ignited. “You!” he wailed, his voice rising above the rumbling thunder. He pushed past his golden shield, heading straight for me with no regard for the water, his entire body trembling with rage. “Tell me, was it you all along? *You’re* the one who took her?”

“The fuck are you doing?” The Atlantic prince seized Kai’s shoulder, hauling him backward before the waves could reach his feet.

“*Tsk*,” I scoffed, eyeing where the salt water swelled up the shore. “How disappointing. I would have loved to witness the curse with my own eyes.”

“You know this dark spawn?” Prince Leander’s voice was heavy with accusation, his eyes shifting between Kai and myself, torn between where to direct his anger.

I couldn’t help but offer him a sly smile, reveling in the chaos I’d



wrought. “Claira came willingly, I assure you,” I called out over the golden prince’s growls, reminding Kai of how the stakes between us had changed.

The veins in Kai’s neck bulged as he bellowed back, “Claira... She would never!”

Perhaps things would have turned out quite differently had that been true. “Naive as always, I see,” I said dryly.

Another figure emerged from the sandstorm, and my pulse surged with delight.

“Barren Arwa.” I snatched my trident up from where one of my tentacles held it under the waves, enjoying how the Indian Ocean prince’s gaze froze on my dark appendages. “I must say, you’re quite famous among my kind. The boy king, brought down by the might of a single tentacle.”

At last, the final piece of this puzzle was in place, and I couldn’t help but relish how seamlessly three mermen who hailed from separate oceans had come together.

The sky erupted, and a streak of lightning shot down at me with the force of a heaven-thrown spear. Sparks flew in every direction as I repelled it, tossing the blast aside with the end of my trident.

I grimaced, the muscles in my arm burning as I heaved in a breath. “For a prince marked with gold, you’re not very bright, are you?” The air was thick with the smell of hot metal, but I didn’t dare waste time inspecting how my weapon had fared.

The Atlantic prince possessed immense power, I’d give him that, but it was clear he had little control over it. “Do you really think,” I started, panting between words, “she’ll survive down there without me?”

“Barren!” Leander’s voice surged, a desperate plea disguised as a command. “Find out where she is.”

A prickling sensation built in my mind, and my attention cut over to the Indian Ocean’s fallen heir.

“Trying to pry into my thoughts, are we?” I forced a laugh, working the tightness out of my muscles by rotating my trident. “I’m afraid you might find my mind difficult to penetrate.”

“I don’t understand,” the Indian Ocean prince grunted out, his head shaking. “His mind... It’s like static.”

“Good to know those long nights of spellwork weren’t in vain,” I remarked, not bothering to mask my satisfaction. Perfecting that spell had drained a considerable amount of my magic. And while it had proven

effective on Aracos, the Indian Ocean prince's abilities were nothing short of extraordinary.

"No need to read my mind," I continued. "Ask me whatever you wish, and I'll tell you. Don't believe sweet Clairra would come to me willingly? Well, I can be quite persuasive. If you don't believe me, ask Kai."

"The fuck is he talking about, Kaius?" Prince Leander's distrust was palpable, yet his attention had been locked on me since releasing the bolt, his gaze refusing to waver.

"I—" Kai started, but his voice trailed off.

It appeared he was unable to utter the words I sought. How disappointing.

With a theatrical sigh, I extracted a seashell from my collection. "I suppose I'll have to enlighten you on the situation myself."

Smoke billowed from my hand as I cracked the shell in my fist, releasing the magic stored within it, and the shock and anguish on their faces when Clairra's voice started playing in the air were a sight to behold.

*"What would I say to them?"*

With a grin, I mouthed along with the recording of my voice. *"Do you wish they were here with you now instead of me?"*

*"No, I—I need time to figure out how to tell them."*

This was absolute perfection.

The air felt still and thick as her sweet voice lingered on the wind. Even the clouds seemed to momentarily cease their movement.

"Ah—I suppose you couldn't hear the full effect," I added, smirking down at my captive audience even as the waves pummeled, tossing me about. "Her voice... it calls to me so *lovingly*. I cannot wait to become more intimately acquainted. I think I'll enjoy our time together immensely."

