

JOCELYN MONTANA



FATE
PROMISED

Werewolves of Ulterra Book 2

FATE PROMISED

WEREWOLVES OF ULTERRA

BOOK TWO

JOCELYN MONTANA

H. DELANEY PUBLISHING, LLC

Copyright © 2023 by Jocelyn Montana

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction and is intended for adults only. Some scenes may contain explicit material.

Any names, businesses, places, or events used in this work are fictional. Any similarities to living or dead people, incidents, companies, products, or organizations are purely coincidental.

✿ Created with Vellum

Map design by S.J. Primrose

Cover design by Merel Pierce Designs

For everyone who likes a little monster in their man

CONTENTS

[Glossary](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Want More?](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Jocelyn Montana](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

GLOSSARY

Glossary of Terms

ala — An ancient being that can shift into a massive raven and wield large hail. Destructive and dangerous and guards the junction at the Shaking Mountain.

azhdaya — A two headed, wingless serpent. Lives on mountain tops and covets land. Tries to kill anyone that enters its territory.

bauk — An ogre like creature with tusks in the lower jaw and leathery skin. Smart and more difficult to kill than goblins. Like dark places and possessive over their hiding holes. Eat humans but more interested in feeding off those with magic. They keep them alive and drain them over and over to fuel their own brief bursts of magic. Can only be killed by a blow behind the knees, under the armpits, and under the ears.

brownie — Immortals about four feet tall that live in usually already occupied homes. If the owner of the home has offered them milk or other treats brownies love, they will usually willingly take care of the home and help those that live there.

Bodec Mountains — Jagged mountains in the northern section of the Kuls, outside the vae border.

cockatrice — Called the vultures of Peklo because they like to eat the dead. Resemble a cross between a rooster and lizard. Can fly and attack with their claws. About the size of a horse.

Coromesto — the main city of Trulo and magic is weaved openly into daily living.

crullock — A monster in Peklo that resembles a crab but about the size of a donkey.

Cursed (the) — All the immortals punished to leave Ulterra and live in Peklo forever.

Demi-Immortals — Non-immortals who live long lives (can be many many centuries).

Divoky Forest — The wild forest west of the Wide River.

dokkaebi — A clever variety of spawn that covets things like money and possessions. Resembles humans in appearance and will join villages to blend in.

Druk — Thunder dragon. An ancient line and an ancient word most don't remember or recognize.

enchanter — Can enchant objects, create draughts, and possibly influence humans and animals to do their bidding.

fenix demon — Demons with the power of scorch. Their society consists of two kinds of demon:

- mudri class—the intellectuals. During testing, they show a lot of skill controlling their scorch ability. Only the mudri rule as king and queen and only the mudri are on the Council.
- warrior class—Larger, and always with wings, they have great scorch power, but their control is usually much less. They are kept roaming their territory, keeping their enemies away.

frior — The vulk term for someone who is their ally or under their protection.

gloson — A swine-like beast standing ten feet high at the shoulder with a blue spine along its back and four eyes. The males have four tusks in the lower jaw.

goblin — Four-foot-tall spawn of the underworld with long hair. They like to live in the forest and prey upon unsuspecting passersby. Not usually very intelligent and competitive with other spawn.

heat (in) — The time when a female demi-immortal or immortal is fertile. It occurs rarely. A female must be in heat to conceive.

- *Vulk related note: Vulk can only get wolf peltwalkers, or zorzye (lightwielders) pregnant.

Herskala Academy — The school for all magic-wielders in Trulo kingdom.

hzievda — A star.

Immortals — Those whose lifespan can go on for eternity. Includes the vae, vulk, ancient gods, demons, and many others. If an immortal bonds with a non-immortal, their mate achieves immortality as well.

incubus — Male variety of demon who can gain more energy and power through sexual activity.

jedak — An amphibian resembling a massive frog with long vines on its head. It disguises itself by sinking into the mud of the bog so the vines look harmless, but then it preys on passersby.

junctions — The crossing places between Peklo and Ulterra. There are only a few known crossing places, and each is guarded. No one may exit Peklo unless they allow it.

kon — A large variety of horse with wider hooves to manage the treacherous Ryba Mountains where they are native.

Krol — King of the vulk. A krol wears golden armbands on their biceps and has enhanced senses and strength. They are able to walk between Ulterra and Peklo and into the realms of the afterlife.

Kuls — All the way to the east, it covers all the land east of the Wide River.

landvaettir — A guardian of a specific location, usually a portion of land. They remain tied to their location and cannot leave for as long as their bond with the spot exists.

leshak — Fifteen-foot-tall beings with an elk skull for a head and large elk antlers. They kill by consuming souls.

magicwielders — Usually humans, although on occasion a peltwalker is born with magical abilities. Almost always the gift is passed along genetically which has created strong magic

families and alliances. A human with this ability has a longer life span. Magicwielders gain their magic from the light of second sun of Ulterra. The light does not flow through them, they must tap into it, causing a chemical reaction that smells like sulfur.

There are three castes:

- sorcerer
- spellcaster
- enchanter

Necromancers are not their own separate caste, they are any magicwielder who has chosen to perform magic that taps into death.

mtwt — [Pronounced mahtoot]. A word in one of the ancient languages meaning both semen and venom.

necromancer — Dark magic practitioner with a connection to death.

Non-Immortals — Ulterrans who do not have eternal life, although some may have very long lifespans. Includes humans, magicwielders (long life span) and peltwalkers (long lifespan).

obol — A gold coin that makes up the main monetary system in Ulterra. It weighs 25 grams and shavings of gold can be combined to equal an obol when they weigh 25 grams.

Peklo — The underworld which resides below Ulterra. While physically below Ulterra, it is another realm and is separated by a barrier. Only set crossing points (junctions) allow crossing between Ulterra and Peklo, although the two realms sometimes shift against each other and pockets form which allows denizens of the underworld to break through.

peltwalker — A human looking species that can shift into an animal when they touch the specialized gifted pelt/feather of that animal. Some known clans are:

- lionwalkers
- wolfwalkers
- eaglewalkers

Piesok — The main city of Stok kingdom.

ravec — Giant insectoid creature that lives in Peklo and rarely leaves its dark holes. Spits bile to incapacitate its prey and pre-cook them.

Rohant — The eastern kingdom.

rut — When a male demi-immortal or immortal becomes overcome with desire. Eyes turn solidly black. A female in heat will often cause a rut response.

- *Vae related note: Vae males go into a rut when they are fertile. This is the only time the vae can conceive. An unmated vae must find a willing partner, or a battle, or he may die.

Ryba - A fishing village up in the north.

sorcerer — Innate magic users that can cast magic without using spells or a medium of any kind.

shuwt — The life essence of a person encompassing their soul, their personality, and their vitality. It can be freely bound to another person. Those who lived their lives in darkness, when they die, their shuwt roams the underworld. Others can ascend to the afterlife.

spawn — A group of creatures banned to the underworld that try to escape to prey upon humans. Refers to several different species — goblins, bauk, and dokkaebi.

spellcaster — Always have to use a spell or a medium like a crystal, rock or chalk diagram to cast magic.

Stok — The southern kingdom.

succubus — Female variety of demon who can gain more energy and power through sexual activity.

thrall — A person who has given away their shuw't to another and is in servitude to them.

Trulo — The western kingdom.

Uit — Vulk swear word.

Uterra — The upperworld consisting of one large landmass, several islands, and a surrounding sea.

vae — A supernatural species that lives in the Kuls, looks mostly human, and has magic abilities.

vedogon — A dangerous and rare fish that is difficult to catch and has lethal spines along its back.

vodnik — Water demon. Enemy of the fenix demon.

Vieska — The smallest village inside Rohant.

vulk — Werewolves. Current pack members are:

1. Hans
2. Juri
3. Kyril
4. Ayren
5. Thane
6. Danyr (Dan)
7. Troyan (Troy)
8. Blazh
9. Finn

Wailing Trail — The only known way in and out of Rohant. A treacherous path through the mountains.

wyrdstaaves — The practice of runic magic

wyvern — Dragon-like serpent with the ability to fly.

zmey — Sea-dragon.

zorzye — A species of human-looking supernatural beings with the ability to wield light.

Zuby Mountains — The high mountains of the southern Kuls.

Map of Ulterra



THE EMPTY CASKET was set on fire. It lay on a roughhewn raft that was crafted earlier and loaded with marsh grass and kindling to make the pyre, and now, a few of the village elders pushed it into the sea. Juri glanced at the flames once, then turned his attention to the girl clutching her father's hand. Even from here, he could see Triska needed her father to put his arm around her, but he didn't—he only stared into the ocean.

If Juri was next to her, he would brush his arm against hers. Let her know she wasn't alone because Triska liked snuggling close to people. Now that they were ten, he didn't hug her in public anymore, but he still let her sit nestled beside him, even if the other boys at school teased him about being friends with a girl.

Juri gazed at the casket again. A burial at sea wasn't common in the village, but since the sea had taken Triska's mother, the village elders thought it fitting.

"Come on, Juri," his mother said. "We'll go down and say a few words to Triska and her father."

He swallowed. "What do I say?"

His mother rubbed his hair the way he liked. "You don't have to say anything. Just walking over will let Triska know you're here for her. Later, you can find her before we leave for our trip and say goodbye."

His stomach roiled. When he'd first learned he and his ma were going to visit her home clan up north, he hadn't slept for

days because he couldn't wait to leave. Maybe up there his ma would give in and let him shoot a bow and arrow—heck, other ten-year-olds in Ryba had been shooting for years. But as the day for leaving grew closer, he'd caught his ma staring into space, her eyes watery and sad and he'd grown suspicious about their trip.

His mother loved her old clan up north. She'd even loved the long dark winters. Something was off.

Then Triska's mother died, and he didn't want to leave Triska behind. Alone.

“When are we coming back to Ryba? It will help her feel better if she knows.” Maybe his ma would finally answer the question if he made it seem like Triska needed to know.

Ma's small smile didn't reach her eyes. Was she sad because they were at a funeral? Or because of the question? “Our visit will be for a while.” He'd sprung this question on her loads of times and always got the same answer.

He growled low in his throat. Recently he'd learned he could make the noise, and he'd practiced ever since. It was almost perfect. He could growl in an alarming and scary way or as more of a warning. So far, he'd only practiced on seagulls, but soon he'd try the fishmonger's cat.

He'd asked the peltwalkers who shifted into wolves—wolfwalkers—and he was the only one who could do it. Even his mother couldn't make the noise. At least it was something he could do that the others couldn't. There were five wolfwalkers in his class, and he was the only one who hadn't connected with his wolf form yet.

His mother was a wolfwalker, so he should be too. And she'd said she got her pelt when she was nine. So why didn't he have his pelt yet?

Ma said that when a peltwalker reached a certain age, they were gifted with the bit of pelt that would allow them to take their animal form. She was skimpy with the details of how he'd get his pelt, though. Supposedly it was some kind of mystical experience, and it couldn't be described.

He kicked at a patch of dirt as he trudged up to Triska. Heck, Ma could at least try to describe it.

A line had formed, the entire village trying to pay their respects to Triska's dad. Juri's eyes narrowed as he stared at Mr. Sekelsky. Triska always got the highest marks in school; last year, she'd won the writing contest, beating even the sixth- and seventh-year students. Juri was there when Triska ran up to her father and told him. All he'd done was nod once. Juri had wondered how much trouble he'd get in if he'd kicked Triska's father in the shins—hard—but Triska said her father was often distracted, and it was fine. From that moment on, he didn't like Triska's dad.

Seeing her upset always made him want to claw at everything and everyone around her until whatever made her upset, was gone. Forever. His hands balled into fists. Right now, he wanted to help her, but he didn't know how.

And he'd have to leave tomorrow.

When he stood in front of Triska, the worry lines between her eyebrows faded. His mother spoke to Triska's father, and Juri leaned forward. "Sneak out to the cove after dusk," he whispered.

She glanced up at her father. "I don't know if I can."

"You have to. It's our last chance to talk before I leave." He glanced up at Ma. "I don't know when I'll be back."

Her lower lip trembled.

After all his excitement about the trip, he didn't want to go. Triska needed *him*, not her father, who'd just go out fishing. He let his hand brush against hers. "It'll be all right."

His mother put her arm on Juri's shoulder and nudged him to keep walking. "The cove," he whispered furiously. Triska gave him a tiny nod.

When he reached Triska's dad, he wanted to bare his teeth, but making faces would probably make Ma yell at him for an hour. A frequent occurrence even though he tried to avoid it. His eyes narrowed a fraction, and he nodded, then glanced

pointedly at Triska. *Pay attention to her.* Triska's father ignored him and greeted the person next in line.

As they walked back to their house, away from the main part of town and set back near the forest, Juri slipped away from his mother and trotted back toward the market. He had something he needed to get before he met Triska.

AS NIGHT SETTLED IN, Juri leaned against the tree trunk of the great oak by the shore in the small cove near town, watching the reflection of the two moons in the ocean spread below him. Waves crashed against the beach, the surf raging the way it did before a storm rolled in. The moons appeared to be dancing, wobbling across the sea. It was the night of the harvest moons, making the tide rise higher, and the sea roil. This was their place.

Where was Triska?

Sneaking out of his house was easy. After years of battling to keep him in bed all night, last month Ma had relented and now he was allowed to roam until they doused the gas lamps at midnight.

A twig snapped, and Juri straightened. Triska trudged up the dune, her shoulders slumped and her head down. He'd always been a lot taller than her. He liked to rub it in her face how fast he grew, but tonight she looked smaller. Frail.

"Your old man try to keep you in?"

She shook her head. "No, but there were a lot of people in the house, baking bread and leaving food. I had to wait until no one was looking to duck out the back."

He flung himself down on the sand and patted the ground next to him. "Come sit."

Triska frowned. "It's high tide, what if a big wave comes? The sea will drag me in."

Juri studied her. She loved the ocean, and she'd never worried about it before. Besides, the tide never reached this high. "I'll keep you safe."

After a moment, she nodded. She settled next to him and sidled close until she pressed against his side. His stomach did a funny little flip. “How are you doing?” His voice came out strange—soft in a way he’d never spoken before.

She shrugged and leaned against him.

They sat like that for a long time, Triska staring at the ocean, her eyes wet. Ma was right; he didn’t have to say anything. All he needed to do was sit beside her for as long as she wanted him to.

Triska sniffled. “I should probably head back.”

“I wanted to give you something before I leave.” Juri reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring he’d had the blacksmith fashion out of a nail for a horseshoe. He’d had to sweet talk the smithy for ten minutes, and then sweep the shop and wash away the seagull crap from his stoop as payment.

Seagulls were the worst.

Her eyes were big and blue as she stared up at him. There were so many things he wanted to say, but the words seemed all tangled up. He cleared his throat. “When we’re grown, things will be different.”

She nodded.

He handed the ring to Triska, and their fingers touched. “I promise when we’re old enough, I’m going to marry you.”

Triska slid the ring onto her middle finger, her long lashes lowering as she examined it. She made a soft sighing sound. “I love this ring.”

A sense of everything being ... right ... slid over him, warm and comforting. “I won’t be away long.” The words seemed to come from somewhere else, somewhere deep inside him. “I promise I’ll always be here to protect you.”

Her head snapped up. “You need protection, too. I pull you out of the water every time you capsize my skiff.”

He ruffled his hair. “Well ... boats don’t like me. That’s not protection, you’re just helping.”

Her mouth puckered in a way he knew meant she was about to argue. “What about the time you were pretending to slay a dragon near the stables, but you were only slashing around with a stick near the smithy’s mean donkey, and I pulled you back right before it kicked you in the head.”

“Okay, two times you’ve *helped*—”

“No, what about the time—”

“Fine!” He crossed his arms and turned back to the ocean.

Triska nudged him with her shoulder. “I agree to marry you.”

He hadn’t realized it was a question. “Oh. That’s good.”

A shimmery golden light filled the overlook. Juri shot to his feet and grabbed Triska, tucking her behind him.

She clutched his waist and peeked around his arm. “What is it?”

A golden symbol hung in the air, a circle with a wavy line moving horizontally across its middle. Juri swiped at it, and his hand passed right through, but the symbol didn’t go away. “Dunno.”



It began spinning, then split in two and shot toward him and Triska. One beam of light hit him square in the chest, and the other hit her. He yelped, but it didn’t hurt. It was warm. Pleasant.

A faint whiff of blackthorn blossom filled the air. In May, these hills filled with the white flowers of the thorny shrub, declaring spring had arrived. But May passed a long time ago.

Triska rubbed her chest. “Gads, what was that?”

Juri peeked down the front of his shirt. A perfect replica of the symbol in the air was tattooed in gold on his chest. “I’m hit! That thing branded me.”

She rubbed her chest but didn’t look down her own shirt. “Maybe it marked me, too. It’s all ... warm here. Is this magic?”

“Must be.” He scanned the cove. If there was magic, there must be a magicwielder nearby, but the beach stood quiet, the only movement the soft sway of the dune grass. “Let’s get out of here.”

They raced back into town, and he aimed for the stable next to the tavern. Warm and quiet, they often snuck away here. He liked climbing the rafters, and he’d swing around and tell Triska stories, trying to make her laugh so hard she fell over.

When they reached the main road, they slowed, and Triska rubbed her chest again, the worry lines back on her brow. “What was that? Will we get in trouble? Is something going to happen to us?”

He puffed his own chest out. “Nah. I told you. I’ll protect you.” A pleasant tingle spread from his heart. “And I’m coming back real soon to see you. Don’t worry.”

“I’ll write you.” Her eyes narrowed. “You write me back.”

He winced. “Yeah, yeah.” She knew how much he hated making his letters. Pencils always seemed strange in his hand. He couldn’t make the pretty loops and neat letters Triska did.

Before they could duck inside the stable, a group of older women saw Triska and made a beeline straight for them. The one in front, Mags, put her arm around Triska. “What are you two doing out here? Come on, dear, I’ll bring you home. Your father must be looking for you.”

Triska shot him a quick look, held up her ring again and smiled for the first time. “I’ll see you soon. I hope.”

He nodded and watched her walk away. He’d be back soon. She needed him.

PRESENT DAY

JURI DROPPED TO ONE KNEE, and a crunch rippled through the silence. His lip curled up his eyetooth. Rat bones. He turned all sorts of meat into jerky but didn't touch rat. Arched, faded brick surrounded him without a torch or gas lamp to cast light along the tunnel of the long-abandoned sewers. The air was stuffy and humid even though outside, with winter approaching, the wind blew crisp across this part of Ulterra.

Kyril, Juri's pack brother, drew near, his hind claws scuffing along the silty floor. "Admit it, you lost his trail down here. He probably scurried down one of the narrow passages."

While the sewers of Coromesto no longer collected waste, rainwater washed through the complex brick tunnels, spreading bits of dirt and flotsam along the floor where fungi and other plants scratched out a sunless living.

Juri studied the blackening brittlegill mushrooms at his feet. "Sod off, I didn't lose him. He passed this way about thirteen minutes ago."

Kyril chuffed. "Now you're being a wiseass. You can't know that."

Juri pointed. "This mushroom is red. Well ... it would be red in the light." A vulk's vision at night was almost as clear as during the day. Colors turned to shades of gray in the dark. "Brittlegill turns red about thirteen minutes after it's cut or stepped on. After fifteen minutes, it turns black. This was stepped on, but it isn't black yet."

Kyril leaned forward and studied the fungus. "Huh."

Juri stood. Even at his full height of almost eight feet, his ears didn't touch the top of the tunnel. "Odd it's growing down here. They like beech trees, usually." Long forgotten by those who walked the city above, the old sewers lay under the roads of Coromesto, providing vermin with a safe place to tread, and others, vulk like him—the werewolves of Ulterra—access to

pad through the city without being seen by the humans and magicwielders above.

He'd thought only the vulk remembered these tunnels. He was wrong.

A faint whiff of sulfur, almost too faint to scent over the stale, chalky odor of the sewers, threaded along a tiny current of air ahead of them. "I want to catch him before he leaves the sewers, and we're near the large exit by the ocean. Let's move."

Both vulk sprang forward, padding silently along the brick and grit. No non-immortal—including the magicwielder they hunted—could outrun a vulk, and based on the tracks in the dirt, this magicwielder was dragging his right foot slightly. A slight limp, but one that would be noticeable when he walked and was probably slowing him down.

As they neared the western exit that lay hidden underneath the docks, fresher air greeted them, and a flickering blaze of light. Lanterns, or maybe torches.

He inhaled deeply. Not torches. Torches were wrapped in pitch, and the smoke burned more acrid. This was a flame burning on a wick.

He inhaled again. *Two wicks*. One tallow and one beeswax. A third inhale brought him a mix of sulfur and soap. Someone else had entered the sewers.

Juri gestured to Kyril, and they both slowed. Voices floated down the tunnel, and the scent of sulfur increased. The magicwielders were either using active magic now or they had recently. Why? Why down here?

"You fool," a man's voice hissed. "You requested a meeting and then walked down from the east entrance? Anyone could have seen you."

"I know what I'm doing," answered another man, his voice nasal.

The tunnel Juri and Kyril followed joined with two others, forming a larger junction like a small room, which spilled out down a slight slope to the beach exit of the sewer. This was

how the waste and runoff had been removed in older days. After the magicwielders took over the city, they managed every element with magic instead. As the vulk drew closer, they crouched, and Juri eased forward to see around the bend into the open space.

Shadows flickered over two men in black cloaks. Past them, the exit showed a slash of the beach, silvery in the moonlight. One man had the hood of his cloak pulled up over his face, keeping it hidden, but along his robe on the left side of his chest was a vivid red handprint, as if someone had clutched at the man's heart. It shone slick and shiny—perhaps it was attached by magic rather than embroidered.

The other wore his hood pushed back, and his cloak had no embellishments. He stood with one shoulder an inch or two higher than the other, making him appear to lean on a stick, but he held none; there was only a pack at the floor at his feet, the top flap open. A slivery scar slashed downward from his brow, bisecting one eye, before disappearing into the man's full beard. A scar left from powerful magic.

Hoyt. The magicwielder he'd tracked over the past month.

Calling him a magicwielder was a stretch. Hoyt was a necromancer. Outcasts with little magic, necromancers clung to each other, setting up nests in hidden places like the sewers. The dregs of magical society.

This was the first time he'd actually laid eyes on Hoyt. All he knew about Hoyt's appearance was he had a thin, goat-like beard centered on his chin, and he'd almost lost his life in a magic attack. However, now his beard filled his entire lower face. Perhaps to hide the recent scar that proved the man standing in the sewer was the one they sought. It wasn't working.

“What are we waiting for?” Kyril whispered, speaking in Vulk. Kyril always spoke Vulk unless forced to use the common tongue. “It's him. Let's tear his head off and get out of here.”

Juri's hackles rose. Something wasn't quite ... right. Over the past month, he'd tracked Hoyt from the kingdom of

Rohant, in central Ulterra, through the Divoky Forest, then narrowed in on him here, in Coromesto, the largest city in Ulterra, perched like a jewel along the coast of Trulo kingdom. He didn't care much for cities, and Coromesto was the worst. It reminded him of a grand dame, a matriarch with an iron fist, sitting on a throne with all her jewels on display, but underneath she was cold. Cruel.

Jewels from a distance, anyway. The city sparkled. Since it was the seat of the magicwielders, their magic whisked along roads and through houses, supplying never-ending light on the lamp posts and horseless carriages driving along white, perfectly paved roads. However, beyond the superficial glitz, it was a divided city with humans on one side and magicwielders on the other, all circling around Herskala Academy, the magic school.

“Why did he stop here? Why now?” Juri whispered. The necromancer had evaded him for a month. Not an easy feat since Juri was a tracker—the only vulk in the pack with extra heightened senses. Someone who'd avoided a vulk for the past month would know better than to enter a tunnel with limited ways to get away.

He wasn't worried about magic—magic bounced off all vulk—but something still seemed off.

The necromancer shouldn't have known the vulk chased him, so he shouldn't have worked his way through Ulterra in hiding. After attacking their Alpha a year ago, the vulk thought the necromancer dead until a couple weeks ago. Yet Hoyt acted like one on the run.

Except for tonight. He lingered in the sewers tonight, and now he'd stopped for a chat?

“Who cares?” Kyril muttered. “Winter's coming, and I don't feel like trudging in snow to get back to the pack. Let's take care of this and go.”

“Hans wants Hoyt alive to question him. We'll be slow getting back regardless because we'll be dragging the necromancer with us.” Their Alpha, Hans, had questions about the attack on Hans that involved Hoyt last year. Hans would

have joined them to track Hoyt himself if his mate Briony hadn't recently given birth to twins.

Kyril cursed. Even though they both spoke so quietly it wasn't even a whisper, somehow Kyril's salty language made it seem like he raged loudly. Juri bit back a smile.

Kyril should have known Hans would take care of Hoyt himself. When Hoyt attacked Hans and kidnapped his mate Briony for a spell he was casting, the necromancer's days were numbered.

The hooded man sneered. "You have five minutes of my time before I leave." The hood twitched as if the man tilted his head. "How did you get that scar? I thought Morana's followers were invincible? Dabbling with magic far beyond anything the rest of us could imagine." His laughter was cold and brittle. "Word got round you brought her back from the underworld." He waved his hand. "Where is she? Why hasn't she taken over Ulterra and granted you unlimited power?"

Hoyt steepled his fingers. "You know, she told me you asked to join our number, but she refused you."

The other man drew back. "Lies. The Dark Lady always lied."

"Perhaps. She had her secrets." The two men lapsed into silence, Hoyt glaring. Finally, Hoyt shifted. "I no longer follow the Dark Lady."

Next to Juri, Kyril snorted. "He left out the part where she left him for dead and gave him that nice scar." Morana was an evil sorcerer the vulk defeated in battle last year. When Hoyt helped raise her from the underworld, she'd blasted him across a cave, a blow that should have killed him.

The hooded man crossed his arms, and a ring caught the light, winking on the middle finger of his right hand. Emblazoned with family crests, magicwielders used large, gold signet rings to stamp the wax on their letters. The man was too far away for Juri to make out the ring's design. "You said you had magic information to share. You have two minutes left."

Hoyt reached down into his knapsack and withdrew a large pewter bowl. He placed its base on the sewer floor and retrieved a small flask filled with liquid. He poured it into the bowl.

The hooded man scoffed. “A scrying bowl? Really? You think to impress me with this?”

Hoyt ignored him. He waved his hand, and a plume of green smoke drifted from the bowl’s surface. The water swirled, and an image appeared of a room with a wide window revealing desolate mountains and windswept, reddish hills. Juri squinted, studying it. He’d traveled most of Ulterra, and this wasn’t familiar, but from his vantage point, it was tough to make out the details.

“Touch it.”

The hooded man reached for the bowl, the ring glistening in the lantern light. His fingers dipped into the water.

A bright flash lit up the sewer.

Green smoke billowed out, circling the man. He screamed and jerked, but his hand remained stuck inside the scrying bowl.

Hoyt circled the man, who stopped screaming but remained jerking, trying to twist away. “Yes, the first few times aren’t pleasant, but you get used to it.”

“What is this?” the hooded man asked, his voice strained.

Hoyt reached out and touched the other man, exactly over the scarlet palm print on his chest. The smoke darkened in color and swirled around Hoyt, who raised his head and *breathed it in*. The other man stumbled, swinging his free arm to push Hoyt away, but it flailed uselessly as if drained of all strength, barely skimming Hoyt.

When Hoyt absorbed the last of the smoke, he spoke a few words in the arcane tongue, the language of magicwielders, and the hooded man snatched his hand from the scrying bowl. He slumped back against the wall of the sewer, clutching his raw and reddened hand to his chest. “What did you do?”

“You’ll be all right. I didn’t take too much. You’re lucky I need something from you, or I could have drained you completely, leaving you helpless on the floor for the rats.” Hoyt smiled his thin-lipped smile. “It’s temporary—you’ll feel all right in a few hours. I figured this would be much more effective for my little presentation.”

Juri frowned. What had Hoyt done? How was that possible?

The other man massaged his chest, and his gasps for breath filled the tunnel. “How? How did you do this?”

“Morana needed me to release her from Peklo because Peklo has no suns. Which means she had no access to the normal source of her magic.”

Juri avoided magicwielders, but he knew their magic came from the light of the smaller, second sun, which didn’t appear in Peklo—the underworld.

“She found another source, and she fed me that power so I could conduct my spells for her,” Hoyt continued.

The other man remained crumpled against the wall, and Hoyt appeared the larger of the two now. “Shuwt?”

Hoyt nodded. “That’s right.”

Juri frowned. What was shuwt?

“You dared drain me?” the hooded man asked. “I’ll have no magic for the rest of the night.”

Hoyt shrugged. “I needed to prove my capabilities. Guess you better stay on the human side of town tonight.”

A brief silence filled the sewer until the hooded man said, “We’ve tried to figure out how to tap into its power for centuries, and everything has failed. Tell me how you did this.” The man’s voice had changed from arrogant and hissing to almost worshipful.

Juri turned to Kyril. “Hoyt just zapped this asshole, and he doesn’t care. All he wants is to learn how to do it himself.”

Hoyt shifted his weight and stood taller. “Morana fed me bits of power, and I knew it was a different source. More powerful and more difficult to wield. But everything she fed me was temporary, and it had to come through her. I couldn’t access it on my own.”

He pointed at the bowl. “But I could access this bowl whenever I wanted, and it showed me ... many things.” His voice dropped to almost a whisper. One dripping with a tinge of lust. Or reverence.

“It showed you how to access shuwt?”

Hoyt shook his head. “Not exactly. It showed me where to find something much better.” He reached into his robes and revealed a leather-bound book, the ends of the paper rough from being cut unevenly.

“A moldy old book?”

“This is Herskala’s grimoire.”

The other man inhaled sharply. “Impossible. Let me see it. I don’t believe you.”

Juri frowned. Herskala? The magicwielder died centuries ago, and while there were legends about the strength of his magic and his role in the Deciding War, there was never anything said about a grimoire. Most of the tales were centered on him founding the magicwielder academy that now bore his name.

Hoyt smiled. “Oh, it’s real. And it’s less a book of spells and more a book charting his magical inquiries. Of course, he wrote in code mostly, so it’s taking me some time to get through it. But his most intense field of study was shuwt. And he knew the one place in Ulterra where he could gain all the power he wanted.”

“I want to see what it says,” the other man said.

Even from where Juri stood, he could tell things had suddenly shifted between the two men. The hooded man’s voice had lost its decisive edge, and Hoyt seemed larger in the sewer tunnel. Hoyt smiled. “After you help me with the first step.”

“Which is?”

Hoyt waved his hand, and the scrying bowl flickered a different image, this time of a forest and a town. The image moved a little slower, and a lighthouse glimmered from amid an outcropping of rock. Ice dripped down Juri’s spine. He knew that lighthouse well.

The hooded man drew himself up to stand. “What is this? Why are you showing me this?”

Kyril nudged Juri with his shoulder. “These magicwielders are barmy. You take Hoyt, I’ll take the other one.”

Juri jerked his chin to the right. “There’s a small, second exit down to the water that way. Duck around and cut them off near their exit. Wait for my howl, and we’ll close in. I don’t want them getting away.”

Kyril nodded, then slunk away without a sound.

The hooded man peered into the bowl. “What is your plan?”

It felt like the sewer held its breath, the image in the water expanding and lifting into the air. A coast—a *familiar coast*—and a wide, sweeping bay. Out in the bay, a land mass emerged from beneath the waves. Hoyt pointed. “I need to raise the vanishing isle.”

Kyril was right; the necromancer was out of his wits. The vanishing isle hadn’t shown up in Ulterra for many long years. Not in Juri’s lifetime, anyway. It was a floating island said to travel between realms. Besides, it wouldn’t matter if he raised the isle. When it appeared in Ulterra, no one could ever reach it—it lay wreathed in mist, a land of legend.

There was a long pause. “The Dark Cabal has power, but not that kind of power,” the hooded man said. “Why bother? It belongs to a realm all its own. It has nothing to offer.”

“No? You know the stories about the sorcerers who lived there in the older age. Their power was limitless.” He tapped his book. “And Herskala did too. He believed he was related to them. Where do you think all that power came from?”

A sharp inhale. “They knew how to channel shuwt?”

“Yes. The vanishing isle can grant anyone the power to access it if they know the incantation.”

A long silence filled the sewer.

The image in the smoke twisted. It centered back on the village, viewing it as if from above. People walked along the street, including one figure he’d know anywhere, even through the lens of a scrying bowl. Juri’s claws lashed out to their full six inches. *Ryba. Triska.*

It was time to end this necromancer meeting, but Kyril hadn’t had enough time to get in place at the exit. He clenched his jaw and waited.

“And you know how to perform this incantation? How we all can do this?” the hooded man asked.

Hoyt’s lips twisted, and he shifted his weight. “The grimoire is revealing how. I need to get onto the island to finish deciphering it. That’s why we need to go here,” he pointed at the town in the bowl, “and call forth the island. With your help, I can magnify the spell I used on you. Using the entire town, we’ll have enough power to bring the island here.”

Ryba. Hoyt wanted to go to Ryba.

Juri remained frozen for a beat. Hoyt wanted to touch *his* town? His vision turned crimson. He roared and launched forward.

Hoyt whirled to face him. The necromancer chanted arcane words, and a ball of green magic appeared in his palm. But instead of hurling it at Juri, Hoyt *blew into it.*

It turned to smoke and drifted in a glittering cloud of green, hitting Juri full in the face with a sickly stench, like a flower gone to rot. His lip curled, and he gagged.

His limbs gave out. Head swimming, he tried to jump, to race the last few feet to sink his claws into Hoyt, but his legs wouldn’t hold him, and he remained slumped on the ground.

Hoyt cackled. “The grimoire discusses the vulk, too. Of course, Morana was also obsessed with them, but everything she tried was wrong. Herskala, it appears, was not wrong.”

Juri scrambled to stand, but his claws skated across the brick uselessly.

Hoyt’s lips twisted into a smile. “I can’t beat a vulk in strength, and hurling magic at you just bounces off. But you vulk *do* have weaknesses. I discovered the first back in the cave last year. Since then, I’ve researched others.”

The hooded man stood frozen near the exit. An exit Kyril hadn’t reached yet. “But they’re impervious to magic.”

The overwhelming need to sleep, to close his eyes, flooded through Juri. He fought against it. Warning bells screamed in his head. *He’d threatened Ryba. Triska.* Vulk destroyed all threats.

“As you can see,” Hoyt pointed at Juri, “they aren’t. At least, sometimes they aren’t. I hexed one last year—the first time I’ve seen magic work on a vulk—and tonight, my magic worked again. But I haven’t quite figured out why the vulk are vulnerable at times. The part in the grimoire about the vulk is ... difficult to decipher.”

Juri gritted his teeth. Anger surged hot and viscous, and his fingers twitched. He clawed against whatever magic had stolen his strength from him, fighting to regain control.

The hooded man sauntered over, and the tip of a nose and thin lips peeked out from under the hood. “We can’t kill a vulk without a silver blade.”

“All we need is to keep them out of our way. Injure this one badly enough, and the pack will swarm here in Coromesto. And we’ll be far away.”

Juri’s throat flexed; he couldn’t even snarl. He struggled and managed a swallow. The magic holding him relaxed another fraction. His clawed toes curled. Whatever spell he’d breathed in wasn’t holding. All he needed was to howl. One deep inhale.

The image of Triska walking along the streets of Ryba flashed in front of him. He needed to make sure she remained safe. In one motion, Juri jerked his head up, drew in a great breath, and howled. The sound reverberated through the sewers. Rats squeaked in fear and scurried away.

There was a soft thump as Kyril leaped onto the beach and stood at the sewer exit. He roared and lunged forward.

Hoyt swore and waved his hand, but the puff of green smoke didn't stop Kyril. He charged right through. Hoyt screamed arcane words, and the air churned into a dark swirling mass—a portal.

Juri summoned all his strength and lurched forward, his legs barely holding him. He smashed into the necromancer, hurling him to the ground. The necromancer screamed and rolled free, leaping to his feet. Juri still couldn't school his limbs to obey as he strained forward. He swung his arms, his claws trailing down Hoyt's calf, but the necromancer grabbed his scrying bowl and jumped into the still-swirling portal, the hooded man at his side.

The portal snapped closed behind them.

Juri gasped for breath and sagged to the floor. He'd failed.

Kyril grasped his wrist, tugging to get Juri to his feet. "What the shit is wrong with you?" But Juri's legs wouldn't support him.

"He ... sprayed some kind of magic. I dunno." The words came out sluggish and slow, his throat still not working right.

Kyril leaned forward and sniffed, then sneezed. "All right." Still holding Juri's wrist, he dragged Juri out the sewer, over the strip of beach, the sand scratching along his side, and hauled him into the water.

"Hey, what are you—"

Kyril pulled him all the way in. Icy water closed over Juri's head, so sudden his breath caught in his lungs. But the fogginess cleared. He swung his feet down and stood in the waist high water. He shook himself and bared his teeth. "You're an asshole. I could barely move, what if I drowned?"

“Worked, didn’t it? What the *uit* just happened? What kind of magic was that?”

Juri shook his head. “I don’t know. It was some kind of sniffable magic, but it didn’t bother you, only me.”

Juri paced along the beach, seaweed squishing underfoot. Hoyt peering at the image of Ryba kept replaying in his head. The one where Triska walked along the sleepy road. “We need to go.” He turned to the north.

“What? Where?”

Juri’s hands fisted, his claws still out an inch, nicking his palms. Hot blood welled up. “Ryba. They’re going to Ryba.”

TRISKA SCANNED the grassy field on either side of the road leading into town and pulled her sou-wester hat more firmly down on her head. With the crowd too large to gather in Ryba's small dockside market, this was the only place in town with enough room to hold the entire village and the visitors.

Dribs and drabs of the fence that once penned in the mayor's prized horses remained, even though years ago the mayor moved them to higher ground so he could cut this field for salt marsh hay. There was enough room for people to walk easily from the road to gather in a half-circle around the newly erected stage in the middle of the field. A string quartet played the town song, the energetic notes punching through the air.

Well, the song the mayor was touting as the town song. Considering one line was, "I return to your loving bosom over and over," Triska was certain the song was originally a romantic ballad.

Standing in the middle of the stage, the mayor rocked back and forth on his heels, apparently not too bothered at having his hay destroyed. A lean man, he stood with one hand stuffed in the pocket of his vest, fiddling with his pocket watch as he was apt to do when excited. Or soused.

A fog blurred the woods and the homes on the outskirts of town, but its tendrils didn't extend into the field. This wasn't a fog that burned off as the sun rose, like most did; instead, it remained as the sun reached its zenith. It was a fog that rolled so thick a sailor couldn't see their hand waving in front of their face. One spelling doom if they couldn't hear the

lighthouse bell tolling a deep note to guide sailors safely to shore.

A brief slap of wind gusted across her face as an albatross flapped its expansive wings and landed rather ungracefully next to her, bobbing his head up and down. “Hi, Al.” Triska put the mug of coffee she held down on the ground and fished out a chunk of hardtack from her pocket.

A woman walking by with her son gasped and stared. Triska smiled. She supposed a three-foot-tall bird was a bit intimidating.

She tossed Al the hardtack, and he snagged it out of the air. Al spread his wings their full eleven feet as if to show off, and the woman yelped and scuttled away, clutching her son’s hand.

They definitely weren’t from Ryba. Everyone in town loved Al and knew albatrosses were good luck. Although Triska was worried about Al. It had been three years since she’d found him as an injured fledgling, and since then, he’d become as much a Ryban as anyone else—hanging around town chasing the seagulls away from his patch of boardwalk—but so far, Al hadn’t gone to find his kind.

Al brayed a short staccato caw and bobbed his head again.

“Sorry, that’s it for today, and not many oysters for you this week either, I’m afraid, it’s festival time, and I’m not working.”

With a scolding chatter, Al launched himself back into the air and took off.

Triska grabbed her coffee and wove through the crowd, scanning for the man wearing the brown sou-wester hat. It matched the one she wore, except her father’s had a small tear in the brim from where he’d once snared it on a fishing hook. Few other fishermen and women wore their fishing hats today since everyone remained landside for the week of the Autumn Festival, but she’d put hers on out of habit and knew her father had, too. He never went without his hat.

She found him near the front and elbowed her way to his side, the steaming mug of coffee in her hand sloshing and

burning her palm. When she reached him, she handed it over. “Here. When I stopped by yesterday, I saw you still haven’t gotten more coffee. I’ll pick you up some today. I brewed it strong, the way you like it.”

He grunted but plucked it from her, taking a sip. That meant he was pleased.

“I stopped at the house this morning and put your dinner in the icebox. I cooked up something new last night, a fish pie recipe Cleary down in the bakery said—”

“Probably eat at the tavern tonight. We’re all heading for a pint after this nonsense is over.” He nodded toward the make-shift stage and the mayor. “Our festival was just fine before he became mayor. Now we have strangers taking over the town and the streets lined with flowers. It’s butter on bacon. Too much.” Last year the old mayor retired, and only one person, Archibald Burr, stepped up for the role in his place. Ever since, he’d become obsessed with making Ryba a tourist destination, and judging by the overcrowded inn, he’d brought a lot of visitors this week. She disagreed with her father on one particular though; she didn’t think it was too extravagant to have the streets lined with sunflowers.

She glanced at the tourists. Were they peltwalkers? Magicwielders? Humans? It was impossible to tell at first glance, and Ryba was one of the few places where all the different non-immortals lived and mingled.

“Share the fish pie with Emil when he comes tomorrow.” Her father took another sip. “I’m going to have him stay at the house with me. The inn’s full.”

She inwardly groaned. Emil was an eagle peltwalker—eaglewalker—from the clan of Hork, and he and her father had united their fleets to set up a new trade route. So far, it had proven quite lucrative. Emil was handsome with a quick wit, and when he sailed to Ryba, he always asked Triska out for a meal. She’d gotten the impression he was interested in uniting more than his fleet, but so far, he hadn’t pushed their relationship past a few meals in the tavern.

“That’s fine.” Although it wasn’t. In Ryba, having her loner father allow Emil to stay at his home would signal to the busybodies that her father supported Emil’s courtship, and they’d consider her married soon. They’d been after her to marry for years.

She sniffed. She was only one hundred and eighty-seven; there was no reason to hurry things along. Magicwielders and peltwalkers lived long lives—and she had a touch of peltwalker blood on her father’s side. It was like she was still in her twenties, and her father barely appeared over forty years old, a trim, powerful man with only a few streaks of gray at his temples, yet he was in his third century.

Her father shot her a quick look, the corner of his mouth upturned. “I know that tone. You’re not pleased.”

“He asked me about staying at my house, but I only have the one bedroom. And I don’t want the gossip.” Imagine sharing her private cottage and its single bedroom with someone she hadn’t gotten to know well yet? She’d never let anyone spend the night, kicking any past lovers—which did not include Emil yet—out after any romantic interludes so she could sleep alone. The way she liked it.

He pulled his hat off and scratched his brow. “He’ll learn you’re not interested soon enough.”

A familiar ache strummed in her chest, and she wrapped her arms around herself. Once, she’d wanted a mate and a family more than anything. But her father knew she would never marry. He knew what she kept secret. What she kept locked away in the closet of her bedroom.

Of course, she’d also wanted adventures and travel, but now all she wanted was to live quietly and enjoy Ryba. If she was more a spectator than a participant ... it was better that way.

A warm breeze blew off the ocean, adding a hint of salt and seaweed to the air. Winter was approaching, but so far, it hadn’t turned cold. Despite the warmth, Triska shivered as if ocean water had dripped down her spine.

She turned and scanned the scrum of the crowd with all the unfamiliar faces to study, but it was the field with its crisp, long shards of grass that held her attention.

They shouldn't have gathered here. Rumors had trickled in that the mayor hadn't moved his horses only because he wanted extra cash selling the salt marsh hay. There were whispers that his favorite mare became possessed by an evil spirit, never to be ridden again, and late on a moonless night, if light flickered across the marsh, a wise person stayed far away. It wasn't men making their way across the marsh but something ... else.

Triska shivered again.

The mayor raised his hands, and a hush fell over the crowd. "Today is the kickoff of our weeklong Autumn Festival, and we have more in store this year than ever."

As the mayor droned on about the wonders of the Ryba markets and the locations of each event, Triska tuned him out until he boomed across the marsh, "I can announce a great secret I've kept for the past few months. Ryba is now the only town approved to sell the rare cheese, Goats Got Your Tongue made by the eaglewalker clan up north in Hork. Trust me, you will not want to miss it!" The mayor puffed out his chest. "I've worked for five years to develop trade with the Hork peltwalkers, and this is only the first of many special relationships for Ryba. We'll be the best place to live *and* eat in all of Ulterra!"

Her father grunted. "Oh, *he* did all the work, did he?"

As if he'd heard him, the mayor waved at her father. "A special thanks to our eaglewalker friend Emil up in Hork and his collaboration with Remi Sekelsky." Her father touched his thumb to the brim of his hat. The mayor plowed on, "You can purchase some of this delicious cheese for only two obols down at No Whey, our cheese monger shop."

Triska's father grunted. "Two obols? Who'd spend that kind of money?"

Triska remained silent. She'd tried some of the cheese several days ago and immediately purchased one of the small wheels for herself. Not much remained.

Mayor Burr's gaze skipped through the crowd, then skimmed back and rested on her. He beamed as if giving some kind of benevolent blessing. "By the way folks, sweetest oysters in all of Ulterra down at the Salty Mizzen, all caught by our local oyster fisher Triska Sekelsky. An obol for all you can eat on Tuesdays, and of course, from those oysters, we also have the famous Ryba black pearls, the most magnificent jewels in all of Ulterra. I'm afraid those are only sold by special appointment, so if you're interested, see me."

Triska snorted. "He has nothing to do with it. The three I've found were all purchased by Fergal, and he's not selling them." Fergal had paid an exorbitant fee for each one. The first pearl she'd sold was why she could buy her home. She wasn't sure about all the properties of a black pearl, but she knew they were powerful when used by a skilled magicwielder.

Her father shrugged. "That's the mayor for you."

Mayor Burr clapped his hands. "All right, now down to the beach for the judging of the scarecrows, then at nightfall, our official festival kickoff with the scarecrow burning."

A bugler strode out of the crowd, and his piercing notes bounced through the meadow as the crowd followed him, clomping over the boggy grass to the road. Triska lingered at the back of the procession, watching many villagers peel off for town, either to prep their shop for the upcoming burst of shoppers, or to enjoy the rare day off from fishing in the tavern like her father. She followed the parade down toward the ocean to watch the scarecrow contest.

The main road in town ended at the boardwalk, which spilled down several stairs onto the beach—a fat slice of sugary, soft sand, made fatter by the current low tide. Breaths of mild wind ruffled her ponytail as she walked down to the beach. The crowd milled around the boardwalk, shopping, or in a ring around the scarecrows, waiting to hear the winner.

Ryba nestled in the lee of a crescent-shaped slip of a peninsula, one horn of the crescent curling far out into the ocean. A tall lighthouse flashed its light at the horn's tip, guiding travelers home around the jutting rocks. The faint, sweet scent of the saltwater taffy shop drifted on the ocean breeze, cutting through the briny air.

Five immobile figures stood like sentinels along the sand. Each about seven feet tall and wearing leftover clothing and rags stuffed with straw and cornstalks. The figure closest to her had a pumpkin for a head, and someone had carved a face into it, creating a wide gaping mouth, the lips curling inward as they rotted. The rest of the figures had stuffed burlap for heads, with dye providing a slash of a mouth and eyes. Each figure had its arms outstretched as if trying to hug the ocean, with pointy sticks for hands. She turned to the water. Only the waves close to shore were visible, the rest obscured in white fog.

Come.

The whispered entreaty caressed Triska, washing over her in a gentle tingle. She sucked in a breath and yanked her gaze from the water. She'd ignored that call for a long time, and she'd ignore it again today. Still ... it sucked at her, beckoning her to enter the waves.

The last few weeks, its pull had gotten worse. She spent every day on the water, and she'd long ago learned to ignore the licks along her skin, but twice last week, she'd found herself sitting in her boat, her hands gripping the side of the hull, drifting with the current as she'd lost herself gazing at the waves.

How much time did she have left before meeting its call? A month? A day? She wrapped her arms around herself and focused on the beach.

A trio of judges walked around each scarecrow, scribbling on parchment. Triska watched as Mrs. Doubek and her two small sons, Liam and Callum, stepped forward to stand by the scarecrow nearest her, the one with the pumpkin head. Both boys noticed Triska and waved, but as the three judges walked

over to them, they clasped their hands behind their backs, schooling their faces into sober expressions.

Triska stifled a smile. No one would believe those two were serious about anything. A year apart but more like twins, they ran wild through town in their human and wolf forms.

Triska slipped through the crowd to get a little closer, and after the judges turned to the next scarecrow, both boys scampered over. Callum reached her first, but Liam shoved him aside. They jostled each other vigorously for a moment. “Wotcher, Miss Tris, whatcha think?” Liam asked. He didn’t wait for an answer. “Bet we win first place.”

“A quite impressive entry. I like the hands you made.” Twigs jutted out from the scarecrow’s sleeves, resembling hands trying to grasp something. The bark was smooth and light-colored as if someone had whittled it.

“Corking good branches for a scarecrow, all twisty and scary,” Liam said. “They even scared Al away, and I know he wanted a bite out of the pumpkin head.”

Two of the three judges were chatting and jotting down notes. However, the third, Fergal, the town’s taffy maker and the one who’d purchased her pearls, squinted at the scarecrows, his white hair blowing around in the breeze. Fergal looked like a bit of fruit left in the sun too long, tanned and dried. He may be the town taffy owner, but he was a gifted magicwielder, too.