Kai was the first to shatter the silence that followed, his voice leaden and desperate. "Leander—Barren. Don't you dare listen to anything that demon says." Then he turned to me, determination lighting his eyes. "You're lying. You could never be one of Clairra's mates."

"Oh?" I countered, thoroughly amused. "And what makes you so sure of that?"

"Because of what you *are*, dark spawn," he declared, planting a foot deep into the sand. "Cold, unfeeling. Clairra would never be drawn to a creature like you."

"A creature like me..." My lips tightened over my teeth.

Perhaps this was the very reason behind my little captive's trembling, her

struggle to embrace her true nature. *How infuriating.*

“I suppose we’ll see about that,” I replied, not bothering to temper my spite. “Better yet, why not follow me down to the Undersea and ask her for yourself? Ah, yes—I suppose that would be a problem, given your current —”

A deafening crack of thunder interrupted our exchange, and I found myself forcibly blocking another bolt of lightning.

“*Ha!*” With a snarl, I hurled the lightning bolt back into the dark sky. My patience was quickly waning. “How tireso—UGH.”

A second bolt darted down from the heavens, its path a chaotic zigzag that I hadn’t anticipated. The bolt bounded off the crest of a wave and found its mark. Intense white light blinded me as the energy of the strike blasted my shoulder with punishing force, and I bit down on the agony.

Up until this very moment, my meticulous plan had unfolded flawlessly.

Yet now, pain surged through me, nearly drowning out everything else. My tentacles writhed, every muscle contracting as my body overloaded. And my hearts—were they still beating?

The Atlantic prince lunged toward the water, but his figure blurred in my doubled vision even as his mouth moved in a maelstrom of curses. “*I fucking... rip... spawn!*”

Waiting around for the golden prince to hurl himself into the ocean in a fit of rage would serve no purpose.

With my objective achieved, it was time to retreat.

I pressed my eyes shut and searched for the power to vanish from their sight, then gasped down water the moment I reappeared at my desk.

The pain in my arm reached its peak, and I crumpled over my scrolls, wondering what it might feel like if one of my hearts had truly exploded.

Struck by lightning...

It shouldn’t have been such a surprise that the Atlantic prince was so adept at commanding the heavens. His every feature mirrored that of his forefather, Poseidon, the god of storms, not that the prince was aware of this kinship of his.

I attempted to speak, but my lungs shook. “*An...noying.*” My arms, chest, and my entire body trembled uncontrollably. Bursts of white light continued to flash before my eyes, and a strange mix of bitterness and understanding welled within me, a sense that perhaps I was receiving no less than what I deserved.

My vision gradually cleared to the ominous black marks splintering down the side of my shoulder, mirroring the lightning bolt's path. With an unsteady hand, I attempted to channel my magic into the wound to mend it, but the effort proved futile.

Ah, yes. This *was* what I deserved.

For now, I would have to settle with concealing the injury and hiding the evidence of what I'd done.

I lay the concealment spell over my skin then sank back down on my desk, not caring that my face pressed into a mound of scrolls.

No, things hadn't gone as smoothly as I'd hoped. But it was finally done.

The princess's lovers now believed that I'd poisoned her mind with my villainous ways.

*Ha.*

I had no doubt they would be exploiting every relic, every bit of magic their kind possessed, to find a way to reach her. To save her from *me*.

***“Do not let the princess return to the merfolk.”***

Oh, to see the vile queen's face once Clairia escaped this place.

If I couldn't let her return to them, I would do everything in my power to get them to return to her, even if it meant playing the villain.

I was good at it, after all.

What was it the Pacific mer had called me... Cold and unfeeling?

How convenient it would be if that were true.

The agony lessened and gave way to numbness that spread through my shoulder, working its way down my chest and across my limbs.

*My scared little captive...* I could envision her now, cowering in the corner of her chamber.

Even if I handed her all the tools to escape this place herself, would she find the strength to use them?