He was also one of the few people in town who knew she possessed a little magic. She wasn’t exactly a magicwielder, her magic didn’t work like theirs, but Fergal had tutored her and helped her hone her abilities. It wasn’t something she spent much time on, though, and the only reason she’d worked with Fergal for so long was because her magic fascinated him, and he wanted to study it.

“We stole some yarn for the hair, don’t tell anyone,” Callum whispered.

She mimed buttoning her lips together, and he grinned.

Two women walked down the beach together, weaving through the crowd. While both were blonde, that was as far as their similarities went. Hazel strode through the crowd with barely a nod for anyone, but Chessa, a few inches shorter, called out greetings or jokes with everyone along her path. When they saw Triska, both aimed for her.

“Uh oh, I’m outta here.” Liam scrambled away.

Callum chuckled. “Miss Hazel threatened to turn him into a newt because he kicked a ball, and it hit her house. If she turns him into a newt, will she let me watch?”

As Hazel and Chessa joined them, Triska raised a brow. “A newt, huh?”

Hazel tossed her head and swatted a smattering of sand from her sleeve. She frowned down at Callum. “Why are you always trying to come into my yard? Stay in Triska’s.” But her lips curled into a small smile. Hazel had moved into the cottage next to Triska a year ago, and only a small hedge separated the two. The first time she’d met Hazel, the other woman was using gardening shears to trim the bushes into perfect squares, each one precisely the same height.

“Yours is more fun. You blow things up with your magic. Liam figured a blast with the ball would get you roused up, and you might explode things for us again.”

Chessa’s brows shot up, and she turned to Hazel. “I thought you weren’t practicing anymore?”

“I blew up a few pots for an appreciative audience,” Hazel said. She looked away over the bay.

Callum tugged on Hazel’s sleeve, and she let him grab her hand and pull her down the beach, chattering away about how magic would improve his scarecrow so he could win.

Chessa leaned on Triska. “Lots of travelers in town this week. I’ve got to mingle and see if there are any men I’ll let buy me a drink. I’d bat my eyes at Emil, but that dreamy one has already claimed you.”

Behind her in the forest, a twig snapped. Triska turned around, frowning. A long low note rumbled through the fog.

Was that growling? What beast in the Ryba woods would make that kind of noise?

Triska turned back around, still frowning. “I’m surprised you aren’t in your shop.”

Chessa took a step and spun. Her exquisite coat, with its high collar, invisible stitching, and sculpted waist, fluttered around her. “I’m a walking advertisement. After everyone gets a quick peek at this season’s Ryba coat, I’ll nip back in the shop. Stop by, I’ll make some hot cider, and we can sneak some rum in when my customers aren’t looking.”

Several years ago, the Ryba coat became a sensation, with orders flocking in from as far away as Rohant and Stok. Chessa had designed it and became the most sought-after tailor in Ulterra. Triska knew the king of Rohant had told her he’d put her in an estate to become the royal clothes maker, but Chessa had refused, wanting to stay in Ryba. She’d told Triska the setup sneaked a little too close to feeling like a mistress, and if the rumors about King Henri were true, she might have had good reason to be concerned.

“And bring Hazel, for heaven’s sake. I need to get her in one of my coats.” No matter the weather, Hazel always wore the same thing—a red cloak. Then again, Triska almost always had on her fishing ensemble—oilskin smock, sou-wester hat, and sturdy breeches tucked into knee-high oiled boots, so who was she to comment on fashion with anyone else? Not today though, she’d left the smock at home, and the chunky sweater she wore was a Chessa creation, another huge hit throughout Ulterra, especially with the peltwalker clans in the north.

The judges moved closer to the water and held up the ribbon for the winner. It went to the scarecrow in the middle. Liam and Callum both appeared mutinous. Hazel put her hands on their shoulders and led them a few steps down the beach. She waved her hand. Twin tornadoes of sand, only a foot high, whirled in front of each boy. Light flashed, and the swirling sand settled, revealing two glass figures, one an octopus, the other a shark. Both boys gaped, then grabbed their gifts, dancing around Hazel. Their grins reminded her of Juri, their older half-brother.

Juri.

Mrs. Doubek returned to Ryba without Juri about ten years after the two of them left. She'd lived alone until fifteen years ago when she met a wolfwalker traveling through Ryba on his way south. He'd taken one look at her, and that was that; a short time later they had a mating ceremony. Since then, they'd had two wolfwalker sons. As far as she knew, Juri hadn't come home to meet them.

Triska shook her head and stared out at the water. After all these years, Juri still crept into her thoughts.

She fiddled with her hat. In the century and a half since he'd disappeared, she'd gotten one letter from him. *One.* And read it so often the tough parchment—a scrap of paper with a tavern inventory list on the back—had turned as soft as a piece of linen, the ink faded.

He'd written to tell her he'd learned he was a vulk, and he was never returning to Ryba. That she'd never see him again.

Her first instinct was denial—no way was Juri a vulk. His mother was a wolfwalker, one of the demi-immortals who could shift into a wolf at will. A vulk was an immortal *werewolf*, one of the mythical beings who walked on two legs with wolfish features and remained in their werewolf form all the time.

But then ... it made sense. He was always the largest boy in their class; even taller than boys several grades above him. By the time he was eight, he'd excelled at every sport and ran faster than anyone in Ryba. What was his life like now? How had he felt when he'd learned he'd become one of the strongest immortals alive?

All Mrs. Doubek ever said about him was that he was traveling Ulterra as he'd always wanted to. Triska never revealed her letter or that she knew Juri was a vulk, and Mrs. Doubek never mentioned it either.

Even after all this time, a slight ache rolled through her. She still missed him. Triska placed a hand on her chest. Through the thick wool sweater, she could feel the necklace

she always wore around her neck, with the ring he'd given her resting above her heart. Silly, really, to keep it for so long, but she'd come to think it brought good luck. Sometimes it grew ... warm. Like right now, it flared as if it contained an inner heat.

The pull along her skin, beckoning her closer to the water, lessened, and she took a deep breath. She relaxed for the first time in weeks.

Turning to Chessa, she said, "Let's go make that cider. Maybe I'll even buy something in your shop."

Chessa grinned. "All right! Some suds and a sale, my favorite combination."

The two of them wound their way down the beach toward the boardwalk.

JURI STARED down at the waves lapping the shore of the cove in soft slaps, darting to the sand and retreating as quickly as possible, as if they didn't want to linger on the beach. Night fell, and in the thick fog, the water appeared only in shadow as a rolling, flexing muscle, and the boardwalk was barely visible a short stretch down the beach.

He stood on a slight slope of dune where the forest began with its scrubby, short trees coated in blueish moss—the trees that best withstood the sand and the wind. *Ryba*. A ripple of peace washed over him with its familiar twinge of pain.

Needles on the ground crunched as Kyril joined him, his stride short as if he were about to leap into an attack at any moment. His usual way of walking. “I checked the high dunes. The escarpment looks like it broke off recently, and all the caves there are buried. The necros aren't there.” They'd raced up the coast from Coromesto over the past two days, arriving in *Ryba* this morning. A third pack member, Finn, had remained on the outskirts of Coromesto while they'd gone down to the sewers, keeping watch for more necromancers. He'd left to go back to the pack to give Hans a report on what they'd seen, leaving the pursuit of the necromancers to him and Kyril. So far, they'd scoured the forest rimming *Ryba*.

Kyril pointed toward the five lumpy figures surrounded by firewood. “What the uit are those?”

“Scarecrows. The town is about to burn them and kick off the Autumn Festival. We give the water spirits their due for another safe year at sea. And there's an old obol stamped with

the Ryba crest inside one of them. Tomorrow, after the ashes are cool, the kids will try to find it. He or she becomes king for the day. I was king once, of course.” He rubbed his stomach. “I ate so much I couldn’t move.”

Kyril shrugged. “You do that whenever you get the chance.”

Juri grinned. “I was a lot smaller back then, yet with a vulk-sized appetite. I’m surprised my stomach didn’t burst.”

“It took the entire clan to feed me when I was growing up.” Kyril shot him a sideways glance. “I don’t know how your mother did it alone for all those years.”

Juri’s grin faded. Every other vulk in the pack had grown up in wolfwalker clans where the entire village helped prepare them for vulk life. Not him, though. He’d spent the first ten years of his life unaware he was a vulk. Unaware his life would keep him from making Ryba his home ever again because once a vulk took his permanent form, it was forbidden to return home.

Kyril stretched. “Well, all those times you’ve made me come with you to tromp through these woods, freezing my balls off, is finally going to pay off. We know this area better than anyone. The necros can’t hide.”

Juri chuffed. “You’re such a delicate flower. And no one cares about your balls.”

Kyril snarled. “Some females do.”

Juri guffawed. “Not a chance, you’re too ugly.”

Kyril ran his hand over his head and frowned. “We look similar.”

“No, your muzzle is more pointed, like a jackal.”

Kyril turned away toward the ocean, but Juri caught him running his hand over his muzzle as if checking its length. The corner of Juri’s mouth twitched. Since when was Kyril interested in females? All the times they’d journeyed to the vae lands, where Juri had spent time with a vae female or two, Kyril hadn’t shown the slightest bit of interest.

Kyril turned back, eyes narrowed. “You sure the vanishing isle showed up here? I mean, you saw it in a bowl. I think this is an excuse to watch over your village again.”

Juri pointed at the fog, its heavy mist turning the air above the water into sludge. “I’d know this coast anywhere. Out near the lighthouse is where the island showed up in the scrying bowl.”

“The vanishing isle is complete bollocks. Like most of your stories.”

Juri decided not to point out that whenever he told stories in the vulk den, Kyril was always the first to sit down to listen, and when it was his turn to request a tale, Kyril asked for long ballads about warriors who fought battles on and off the field to gain their one true love. The *romantic* ballads.

Juri ran his hand through his hair. “The vanishing isle is less a story and more ... part history, and part cautionary tale.” He frowned. “It’s said powerful shapeshifting sorcerers lived on the vanishing isle a long, long time ago. Their blood possibly runs in the veins of any peltwalker born with magical abilities.”

Townfolk spread out along the beach, lighting small bonfires or shoving long torches into the sand, making the entire beach alight in a warm, red glow. The crowd ringed around the scarecrows, waiting for the burning. A pack of boys raced by, playing tag through the group. His brothers weren’t with them. Juri scanned the crowd. He didn’t see his mother either.

They’d been there earlier for the judging. And *she’d* been there too. Standing so close to where he hid in the forest, he could hear her speaking to her friend.

After he and Kyril took care of the necromancers, he’d visit his family. He only stopped by during the darkest hours of night, making sure no one knew he was around, but his wee brothers enjoyed waking up to see him.

Once he’d become a vulk, it was verboten for him to maintain contact with his family. The ways of the vulk were

ancient and secret, and once a vulk took his permanent form, he was supposed to consider his life born anew, leaving the old behind forever.

He hadn't exactly followed that rule. And he'd had Kyril join him because he needed a lookout to make sure no spawn or other enemies saw how often he returned to Ryba.

Kyril still stared out at the bay. "Where are those sorcerers now? Were they cursed during the Deciding War and tossed in Peklo?"

Juri shook his head. "I don't think so. Something happened afterward." He frowned. "It's said their leader betrayed an oath ... or he betrayed someone. It isn't quite clear. He was punished, and the isle sank into the ocean. The rest of the people scattered throughout Ulterra. Hoyt mentioned Herskala thought he might be descended from them."

Kyril growled. "Is that in any of the tales?"

"No." As they'd run up the coast to Ryba, he'd thought about every tale mentioning the vanishing isle or those who'd lived there. Not one mentioned their power.

Kyril shifted. "Seems ridiculous to raise an island to get a bit of magic." He stretched, flexing his claws. "Who needs magic when you've got claws and fangs?"

Juri nodded. "Well, when you're a simpering little rodent like Hoyt, I guess you'll do whatever. Including some incantation that will probably kill him. But it doesn't matter, we'll find him before he raises that island. Let's go. We've stood here long enough."

Before he could take a step, a familiar face threaded through the crowd, and his heart lurched. Triska, still wearing her white fisherman's sweater and black trousers tucked into boots but without her sou-wester hat, walked with the female in the odd coat she'd stood on the beach with earlier. Both of them smiled at something. Ten steps, maybe twelve, and he could be at her side. See her face up close for the first time in ages.

“I changed my mind. The entire town is here,” he said. “Let’s stay a little longer and keep a lookout over them.”

Kyril growled again. “If they’re all here, it gives us a chance to roam through town and see if we can find anything.”

He had a point. Although with all of Ryba’s magicwielders threading the stench of magic through the town, it would be tough to scent something that didn’t seem right.

Triska walked along the sand, her face golden in the fire’s glow. The most graceful vision he’d ever seen. She and her companion stopped along the outer edge of people and turned to watch the mayor as he descended the boardwalk steps with a large torch.

Kyril jerked his chin toward the beach. “I knew you were waiting to see her. Guess we’re not moving.” He sighed. “You’ve never talked to her, and you’ve told me you never intend to, yet you force me to come here with you over and over so you can check on her.”

Juri’s hands fisted. “I promised to watch out for her. At least *that* promise I can keep.”

Kyril shook his head. “Whatever. Well, soon you can give it up. You heard her friend earlier—she has a dreamy suitor. Let him keep her safe.”

Juri’s vision turned pure scarlet, and his claws extracted their full six inches, nicking his palms. Warm blood welled and dripped down his fingers. Triska was engaged to *him*. She was his.

He gulped in air, and his vision faded back to normal.

The vulk took no mates. And even if Hans had taken one last year, he was different. Hans hadn’t experienced what Juri had—the terror and guilt of those he cared about getting injured simply because they were related to a vulk. Juri pushed the memory aside. He tried not to think about it, even though every time he saw the scars on his mother’s right arm, he relived it.

He watched Triska put her hands out to warm them. Her chestnut hair fell down her back in one long braid except near

her temples, where a few locks had gotten free. Her eyes were still the same—almost too large for her face—framed by arching brows and a high sweep of cheekbone.

The protective urge he'd always felt toward her ... shifted. His blood heated. A shot of warmth kicked in his stomach. What would it feel like if he ran the back of his knuckle down her sloping cheek? Brushed his thumb across her full, pink lips?

The flare of warmth flamed into full fire. He wanted to caress her more than he wanted his next breath.

He jerked back and shook his head. It was never going to happen. Triska was safer if he stayed far away. She wasn't really his—childhood promises didn't count. Especially ones made so long ago.

His chest felt a little colder. Like something vital that lived there had just been hollowed out.

The annual ode to the sea filled the air as the village elders chanted, and the mayor turned and lit the nearest scarecrow. With a whoosh, it ignited.

As the mayor lit the last one down the line, the sour stench of brimstone clouded the air. Juri tensed, and next to him, Kyril pressed up onto the balls of his feet. "Is magic included in this little festival of yours?"

"No." Juri scanned the beach. No black cloaks. Only smiling, relaxed townspeople. A gust of wind blasted down the beach, spraying sand everywhere. Several people yelped, covering their faces.

The fog, previously clinging to the water, blew in as the winds shifted, blurring everyone down at the beach. A scream rent the air, and the crowd backed away from the flaming scarecrows. Juri's hackles rose, and a growl erupted low in his throat.

The fog took on a greenish tinge, swirling around the five fires as each scarecrow burned. Kyril snarled. "Look at the smoke."

The fire on the beach blazed, the flames leaping high into the air, but the smoke billowing off it was a deep, emerald green, and it wasn't pluming up into the air. It curled down onto the beach, blending with the ocean fog to coat everyone in a thick smog.

People screamed and fanned the air in front of their faces. Juri squinted, scanning the beach. Smoke stung his eyes, and he blinked. He crouched.

The screams grew louder, and people scrambled.

"Come on, we need to get down there," Juri said. "Those necromancers must be close to be doing this." Juri sprang forward, and with a snarl, Kyril followed him.

Juri plunged into the swirling fog, scanning for the necromancers. He strained to catch any chanting, but the screaming was too loud. He halted. "They aren't fleeing the beach." The townsfolk beat at the fog, but they struggled in place as if stuck. Exactly like the man in the sewer had when he touched the bowl.

Lightning crackled through the roiling mass of smoke in a flash of vivid green. A jolt zapped near Juri, reaching out and connecting with a tall man to his left. The man jerked, and his face went slack. He stopped moving and stared blankly, stuck in place and ready for whatever the necromancers had planned for him.

More flashes and more people around Juri went still as lightning hit them. Juri raced forward, dodging the flashes zipping out of the cloud. Where was Triska? Where were the necromancers? Flashes of red and blue erupted farther down the beach, and ozone burned the air as magic collided and fought. Some Ryba magicwielders were launching a counterattack.

A white glow appeared a few paces away. In the center stood Triska, her hand raised. A silvery shimmer coated her, and the fog curled back on itself away from her. But she wasn't alone. Hoyt stood in front of her, a portal of swirling air at his back and one hand raised. Juri froze for half a second, his limbs seizing. Hoyt blasted a bolt of green lightning from

his fingertips, and it whistled forward. The white light around Triska flashed in answer. Lightning didn't sink into her chest like it had the others on the beach. Instead there was a loud clang, and ozone rent the air. The lightning fractured into small zapping branches and formed a cage around her.

A golden symbol rose into the air. The one from his childhood. A symbol he'd learned was a rune.

Juri snarled and crouched to spring forward. A hand clutched his arm, wheeling him around.

A small, wizened man with snowy tufts of hair blowing in the wind held him. Juri recognized him—Fergal, the taffy seller—he'd visited him often as a kid. "Wait," Fergal said. "Spring too soon, and you may kill her. Rune magic is temperamental at best." He nodded toward Triska. "She's holding her own."

A BEAD of sweat dripped down the back of Triska's neck. What was going on? A magicwielder she'd never seen before had just *blasted* something at her, and she was holding it off, but she remained tethered to him as his lightning pressed against her. What was he doing? Why was he attacking Ryba? And why was the symbol from her chest flashing above her right now?

Over the magicwielder's shoulder, she glimpsed Hazel whirling her magic around, flashes of blue beating back the fog, but many villagers stood stock still as if frozen in place.

Her magic skated over her skin, the pale glow shining brighter, pushing the green cage back a few inches.

The magicwielder across from her glanced upward, studying the symbol rotating in the sky. Triska kept her gaze trained on him, watching the symbol in her peripheral vision. Verdant smoke swirled around the magicwielder, and he ... *inhaled it*. His power surged against hers. He smiled slightly, his eyes glossing over for a moment as if he'd experienced something pleasurable.

The hair on her arms stood up, and she shuddered. Whatever this magicwielder was doing was wrong. Panic clawed inside her. Her magic was like water on a flame, dousing anything around her so it couldn't harm her or anyone else, but this magicwielder had vast stores of magic continuing to surge against her.

He glanced up at the symbol again. “What is this? It’s not what I’m calling forth tonight.” He tilted his head. “But it’s powerful.”

The cage closed, pressing closer. Ice crept through her veins as her magic sucked more of her warmth away. If she kept fighting, eventually she’d collapse from the loss of body heat. It had happened a couple of times when she’d first started learning how to use it.

Triska gritted her teeth and pushed back.

There was a roar, and she turned her head a fraction. A gust of wind blew away a dense cloud of fog, revealing a massive, charcoal vulk wearing leather trousers and a vest. Her heart skipped. *A vulk*. He had to be close to eight feet tall, with long, dangerous claws and bared teeth, his muscles flexed to spring. She sucked in a breath. He was glorious, all hard lines and ripped muscles, and vivid, golden eyes.

She’d only seen one person with eyes of that color. *Juri*.

“Triska!” he shouted.

It *was* Juri. Her heart fluttered. After all this time, he was here. In front of her. For a moment, her spell slipped, and the cage closed in.

The man in front of her turned his head from her to Juri. “Bloody vulk, such a nuisance. Yet ...” his eyes narrowed as he studied her. “A vulk and a female. Again.” He squinted up at the glowing golden symbol. “And some kind of magic. There must be a connection I’m missing.”

“What are you talking about?” She pushed back against his magic, and the silvery light expanded, moving the green cage away several inches.

The magicwielder across from her grunted and dug his back leg in as he pushed back. “How are you draining my magic?” he asked, inhaling again, more green smoke entering his nose. With a swirl of green, he shot another bolt at her. This time, it hit her white light, bursting into a sea of sparks. Several of them hit her hands and sizzled. She hissed.

Juri roared.

The man smiled, and the scar across his face twisted in the light. “Definitely a connection.” His gaze flicked up toward the symbol again. “If I kill you, does he die too? Is he your mate?” He shook his head. “Last year, I had a female tied to a vulk, too, yet I thought she was nothing. A distraction for him. Perhaps I was a fool, blinded by the Dark Lady and her plans. All I had to do was kill a simple female, and everything would have been fine.”

“The vulk don’t take mates,” she said through clenched teeth. Everyone knew that. The vulk were all male and elusive. Always living in the shadows, they seldom mingled with non-immortals or demi-immortals.

The symbol in front of her chimed, and the man lowered his hand a fraction, the lightning tether loosening its grip. *Yes. Just a little more.*

The symbol spoke, in a clear, echoing tone.

*“First, a rune will bind,
But only a bite permanently entwines.
With true love, it must be done,
Or two will never be one.
The vulk they call the Bard,
Has long had up his guard.
Is he able to take his true desire,
Or will duty, overpower?
The lightwielder hears the call of the sea,
Beckoning her to flee.
Her life has never truly been her own,
Will the right path for her be shown?
It isn’t a decision made lightly,
The bonds weave tightly.
Two souls chosen by fate,
Have only a month’s time to gain their mate.”*

Time seemed to still. Was this symbol a rune? And was it about her and Juri?

The man's smile widened. "No mates, huh?" He studied her, then turned toward the vulk. His lips twisted. "This time, I won't be tossed out of the way." He turned to Juri. "Stay back, or I kill her."

Juri's eyes turned crimson, and his hands fisted, but he remained in place.

The man's arm raised, and he muttered twisted, strange words. Chanting came from the woods, where black-cloaked figures stood at the edge of the verdant fog. The fog turned a deeper shade of green, and people along the beach slumped to the ground.

A great rending boomed across the beach like the earth itself yawned and groaned. Wind rushed, spitting sand.

Triska staggered, putting a hand over her eyes. She braced, expecting the man to blast her with more magic, but nothing happened.

She wiped the sand from her eyes and peered around her. Panting hard, his hand on his side as if he had a stitch, the man stared out across the ocean. "It's there."

She followed his gaze and saw a mass sitting in the bay. "What have you done?"

The man was ashen, his face thinner, but his eyes flashed, and green light flared in his palms. "Let's take care of you and the vulk."

The man whirled toward her right, flinging another ball of green. Triska raised her arms, and her magic surged, deflecting his attack, but she trembled, her body chilling.

The man stepped forward.

Her heart hammered so hard it felt like it pounded in her throat. She drew on the last dregs of her magic and swirled it back around her. Then she tossed it forward like a blanket to douse the man's magic.

Juri leaped forward.

The man's magic flashed toward Juri, hitting him square in the chest. Juri ground to a halt, snarling, a hand clutching at where he'd been hit. A sharp pain lanced through her chest in the same spot, and she staggered.

"Tsk, tsk, better stay back." The necromancer focused on the rune, his eyes narrowing. He was panting harder, and his hand shook, "Let me do that again."

No! First, he'd attacked her town, and now he wanted to attack Juri? Not a chance. The man's magic was fading, the power fighting against hers weakening.

She gritted her teeth and poured more power into the light surrounding her, pushing it to reach up and surround the man.

It crept, inch by agonizing inch. A little farther ...

Cold crept over her, the tips of her fingers turning numb.

The necromancer hissed. "What are you doing? Stop that."

She fisted her hands and let her magic flow through her in one surge. It reached up and covered both the man ... and the rune.

The symbol rotated and broke in half, one part shooting forward and crashing into her chest, exactly as it had when she was ten years old. Sparks erupted as her white light exploded, sending another powerful wave of magic out in front of her over the beach. The man screamed as he was lifted off his feet and backward into the mass of swirling air. And he disappeared.

A dark form wrapped its arms around her, tumbling them both to the ground. She braced herself, but instead of smashing into the sand, she landed on a warm chest. Arms tightened around her, holding her close. A heavenly scent of cedar, mixed with a touch of wild air, like the first blast of winter, swirled around her.

She drew back and looked up at the massive face. "Juri," she whispered.

JURI SAT UP, cradling Triska in his lap. The scent of blackthorn blossom—her scent—surrounded him, and his pulse steadied. He didn't release her as he scanned the beach. The fog was gone, and the smoke billowing up from the fires no longer held a greenish tinge. Villagers slumped to the sand, clutching their chests in the same way the hooded necromancer had after Hoyt drained him in the sewers.

Kyril stormed along the beach, scanning the crowd, his eyes red.

“Are we safe?” Triska asked. “Is that magicwielder gone?” She turned to fully face him. “What are you doing here?”

Her voice was pure and melodic, and he wanted her to keep talking so he could memorize every lilting tone. “He's a necromancer named Hoyt, and yes, he's gone for now. You blasted him pretty good.” No more sulfur dotted the air, only the brine of the sea. Juri kept Triska in his arms. His chest still tingled from where the symbol had hit him. Unlike when he was ten, and the symbol adhered to his chest, this time a feeling of joy ... of bliss ... washed over him, making his knees almost buckle.

Yet Hoyt had used their connection to try to kill Triska. Kill both of them. The blissful feeling cooled.

His chest still twinged as he stood, slowly dropping Triska to her feet. He swept sand off her arm and lifted his hand to remove a smudge from her cheek but lowered it again. “I've been tracking him for weeks, and he ended up here.” He

scanned the bay and the now raging water. Thick fog had roiled all day, but now it was gone, and an island stood visible beyond the outermost tip of the rocks. From this distance, it appeared as a dot against the moonlit sky.

Juri growled. “He called the vanishing isle.” Swearing violently in Vulk, his hands clenched into fists. He’d failed to kill Hoyt—again—and the necromancer succeeded in bringing forth the vanishing isle from whatever realm it normally lived in.

Triska wiped the sand off her face. “The vanishing isle? Are you sure?”

His hackles rose. He had to keep Hoyt from getting on that island, no matter what. “You were performing some powerful magic there. You learned magic while I was gone?”

She shifted. “Sort of, it’s hard to explain.”

Whatever she’d done had eliminated Hoyt. “I should go check on the others and see what else the necromancer did.”

Triska nodded. “I’ll come with you.”

Before they could take a step, Fergal shuffled up to them. “I didn’t think I’d see a rune in my lifetime.” He squinted first at Triska, then at Juri. “And this one is particularly surprising.”

Juri’s eyes narrowed, and he studied the taffy seller. “You know about runes?”

“Know it? No. No one can *know* them, although there are wyrdstaaves who *think* they can whisper words to a rune to make it obey, but runes are ... unknowable.”

Juri glanced at Triska. “What do we do?”

Fergal’s brows shot up. “Do? When a rune speaks, you listen, boy.”

“Boy?” Juri’s glanced down at himself. “I haven’t been a boy in a long time.”

Fergal waved his hand. “You’re still a lot younger than me.”

“And a lot hairier.” He glanced at Triska, and her lips lifted a fraction. The way they would back when he sassed teachers in school. Making her smile was always his only goal in school. Learning was not.

He sobered and rubbed his chest. “I meant what do we do about Hoyt—that necromancer. He noticed the rune and the connection. Is he one of these wyrdstaaves? He seemed to think he could attack one, or both, of us.” Hoyt had shot magic at him, and it landed instead of bouncing off him like magic usually did.

Fergal cocked his head. “I think it’s safe to say you’re both at risk, and you’d better protect each other. I heard the poem, the rune is mimicking a bondmate kind of connection, and you know what often happens if one bondmate is killed.”

Triska blanched. “The other dies as well.”

Juri’s stomach clenched. His connection to Triska put her in mortal danger. Exactly what he’d always tried to avoid. All these years of staying away, staying apart, only to have her targeted by a necromancer now... This was his fault.

If she didn’t know him, she’d be safe in her bed right now.

“I’ll look through some of my books that touch on rune magic,” Fergal continued. “It’s been a long time since I studied them, and I need to refresh my memory. Maybe there is something we can do. And we also need to deal with that.” Fergal pointed out at the bay.

“I know. He wants to get onto it.”

Fergal snorted. “No one gets on the vanishing isle. He’s a fool.” But his eyes narrowed, and he lapsed into silence. “Well, no one will get onto it tonight. Even with full moons to sail by, that water is death to anyone who tries.” Waves smashed onto the shore, eating far up onto the beach. Protected as the bay was, only the fiercest gales caused the waves to crash like this. But there was no ripping wind. The roiling sea was responding to something else.

Fergal turned back toward the beach. “We’ll see it better in the morning light. Right now, I’d better make sure those damn

necromancers didn't injure anyone permanently. Hoyt was a careless student in school, and I'm sure his magic work is just as sloppy now."

"I'll help you," Triska said.

Juri peered at Fergal. What had the magicwielder said? *Hoyt was a careless student in school.* "You know Hoyt?"

"Yes, I knew him when he was a student. His power has changed remarkably since then." Fergal reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of taffies. He gestured toward Triska. "Eat one. It'll help you feel better, and it has a bit of ..." his eyes twinkled, "oomph to it to help restore your magic. Wait for it to kick in before you help to heal anyone."

Juri glanced at the treats wrapped in wax paper and plucked a chocolate one out. He handed it to Triska.

"Ooh! Chocolate. My favorite." She smiled, and his heart stopped.

Fergal moved his handful of taffies toward Juri. "You can have one too. Heavens knows you used to steal them off me every chance you got."

Juri snagged a peanut butter taffy. He fumbled with his claws to remove the wax paper.

"Hold on." Triska's fingers brushed his palm as she unwrapped it for him. When she was done, she held it between her thumb and forefinger, and her hand moved toward his face as if she were about to feed him. Ducking her head, she dropped it into his hand.

Juri popped it in his mouth and chewed. His heart rate still raced from being so close to her. He wished she had fed him, although feeding someone by hand was a courtship activity. One he'd never partaken in.

He took a step back and jerked his chin toward the others. "We should head down the beach." He needed to walk around and make sure everything was all right, then hunt for the necromancers.

Fergal was a few steps ahead of them, and he halted. “What is this?” Fergal lifted something from the sand where Hoyt had stood.

Juri inhaled sharply and walked over. “It’s Hoyt’s scrying bowl.”

Fergal’s expression clouded. “Give me your vest. Quickly. This is no scrying bowl.”

Juri whipped it off and handed it over. “What is it?”

Fergal wrapped the bowl and tucked it under his arm. He shook his head. “I need to make sure no one is listening first.”

No one stood near them except Triska. He rubbed his mouth. “Who’d be listening—”

“This isn’t the right time.” Fergal gestured down the beach toward a few townsfolk slumped on the sand. “Come to my store in the morning. This will be safe then.” He settled the wrapped bowl more securely under his arm.

As Fergal trundled off, Juri stared after him. “All magicwielders are loons, but he seems to really be swimming against the current.” Wrapping a bowl, even a magic one, seemed odd, but then again, he’d never understood magic or magicwielders.

“Oh, he’s as sharp as ever, but he’s always been a little strange, and he’s cryptic with information.”

Everything felt surreal. Ryba attacked, an island that only existed in tales a short stretch away, and here he was talking to Triska on the beach in front of a bunch of townsfolk. He’d dreamed of this moment for so long, but he’d imagined a much different setting. “I should move back into the forest. The vultures ... we shouldn’t be here.”

Triska pointed. “I think it’s okay. Our mayor is talking to your friend.” Down the beach, the mayor gestured wildly as he spoke with Kyril. Across from him, Kyril had his arms crossed and wasn’t responding, only glowering. Villagers eyed him, but no one ran in terror.

Juri ran his hand through his hair. “The vulk don’t speak in front of humans.”

She frowned. “Well, there are few humans in Ryba who don’t have some kind of magicwielder or peltwalker blood. People here are more tolerant because we have all kinds living here.” She smiled. “That’s why we were named the best place to live in Ulterra by the *Ulterran Chronicle*.” Triska gestured toward the mayor. “Mayor Burr has been rather motivated ever since to put our town on the map.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I saw that story in the paper.”

“You did?” Triska turned to him, her large eyes even wider, her lips parted slightly. Soft, pale pink lips. “You get the paper?”

“I pay a brownie to deliver it. Of course, he keeps trying to sneak inside my den to see if it’s a place he might want to live. He’s a quick little sucker, but I catch him every time. Once they get in, it’s hard to get them out.”

“Really? We don’t have brownies here. I think I’d like to see one.” Her brow wrinkled. “Where is your den?”

He swallowed. “North of here, in the mountains between Ryba and the start of the clan land.” Only a short run away.

The line between her brows deepened. “All this time you’ve been so close ...?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. Words died on his tongue. There were so many things he wanted to say to her. To try to explain ... but almost everything was verboten for a vulk to say to someone outside the pack.

The mayor clapped his hands then waved, moving into the center of the light from the fires still burning along the beach. He rocked back and forth on his heels. “All right, that was a bit of a ... surprise ... this evening, but no worries, no worries.” He rocked faster. “There have been reports of necromancer unrest throughout Ulterra. Why last week, even Coromesto had an attack.”

Juri frowned. He hadn’t heard anything about an attack, but then again, he’d spent his time there in the sewers.

The mayor cleared his throat. “That’s why I hired vulk protection for our Autumn Festival. Nothing but the best here in Ryba.” He flashed a smile at the crowd, but his gaze still zipped from person to person as if scanning their faces to make sure they believed him.

Juri’s brows shot up, and he stared at Kyril. Kyril’s lips were curled up his eyeteeth, and he looked like he was about to bite the mayor’s head off.

“As you witnessed, the vulk saved us, and they’ll continue to offer their protection like they used to back before the Territory Wars. I’m the first mayor to resurrect this old treaty with the vulk.” He waved his hand as if petting the air. “No need to worry about further attacks, the vulk have everything under control. I’m so confident, I’m going to roll a few barrels of our newest beer out into the street so we can all celebrate.”

“The mayor hired you?” Triska asked.

Juri rubbed his head. “First I’ve heard of it.” He paused. “The vulk protected villages in the past, though. Like we do now with the wolf clans. I need to talk with Kyril.” His pack brother had fully bared his teeth, and a hint of red glistened in his eyes. “Before he starts another war.”

“Wait a second. You’ve made your hair a mess. Bend down.” She reached out, and when he froze, she snatched her hand back. “I mean, is it okay if I touch you?”

He swallowed hard. “It’s fine.” His voice came out deeper.

Triska reached up toward his face, and he ducked his head, his gaze locking on hers. “I don’t really have hair.”

“Yes, you do. Up here on your head and around your face you do.”

“I’d say it’s more like fur.”

She smoothed the hair down but lingered, running her fingertips along his forehead and between his ears.

Juri purred, the hum rumbling out of his chest in a rusty murmur. Her eyelids fluttered, and she stepped closer. One of

her hands landed on his chest, and her gaze lowered to it. “We both still have that mark on our chests. Is it really a rune?”

“Aye, we need to talk about that.” He’d learned about runes last year when a different one showed up, one not intended for him. He’d recognized that it was the same type of symbol he and Triska had shared all those years ago, and he’d learned a little about them. “I also want to know when you started shooting off magic.” The corner of his mouth curled upward.

“Come for dinner.” She glanced around at the beach. “After we sort this out.”

He thought he’d forgotten how to breathe; all he could do was nod. Dinner with Triska? Just the two of them? He couldn’t think of anything he wanted to do more. Even killing Hoyt came in a distant second.

As he turned to join Kyril, Triska remained at his side, her steps quick to keep up with his, and he slowed, making it easier for her to stride through the sand.

When he approached Kyril, his pack brother’s eyes flashed red. “The puny human leader of this town has tried to commandeer us,” he said in Vulk. “We take no orders from humans.”

The people of Ryba huddled together, a few faces still ashen. His mother and his brothers weren’t here, but they could have been. Ice crept down his spine. The vulk protected Ulterra. This was their duty.

And he’d failed tonight.

“We have the same goal as the mayor,” Juri said in the common tongue. “To get rid of the necromancers. It will be beneficial to work with the people of the town to hunt them down.”

Juri glanced over his shoulder. “And we’ll need a boat to get to that island.”

“Are you kidding?” Kyril said in Vulk. “These humans will only get in the way.”

Juri raised a brow. “Do you know how to sail?”

Kyril growled, and the mayor’s eyes widened. He edged a few steps away. “Vulk are land animals,” Kyril said. “I don’t go on the water.”

Juri coughed, but it was half a cough and half the Vulk word for baby.

Kyril bared his teeth again.

“We’ll need to work together.”

One of the little boys who’d been playing tag earlier stared up at Juri. “Are you really going to protect the village?”

As Kyril shook his head no, Juri only had eyes for Triska. “Yes, I am.”

TRISKA STOOD BAREFOOT on the icy floorboards of her bedroom, unlocking the drawer in her desk. The past hour had whirled by in confusion and chaos as the villagers left the beach and returned to the main street of Ryba where the tavern stood. Juri had been surrounded by a group of younger men, all wolfwalkers, peppering him with questions until Mrs. Doubek, Callum and Liam in tow, charged down the street and greeted him.

For the first time, she saw Juri smile, and even though he was a vulk with wolf-like ears, a muzzle, and dark fur smattering over his body, he still had human qualities. His limbs were muscular and defined like a man's with wide and powerful shoulders and chest, and his smile was the same slightly mischievous one he'd had as a kid. He'd picked his mother up mid-sentence and whirled her around until she laughed. He put her down before hauling a boy up under each arm.

Triska remained a few minutes longer, then went to the tavern to hunt down her father. He'd heard what happened and was on the street, and after they spoke, he'd slipped into the crowd to find the mayor to help. So, she'd come home.

She slid open the drawer and lifted Juri's letter and some of her drawings out. A few of the sketches, the ones she'd made before she'd gotten Juri's letter, showed a young man with hair that curled at the tips, giving a cheeky grin. Always a cheeky grin.

The later sketches were of a vulk.

She studied those. The likeness had been close but not quite right. She hadn't captured the true breadth of him. Showed the strong, masculine lines of how big and strong he was. The way his golden eyes lit from within with intelligence. How his brows expressed his emotions with a fraction of a motion.

Triska let the sketches fall onto the top of the desk until she held only his letter.

TRISKA,

TODAY I RECEIVED ALL ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY OF YOUR LETTERS. FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS, THEY WERE PLACED IN A LARGE BOX GATHERING DUST, BUT NOW THAT I'M LEAVING THE CLAN, I GUESS THEY FINALLY DECIDED TO GIVE THEM TO ME. I JUST READ YOUR LAST LETTER. DID YOU REALLY THROW MY RING INTO THE SEA?

I BET YOU'D BE SURPRISED TO KNOW I WROTE TO YOU, TOO, EVEN WITHOUT GETTING A LETTER FROM YOU FIRST. ALL THE LETTERS I TRIED TO SEND WERE ALSO IN THE BOX, NEVER MAILED.

WELL, I'M FINALLY ON MY OWN, ABOUT TO JOIN THE VULK PACK FOR THE FIRST TIME. YEAH, I'M ONE OF THE VULK. ABOUT FELL OFF MY CHAIR WHEN THEY TOLD ME THAT BIT OF NEWS. I HOPE THAT EXPLAINS WHY I NEVER RETURNED. WHY I CAN'T EVER RETURN. ONCE WE TAKE OUR PERMANENT FORM, OUR OLD LIFE IS SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD TO US, AND OUR NEW LIFE IS ALL WE KNOW.

YOU'VE HEARD THE TALES ABOUT US. MERCILESS. RUTHLESS. HUNTING ANY HUMANS

WHO DARE TREAD ON OUR LANDS. NOT ALL THE THINGS YOU'VE HEARD ARE TRUE. BUT WHAT IS TRUE IS THAT WE HAVE NO SOULS AND CAN OFFER NOTHING. WE TAKE NO MATES.

SO, IT'S BEST YOU TOSSED THE RING. IT WAS ONLY A NAIL, ANYWAY.

BUT ONE THING ABOUT BEING A VULK, IS THE VULK PROTECT ULTERRA. I CAN STILL MAKE SURE YOU'RE SAFE, LIKE I PROMISED.

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO END THIS LETTER. SAYING GOODBYE SEEMS TOO LITTLE AND SAYING I'LL MISS YOU ... THOSE ARE JUST WORDS.

There was a large smudge at this part of the letter as Juri had scratched out one line. No matter how hard she'd tried, she couldn't figure out what he'd originally written to end the letter. Instead, all that remained was simply his name.

JURI

Her first reaction when she read the letter was shock. The letter arrived *ten years* after he'd left. Long past the time she'd ever expected to hear from him.

She'd slumped onto the chair at the dining room table—she'd still lived with her father then—and read the line '*Yeah, I'm one of the vulk*' over and over.

It took weeks for it to sink in.

When she was ten, she'd written to him weekly, racing for her mail every day, hoping to see a letter for her. One never came. That year, and the next, she'd been so lost. She couldn't even remember that time clearly; it was like the pain was so intense she refused to remember it.

Her mother was dead, and her best friend was ... gone.

She had almost tossed his ring into the sea because she was so angry at him. While her mother was dead and could never return, Juri was alive, and he'd abandoned her.

As time passed, she'd tried not to think about Juri. But whenever she looked at the golden tattoo on her chest, it was like he was next to her again. And he kept intruding in other places as well. When she reached eighteen, boys started courting her, and every time one held her hand or kissed her, she wondered, *what would it be like to do this with Juri?*

Of course, the ring—his proposal—was all kids' stuff. No boy who proposed at ten truly meant it, but she *hadn't* thrown away his ring.

No, when her finger grew too large for the ring to fit, she'd put it around her neck and never taken it off.

The letter arrived when she was twenty. After reading it, she'd scraped herself up off her chair and run outside. Run to their cove. A place she'd never visited since he'd left. She'd sat under their tree and sobbed. All the anger, all the disappointment and hurt, washed over her like it was brand new.

Juri hadn't left her behind. He'd learned he was a vulk. And the vulk had no souls and took no mates. Her heart hurt, some for herself, but a lot more for him.

He'd loved Ryba. His nickname was the Little Mayor because he had every person in town wrapped around his finger. Even when he got into trouble and was scolded, they still loved him.

Just like she'd loved him.

As the years passed after she'd gotten his letter, she'd steeled herself to accept she'd never see Juri again. His life was a complete mystery to her and one which took him far away.

Triska sighed and smoothed the paper still in her hands. She put the letter back in the drawer and slid it closed. Finger combing her hair, she left it loose down her back, something she rarely did because with her job on the water and her hair

so long, she always braided it, or it would get in her way. She'd also changed into loose breeches—her comfortable breeches for lounging at home—and a warm, wool, long-sleeved shirt.

She plucked at it, nerves skittering. Should she wear something more formal? This was Juri, her childhood friend, but also a vulk. One of the rare forest immortals. An almost mythical being. One who'd probably walked with the vae and met kings.

She'd be less nervous if one of those kings were coming to dinner. Down at the beach, standing near him, he'd been so large, so primal. Yet his gaze softened when it met hers. His scent was intoxicating, and when she'd touched him ...

He'd made that purring sound, and she'd melted. Simply melted. A sizzle had started deep inside. Waking up parts of her long dead. She'd wanted to let her hands continue to explore him. To find out what else made him purr like that.

He wasn't the boy she'd known—he was a vulk. And she really wanted to get to know him all over again.

She shook her head. This was ridiculous. He was only here because he was chasing a necromancer who'd raised the vanishing isle. He was doing what he'd said he'd do in his letter—protect Ulterra. His presence had nothing to do with her.

Triska frowned and pressed a hand to her chest. Except it did. Their rune had reawakened on the beach, giving her a clear choice this time.

The lightwielder hears the call of the sea,

Beckoning her to flee.

Her life has never truly been her own,

Will the right path for her be shown?

A lightwielder? Fergal had never named her type of magic, but it made sense. Her magic was silvery, like the moonlight. And the rest of the poem was true too. In one way, she and Juri were similar. They'd both learned things about their true

selves after they'd parted. Her life *wasn't* truly her own, but she didn't need her path to be shown. She knew exactly what was going to happen; she just hoped she had as much time as possible before it did.

Whatever the rune mark was on their chest or what it truly wanted, nothing was going to change. But she could help Juri with the necromancer, and she could make sure Juri's link with her was safe, as Fergal said.

Maybe that meant they'd have to spend a month together while the rune was active and waiting. A frisson of pleasure threaded through her at the thought. An entire month with Juri. A chance to get to know him again.

She smiled to herself. Gulping in a deep breath, she descended from her loft bedroom down to the kitchen to start dinner.

“YOU GOTTA BE SHITTING ME.” Kyril’s eyes flashed scarlet as he glowered at Juri. “Vulk aren’t hired guards.” He pounded his chest with a fist. “We’re the elite. The few. We tell this town we’ll take care of the necromancer problem our way. Actually, we don’t *tell* them anything. We just do it.”

Night had fallen along the quiet lane where a few houses nestled behind small hedgerows. It was a peaceful place in the southern part of town, where lanes ran back toward the forests and fields, away from the bustle of the boardwalk and the market. Here was where he’d always picked the best blueberries in early summer.

They stood in front of the smallest cottage along the lane. Triska’s place. When he’d lived in Ryba, it belonged to Mags, an older lady who loved to invite him in for tea and also yell at him for nicking her strawberries.

Juri only half listened to Kyril.

Kyril plowed on. “You’ve broken at least three rules.” He lifted a finger. “You spoke to humans.”

Vulk protected from the shadows. They rarely spoke with magicwielders, and they avoided humans altogether. Juri shrugged.

Kyril raised another finger. “You’ve returned home, although you’ve been breaking that rule for ages. Uit, your mother still has a bedroom set up for you.” He’d snuck to Ryba often and checked in on his mother whenever he could. It was *verboden* for him to return, but before his ma met her

now mate, she'd been alone. Every visit, he considered sneaking in to see Triska, too, but he'd always decided against it. He had nothing to offer her. The vulk had no souls, one of the sacrifices his kind made for their immortality and strength in order to kill the leshak—the souldrinkers. If he had no soul, how could he truly connect with anyone? It was yet one more reason why the vulk didn't take mates.

He wasn't the boy she'd befriended any longer.

Another finger. “And you're interested in playing patty cake with some human female.”

“She isn't human. She's as old as I am, and humans don't have a lifespan this long.” Both of them were one hundred and eighty-seven. As a kid, Triska hadn't gotten a pelt or magic, so he'd assumed she was human. Until Briony told him last year that humans didn't live as long as peltwalkers and magicwielders did, he hadn't realized most humans lived shorter lives. Growing up in Ryba, most of the humans here had a touch of demi-immortal blood, or they mated one of the demi-immortals and took on their extended lifespan, so he'd never realized there were humans out there who didn't live as long. Clearly, Triska had magic, so she had some demi-immortal blood in her line.

“It doesn't matter if she's human or whatever she is. She isn't yours. Besides, there are better things for us to do tonight. Like catching necromancers.”

Juri ran his hand over his head. “We have a plan for tonight.” Before they'd left the beach, they'd come to an agreement with the magicwielders in town to halt all magic unless they were fighting off an attack again. That way, if the vulk sensed magic in use, they would know it was from necromancers.

“Yeah, an agreement that includes Hazel. How do we know she isn't working with the necromancers? This is the sorcerer who took Zann.” His claws extended to their full six inches.

“Spellcaster,” Juri said.

“Pah.” Kyril waved a hand. “It’s all the same.”

“You know it isn’t.” There was a strict hierarchy in the magicwielding community: sorcerers, spellcasters, and enchanters. The necromancers weren’t a separate class of magicwielder; they could be from any of the other three. They simply delved into darker magic, steeped in death.

“I know, and I don’t care. Each and every one is a pain in the ass.”

“Hazel helped us destroy Morana, and Hans and Zann haven’t gone after her. We have a sort of ... truce with her.”

What Kyril didn’t know, and the reason Juri knew Hazel wasn’t a threat, was that Briony met with Hazel regularly. And Hans allowed it. During the first few visits, Juri was there, hiding nearby in the trees while Hans bound the spellcaster’s hands and wouldn’t let her within arm’s length of Briony. Hazel never complained, sitting and talking to Briony for hours. She’d brought Briony things to help her during her pregnancy, and the two became friends. If Hans let his mate near Hazel after everything that happened, then Hazel was okay.

He gestured toward Triska’s cottage. “I’m here in case Hoyt shows up again. I want you to return to my mother’s house.” They’d spent the last hour visiting with her.

Kyril crossed his arms. “You’re leaving me with your brothers?”

“Don’t show any weakness, and you’ll be all right.”

Kyril sighed. “I’m a vulk, I have no weakness, but I don’t know how to talk to young ones.” His shoulders lowered a fraction. “Your mother is a good cook, though.”

“Howl if you need help.”

Kyril turned his head. “With your brothers or if the necromancers show up?”

“Either.” Juri scanned Triska’s cottage. A flickering light shone in one window; the rest were dark.

The front door opened, and a sliver of buttery light illuminated the front walk. Triska peeked her head out. “Hi.” She gazed out at the road. “Does the grumpy one want dinner too?”

His heart thumped. Her hair fell over her shoulders in gentle waves, and her eyes seemed to glow in the shadows. “No, he just left.” No way was he letting Kyril intrude on time with Triska.

“What language were you speaking?”

He was already walking to the gate in her hedgerow before he answered. “Vulk. Our language.”

She leaned against the doorsill. “It’s pretty.” She opened the door wider. “Are you ready to eat?”

“Of course.” His mother had fed him, but he considered that only a pre-supper snack.

The path to the front door led through a modest front yard with a neglected garden overrun by beach roses. When Old Mags lived here, she made jam from their plums. When he’d done chores in exchange for pocket money, she’d spread the jam on crackers for him. Bit stingy with the amount of jam, though.