Or would she end up like me, living a life of sacrifice and captivity. Would she allow herself to waste away for the gain of another as I'd done?

Either way, before the moon cycle was through, she would be far away from this place, far from the queen.

She'd be far from me.

If I had to break these bonds and rewrite every law of the ocean to make it so, I would do just that.

*And then maybe, for once, I—*

White overtook my vision, clouding the corners of my sight as the

numbness spread. “*Tsk*. How irritating,” I murmured, attempting to fight how heavy my eyelids had grown.

Rest was a luxury I couldn’t afford, but perhaps it was what I needed. The toils of the past few days had been relentless, after all, draining my magic reserves almost entirely.

In fact, I could only sense... ah, there it was—a faint flicker of magic. All the power I had left.

Yes, *rest*. That was what I needed.

With one final whisper, I let my eyes slide shut.



## BARREN



**L**ightning bolts cut through the sky, filling the air with electric energy that drowned out Kai's shrill pleas. "Breathing—remember your breathing!" His hands flew to Leander's shoulders, anchoring him to the sand. "You need to calm down!"

Kai hadn't hesitated before charging after Leander. He'd followed him to the edge of the ocean, grabbing hold of him before he could plunge headfirst into the violent tides.

And what had I done?

I'd stood here as though I were an outsider looking in. Even as the wind picked up and the waves grew more violent, threatening my home, the island I loved, and this life I'd built for myself, I'd done nothing to build or improve on the brotherly bond I knew we'd one day depend on daily.

I was about to lose everything I'd worked for, but no loss could compare to the grief of losing her. She'd been right there with me, in my grasp, and I'd failed to protect her. Inside me was an agony so crushing that I was certain my soul could never recover.

Leander let out a roar that opened up the sky, his emotions too far gone to listen to reason. His soul was as battered and torn as my own, and even without reaching out to feel what he was feeling, his emotions crashed into me in violent waves.

*She left me.*

His thoughts slipped into my mind like shards of glass, unbidden. I felt the pain of his greatest fear surfacing, as if it had been my own.

*I don't want to be alone.*

Then, as if something in him had cracked, the very air around us stilled,

and Leander dropped to his knees, letting out one final roar.

Kai caught him, and Leander's head dangled, listless, as the sand fell from the air.

"She... left," he whispered, his eyes growing distant as the clouds dispersed and gravity stabilized the waves. "She told me she would always come back."

"Leander, look at us," Kai threw back, his voice firm. Although Leander looked up, first at me and then at Kai, his normally bright eyes seemed to have dulled into an emotionless void.

"Bro, breathe with me," Kai urged. "In and out... Good. A few more."

Leander's chest shuddered violently with each labored breath.

"We'll get her back," Kai promised, trying to hide his own emotions. "Right, Barren? We'll do whatever it takes."

Kai's eyes darted anxiously between the clearing sky above and the stilling sand below. "She didn't leave you on purpose," he added, although I could sense his own panic rising. "You know she wouldn't. Remember the note? Laverne and the clams? She said she'd come back."

Then his arms shook around Leander as his anger resurfaced. "This... this is that dark spawn's doing."

It was true that the cecaelia had her, but Kai was overlooking one thing: Clairra had run to them willingly.

The meaning behind the drawings on the note she'd left for us became clearer—the hearts representing the cecaelia, creatures with four hearts, and the sea lion indicating that she was going to a place only accessible by Laverne.

"*Alhey*," I muttered, because a terrible realization hit me. *I'd* been the reason she'd left us in the first place.

Clairra knew the truth—and, without meaning to, I'd pushed her away with my thoughtless words. It was a misunderstanding I might never get the chance to undo.

"*No, I—I need time to figure out how to tell them.*"

Even now, I could hear the tremble in her voice. Despite Kai's belief that the cecaelia's magic was a trick, Clairra's emotions had sounded too raw to me to be anything but genuine.

Why had I ever mentioned my arm or brought up the Indian Ocean's superstitions?

Clairra and I had shared a special moment together when I'd taken her



down to the gates of Malkeevo. I'd felt bonded to her then, closer than I had ever felt to another—a feat I'd never thought possible, considering how carefully I had kept myself from tapping into her thoughts and emotions.