Despite the overgrown look of the rest of the garden, someone had perfectly trimmed the hedges. “Nice shrubbery,” he said.

Even with her face in shadow, he saw her brows rise. “Uh, thank you? After all this time, you’re finally back and commenting on my shrubs?”

“A good shrub is a good shrub.”

“That’s all on account of my neighbor.”

At the front door, he opened his palms. “I don’t come bearing any gifts. I should have nipped into the tavern or one of the shops and—” What was he saying? He couldn’t pop into the tavern, he’d startle everyone in there off their stools, and how was he supposed to pay for anything? The vulk had

currency, they often found gold while digging out their dens and could convert it to obols, but he didn't have any with him.

Triska moved out of the way as he entered, but he still had to brush against her, and his pulse raced. The sweet scent of blackthorn blossom filled the air.

He inhaled deeply, and his blood heated. He wanted to bury his nose in the crook of her neck. Lick his way to the hollow at the base of her throat, then keep going. Need punched through him, hot and ready. He forgot about everything else. All he wanted was to close the distance between them. Run the pad of one finger up her jaw to see if her skin was as soft as it looked.

Maybe it was a bad idea to be in her home with her.

He tore his gaze from Triska's face and took the rest of her in. She stood barefoot, with loose breeches skimming the tops of her feet. Tiny, delicate feet. The soft wool of her breeches matched the shirt stretched over her breasts, showing off their perfect shape. His mouth went dry.

"What would a vulk bring as a present?" Was her voice huskier? She hadn't stopped staring at his face as if trying to memorize it. Or see the human he'd once been.

"Dunno about other vulk, but I'd bring you something sweet." His gaze dropped to her mouth. Yes, something decadent she'd lick off her lips. Her lips parted as if she'd read his thoughts.

Perhaps it was best not to stare at Triska's mouth. He turned and surveyed her home instead. He'd entered through a small mudroom that opened into a galley-style kitchen with a living room off to the right. Triska had a long yellow sofa with scrolled armrests tucked up near her fireplace. Two bookcases stood next to it, their shelves not filled with books, but with illustrated booklets called the *Quarter Obol Dreadfuls*.

Juri walked over to the bookcase, his feet sinking into a shaggy sheepskin rug. "I thought you might still read these." One thing bonding them together as kids was how much they both loved stories. He pulled one from the top shelf and

thumbed through it. It was a tale of a swashbuckling pirate robbing the rich. When they were kids, they read these together each month when they came, thumbing them so often the corners of the pages grew worn and torn.

Triska joined him and plucked it from his hand. “Of course. They’re marvelous stories.” She reached up on tiptoe to shelve it back into place, not quite able to reach.

He gently slipped it from her fingers. “I’ll do it.”

She huffed and pointed. “Put it back in order.” Keeping his claws back, so he didn’t rip its delicate paper cover, he slid it into place. “You always did like to show off how much taller than me you were,” she said.

When he turned back, one side of her mouth curled upward in a half smile.

“Wasn’t hard, you were always a tiny thing.” Not anymore. She’d filled out exactly right.

Triska’s gaze skimmed down his body, and he wanted to flex but didn’t. Had her breath just hitched? Her pupils dilated, and the scent of warm honey filled the room. As his groin tightened, he stifled a groan. Definitely a bad idea to be alone with her in the house, especially with the rune spitting poems at them. A poem that kept racing through his mind, the words echoing.

“You’re so big, Juri. I mean,” she swallowed, her throat flexing, “look at you.”

Was big good or bad? “It’s a vulk thing. Do you like what you see?” It came out as a purr.

Her lips parted, and she stood with her head tilted up at him, her cheeks turning pink. “Yes.” She reached out and ran her fingers over the smattering of hair on his arm, and her expression turned puzzled.

“What?” he asked.

“You were blond as a kid. I’m surprised your hair is charcoal now.”

“All vultures are dark gray, except for our Alpha and his brother,” Juri said. “Hans is solid black, and his brother is white. We called them Shadow and Ice when we were younger.”

“Did you have a nickname?”

He rubbed his mouth. “Er, sort of. They called me the Bard, and it’s stuck a bit.”

Triska looked down, long lashes shading her eyes. “The rune called you that, too. You always did like to tell me stories to help me fall asleep.”

“I still like telling tales.” Whenever he told a tale, even after all these years, he pictured her as his audience. He stepped back and glanced around her room again. Besides the shaggy rug under his feet, blankets of the same fluffy material were tossed on the couch. “I think you’re single-handedly keeping the Ryba sheep market in business.” He pointed at the blankets. Ryba sheep had a unique wool; unlike any other sheep, the soft inner part could be used for spinning soft clothing like Triska wore. Or it could be kept in its natural state, long and shaggy for rugs and such.

She raised a brow. “I like warm things with a bit of soft hair.” Her gaze went to his chest again.

He forgot how to breathe.

Triska returned to the kitchen, and the way her breeches hugged her backside ... he may not remember how to breathe ever again.

She stirred a bowl with a large wooden spoon. “Do you want dinner now or later?”

“Definitely now. What are you making?”

Triska waved the spoon, a drop flying off it and splattering on the floor. “Oops. I’m making flapjacks. My specialty. Well, not really. More like my go-to when I’m tired and don’t feel like making anything else. Or, in this case, when I haven’t bought any groceries.”

Her kitchen was u-shaped, with stools pulled up to the counter instead of having a separate dining table. He eyed the wooden chairs and settled into one. It creaked but held his weight. The only vulk sized chairs were the ones Hans made. Over the past year, Hans had outfitted their pack den with some really comfortable ones.

The youngest pack member, Ayren—one hundred and sixty-seven years old—was trying to learn woodworking, but so far, all Ayren had made was one oddly shaped stool, and Finn said he'd had to pull a nail out of Ayren's palm. Not the most promising of starts.

As Triska turned to the flat pan on the stove and dolloped out flapjacks, Juri watched. This was the first time he could drink her in without feeling like an outsider, sneaking a glance through the trees.

Her home suited her perfectly, and there was a coziness here he rarely found, but possibly it was because Triska was with him. She was in profile, facing the stove, as she said, "Tell me what your life is like. What do you do?"

At first, he was hesitant. Unsure what to say. The vulk were secretive, and as Kyril pointed out earlier, there were a lot of rules around interacting with non-vulk, but the longer he spoke, the easier it was. He told her about the pack, first about Hans—his best friend and their Alpha—then Kyril, then moved on to the other seven pack members. He described their new pack den and the intricate carvings of stone they'd inlaid in the walls last winter.

Triska spread the pile of flapjacks in front of him and took out a small sack of brown sugar. She went to her icebox, pulled out a lemon, and sliced it. Before she returned to the counter, she gestured toward the ice box. "Do you want a beer? I have some from Vieska. It's really good. Hazel goes there every once in a while, and brings it back."

"Beer and flapjacks?" He shrugged. "Sure, why not. I haven't had a beer in ages."

Triska pulled two brown bottles from the icebox and sat beside him, their shoulders touching. She grabbed a couple

flapjacks, spread brown sugar over them, then squirted a bit of lemon over both. With a flourish, she rolled them up into tight little logs; the sugar tucked inside. She handed him one, then took a bite of the other.

Her face softened, and she closed her eyes. “Mm.” She licked her lower lip.

Juri shifted on his seat and swore mentally. If he ran his tongue along her neck, would she make the same sound? Tearing his gaze away, he took a large bite of flapjack. His brows rose. “I forgot about these.” In two more bites he polished it off. “I could eat about a hundred.”

Her lips quirked. “We’ll need to borrow some eggs for that.”

As he rolled up another one—more sugar this time—he asked her what she did with her time, hoping she didn’t mention the suitor he’d overheard her friend talk about.

She didn’t.

Triska talked about oyster fishing every day and spending time with Hazel and Chessa, and an evening here and there with her father.

She chewed and swallowed a bit of pancake. “When did you learn you were a vulk? Was it right after you left or later?” She busied herself with another flapjack, avoiding looking at him.

He sighed. “Right after I left here. I wrote to you and told you, but ... they kept all my letters. I thought they’d been sent. Ma, too. She didn’t know they took all the letters, and it surprised her when you didn’t write.”

She nodded. “I know. I got the letter you sent me later. The one you bribed a brownie to send.”

Juri looked down at his plate. “Even after ten years, I wanted to let you know that I didn’t just ... leave. I wanted to let you know I didn’t have much choice.” He swallowed. “I *still* think about you. Often.”

She crossed her arms, and her chin went up a fraction. “Why didn’t you visit?”

His stomach clenched. This was the question he’d hoped to avoid. “Once we take our vulk form, we’re supposed to leave our former life in the past. It was forbidden for me to return to Ryba. Even more so to see you.” He waved his hand. “I’m not supposed to be here now, either.”

He ducked his head and rubbed his hair. “I snuck around and checked in on you, though.”

Her arms remained crossed, her face set. “You visited your mother, didn’t you?”

“Yes. But you don’t understand—”

“You risked your vulk rules to see her.”

Juri stared out the window above the kitchen sink, where the hedge rippled in a soft breeze. “I thought about walking to your front door many times.” He locked gazes with her. “What would you have done if you got a knock on the door in the middle of the night? It would have to be the darkest part of night, so no one would see me. When you’d open the door, what would you see?” He gestured to himself. “A towering beast. You would have screamed. Or run. Besides,” his hands fisted, “if I visited you, you’d become a target for every one of my enemies. Like you are now.”

She said nothing, continuing to stare. Frost could have formed from her gaze. “You’ll never know how I would have reacted. And your mother kept herself safe all these years, I could have too.”

He stood and paced. “This is why vulk are raised in the wolfwalker clans. So when we leave, everyone understands we’ve left for good. I’m the only vulk in the pack who grew up not knowing what he was.”

Triska uncrossed her arms. “Why didn’t she ever tell you? I mean ...” Her hands fell to her lap. “You got upset so many times because you thought you were a wolfwalker and you hadn’t gotten your pelt yet. She must have considered telling you?”

“You have a good memory. I mean, it’s been over a century and a half.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Time seems to stand still here.”

“That’s what I like about it.” He thought about his mother and how sad she’d looked when she’d told him he was a vulk. “She wanted me to grow up with a normal childhood. Back in her clan, she said the vulk kids were treated like little princelings, but they still weren’t really a part of the clan, you know? She wanted me to live normally. That’s why she raised me here until she realized I had to know.” He’d always suspected his mother had also seen his attachment to Triska, and knew nothing could come of it in the end.

They stared at each other a long moment. Finally, she sighed and patted the seat next to her. “Come back.”

As he sat, he searched her face. “I wish things could have been different.”

She picked at the flapjack on her plate again.

“Every time I saw something beautiful or funny, I wanted to tell you. Every time I told a story to someone, I pictured you. Even after all this time, that’s never stopped.” He shut his mouth. More words were waiting on his tongue, but he held them back.

Her expression softened. “I’ve changed too. I mean, everyone goes their own path. What we think and say when we’re ten ... it’s not going to last. It was probably best for us to drift apart.”

Yeah, no one married the girl they proposed to when they were ten, even if they weren’t a vulk, and it was forbidden.

“Did you meet your father when you joined your pack?”

His shoulders tensed. “No. All the older vulk died during the Territory Wars, including him. There’s only ten of us left.” He ran his hand over his head. “Shit, Kyril’s going to kill me. That’s one of the vulk secrets I’m not supposed to tell.”

What he hadn’t told her was that even if his father was alive, most likely, Juri wouldn’t have ever known who he was.

The vulk had children with females from the wolfwalker clans when a wolfwalker in heat wanted to partner with a vulk instead of one of her own kind. Demi-immortals like wolfwalkers didn't go into heat often, and it was even less likely a wolfwalker would want a vulk child, but those who did understood that the vulk didn't stay with the clan to help raise their offspring. When a vulk child—always a male—reached twenty and took vulk form, he would join the vulk pack and leave his original home behind forever. Never to return. Father and son were reunited, but it was verboten to acknowledge it. In the pack, all were brothers—warriors united in the battle to protect Ulterra.

Triska stared down at her plate. "I'm sorry."

He decided to change the subject. "When did you catch magic?"

She glanced up at him. "Catch it?" Her lips quirked into a small smile. "That's a strange expression." She shrugged. "One night, I was working late on the bay, and a thick fog rolled in, worse than the one tonight. I could barely even see the lighthouse. You know what it's like on the water, in the fog?"

He nodded. Even the best fisherwoman could get disoriented, unable to see past the gunwale of their boat. After losing her mother to the sea, it must have been terrifying for Triska.

She held up her hand. "I wished so hard for a light, and one appeared in the palm of my hand. I was so shocked I almost fell out of the boat." Triska frowned. "My magic is different, but it's close enough to magicwielder magic that I could get some coaching and learn about it."

"Different how?"

"Well, it only works at night. Strange since that poem called me a lightwielder. You'd think it would be active when there's more light around."

"Our Alpha's mate, Briony, has similar magic." Last year he'd witnessed Briony use her magic during the battle against

Morana, and she only wielded it at night. He'd never asked her anything specific about it, and she didn't use it much around the pack, but he knew she was called a lightwielder.

He briefly told Triska how Briony's magic gave her the ability to heal. "We found out lightwielders are descended from an ancient race called the zorzye. It was thought they'd died out, but the bloodline must still be lingering." He neglected to mention the zorzye died out because they were demi-immortals, only gaining true immortality when they found their bondmate. And their bondmates were the vulk. Many years ago, the vulk decided they would walk their life path alone, never taking a mate, and doomed the zorzye to fade out.

Except it seemed the bloodline still lingered. "Do you think your father ... or your mother could have zorzye blood?"

Triska's lips tightened at the corners. Only a smidge, but he caught it. He knew Triska had loved her mother, but that loving her was complicated. He remembered her mother was a beautiful woman, at times vivacious and laughing, and other times, walking the beach, her eyes vacant and staring.

"Maybe my father ... He's always said he has a few drops of wolfwalker blood, and that's why his family is long-lived, but his mother died in childbirth, and his father left long before that, so he doesn't know much about where he comes from. My mother ... no. Definitely not."

Triska's face took on a closed expression, and he was sorry he'd brought her mother up. "What does your magic do? I saw it was beating back Hoyt's on the beach."

Triska nodded. "Yes, my magic negates magic around me, absorbing and diffusing it. Getting tutored has been challenging since I zap out the surrounding magic." She shifted on her seat. "I don't really use my magic, and few people know about it. Well," she shot him a half smile, "I suppose they know now."

They spent the rest of the evening talking about lighter topics, and other than nights by the fire with the pack telling tales, he'd never been so relaxed.

After Triska yawned for the second time in five minutes, he stood. "I should get going so you can get to bed. I'll stay by your house, keeping watch." A twinge sharpened in his chest at the thought of leaving. It was directly under the rune as if an invisible thread now tied the two of them together.

Triska wrapped her arms around herself and bit her lip, her head tilted down. "You'll probably hunt down the necromancer tomorrow, right?" She gazed up at him under her lashes.

"Definitely."

"And then you'll leave again."

He swallowed thickly. "Yes."

Triska rubbed her chest. "We haven't talked about the rune, yet. It said we have a month together." Huh ... he hadn't thought about the rune. He'd been too focused on catching up. Learning about what Triska was like all grown up.

His chest twinged again. "A month to choose," he corrected. "I know a few things about runes, and Fergal seems to know even more. He may have some insight tomorrow."

"What do you know?"

Hans kept a lot of what happened with his mate private, although he'd shared that he and Briony had both known when the time to make their choice was before them. "We're runebound for the next month. Tied together until we choose."

She raised her head and rubbed her chest again. "Is that why I don't want you to leave? My chest feels funny when I think about it." Her cheeks flushed pink. "I mean, I want to stay up talking to you all night anyway, but if you're going to chase necromancers, you need your sleep. You can stay in the living room and sleep on the sofa, if you'd like?"

He glanced at the sofa; it was at least three feet too small for him. "Okay." The closer he was, the better he could protect her. Right?

They gazed at each other for several long moments until Triska turned and padded silently up the stairs to her bedroom.

He pulled the cushions onto the ground and lay on his back, his arms beneath his head. He'd only snatched a few hours of sleep in the past few days, and his lids were heavy. With a vulk's reflexes, he'd wake instantly if he scented sulfur anywhere nearby.

Did she sleep naked?

He groaned. What could he think about instead? Food? Nope—all he pictured was licking it off her. A tale? Nope—the only ones racing through his mind were the ones with a hero pursuing a heroine, and the bawdy descriptions of what they did when he caught her. Kyril? That might work, his scowling face put a damper on everything.

He tried not to listen for the slight rustling of sheets upstairs and closed his eyes.

AS MIDNIGHT APPROACHED, Triska walked down the stairs, stepping over the squeaky one to get down to the living room. The fire was a lump of black embers, a few streaks of red left in the logs as they held onto the last gasps of flame. Also lighting up the dark room were Juri's golden eyes, watching her as he lay sprawled on the floor with his hands behind his head.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

He sat up. "You can't sneak up on a vulk."

She pointed at the cushions he'd spread in front of the fire. "As I was falling asleep, I realized the couch was far too small, so I wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

His lips curled into a half smile. "I've slept on the floor often, this is fine. Besides, you have a squashy rug."

She smiled, too. "It's just like when you used to sleep on the floor next to my bed because I was afraid of the dark."

He rose to stand, and her breath caught. The hair on his head was ruffled, and his trousers seemed to sit even lower on his hips. In the pale light of the moons shining through the window, he looked every inch the mythical immortal from tales. Ethereal and wild. He didn't seem to fit inside a snug cottage; he seemed destined for dark forests and stark mountains. Places she didn't go.

Ever since the rune let loose with its poem about them and split in half, she ... *felt* ... him in her chest. Like an invisible rope tethered them together. When they were kids, and the

rune showed up, she hadn't felt anything like that. All it did was leave the mark on her skin.

This time was different. And with it came a need to have Juri close. Really close. She'd come down to him because of the couch but also because she'd wanted—needed—him closer.

“And you usually crawled out of bed and lay next to me.” His voice took on a deeper tone, almost a croon.

When they were kids, his mother had converted her sewing room into a small bedroom for Triska because she spent so many nights at the house. Triska's mother would travel, and no one really knew where she went. Most of those nights, Juri ended up sleeping on the floor next to her bed, and she'd crawl down to curl up beside him.

His eyes seemed to gleam. “I hoped maybe that was what you were sneaking down here to do tonight. To curl up next to me.”

Awareness prickled across her skin as they stared at each other. Her clock on the wall, one of the old-fashioned ones with a cuckoo, ticked, and it was the only sound. Five ticks. Ten. “I came to offer you my bed.”

His lips curled into a half grin again. “Och, you don't have to give up your bed for me, but I'll take it.” He strode forward as if to walk upstairs without her.

She grabbed his arm, pulling him toward her. He stood inches away, and her gaze drifted to his chest. His bare chest.

The same awareness built around them, like seeing a bolt of lightning and waiting for the rumble of thunder to follow. They both seemed to be waiting for something. A signal. A change. A moment that signaled a shift from lost childhood friends to something ... else.

“I'll be in bed with you.” She held out a trembling hand for him to take, hoping she hadn't read this wrong, that he wanted it too.

One moment he was in front of her, and in another, he'd swept her into his arms. She squeaked, then laughed. As he

trod softly up the wooden stairs, a faint scudding echoed in the quiet. She ran her hand up his shoulder to put around his neck and a low rumble emanated from his chest. Burrowing closer, she stroked him again. The purring got louder.

At the doorway to her room, he paused. “Your bed is big enough to fit a vulk.” When she’d bought the house, it came with a bed built into the room. It had its own nook along the entire back wall where the roof caused the ceiling to slope downward.

As Juri stepped forward, his ears brushed nets hanging from the exposed rafter, filled with clothes and other odds and ends. She’d set the room up to be like a bunk at sea.

He settled her into the middle of the bed and shifted some blankets, destroying her nice nest.

She sat up. “Hey, I like all my cozies around me when I sleep.”

“I’ll be your cozy.” He lay down and curled around her. She turned so she faced him, both lying on their sides, a few inches apart.

“I like to be warm. Really warm.”

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. His head dipped to her neck, and his breath fanned under her ear. “How’s this?”

She ran her hand up his stomach and over his chest. He went still under her touch, then his rumbling purr started again. “I’ve had worse sleeping arrangements,” she said. She stroked him again. “You’re right, you run nice and warm.”

He remained motionless. Even his chest barely moved as he breathed. She shifted her legs closer, letting her thigh brush against his. Brush against the bulge between his legs.

Her heart pounded, and she inhaled sharply. A truly large bulge. Juri was definitely aroused, yet other than laying his hand along her waist, he hadn’t moved any closer.

She closed the distance between them, letting her fingers trail over his ribs as she ran her hand up and down his side.

This was *Juri*. All these years she'd wondered what he looked like as a vulk. What he felt like. And here he was in her bed. A bed she hated sharing because it was her private nook, but not tonight. Tonight, he belonged here too.

His skin was smooth under her fingertips, taut over defined muscles. His cedar scent washed over her every time she inhaled. Something shifted deep inside her like she'd been starving for something she hadn't known she needed, and finally, she had it. Here. In her bed.

She felt like she was floating. Or in a dream.

His purring smoothed. Became silkier. She gasped and rubbed against him. He rolled, flipping her to her back, settling partially on top of her. But he remained on his forearms, keeping distance between them. "I overheard your friend say you have a suitor."

"What? No, I don't. Someone my father works with is interested, but I'm not." She put her hand on his cheek. "I wouldn't have invited you up here if I was."

His golden eyes darkened. "Good. Otherwise, I'd have to go find him and tell him you're already betrothed."

Even though he must be joking, her chest warmed at his words. "Is that so?"

One of his hands stroked through her hair and gathered it at the nape of her neck, tilting her head back slightly. "I want to taste you."

Her pulse jumped. Her hands went to his shoulders, and her nails bit in. "Yes."

Whatever leash held him back, snapped. He growled low in his throat and closed the distance between them. His tongue dragged up her neck, and she groaned, tilting her head farther back to give him better access. She mewled a soft, strangled note and didn't recognize the sound.

Heaven above, *Juri* was touching her. He was both a wild, powerful vulk and her childhood friend, and she couldn't believe he was here.

She ran her hands over his back and his shoulders, trying to memorize every swoop of muscle, touch every inch of his skin. This wasn't a dream.

She trembled as he nibbled along her jaw then nuzzled over the pulse leaping in the hollow of her throat. His teeth grazed up her neck. A tease. She arched, trying to get as close to him as possible. Juri's tongue was a touch rougher than a man's, his lips, his teeth, skated over her skin in a mix of hard and soft. He couldn't exactly kiss her, but what he did with his mouth was divine.

She kissed along the sharp angle of his cheek, let her lips slide along his jaw in a way similar to what he was doing. The bulge in his pants pressed against her. Much larger than before. He rumbled out a half purr, half groan, and wove one hand in her hair, gently tilting her head to the side as he feasted up her neck.

The room faded. Juri was sweeping her away. Carrying her on waves somewhere she hadn't known she needed to go. "I feel like if I don't touch you, I might die," she whispered. She'd never felt this before. It was lust layered with something potent. Something she didn't understand. "Is it the rune magic?"

His gaze dropped to her mouth. He ran his thumb over her lower lip, and she quivered, then opened her mouth and ran her lower teeth over the pad. He tilted her head up farther until they locked gazes. "No. There's no magic working in this room right now, I'd sense it. This is you and me."

She couldn't hold his gaze. "We both know there can't be a you and me. I remember what your letter said about the vulk." No mates. And even if it was a possibility for him, it wasn't for her. Pain streaked through her chest.

While the vulk couldn't take mates, she *wouldn't* ever take a mate.

Earlier, she'd considered telling Juri about what lay inside the small chest buried at the back of her closet. About how someday, she'd open it, unable to resist its pull any longer. But

she'd decided against it. No need to ruin their pleasant evening with unpleasant things.

He settled back onto his side, putting distance between them. "Aye."

She lowered her gaze to his chest. They should stop, but damn it was hard. He was right *here*. He could still be touching her right now with his massive hands. Using his skilled tongue. "I still want you to sleep next to me, though."

"I might have to build a pillow wall between us to keep my hands off you. Heaven knows you have enough of them." He gestured toward the wall of pillows near their heads.

She turned so she faced away from him, then snuggled back into the lee of his arms. "What about this? Is this better?"

He circled her with his arm, and drew her snug against his chest. "For a vulk, this position is ... enticing." He purred, low and choppy.

She sucked in a breath, warmth pooling in her lower stomach. "All right." She rolled over to face him.

He traced his thumb over her cheek. "Besides, this way, I can look at your face. I've wondered about what you looked like for ages." He stroked the back of his knuckles up the side of her face, then ran his fingers through her hair. Her eyes closed, and she pressed closer.

"Do I look like what you expect?"

"I knew you'd be the most beautiful woman who walked Ulterra. And I was right." He tucked her close, and she fell asleep to his purr vibrating in soft notes against her.

WHEN TRISKA WOKE UP, the first thing she did was reach for Juri—and he wasn't there. A brief flare of panic zipped in her chest, her heart thumping hard, and she sat up.

Her heart rate leveled as she sensed through their bond he remained close. He hadn't gone out hunting for necromancers yet. Since the rune reappeared last night, she'd felt a faint link to Juri. Like she had an added awareness of him.

Triska disentangled herself from her sheets and padded over to her small desk under the large window overlooking her backyard. Along its surface lay the sketches she'd taken out last night. Had Juri seen these? Her hand lingered on one where she'd drawn what she thought Juri might look like as a vulk.

She withdrew the necklace from under her shirt. She'd half expected him to discover it last night, but then again, he'd begun doing wicked things with his tongue. Wicked things that made her want to tear off her clothes and beg him to keep exploring every inch of her body.

She rubbed her chest and frowned. Did he feel the same need to be close to her? Would it fade when the month went away?

She really hoped so, for Juri's sake.

Triska shook her head and scooped the drawings back into the drawer. After washing up, she tugged on a sweater and breeches, her everyday outfit when she wasn't working. However, today was the first time she'd ever looked at her closet and seriously considered buying new clothes from Chessa's shop.

When she walked downstairs, Juri was in her kitchen, pots and pans spread on every surface, staring up at a bit of egg dripping off her ceiling. With his size, he made her kitchen appear pint-sized like it shrank overnight.

He turned toward her, and his gaze heated. She paused mid-step, her heart flipping in her chest. Several times last night he'd glanced at her, and she'd thought his gaze hungry, but now, the way he stared at her went far beyond hungry.

Desire punched through her, wild and fierce, and her breath hitched. Pure lust licked through her veins, making her breasts tingle and between her legs ache.

Juri's pupils dilated and the bowl he held slipped to the ground with a crash. Neither of them jumped at the noise.

“Juri—”

A pounding shot through the room, followed by someone speaking loudly in another language. Juri jerked backward, and the connection between them faded.

Triska ran her hands through her hair; she'd left it down again today. "I think your friend wants to speak to you."

Juri spat out a torrent of words in Vulk, and if she had to guess, they weren't very nice ones. He stomped to the front door and hauled it open. Kyril stood there, his hand raised to pound on the door again. The two of them spoke heatedly in Vulk.

Triska walked around the counter into the kitchen. As Juri spoke with Kyril, she slid the eggs on the stove onto a plate and placed it on the counter.

A loud yell shot through the house.

Triska raced out of the kitchen to the front door, heart pounding. Was the necromancer back?

When she reached Juri at the door, she snuggled against him to peer outside. No one was around except Kyril and Al, who stood a few feet in front of her front door like he did every morning.

Kyril's eyes were wide, and he pointed at the bird. "What in the name of Perun is that?" He stepped back from the path.

Al flapped his wings and brayed, not concerned about the vult.

Triska frowned. "Stop annoying him. He's an albatross, and he's here for breakfast." She ducked back inside and tossed some herring from her icebox into a bowl.

When she returned, Juri had walked out to join Kyril, staring at him with a wide grin. "You're afraid of birds."

Kyril growled, but he still stared at Al. "Birds hold a lot of hate inside, and they don't blink. It's creepy. You never know when one will jump on your back and peck at you."

Juri's grin widened. "Don't worry, I'll make sure no wee birdies fly near you when we're patrolling the forest today."

Kyril snarled and responded in Vulk, and Juri laughed, throwing his head back.

Triska's stomach flipped. He was so handsome, yet also ... primal. Even the way he moved was like a supreme predator, all coiled energy as if he might spring and attack any moment. But he was still Juri—her best friend and the only one who could make her laugh until she thought she'd burst a rib.

“Better hope no cockatrice show up, you might faint,” Juri said, dodging as Kyril swiped at him.

Kyril nodded toward the road. “Let's go.”

“Do you want your breakfast?” Triska asked.

Juri rubbed his mouth. “Definitely.” His expression turned sheepish. “I left a bit of a mess. It's been a while since I cooked in a human kitchen.”

Kyril harumphed.

Triska scooted inside and wrapped some eggs in two pieces of toast. She brought them out to Kyril and Juri. Kyril stared at the meal in her hand as if she held something dangerous, then slowly took it from her. “Thanks,” he said gruffly, then turned to the road, hopping over the gate instead of opening it.

Juri frowned. “Kyril's right, I need to go with him and do some searching this morning. I'll meet you down at Fergal's a bit later. I'm going to stick close, though.”

A door opened next door, and Hazel walked into her front yard. Although they'd had a few frosts come through, Hazel's front garden was still lush and green, with tomatoes hanging on the vines and sunflowers providing a flash of golden color. Triska suspected Hazel was using magic, but she hadn't caught her yet. “I'm here, so she's plenty safe,” Hazel said.

“Do you normally listen to other conversations?” Juri asked, scowling. “You live next door?”

Hazel gestured back at her front door. “As you can see.”

Juri growled. “I don't know, you seem like the type to break in and make yourself at home.” He strode to the hedge.

“Stay with Triska until I meet up with her later. If something happens, send an alert with magic.”

Hazel’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t take orders from anyone.” Her gaze flickered to Triska, and her expression softened. “She’s safer with me than she is with you, and I don’t *need* to be asked to protect my friend. I was out there fighting the necromancer’s spell too.”

“Good.”

The two glared at each other, and Triska thought the hedge might burst into flames. She rolled her eyes. “Okay, that’s enough neighborly chat this morning, I think. We all need to work together.” She turned to Juri. “I’ll meet you at Fergal’s later.”

“All right.” His hand not holding the egg sandwich, wrapped around her lower back, drawing her close in a one-armed hug. His lips teased along her neck. “I’ll know if you need me. I can sort of sense you with the rune,” he whispered.

As he stepped back, she raised a brow. “And I’ll know if you need me.”

He didn’t say anything, but his lips quirked. Then he turned and left.

Hazel let herself in through the front gate and stomped after Triska into the house. She walked two steps inside, entered the kitchen, and gasped. “Look at this disaster.” Her fingers twitched. “There’s even egg on the ceiling.”

Triska glanced up to where another drop of yolk hung precariously, about to fall. “I’m not sure how he did that.”

Hazel rolled up the sleeves of her red cloak and grabbed a cloth. “Typical vulk, they make a mess of everything no matter where they go or what they do.”

Triska raised a brow and joined her. “How well do you know the vulk? You’ve never mentioned them. And seriously Hazel, go sit and eat the rest of the eggs, I’ve got this.”

Hazel’s cheeks flushed pink, and she turned to scrub the stove. “I can’t be in this room like this. I need to fix it. And the

vulk ... I crossed paths with one of them a while ago. It wasn't a pleasant experience." She paused and spun around. "Did that vulk *sleep* here last night." She pointed at the cushions still on the floor in the living room.

Triska shrugged. "I wasn't about to make him walk around in the cold all night."

"I would have." Hazel turned back to the stove. "What about Emil? You going to tell him you let a strange male sleep in your house when you wouldn't let him?"

"Juri isn't a stranger, we used to be close." As she and Hazel put the rest of the kitchen back to rights, she explained about their childhood friendship until Juri had moved away.

"After all this time, you still remembered him?" Hazel asked. "I mean, I had a few childhood friends, but we outgrew each other ages ago. You, Chessa, and Briony are my friends now."

"Juri talked about her last night, too. I didn't know your Briony was mated to a vulk."

Hazel nodded. "She's married to the vulk Alpha. They had a fancy wedding and everything. They didn't invite me." She crossed her arms. "Because the white-furred asshole was there. He's the Alpha's brother, and they were afraid I might zap him if we spent too much time together."

Triska stared. "This white-furred asshole is the vulk you crossed paths with before?"

Hazel nodded.

"Would you use your magic on him?"

An odd expression crossed Hazel's face, almost as if she were in pain. Just as quickly, it passed. "Eh, probably not. He's had enough magic used on him." She scowled. "He has a gift for making me angry, though."

Triska put her hand on her chest, feeling the necklace underneath her sweater. "Juri never made me angry." No, he'd been a mischievous rascal who always looked after her and told her stories. She shook her head. "You're right, it was a

long time ago, but it's not so weird to stay in touch with old friends. Chessa and I met in grade school, and we're still friends, too."

Hazel waved her hand. "Chessa won't let anyone forget her. The vulk, though, it's best if you try to forget him. They have no capacity to care about anyone but their pack." Her lips tightened. "All they desire is to kill spawn and other monsters. They may have lust, but they have no capability to love. They don't have souls."

Triska froze. "You know about that? Do you know why?"

Hazel shrugged. "It's the swap they made to be the biggest and toughest beasts in Ulterra. They're practically unkillable. Even magic doesn't work much on them."

"Wait, you said your friend married a vulk, though?"

Hazel snorted. "Yeah, I don't know how that happened because the vulk don't take mates. Ask Juri or the angry one, and they'll tell you. It's part of their creed." Hazel studied Triska. "Besides, you have a handsome eaglewalker courting you."

She ignored the comment about Emil. "I know they don't take mates."

Hazel's eyes narrowed. "Make sure you don't forget."

She sighed. "Let's finish breakfast and head down to Fergal to see if he's discovered anything."

FERGAL STOOD in front of his shop next to Juri, a brass telescope held to his eye. “This fog is as thick as Hildegard’s chowder. I can’t see a darn thing. We need to go out in my boat.”

Back when Juri had lived here, Hildegard, the tavern owner, made only two things well—fish and chips and clam chowder. She was famous for her other attempts, and their failures. Had her menu improved since then?

Juri rubbed his neck. “Could the necromancers be on the isle?” He and Kyril had searched all morning, and not a whiff of sulfur or Hoyt’s musty scent anywhere. “And will we even be able to get close to it?” One legend of the vanishing isle was that anyone who approached it, could never reach it.

“Magicwielders have tried to get on and off the vanishing isle and never succeeded. But no one has ever called it forward, either. We’ll see what happens.”

“And what about the scrying bowl? Where did that end up?”

Fergal toed a large black velvet sack that lay at his feet. “The bowl is safe now, but we need to keep it with us. Always.”

“Why?”

But Fergal ignored him, peering through his telescope again.

Juri squinted. The fog was like soup swirling around the isle. A light mist over the boardwalk made the colorful awnings and Autumn Festival celebrations seem brighter.

Other than Fergal, Triska, Hazel, and the two vulk, only a few villagers scurried along the boardwalk as they walked to the shops. They kept glancing nervously at the group, although perhaps Kyril's glowering didn't help.

"The necromancer said he wanted to raise the island to perform an incantation on it. Any idea what that could be?"

Fergal scratched his nose. "Nope. Let's go and see what we can find."

"And he promised the Dark Cabal they'd be included."

Fergal shook his head. "Dark Cabal? What idiots—you'd think they'd come up with a more inventive name."

Juri chuffed. "Well, it gets to the point, I suppose. But when I start my own dark cult, I'll name it something like The Paramours of the Fleshly Beast. Has a nice ring to it and it's a bit more mysterious."

Triska placed her forearms on the railing, leaning to peer farther along the beach. Bent forward like that, her breeches tightened over her backside. She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. "How many paramours are you planning on having in this cult of yours?"

His cock thickened, and he bit back a groan. He wanted to rip her clothes off, keep her tucked under him in that exact position, and give her so much pleasure she forgot everything except how to say his name. *His* name. No other. "The right amount."

"Oy!" Steps rang out as the mayor entered the boardwalk from the road and strode over the wooden planks to join them. "I think I've convinced everyone we're safe," he said. He scanned the boardwalk and frowned. "Although perhaps people are still a bit nervous about walking around."

Mayor Burr rocked on his heels and peered up at the two vulk. "I'll need both of you to patrol the grounds and be visible. The villagers will like that security. Already the story

about how the necromancers ran in fear because of a few snarls from the vulk is all over town.”

The mayor’s gaze flickered over Kyril, who still stood with his arms crossed and a hint of teeth showing. “I want the townsfolk to feel safe, and I’m glad you look scary, but can you try to appear less,” he waved his hand, “like you’re going to eat someone?”

There weren’t many willing to order a vulk around; Juri was almost impressed by the bollocks on this human. Kyril growled. “We’ll be searching for the necros.”

The mayor jiggled whatever was in his pocket. “Fine, fine, but no reason you can’t also scoot through town and focus your hunt there so everyone can see you.”

Kyril’s mouth dropped open, and Juri bit back a smile. “Yes, Kyril,” Juri said. “I think you should *scoot* along the main road so the villagers can admire you and your strength.”

Kyril turned to him, his eyes glinting red. If they were alone, Kyril would have pounced on him and started a sparring session.

Fergal snapped his telescope closed and shoved it in his pocket. “All right, you and you,” Fergal pointed at him and Triska, “you’re coming with me in my boat. We need to see what the isle offers.”

“Hold on, I need a word.” The mayor waved Fergal over, and as they spoke together, Juri lowered his voice and asked Triska, “Are we sure Fergal is the best one to partner with about all this magic stuff?”

“Yes, he’s the one who tutored me in my magic,” she whispered back. “He used to be the dean at Herskala Academy, but he left there after a disagreement. I’m not sure exactly what happened.”

What? *Fergal*? Juri scratched his head.

The mayor was still talking, but without a word, Fergal turned on his heel and marched down the boardwalk toward the docks. Juri was beginning to like the old goat.

Kyril bumped him with his shoulder and said in Vulk, “You going with the old man or staying here? You really think the necromancers sailed to the island last night?”

Juri turned toward the docks. “I doubt it, the waves were pretty fierce.” He ran his hand over his head. “If they aren’t there yet, they will be soon. Hoyt wants to get on that island. Since he raised the isle, I doubt he wants to attack the town anymore but keep a careful watch.”

Kyril growled low enough for only Juri to hear. “You sure you aren’t simply taking a nice mid-day cruise with your human?”

Juri scanned the choppy waves in the bay. The wind came from the west, hurling the waves onto the beach. It wouldn’t be a pleasurable ride. “I don’t like boats either,” he answered in the common tongue.

Triska poked his arm. “You don’t like boats, or you’re hopeless at sailing? Remember the tiny skiff I had? I have no idea how you capsized it as often as you did.”

“Yeah ... well ... I was bigger than you. It made the boat tipsy.”

He nodded a goodbye to Kyril, and he and Triska walked toward the dock, her boots scuffing over the spray of sand along the wooden planks and his claws clicking dully. He inhaled deeply, letting the salty air fill his lungs, and catching the tiniest hint of the blackthorn flowers of her scent.

She nudged him, and small sparks of warmth whirled in his chest. “Grown men sail skiffs that size all the time, and they don’t end up in the water.”

He put a hand on his chest. “Clearly, I’m a beast of the land.”

Triska halted, and he stopped too. “You aren’t a beast.” They were only a few inches apart, her arm touching his. “You’re a vulk. The most powerful immortal in Ulterra.”

Her touch was almost as light as the wind, but it seared him. An answering kick of heat flared through his blood. He didn’t want her to stop touching him. “You should stay here in

Ryba with Kyril. Let me go out on the boat with Fergal. Just in case Hoyt targets you again.”

Her chin jerked up and her mouth set. Exactly the same way it always had when he'd try to tell her not to follow him up a tall tree or off a high cliff. His arguments never worked, she followed him anyway.

She pointed at her chest. “We're stuck together, and I need to look out for you.” She waved her hand at the boardwalk. “Besides, Hoyt attacked my people. He doesn't get away with that. I can help. I got the upper hand last night.”

He pointed at the sky. “But it's daytime now. Your magic isn't present.”

“Fergal asked for us *both*.”

“Fergal isn't leading this party. I am.”

Her lips tightened. “I'm coming with you. The rune binds us together. If you're in danger, I'm in danger. And ...” she glanced down, her dark lashes brushing her cheeks. “If you kill Hoyt today, you leave tomorrow. I want to spend more time with you.”

How was he supposed to argue with that? He wanted the same thing. But he wasn't putting her in danger again. It simply wasn't going to happen.

She shook her head. “You have the same expression you had as a kid. Mule-face. The one when you want to get your own way. Too bad. Even if I have to leap on Fergal's boat when it leaves the dock, I'm going. Besides, he can't sail it alone.”

He rubbed his mouth and frowned. “A vulk doesn't look like a mule.”

But she'd already turned on her heel and continued after Fergal.

Walking toward the boat, he snagged her hand and tucked it in his, the way he'd seen Hans hold Briony's back at the pack den. Guess she was coming with him. A slight warmth in

his chest bloomed even as he considered how he could make sure she remained safe at all times.

They strode up to Fergal. “Make yourselves useful,” He shouted as he swung himself along the deck, untying lines, moving with the speed of a much younger man. They’d reached the berth for Fergal’s sloop—a single-masted sailboat about thirty feet long, with two sails furled while in dock.

Juri studied it dubiously, then rubbed Triska’s fingers with his thumb. “Don’t let me capsize this thing, yeah?”

“I’ll keep us afloat.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, Triska balanced on spread legs, one hand gripping a rope line. She'd pulled her hair back, and her long braid streamed behind her as she rode the bow up and down with the waves. The lure of the sea whispered over her skin. Trilled its seductive fingers down the back of her neck and across her cheek.

Come. Play among the waves.

She clutched the rope line harder and let it bite into her palm. Being out on the water, especially going so far out toward the open ocean, she'd known the pull of it would suck at her, but it was far worse than she'd expected. Every day she sailed on the sea and conquered it, yet over the past few days, it seduced a little longer. A little more ardently.

One day, it was going to win.

The sails slapped as the boat crested another wave, water spraying over the bow and over her oil-skinned boots. Behind her, a shirtless Juri clutched at a rigging line with both hands near Fergal at the helm. They'd entered the area around the vanishing isle, and the fog was a white shroud around them, limiting visibility to fifty feet, making it impossible to tell what the coastline looked like. Rocks could appear any moment, and they wouldn't have much warning.

The ship crested another wave, but as they slammed down the other side, the fog engulfed the boat, reducing visibility to mere feet in front of them. Only a dull gleam flashed port side, showing the location of the lighthouse.

The wind stopped as if the air had been sucked away. Above her, the sails flagged, and the ocean's waves smoothed to glass. "What the uit?" Juri cursed.

With no wind, the sailboat evened out and slowed down, the only noise the water splashing along its sides.

Triska turned. "What's going on?"

"Hold the helm," Fergal told Juri. Juri took the ship's steering wheel as if it might bite him. Fergal leaned over the side, peering down, dangerously close to toppling overboard. Triska swung along the deck to get close enough to grab his shirt, just in case he tipped.

A large splash, much louder than the waves, shot through the fog. Triska jumped and peered at the water. A large circle of ripples appeared a few feet from the side of the boat. If something was there, the fog obscured it.

"Triska, come back here with me."

"What is it?" She stepped along the deck to Juri's side.

"Something's out there." He growled. "I can't see a damn thing through this fog." The hair on the back of his neck was up, the way she'd seen it when they'd been on the beach battling Hoyt last night.

"I've never seen the bay like this before. The water is so still, it's like we're on a lake."

Juri's claws extended along the helm. "It's not natural. There any whales or seals still around?"

Triska shook her head. "No, it's too late in the season."

"I didn't think so. But something large made that splash."

She agreed and tried to peer through the fog. Fergal joined them and batted at Juri to release the helm. "Claws back in, don't scratch my boat." He held his telescope to his eye. "Ah, only a bit farther now."

Juri's eyes narrowed. "Let me look through that thing. I don't think that's a normal telescope."

Fergal pointed. "I think you'd rather look at that."

Triska gasped and huddled closer to Juri. The fog parted, pulling back like a curtain, and the island appeared. They were almost close enough they could swim to shore if they wanted. It would be a long swim, but possible. However, with the water behaving so strangely, she didn't want to enter it. Fergal adjusted the wheel, and the boat sluggishly responded, keeling port side as Fergal aimed for a thin strip of beach to the left. "It's definitely the vanishing isle. Eynhallow."

"The vanishing isle is called Eynhallow?" she asked.

In answer, Juri recited,

*"Eynhallow fair, Eynhallow free,
Eynhallow stands in the middle of the sea.
With a roaring roost on either side,
Eynhallow stands in the middle of the tide."*

Triska and Fergal stared at him, and Juri shrugged. "It's an old rhyme about the vanishing isle."

"Ayup, that's the one." Fergal snapped his telescope shut and gestured toward the limp sails. "We're stuck at a crawl for a bit. Now is the time to have a chat."

Juri crossed his arms. "Let's start with you knowing Hoyt," he said.

Fergal lifted a finger. "I knew him back when he was a boy in school. His family kicked him out for not having enough magic to suit them." Fergal's expression darkened.

Triska nodded. "Hazel has only mentioned it once, but her family cast her out, too. Do they all do this?"

"Most." Fergal sighed. "Magicwielding families tend to have many children, aiming to cultivate as much magic as possible. They only want heirs who will increase their power." He shook his head. "The caste system we have, and the shunning involved with it, is ridiculous. I spent my time at the academy working to defeat it, but ... now I make taffy." He squared his shoulders. "You weren't in Ryba by accident. You were chasing these necromancers?"

Juri told them both how he'd pursued Hoyt, describing his battle with the necromancer in the sewers below the city. She noticed he was vague on why he'd followed Hoyt to Coromesto though, only saying Hoyt had angered the vulk.

Triska stared up at him, her lips slightly parted. This was Juri's life? This was what he did every day? It was ... amazing. *He* was amazing. Fergal peppered him with questions about the magic the necromancer had used, especially how Hoyt drained the hooded man and how he'd spoken about gaining more power with shuwt.

"What is shuwt?" Juri asked.

Fergal frowned. "You're certain he said shuwt?"

Juri nodded. "He said that word at least three times."

Fergal's brow wrinkled, making him look even more like a raisin. "It's the life energy of every being. When we die, it's said that our essence, our shuwt, moves on." He gestured toward Juri. "It's believed that the shuwt of those who've lived less than honorably ends up in Peklo, swirling around for eternity. It's not the first time I've heard the theory that someone skilled enough could call forth the shuwt of the underworld to fuel their power."

"It's a soul?" Triska asked.

Fergal shook his head. "Shuwt is much more complex. You can give away bits of your shuwt—like Juri described Hoyt taking from his companion in the sewers—without killing the other person, but you can't take a bit of a soul, only the whole thing." He eyed Juri. "The leshak take souls, and they kill when they do."

A splash came from somewhere behind the stern of the boat, like a large stone had been thrown in the water. Juri and Triska both wheeled around, but once again, all she caught were ripples.

Triska shuddered. "The leshak?"

Juri draped his arm around her. "Don't worry. No leshak can kill a vulk. And they aren't around anymore." The leshak,

souldrinkers, were terrible creatures, and no longer roamed the earth because of the vulk.

Was the reason a leshak couldn't kill a vulk because the vulk had no souls? Hazel said they made a trade to become the most powerful beings in Ulterra. She glanced at Juri. Was that really true ... how did he live without his soul?

“Did you discover anything else about our rune?”

Fergal studied him. “How does a *vulk* know about runes? Vulk aren't interested in magic.”

A puff of wind filled the sails half-heartedly, giving the boat a touch of forward momentum. “I was there last year when the Forest Mother explained about them. I traveled with my Alpha to visit her when a rune showed up between him and a human female. The Forest Mother had a book about runes, but she said the same thing you did. That they act in unexpected ways, and she wasn't sure what the purpose was in binding my Alpha with another.”

Fergal hooted. “That old crone? Is she still mucking around in her swamp? Back when I was dean, she used to show up asking if I was reading the signs, treating me like some kind of fresh-faced lad.”

Triska shot Juri a bemused look. “What signs?”

Fergal only waved his hand. “Back to the rune. The two of you are runebound for the next month. I can ask the rune to repeat the poem if you want to hear it again. They don't normally speak, you know.”

Triska glanced at Juri. “I remember what it said. Do you?”

“I remember every word.” He turned to Fergal. “You figured out how to work with the rune?”

“A few of my ancient books—” Fergal grinned. “Well, a few of Herskala Academy's precious tomes I had in my possession when it was deemed that I would no longer be dean, have a few notes about rune magic. I kept them safe with me when I left.”

Triska chuckled. “Of course.”

Fergal cackled. “The rune offered you a choice. I’m not sure why it targeted you, but it has its reasons. Think carefully before you decide. The fate of more than just the two of you may be at stake.”

Juri snorted. “That’s comforting.”

Fergal’s lips tightened. “At the next full moon, the rune will fade away if you don’t make a choice, but keep it safe until then.” A chill slid down Triska’s back. She remembered the sharp pain when Hoyt shot magic at the rune. It felt like he’d stabbed her in the chest.

Juri locked eyes with Triska. “So, you’re saying I should guard Triska day ... and night?”

Fergal cackled again. “Her magic works at night. She can guard you.”

He remained staring at her, his golden eyes darkening. “Good,” he said. “I’ll need a thorough watching over.”

Triska’s lips parted a fraction, and her skin tingled as if longing to be touched. Another splash, this time closer.