So, when she'd looked at my arm, a place I was more than self-conscious about, I wondered if, for the first time, perhaps another would be willing to share the pain this haunting memory held for me.

I'd thought maybe if my mate knew the story and accepted me as I was, the scars wouldn't be as painful.

Now, I might never get the chance to tell her I didn't care what she was, who else she loved, or where she'd come from.

But I knew with certainty that I couldn't bear to be without her. It was too late for that, our bond too strong, and our souls far too tethered.

If only I'd known how to convey my thoughts properly, then maybe she wouldn't have left us. But my words had begun spilling more freely when I was around her. And now, my opening up, my careless words, had led to this.

“Barren!” Kai called suddenly, holding Leander up by his shoulders. “Help me!” Leander appeared on the verge of fainting; his grief-stricken eyes unfocused.

I pushed forward, and when I got to them, Leander's mouth opened and closed like a voiceless fish, a hand clutched over where the trident lived inside his chest.

I'd witnessed my father struggle through similar attacks time and again. Calling on the trident's power was wearing on Leander, and his body had finally found its limit.

“We'll think of something, okay, man?” Kai assured him, his voice cracking as he nodded, first to Leander and then to me. “What if—” A myriad of thoughts played across Kai's face as he paused. “What if I knew where my father's trident was? The Trident of Creation. If we had the power to create...”

“No,” I said sternly, guilt burning through my chest. My mistake had caused this, and if anyone were to make this right, it was going to be me.

“Laverne knows where it is,” Kai argued, desperation shaking in his voice.

As if we weren't here with him at all, Leander's eyes slowly reopened to gaze up at the clearing sky. “Why would she leave us?” His words were a whisper, broken and desperate.

“It's possible he understands her in ways we can't.” It wasn't the message

he wanted, but it had to be delivered. It was all I could tell them without divulging Clairra's secrets entirely.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kai threw back at me, his tone harsher than I'd ever heard it.

Leander shook his head, his eyes closing as he leaned against Kai. "Yeah... Fuck that."

I didn't answer.

They weren't ready. Clairra knew it. Perhaps that was why she hadn't come back.

I knew the hatred the two of them had for the cecaelia well, but I was different from them in this regard. Even as a merfry, I refused to blame them for losing my arm and the crown. Lynn had been the one responsible for that.

She'd used the cecaelia, just as she used me now.

I hadn't told Clairra that much, because I hadn't thought she'd known what she truly was. Even when I brought her down to Malkeevo, and she couldn't see the gate for the spell that obscured it. She seemed unaware that it was because the gates had been enchanted to appear as a dark illusion for passing cecaelia. If I ever hoped to hold her in my arm again, I had to tell her the truth about how I felt regarding her kind.

And if I was going to reach her, I'd have to do the one thing I never thought I was capable of. But I'd do it—for Clairra's sake. For all of us.

There was one way I *could* reach her, no matter where she was. The price for that power would be extremely high, but I'd pay it.

To get my mate back, I would gladly put my body on the line.

I turned to leave, my attention fixing on where my sister's casino stood in the distance.

Kai's voice barely registered in my ears as he called, "Barren? Where are you going?"

"To take back what should have been mine."

# READY FOR MORE?

I hope you enjoyed diving into Cruel Tides! Thank you so much for reading. Ratings and reviews are always appreciated and are immensely helpful to authors!

**Can't wait to find out what happens next?** Book 3 is currently being published on [Kindle Vella](#) as I go, starting on Episode 136 of the serial version of Cursed Waters. Along with this early access look, enjoy exclusive polls and author notes after each new chapter. Once completed, Book 3 will release on Kindle and KU.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shana Brooke crafts humorous, steamy tales with happy endings to make her readers smile. She was born and raised on the sandy coast of North Carolina, where she lives today with her family and their cat Kyo, who (true to his name) is a bit of a jerk.

Find out more about her and her books at [www.shanabrooke.com](http://www.shanabrooke.com)

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