They both leaped to the side of the deck. She leaned forward, trying to see more of the water. She bumped him with her shoulder. “Maybe there’s a vedogon down there?”

He groaned. “Oh, come on. They exist. You know they exist.”

Triska laughed. As a kid, Juri insisted that the rumors of a fish as large as a whale with huge spikes on its back were real, not a yarn made up by sailors. “Right. Sure, they do. Teeth as long as your arm. Poisonous spines along their back. When are you going to admit you made that up?”

“When I catch one, I’ll make sure you’re the first one I show.”

“Good.”

He nudged her back with his shoulder. “I’ve tracked every kind of beast in Ulterra. I’ll find it.”

“You have? Is that something the vulk do?”

“All vulk like to hunt, but I’m a tracker. The only one in the pack.”

She stared at him as the fog thickened around them the closer they got to the island. A warm fog, like a hot breath. “What does it mean to be a tracker?”

“My senses are more attuned than other vulk, and I enjoy hunting things. The more challenging, the better. When I set my sights on something, I don’t give up until I get it.”

She inhaled sharply, and her heart rate sped up. His face was inches from hers. Every time he was this close, and she could study his face was a reward. A prize. She’d spent years yearning to know what he looked like as a vulk. Tried to draw him in strong, bold lines. Now she could look at him all she liked.

Her chest warmed the longer she gazed at him.

He snagged his arm around her waist and drew her close again. The same heat that sparked between them earlier stirred, charging the surrounding air. Warmth spread through her limbs, followed by a kick of desire. Triska licked her lips, and his gaze dropped to her mouth.

“All right, you two, stop doing the bear. We have more to discuss,” Fergal said.

Triska laughed again. “Doing the bear? No one’s said that in ages.” It was an old term for courtship when two lovers frequently hugged.

She shook her head and walked back to the helm, Juri behind her. The boat rolled over a wave, and he skidded, his claws scratching on the wood deck. “Why do I look like a drunken idiot when I try to walk on this thing, and you stroll across it like you’re dancing?”

She turned to him and tossed her head. “I have a natural athleticism you don’t have.”

“Is that right?” His gaze heated again. “Care to show me some other moves?”

She raised a brow. “Maybe later.”

The side of his mouth curled up as he reached Fergal. “Now, tell me about the scrying bowl—”

A giant mass sprang from the water.

Juri snarled and grabbed her, pulling her backward as a sea serpent with blue, glittering scales crashed into the boat’s starboard side.

The serpent didn’t seem to notice them as it wrapped itself around the bow of the boat, its long body easily twining around it. Like a dragon, layers of horns rimmed the crown of its head and its jowls, and it had four squat limbs, fat and stocky. It opened its mouth, revealing double rows of sharp teeth, and lunged forward, biting the boat.

For a moment, no one moved. It was like watching some kind of bizarre puppy gnawing a bone. A puppy twice the size of their boat.

The boat keeled to the right as the—dragon? Serpent?—shifted its weight.

They tumbled to the deck. “Hold on to me!” Juri shouted. She clung to his neck as he grabbed the side of the boat to stop them from sliding.

The ship leaned farther sideways; if Juri hadn’t held on, they’d have tumbled into the water. “I thought you told me you’d make sure the ship didn’t capsize,” he said.

“Boats seem to hate you. You have a real gift.” She wrapped her arms and legs around him and ducked her head into his chest as the serpent splashed a cascade of water over them. The water was ... warm. Not the icy cold of the bay.

Fergal clung to the helm, one hand raised and golden light glittering in his palm. “This damn serpent is eating my boat!” A flash of white light whizzed past. “Shoo!” Fergal shouted. There was a rush of water, and the boat lurched back upright with a shuddering jerk. The serpent shifted its bulk, not letting go.

Juri leaped to his feet. “Shoo? It’s not a damn bug. I’ll take care of it.”

He helped Triska up, his hand lingering on her waist. She clutched at him. “No! Let Fergal use his magic!”

One of Juri’s brows rose as if he were amused by her. “It’s only a wee little guy. Barely larger than an eel. Stay back with Fergal.”

She pointed. “Have you seen one of them before?”

He shrugged. “Nah, but I’ve seen plenty other creatures. It’ll be all right.” He shot her a cheeky grin, then leaped toward the bow and roared.

The serpent froze, eyed Juri, then thrashed its tail. The boat shot toward the island, and spray splashed across the deck, drenching everyone. Triska spluttered and wiped her eyes.

Fergal desperately spun the wheel, but they continued hurtling toward the island.

“Better hold on, it’s going to get bumpy,” Fergal shouted.

Juri lunged at one of the serpent’s legs. The beast clutched the boat harder, as if it had discovered a prize and refused to relinquish it. It slapped its tail at Juri as if swatting a pesky fly. Juri roared again, and the serpent-dragon released the boat from its jaws, hissed, then uncoiled and slipped back into the water.

The boat groaned and righted itself, still listing port side, even though the serpent no longer clung to it.

The boat shuddered and with a jolt, churned forward. Juri clawed across the deck toward the bow, and Triska swung along after him, holding onto the overhead ropes.

The serpent held the boat by the anchor line, pulling them through the water. Its blue scales revealed hints of emerald and burgundy—kind of pretty, actually. Juri gestured toward the stern. “Go back with Fergal. This thing might jump up again.”

She raised a brow. “I thought you said it was practically an eel?” They both studied the serpent as it wriggled effortlessly through the water in a rather eel-like way. “It doesn’t seem to want to eat us.”

“Nope.”

“It’s a damn zmey,” Fergal yelled from behind them. “I thought they’d all died off.”

“Zmey?” Juri said. “You think? I thought they were huge?”

Fergal snorted. “This one is a baby.”

“What’s a zmey?” Triska asked.

“Sea dragon. I’ve never heard of one eating anything other than birds or fish, but we need to get it away from the boat before it sinks us.” Juri leaned over and roared. The boat lurched to a stop. Triska skidded forward, and he caught her before she fell. The serpent emerged in front of their boat, his head and back clear of the water.

Triska pointed down at the waves. “We’ve hit ground! The water here is shallow.”

Dead ahead was the beach, framed with thick trees making an imposing dark green wall with wisps of fog curling from the canopy. The pressing clouds prevented the suns from peeking through, resulting in a murky light.

Juri leaned over the side of the deck. “That’s good because we need to get off this boat. It’s in awful shape.” He pointed. “Hey, look at this.”

Schools of bright yellow and red fish darted around, and a light green seaweed waved gracefully. “Those aren’t fish from Ryba bay,” she said.

He frowned and drew back. “We’re beached. And the serpent damaged the hull, so we’re stuck here.”

“If we don’t return, my father will come out looking for us. We’ll get home.”

Juri nodded. “That’s true. And Kyril will get tired of dealing with the mayor and demand someone fetch me.” He looked around. “Well, we’re here. Let’s explore and find out why a bunch of necromancers wanted to raise this isle from whatever hole it existed in.”

Triska nodded and looked toward shore.

TRISKA'S STOMACH LURCHED. A mist hung in the air, trailing web-like threads of moisture across her face. From a distance, the island appeared dark and wreathed in shadows. As they'd drawn closer, the reason appeared. Unlike the sugary sands of Ryba that rose and fell in sweeping dunes, the island's sand was black and compact, casting a pall across the landscape.

Trees loomed ahead of them. Moss coated their trunks and branches, making them look like tall green hairy people with too many limbs. A small boat, similar to her own skiff but made of a wood she didn't recognize, lay lashed to a mooring. She gestured toward it. "Someone is around."

Juri put his arm around her. "Could necromancers have sailed here last night?"

She shook her head. "The swells topped ten feet. They'd overtake a small boat like that easily."

"That's what I thought."

The serpent launched itself onto shore, shaking out its scales. It lumbered along the beach, tripped on a boulder coated in moss, and fell flat on its face. It scrambled back up, its tail drooping as if embarrassed. "You know about sea dragons?"

He tucked her under his arm, and she snuggled closer. Exactly how she'd always leaned against him when they were kids. "Have you heard the tale of the Argonauts and the sea dragon?"

She shook her head.

His eyes crinkled in the subtle way she'd already learned meant he was happy. He was quick with a grin, but when he was truly happy, it shone through his eyes. His beautiful, golden eyes. "That story is all about a sea dragon destroying a boat. I'll tell you tonight."

Strange bird calls punctuated the air with long wailing notes. Despite being wet, the air was not chilly, and she shoved the sleeves of her sweater up to her elbows.

Fergal shuffled to their side. "Well, let's see what that creature did to my boat."

He bent over to study the damage to the hull and pointed at a long white tooth impaled in the wood on the deck. "Apparently, he's teething and decided my boat was a good toy. All right, let's get off." Fergal easily leaped off the side of the boat into the waist-deep water. She shook her head. The magicwielder may have white hair, but he defied all attempts to guess his age.

Triska glanced back at the dragon, who'd turned its head toward the woods as if it heard something. "Will the zmey bother us?"

Juri jumped down into the water and reached for Triska. "Nah, he's just a wee beastie, I'll make sure he stays in line. Besides, they can't move well on land. And all the stories about them are about them attacking boats, not people." He gestured towards the damage to the hull. "They must have a thing for them."

She bent, removed her boots, and rolled her pant legs up. When she swung her leg over the side, Juri asked, "Do you want me to carry you to shore?"

"It's warm here, I don't mind wading."

She held her boots in one hand as he plucked her from the deck. He didn't lower her into the water—only knee high on him—but held her for a moment. "Are you sure? I don't mind carrying you." His gaze had drifted down to her bare calves, and his throat flexed as he swallowed. "I wouldn't want a crab to go after your feet."

Her free hand skated over his chest. “Mm ... I’m in the water all the time, and so far, that has never happened.”

“Hurry, you two. Stop canoodling,” Fergal called from the beach.

“Canoodling?” Triska said. “How many ancient terms is he going to use today? And why do I feel like I’m back in school getting in trouble?” She smiled.

“If I were canoodling, I’d be doing much more than holding you.” His lip curled into a half smile. He slowly dropped Triska into the water, and let go.

The water in Ryba bay never got this warm, even in late summer. It wasn’t like bathwater, but it was comfortable enough to swim in without catching a chill, even with the suns barely peeking through the mist. Juri took her boots, and the two of them waded through the warm water toward shore.

A high-pitched unearthly shriek rang through the air.

Juri crouched, his claws coming out, and tucked her against him. “Quick, put your boots back on.” She tugged them on in quick yanks. “Come on.” He hurried her toward the shore.

“What is it?”

“That’s a harpy’s cry.” His eyes flashed red as his head went up, scanning the sky.

On the beach, the dragon scrambled toward the forest and started down a wooden path. It glanced over its shoulder and yowled at them as if beckoning them to follow its bulk along the narrow road.

“It’ll be safer if we get under the trees,” Juri said, hurrying her. Underfoot, the wooden walkway vibrated and flexed with each of the dragon’s steps as it crashed along. Squat plants, built like fat-bottomed vases, stood a few feet tall and lined the path. Their variegated spiky leaves were a dark green and lemony yellow. Juri batted them away before they brushed against her.

“Where are we going?” she asked as they jogged along. A rabbit sized, reddish-brown creature with two large black eyes that filled its triangular face, raced past them.

Juri slowed, cocking his head. “Towards those cries. I can hear a man cursing, and there’s a faint hint of magic. I want to check it out.”

“What about the harpy?” They resumed jogging.

Juri chuffed. “This is what I do, Triska. I take care of spawn from the underworld. Or, in this case, immortals that have left Peklo and are dangerous to humans.”

The path curled around a dense patch of pine trees, these only a foot or two taller than Juri and populated with spiky fronds wrapped in thick moss. The wooden path widened as they rounded the bend, and the forest ended, revealing a wide meadow filled with waist-high grass and purple lupine.

Claws extended, two harpies circled above the head of a man standing in the center of the clearing firing violet-tinged magic at them. He had long black hair and wore a tunic and trousers, a deep blue cloak was clasped at his neck and billowed behind him. According to Chessa, cloaks went out of style ages ago.

The dragon yowled and waddled faster to join the man, flattening the grass in its wake.

“Well, it’s not Hoyt,” Juri said.

Fergal huffed. “Of course not. That’s sorcerer level magic he’s casting. Well, he’s attempting to cast it.”

A purple blast whizzed past one harpy without hitting her, and the harpy dove, the man dodging in the nick of time.

Juri grunted. “As far as I’m concerned, magic is magic. I guess I should go help before he gets himself killed. Stay back here under the trees with Fergal. Harpies use their venom to turn women into one of them.” He pointed at the forest. “They fight by air. If one gets by me, run into the thickest part of the forest. They won’t pursue.”

She nodded, her heart galloping in her chest.

“Don’t worry, though, I won’t let them come near you.” Juri turned to Fergal. “If a harpy gets past me, Triska better not have to run. You have magic. Take care of it.” He turned and stalked toward the fight, his claws lengthening.

The harpies let out a terrible screech. They had scraggly whitish hair framing vulture-like heads, and unnaturally large hands, each finger tipped in a long, deadly claw. They moved higher in the air, tilting their heads as they surveyed Juri and the cloaked man.

Juri spoke to the other man, and he answered, but she couldn’t hear what they said. “Is Juri safe? Are you sure that man isn’t a necromancer? What if he blasts Juri?”

Fergal stepped farther into the meadow. “No, he isn’t a necromancer. At the rate that sorcerer’s going, he might hit Juri by accident, but for sorcerer magic, it’s weak and pitiful, and Juri’s a volk. Magic doesn’t bother him. Don’t worry.”

Triska twisted her fingers together. Last night, the necromancer had hit Juri in the chest with magic, and it *had* affected him. Hoyt had even mentioned it aloud, saying he didn’t understand why his magic sometimes worked against the volk. Was it all magic, or just the magic the necromancer had used?

One harpy dove at Juri, claws slashing. Juri remained in place, only twisting at the last moment. The harpy’s claws lashed past his face without making contact. He leaped, so swift he was only a blur, far higher than a man could ever go, and hit the harpy in her side. His claws dug deep, and black blood flew.

Triska flinched as Juri slammed the harpy to the ground. The grass swallowed the harpy’s last throes, her screech dying in the air.

Juri’s attack was smooth and perfectly timed. That of a powerful immortal. She placed a hand on her chest, her heart pounding. He was magnificent.

The man in the cloak had less luck. He blasted the harpy above him, but she shook off his magic, her claws getting

closer and closer. The dragon wound around the man and roared at the harpy.

“A flightless dragon,” the harpy screeched. The harpy’s shrill piercing cries clawed at her eardrums, and Triska clapped her hands over her ears.

Fergal shook his head and tsked. “That’s atrocious. He’s using air magic against an air immortal. I’d like to know who trained him.”

Triska wasn’t interested in hearing about magic. Her heart still pounded. It felt wrong to stand here and watch Juri; she wanted to help. But even if her magic was active during the day, she wasn’t sure what she could do against an immortal harpy.

Out of Juri’s reach, the harpy circled high overhead, easily dodging any magic tossed her way. Triska turned to Fergal. “Shouldn’t you help?”

Fergal cackled. “Help a vulk? Of course not, this is what he does. I’d get in Juri’s way.”

A small pang squeezed her chest. “This is what he does,” she murmured. The Juri she remembered had wanted to live a grand adventure. As a vulk, was he doing that? She really hoped so.

The harpy dove for the cloaked man, her beak elongating as she hissed. His magic bouncing off her, he dove to the ground, rolling out of sight in the grass. The sea dragon thwacked its tail into the air, narrowly missing the harpy. It did, however, hit Juri in the chest, tossing him back a few feet.

The harpy whirled and followed the cloaked man to the ground, screeching. Triska stood on her tiptoes, but the tall grass hid the figure on the ground from view.

The cloaked man yelled, and Juri bounded to his feet. With lightning speed he sprinted and vaulted into the air, tackling the harpy. He dragged her down and they rolled in the furiously waving grass.

Triska let out a startled cry and took a step forward. Was Juri all right? She couldn’t see through the grass.

Fergal grabbed her arm as the harpy's death cry rang out over the meadow. When Juri stood and shook out his arms, she sagged in relief.

Wincing, the other man stood and twisted to peer at his back. His cloak hung in blood-soaked tatters. He raised his hand, and a bit of purple magic gathered at his fingertips.

"No, no," Fergal shouted. "You'll probably catch yourself on fire judging how badly your spell work is. Come over here, I'll help you."

The man turned, revealing his face for the first time. He had a proud brow, straight eyebrows, and odd, light-colored eyes that appeared to glow from where she stood. He was handsome in an imposing way. Even with the horrible fashion choices, if they'd been in the tavern and he'd walked in, Chessa would have made a beeline for him.

Triska flicked her gaze to the vulk beside him. Not that vulk walked into taverns all that often, but if Juri had, he was the one who'd capture her attention.

Juri and the man joined her and Fergal, and as Fergal waved his hand over the man's back, he asked, "Who are you? And who trained you?" He added, "Absolutely appalling magic work. I've seen better in first-year students."

The man's eyes flashed, and he raised his chin a fraction. "Insulting me ends in death for many, old man." He rolled his shoulders as his wounds knitted together. "But since you're helping me, I'll spare you this time."

Fergal hooted. "Oh, what are you going to do? Flash your sparks at me? Your spells are barely strong enough to give me a nosebleed." He thumped Juri on the back. "Besides, I have protection."

One of Juri's lips crept up his eyetooth. "What's your name?"

"Koschei." The sea dragon tromped over to them, yowling, and butted the man in the side, almost toppling him. "And this is Arrow."

Koschei held up his hands and rotated them, studying his palms. “My magic has been bound for thousands of years. Today is the first time I could use a fraction of it.” He glanced at Fergal. “As you saw, I’m still bound. I can’t truly use it.”

Juri had gone still. “Koschei the Deathless?”

Koschei glanced at Juri, then away, a muscle clenching in his jaw. “I’ve been called that name, yes.” An odd expression flashed across Juri’s face. What did he know about Koschei?

The man held his cloak out taut, studying the tatters. “I don’t suppose you know how to fix this, too?”

Fergal rolled his eyes, and the fabric knitted back together with a wave of his hand.

“Rare for harpies to attack in such a small group,” Juri said.

“You know harpies. They like having men serve their needs.” His gaze flicked over Juri. “Well, perhaps you don’t. I told them I bow to no one, especially not ugly viragos who smell of rotting flesh.” He shrugged. “They didn’t like that response. I’d forgotten how vain they are, but then again, the harpies and you three are the first visitors I’ve had in many, many years.”

He tossed his restored cloak over his shoulder in a flourish and looked them over. When his gaze reached Triska, a brow lifted a fraction, and he studied her a bit longer than the others. “I’ve introduced myself. Must I wait for your master of ceremonies to arrive and announce who you are?”

Juri shot her a look, his lip farther up his eyetooth, then introduced everyone.

Koschei waved his hand. “Welcome to the vanishing isle. Once here, you can’t leave.”

JURI'S HACKLES ROSE, and a growl ripped from deep in his chest. "What do you mean you can't leave?"

Koschei shrugged. "This is a prison. A beautiful one, but a prison, nevertheless. You can't portal in or out, and the mist keeps any ships at bay." He eyed them. "Well, usually. Perhaps the magic keeping the isle shrouded is slipping."

Juri looked around at the murky fog curling around the edges of the meadow, enveloping everything in mist. With the harpies dead, bird calls filled the air, and the stench of brimstone, the scent etched onto the skin of those from the underworld, floated away. The light from the suns wasn't quite reaching the ground, but it *was* still up there. This was a realm unto itself. It wasn't the dark, sunless Peklo or Ulterra.

Fergal raised his hand, and while magic ignited in his palm, nothing else happened. He frowned. "There is a barrier here preventing portals." He shook his head. "No matter, once I fix my ship, we'll be able to leave."

Koschei tossed his head. "Good luck."

"Why was this island created to imprison you?" Juri asked.

Koschei went still. "That is none of your concern."

Juri bared his teeth. This was why the vulk didn't spend much time with magicwielders. They were absolutely impossible.

Triska lay her hand on his arm and his shoulders relaxed. She asked, "Other than us, are you sure the harpies are the

only visitors to the island today? Have you seen any magicwielders wearing black cloaks?"

Koschei's brows shot up. "Definitely no cloaked magicwielders. This island isn't overly large, and I'd notice. Or one of the forest sprites would come tell me."

"Did you see where the harpies came from?" Juri scanned the meadow, but other than the bodies, he didn't see anything unnatural. "We'd have seen them if they flew overhead from Ulterra, so they had to have come up from the underworld."

The zmey yowled, and Koschei turned and scratched along its jaw, underneath the knobby horns. Koschei shrugged. "I was in the meadow, and suddenly the harpies arrived overhead." A smattering of rain spit over them, and Koschei frowned. "The daily rain hits about now, and I'm going home. I suggest you find somewhere to hunker down, too."

Triska huffed and gestured up at the darkening clouds. "You're going to leave us in the rain?" Her eyes narrowed. "Juri just saved your life!"

Rain pelted Juri's face and shoulders, the drops fat and heavy. He put his hand on Triska's lower back and she leaned into him, the cross expression on her face fading.

"Aye, I'm not sure it was worth it," he said to her. "None of the tales about Koschei the Deathless mentioned he was a rude git." It was difficult to blend the old tales about Koschei with this man standing in front of him. Not because the man didn't seem powerful, because even without full access to his magic, there was a stillness around Koschei Juri had sensed only in those with true power, but more because the tales were ancient.

Koschei scoffed. "I would have been fine, and I don't like company."

Juri growled. "Well, we're coming. We need to ask you about the isle."

Koschei studied Triska. "Your kind used to live with my kind. You should know about the isle."

Juri growled and took a step closer, but the sorcerer took no heed of him. “She’s a human from Ryba.” Well, she was a lightwielder, but Koschei didn’t need to know that.

Koschei’s lips curled into a sneer. “A human. Right.”

Triska’s cheeks had gone pink.

What was he missing? Did Koschei recognize Triska as a lightwielder? Triska cleared her throat and gestured at the rain. “Let’s get going.”

Koschei sighed. “Fine, come with me.” He led the way, not looking back to make sure anyone followed, with Arrow plodding along next to him. Juri and Triska walked a short distance behind the group as they re-entered the forest along another path leading from the meadow.

A plant draped along the walkway, with rich heart-shaped burgundy leaves as big as his head and several crimson flowers sticking out the top, their petals narrow and stretching upward as if craning for a bit of sun. As they passed, the flowers snapped shut and sucked back into the plant.

What other secrets was this island hiding?

After he got Triska out of the rain, he would search every inch of this place. Hoyt wanted to come to the vanishing isle to perform some kind of incantation; there had to be clues here on why. And once he knew what it was, the necromancer didn’t have a chance.

“IT’S WARM HERE.” Sweat mingled with raindrops on her face, and Triska wiped her brow. “You think anyone will care if I strip to my bodice?” She plucked the front of her shirt. The wool was already growing damp from the rain dripping from the mossy trees above her.

Next to her, Juri stumbled even though the wooden path was smooth underfoot. They’d fallen behind the others while she took her time studying the woods, and Juri matched her pace.

“I doubt Fergal would notice.” He righted himself, and red flashed in his golden eyes. “The other one definitely would. I don’t think he’s seen a female in a long time.”

“Maybe he has an extra shirt I can borrow.” But Juri was no longer at her side. She turned to find him standing still, his gaze fixed on her neck.

“You’re wearing a necklace. With the ...”

Triska reached up. When she’d played with her sweater, she must have pulled the chain with the ring out from under her shirt. “Oh. Yes.”

Juri moved closer, his feet silent on the path. The air thickened between them, but it wasn’t from the rain’s approach. His golden eyes darkened to amber. He purred, rich and throaty as he grasped the chain and thumbed the ring he’d given her many years ago. “You told me you’d tossed this in the ocean.”

“I almost did. I was really angry at you for not coming back and not writing. When I wrote that, I was hoping you’d finally respond to my letters.” She swallowed, not wanting to think about the year after her mother died and she’d lost her best friend.

“I wear your ring every day. For good luck.” She didn’t mention all the times it warmed, as if it contained an inner heat all its own. How every time the ocean pulled at her, enticing her to step beneath the waves, sometimes the warmth of his ring was the only thing that kept her feet grounded in Ryba and helped her resist.

Their gazes locked, and the ring dropped back to nestle on her chest as Juri ran his thumb up her neck to her jaw. “Every time I touch you, it makes it harder and harder not to reach for you again.”

She pressed into his hand, rubbing her jaw over it.

He picked her up like she weighed nothing, circling her waist with his huge hands, and she wrapped her legs around him. His mouth landed on her neck, and he purred louder. Deeper. A seductive, rich hum. She ran her hands up his

shoulders and along the back of his neck, and he groaned. When his tongue dragged up the side of her neck, it seared.

Her bodice felt too tight, her nipples chafing against the fabric. She wanted to be bare, to feel his powerful body, his warm skin, against every inch of her. He shifted her in his arms, drawing her closer.

Yes. This was Juri. They were supposed to touch like this. Her heart fluttered, and her skin warmed, eager for his touch.

His breath fanned against the delicate shell of her ear. “You agreed to be mine a long time ago. You’re still mine.” And his mouth landed below her jaw, where her pulse jumped. He nibbled, his tongue hotter than the suns of Ulterra, and Triska groaned. She forgot where they were. What they were doing. Juri was all that existed.

She slid her hands up his arms, lingering over the defined slopes of his forearms and biceps. He stroked up her back with one hand, using the backs of his claws in the lightest of teases. “I want to get behind you and lick up your spine. Graze my teeth along your skin,” Juri whispered in her ear.

Her fingernails bit into his arms, and she leaned closer. “Yes.” It felt like the world was shaking.

With a jolt, Triska realized the wooden walkway underfoot *was* vibrating. Arrow crashed through the underbrush, his bulk making the walkway flex. Juri’s head lifted from her neck as Arrow yowled.

Juri growled. “Get out of here.”

The dragon ignored him and lowered his head. Going behind Juri, he rubbed his head along Juri’s back, forcing him to take a step forward.

Triska drew in a shaky breath. Could she even walk right now? Her legs felt like jelly, but they held her when Juri lowered her to the ground. “He doesn’t want us to fall behind,” she said.

Juri frowned, and one lip curled up an eyetooth. “Fantastic timing, the little pest.”

Arrow paused, and Triska swore his lower lip trembled.

“Och,” Juri said. He scratched the dragon under the chin. “All right, all right, you’re only a wee dragon, it can’t be helped.” Arrow yowled again, this time a thrumming sound, and he pushed his head into Juri’s hand, his lids fluttering. Triska wasn’t the only one who wanted Juri’s touch. Her skin still prickled with awareness, as if it had come alive for the first time, and she wanted more. A lot more.

Juri tickled him with his claws, and Arrow grunted and leaned farther, almost toppling over. “Someday, you’ll be the fiercest dragon in all the ocean, won’t you?” Juri crooned as if speaking to a puppy. “All boats will fear you.”

“He likes that,” she said.

Juri straightened. Arrow thwacked his tail on the path and scuttled forward again, looking back over his shoulder at them. “I suppose we should catch up,” Juri said. His hand reached for hers, and he tucked it securely into his palm, entwining his fingers with hers.

A sharp pang twisted in her chest. Part pain, part pure, sweet pleasure. She may wear the ring he’d given her when he promised to marry her long ago, but that promise could never be kept.

There was no future for them.

Even though she was sure that as a vulk he wouldn’t choose to take a mate, she needed to tell him why she never could either. Maybe it would help them both fight the intensity building between them. Because the longer she remained with him, the more she wanted him. In her bed. At her side. Pulling her into his lap to tell her tales.

If she succumbed to desire, it would only get worse. Much, much worse. “Juri, there’s something I need to—”

A low roar rippled through the forest as the skies opened up. Before, they’d experienced a trickle, now sheets of rain, the drops hard and insistent, pelted them. Triska yelped, and they raced down the path.

Out of the corner of her eye, a large bird dove through the boughs, winking into view as it seemed to ... play ... amid the rain. She swatted at her eyes to wipe the water away, but the bird had already darted up through the canopy, out of sight.

They rounded a bend in the path, and Koschei's home spread in front of them, the door open and the magicwielder scowling, waiting for them. "Hurry."

JURI CAUGHT a quick glimpse of Koschei's home tucked among a tangle of trees with moss coating the shale roof and dripping off the eaves before leaping into the entryway with Triska. Rain drummed on the roof, creating a low din, as Koschei slammed the mahogany door behind them. "If you'd kept up, you'd have gotten here before that fool bird and wouldn't be dripping all over my floors."

Triska sagged next to him, her sweater a sodden mess and her hair plastered to her head. Juri growled. "We need towels and something dry for Triska to wear." He hated the idea of her wearing one of the magicwielder's garments, but it was better than her being cold and miserable.

"What do you mean you wanted us here before the bird?" Triska asked.

Koschei glowered at Juri, but he still answered, "A chatak, a rain drinker, lives on this island. It brings the rain. Every day it gets thirsty around lunchtime, but it lives on the other side of the island, so the heaviest rain is usually there." He arranged his cloak. "You expect me to give away my clothing?"

Before Juri could respond, Koschei eyed Triska, and his expression softened. "All right, come this way."

Despite what he'd said about his floors, Koschei didn't complain further as water dripped off them in sheets onto the mahogany floor and woven rugs. "Tell me about this bird," Juri said. "How can a bird call the rain?"

Triska shot him a bemused look. “Juri is a storyteller. He collects tales.”

Koschei turned to him, and for the first time, his haughty expression shifted. “A bard?”

“I’ve gotten to know the history of Ulterra and some of its folktales.”

Koschei’s steps slowed. “There are sentient creatures on the island I can talk to, but I haven’t heard a story in a long time.” He waved his hand at the cavernous expanse of the room they’d entered. It had empty shelves near a fireplace, as if waiting for books. “And there are no books that survived on this island. That’s been ... difficult.”

Exposed beams spread across the ceiling, high enough that Juri didn’t hit his head on them. Along one wall were chairs centered around the fireplace and a massive armoire. Pushed along the other were two large tables, one cluttered with the kinds of bowls and vials Juri was used to seeing around magicwielders, and the other empty except for a solitary glass of clear liquid next to a plate.

Ever since the magicwielder opened his mouth, Juri had felt increasing layers of irritation. Seeing that one place setting on a table built for many to enjoy a meal, his irritation dried up. Koschei lived here alone—he’d built this home large enough to entertain others, yet there was no one else around.

Juri might have felt alone at times, but he’d always had his pack. Even after Hans left and didn’t want to speak to anyone for many years, he still had his other brothers. “This afternoon, you tell us about your island, and tonight I’ll tell you a tale. It’ll be much better than anything you’ll find in some book.”

Koschei halted and studied him. “I admit, I *am* curious about how you’re here and what you want, but I’ve learned this island is ... tricky. Most likely, I’ll blink, and you’ll be gone.” He turned, and they walked on to a wide hallway with a few doorways. At the first one, he held up a hand. “Wait here, I’ll find something.” And he ducked into the room, revealing a flash of an enormous bed before he shut the door in their faces.

“For someone who hasn’t had anyone around to talk to, you’d think he’d be a wee bit friendlier,” Juri muttered under his breath to Triska.

She shot him a quick smile. “I’m wondering if he doesn’t remember how.”

Koschei returned with a bundle of clothes on top of a towel and held them out to Triska. Juri took them instead.

Koschei pointed down the hall. “You can use the spare bedroom to change.”

As they walked, Juri rubbed the clothing, trying to erase Koschei’s scent and replace it with his own. The clothes were clean, smelling more of the island’s air, with its slight mineral tang, than Koschei, but it didn’t matter. Triska wouldn’t smell like the magicwielder—it would drive him mad.

He followed her into the bedroom, and she turned and raised a brow. “Are you going to help me change?”

“I thought you might need help. You’ve had a long day.”

She laughed her throaty, full laugh, and his chest warmed. “I can handle it. Do you want to use the towel on yourself first?”

“Nah, I dry fast, and I’ll go out into the living room and shake. I think Koschei would like that.”

“You know, we could have asked Fergal to dry us.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t think of it. I’m not used to having magic around.”

The bedroom was modest, a simple bed with a woven coverlet, a wide window with thick curtains, and a plush rug that seemed to be made of soft linen. The shutters of the window remained closed, the rain pounding against it in hard raps, and there was no glass in the frame. It brought a coziness, a sense of being tucked away from the weather, similar to how he felt in his den when winter blizzards raged outside.

He glanced at the bed. What would it be like to scoop Triska up and cuddle with her there? Lie and listen to the rain,

then let its frenzied rhythm heat their own need?

The longer he spent at her side, the more his desire clawed to be unleashed. She was *his*. She still wore his ring, after all these years. With every beat of his heart, need hummed through him, a low, constant buzz. He wanted to lay her out on the bed and strip her. Make her wild, satisfy her with his tongue, then bury himself deep between her legs.

He'd never knotted anyone before. Never driven all the way home until the swelling at the base of his cock nested inside another, tying them together. But that's what he wanted with Triska. He wanted to seal them together and make her fully his.

He couldn't give in to the temptation.

Once he sealed them together, she was his forever. There was no way he'd ever let her go. And he had to. Their lives didn't merge. Yet, every moment he spent with her, his resistance seemed to crumble more and more.

He stared at her. No. There was a reason vulk had a rule about walking through life alone. If he made her his, his enemies would hunt her for the rest of her life. She'd be in perpetual danger simply because she was mated to a vulk. He wouldn't do that to her.

Triska toweled her hair in quick motions, and he frowned. "You're being too rough."

She froze. "What?"

Juri plucked the towel from her and gently rubbed her long hair in the fabric. "Everything that touches you should caress you."

Her lips parted as she stared up at him, the blue in her eyes appearing to glow in the dim light. "Everything?"

"Aye."

She glanced at the bed. Did her thoughts mirror his own? He wiped the beaded rain from her brow, then traced the towel down her neck.

“You know I’m an oyster fisher,” she said. “Not much caressing in that job.”

“Every night when you come home, someone should be waiting for you. Ready to lick the salt spray off your skin and rub warmth back into your hands.” His lips twitched. “Also, eat the oysters you brought home and enjoy their special ... effects.” Every time he ate an oyster, his thoughts turned to bedtime pursuits, and he’d heard it was a common effect.

She reached up and cupped his cheek. “Someone? Or the one who gave me a ring when I was ten?”

He shuddered but remained silent. She took the towel and ran it over his arms, then his chest and stomach, brushing against his waistband. If her hands had dipped a little lower, she’d have felt how he’d been thinking about the bed and that his thoughts were ... not innocent. “If I stay here much longer, we’ll never leave.”

She nodded. “And we need to find out what’s going on.” Triska stepped back, and cool air replaced the heat from her body against his. “What are the necromancers trying to do here?”

Triska was being a better tracker than he. He wanted to remove Hoyt, remove the threat to Triska and Ryba, but his hunting instincts had also flared for something else. His blood thrummed, and all his patience, his slow, steady pursuit, was focused on the one wearing his ring around her neck.

A hunt for her heart.

He inhaled deeply. A hunt he needed to give up. Except he’d never stopped a hunt once he started it. “You’re right. We need to get Koschei talking, then explore this island. Other than the magic during the harpy battle, I’ve scented nothing to hint the necromancers are here, but everything about this place is strange.”

“You’re in a tale. Soon, you’ll be telling everyone about your trek to Eynhallow, where you met a baby dragon and a strange man who lived in the woods.”

“With a beautiful woman at my side. One who holds light in the palm of her hands and can sail a boat single-handedly, as if dancing on its deck.”

Her face went scarlet, and she nudged his arm. “All right, get out of here so I can change.”

“I’ll wait for you in the hall.” He slipped out the door.

As he waited for Triska, he paced and dragged his thoughts from Triska to Hoyt. What was the connection to this island?

She emerged from the bedroom and shrugged. “They’re big, but they’re dry.” A large blue shirt skimmed her thighs and she’d rolled the bottoms of the black trousers into cuffs at her ankles. The fabric was light and breezy, good for the warm air.

He reached for Triska’s hand and tucked it in his. He rubbed with his thumb, stroking her fingers gently. “Let’s go see if I can convince Koschei to feed us.”

TRISKA'S STOMACH RUMBLED. Somehow Juri cajoled Koschei to prepare them lunch, and after a brief disappearance into the kitchen, he'd returned with a few platters, and they'd all sat at the table. Triska sat next to Juri, who'd pulled her chair flush against his, whereas Koschei and Fergal sat spread out across from them.

Over Koschei's shoulder, a large tapestry hung near the fireplace, the only item on any of the walls. A reddish gold bird twisted as if pirouetting in the air, its long, graceful neck arched and an eye staring out from the weaving as if daring the viewer to join its dance.

She was hungrier than she'd expected, and she was glad Juri's stomach had prompted him to remember lunch. Koschei had brought a large salad and smoked fish, all tossed in an oil she didn't recognize.

Koschei waved a hand at the abundant greens in the bowl in the center of the table. "I've created a garden in a clear patch of land, and the sprites here have become quite attached to it. I'm sure if you start your own, they'll want to tend it as well."

Triska frowned. This was now the second time he'd spoken to them as if it were a given they were never leaving the island.

She pointed behind him at the tapestry. "Is that a chatak? The bird you mentioned earlier?"

Koschei's gaze turned to flint, and it seemed like the temperature in the room dropped by ten degrees. "No. That's a firebird."

Juri shifted. "A phoenix?"

"No. A firebird. Specific to my kind. We're shapeshifters, and only the most powerful can take firebird form. You know, hollow bones and all. Not everyone can figure out how to do it."

Triska inhaled. So, the rumors Juri mentioned earlier today about the sorcerers of Eynhallow appeared to be true—they were great shapeshifters, and Koschei was one of them. Most likely the last of his kind. When he'd said back at the meadow, 'your kind used to live with my kind' she'd sensed he'd ... known what she was. It was possible her kind *had* visited here a long, long time ago.

Triska stared at him. "Really? Eaglewalkers don't seem to have trouble shifting."

A rumble vibrated from Juri's chest, barely loud enough for her to hear. Why was he growling?

"With my kind, we keep our mind when we shift. We don't become the animal or the being. And we retain magic. It's much more difficult. The firebird is the ultimate proof of one's prowess with magic." His gaze softened a smidge. "Back before magic turned this island wild again, some of my brethren built their homes along the high cliffs, only accessible to those who could take firebird form. Showoffs." His lips twitched as if he might actually smile.

Juri asked her, "Have you seen an eaglewalker shift?" A flash of red glinted in his eyes.

She frowned up at him. "No. Why?" When a peltwalker shifted, they stripped naked. It was intimate and reserved only for partners and lovers to see. It dawned on her why Juri was asking—*Emil*. She raised a brow. Last night she'd told him she and Emil were nothing, yet he was still growling about him.

She turned from him and refocused on Koschei. "What is a chatak? I've never heard of a rain drinker."

“Ah.” Koschei leaned forward, spearing a bite of food, as if relieved she’d changed the subject. “There is a nesting pair here, and they had babies this year, so that means there will be even more storm clouds zipping around.” He spread his hands about a foot apart. “They’re yay big and kind of gray. They don’t look like much except for their tail. It’s twice the length of their body. They aren’t content to drink the water from the spring in the center of the island, they only want fresh rain from the sky.” He glanced upward. “If they weren’t around, I bet it wouldn’t be so misty here, but at least their storms are quick. By the time we’re done lunch, it will have passed.”

“I think it’s time you explain about this island,” Juri speared another hunk of smoked meat. So far she’d noticed he’d ignored the salad except for the plump blueberries scattered on top. “The tales of this place speak of it appearing at dusk, wrapped in mist, and the closer one gets, the farther away it seems.”

“Yes, what is the burden of magic here?” Fergal asked. He had remained quiet, observing and eating, without his usual commentary. “I can feel it’s here, but you’re right that it isn’t all accessible. How is that possible?”

Koschei huffed. “Burden of magic? I haven’t heard that term since I was a lad learning how to shapeshift.” He stared over her shoulder out the window, also battened against the rain. “The island has a long and complicated history, it ... it will be best if I show you after the rains stop.”

STEAM DRIFTED from the soaked boards of the path and the loosely packed earth next to it to join the mist still swirling overhead. Fat droplets rained down over Juri's head, and he tucked Triska under his arm, trying to keep her new clothing as dry as possible. The rains had stopped as suddenly as predicted, and now Koschei led them along a path through the island, but everything was still damp, tingeing the air with the sweet fresh scent of rain.

As Koschei said, the island was wild, with vegetation and trees competing for every bit of ground. There was a sense that if one wandered off the trail, they'd become lost to the forest.

Well, *he* wouldn't become lost. Already he'd marked the distinct smells of the island. The vegetal odor of the dense forest near the meadow. The tangier air when they strode close to the ocean. And he'd also noticed the differences in the trees and the moss. A lot of lichens, with their hair-like tendrils, dripped down from the branches, showing the surrounding forest wasn't as dense as it seemed—lichens enjoyed a bit of sun.

Triska nestled closer to him and whispered, "Someone keeps these paths in good order." She pointed at the well-constructed walkway with its smooth slates. "And I doubt it's Koschei." Their trail gently ascended, weaving higher and higher through the trees. Not dramatically, but gradually.

By the scent of the air, Juri could tell the path they took was skirting the ocean. The trees ended, and they stood along towering cliffs, the waves crashing below. The rocks might

have once been as dark as the stone along the black beach, but over time they'd bleached as if the wind and weather had exposed the bones of the cliffs.

Koschei stood near the edge, his cloak whipping in the wind. "Here was where my palace lay, built along the cliff itself."

Juri scanned the area. The vulk erected vast structures from stone, and he could see how it would be possible to build here, yet no crumbling foundation remained. Even after millennia, the roots of a building of stone remained. Had the magicwielder lost his wits?

Wait ... there was something.

Juri strode over to a section of rock where the earth appeared charred. About ten feet across, the scorched section was a perfect ring. "What is this? How does this place explain the island?"

The others joined him, and the wind died as if it wanted to hear Koschei's response, too. "Once this island was a part of Ulterra, and this was where the junction down to Peklo stood." He gestured around him. "It was a golden staircase in the outer courtyard of my palace gardens. Protected from all access and guarded by me at all times. None crossed the realms without my permission." He glanced away.

The ground rumbled under their feet, and the scorched ring rippled. A yellowish light shot through the air, turning the mist hazy. Shadows of a building, vast and towering, appeared around them with outlines of a tall hedge and opulent gardens. Underfoot, the rumbling wasn't enough to make anyone lose balance, but Juri put his arm around Triska anyway. "What is this?"

Koschei didn't answer him. Instead, he'd raised his hand to touch the ornate pillar in the mist near him. His hand went through it. "I forgot I had my coat of arms on everything, even the pillars. What a fool I was." An oval with a flying firebird, similar to the one on the tapestry, was carved into the pillar, barely visible on the faint shadow of the once grand building. Koschei shook his head. "You can stop your magic now, I've

seen enough.” His expression was haggard and haunted, and his eyes bright.

Fergal shook his head. “This isn’t my doing.” But the surrounding image faded, and the ground steadied, leaving only the vacant cliffs behind.

Juri bent and touched the charred ground. He hissed and snatched his fingers back. Burning hot. Yet there was no stench of brimstone or sulfur. He stared at what remained of a junction into Peklo.

A junction to Peklo.

He raised his head. “You were a guardian?” The underworld lay below Ulterra, a hidden and inaccessible realm except at the few places where Ulterra and Peklo touched. Those crossing points created junctions between the two worlds, and a guardian was chosen to guard each one, allowing no one to enter or cross between the worlds.

The problem was, the two realms shifted occasionally, rubbing against each other and causing rifts to open in other places, which allowed the spawn from Peklo to crawl their way up into Ulterra. And that was when the vulk took care of them.

Koschei stared at the desolate cliffs as if he could still see the echoes of his old palace. “Yes. I was a guardian. Bound here, unable to leave my post. I’m still bound here, even though the junction is now closed.”

“Guardians can’t leave?” Juri asked.

“We have unlimited power but a limited range.” He pointed out at the ocean. “Where you see the mist sink into the ocean is how far I can go. Those are the boundaries of this island.” He shrugged.

Fergal rubbed his mouth. “I think when Hoyt called the island, the barriers around it fell. We entered your waters, and the harpies emerged from somewhere. Maybe here.”

Juri glanced at Triska. What if the mists became a barrier again? Had he trapped her here?

“Called my island? Why?” Koschei waved his hand. “There’s nothing here any longer.”

Juri growled. “I was hoping you could help with that part.”

Triska had remained silent, but now she asked, “Why was this junction sealed off? What happened?”

“I let someone through I shouldn’t have. As a guardian, I’m bound by laws and rules you can’t understand.”

Juri closed his eyes briefly. Magicwielders all had superiority complexes.

Koschei continued, “I broke them, and I was punished. My people were sent to the mainland, and the island went wild when the magic ripped through.”

Fergal bent over and traced a finger over the charred earth, apparently cool enough to touch now. “What is the source of the power here?”

But Juri didn’t need Koschei to answer. “It’s shuwyt, isn’t it?” Juri said.

Koschei’s eyes widened. “I can’t comment on that.”

“We already know the answer.” Juri briefly explained what he’d heard Hoyt say in the sewers about an incantation and gaining access to shuwyt through the island. “Could he really perform an incantation here? How did the sorcerers who lived here get access to its magic?”

Koschei’s brow furrowed. “As children, every single one of us on Eynhallow underwent a ceremony where our powers came to us. In a way, it’s similar to how a peltwalker gets their pelt and learns to shift for the first time. It all comes from the spirit and power of the land. My people are a part of this land. The necromancer you talk about isn’t. It would take powerful magic for him to tap into it. Even more for him to call and claim it without being one of the original dwellers of Eynhallow.”

Fergal sighed. “With Hoyt having Herskala’s grimoire, we can assume he has access to that kind of magic.”

Koschei's mouth dropped open. "Herskala's grimoire? We must stop him."

Juri chuffed. "What do you think we're doing? We're certainly not visiting you because we got word of your hospitality."

Fergal snorted. "This isn't just about stopping Hoyt. We need to make sure no one can use the island for an incantation. Ever. All magicwielders will desire this power, and a full-on war will start."

Juri nodded. "When we get Hoyt, we need that grimoire as well." It wasn't only to prevent the magicwielder war, Hoyt also knew things about the vulk because of what Herskala wrote in that grimoire. He'd created the spell that sent Juri crashing to the floor and said there was more in the book he hadn't deciphered yet.

Fergal studied Koschei. "What can you tell us about the island? How do we stop its power?"

"What?" Juri said. "We can't attack an island."

Fergal nodded. "No, but we can remove the source of its power. We just need to figure out how."

Triska gasped. "But this is Koschei's home. What will that do?"

Koschei shrugged. "My people are long gone. Everything you saw in my home is what this island left behind after I was punished and the magic swept through." He waved his hand. "The island is only a wild forest now, filled with mist."

Juri turned to Fergal. "How do we figure out how to remove the source of its power?"

Fergal still stared at the ground. "I'm not sure, but I may have an idea. It's only a cloud of an idea though ... I need time."

"Time for what?"

Koschei scoffed. "I've lived here millennia, and I know every inch of the island. Every branch. Every plant. There's nothing to find. The power source isn't physical."

Fergal shook his head. “Yes, it is. I don’t know *where* it is, but I have a few ideas. And a few ideas on how to find it.”

The ground shook again, and the black, charred circle belched a small puff of green smoke. Lifting into the air, the smoke drifted away, but it flew into the wind, not with it. The smoke had the same hazy quality of the mist he’d seen when Hoyt drained the nameless man in the sewers and surrounded the inhabitants of Ryba.

He bared his teeth. “I’m going to search this island. If the necromancers are here, or they’ve cast spells here, I’ll find them.”

NIGHT HAD FALLEN, and she stood on the beach near the path up to Koschei's house, watching the small waves lap onto the shore. The moons remained hidden behind the mist, but the fog over the water was lit with an inner glow, making the ocean glimmer.

A short stretch away, Fergal worked on his boat, the sound of a hammer echoing down the beach. He must not be having luck using magic for his repairs. Magic was strange like that. It was good at destruction, not so good at restoration. She'd been surprised Fergal hadn't caught Koschei's cloak on fire when he'd repaired it in the meadow. Every time Chessa tried to use her magic to fix a seam, or a hole in the fabric she worked on, she burnt the entire garment to a crisp.

Come.

Warm water lapped her ankles, and Triska startled, her focus broken from the glittering waves. She hadn't even been aware she'd walked into the water. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, stepping back onto the beach.

"I suppose the three of you can spend the night, although I only have one extra bedroom." Koschei's voice cut through the quiet. "You'll have to share or fight for who gets it. I'm assuming the vulk would win, but he seems to have a soft spot for you, so maybe not."

She turned as Koschei strode down the trampled path Arrow had made from his house down to the beach, his light

eyes seeming to glow in the dark. “Fergal has a bunk on his boat, and he said he’s sleeping there,” she said.

“So, it hasn’t sunk into the ocean, then?”

She shook her head. “No, he said earlier he can patch it up enough to limp home, but it will have to be a day with easy waves.” Triska frowned. “But he didn’t spend all his time working on the boat, he’s puttering around on something else he won’t let me help with, and he won’t tell me about.”

Koschei huffed. “He has an annoying air of being a know-it-all.”

Triska’s brows shot up, and she bit back a smile. She found Fergal and Koschei a bit similar.

Silence settled between them. The magicwielder—or perhaps she should think of him as a guardian—didn’t make her nervous, but she remembered what he’d said back at the meadow, ‘your kind used to live with my kind.’ Every time he looked at her, she felt like he was seeing something she didn’t want him to.

Koschei nodded toward the ocean. “If you want to take your true form, I’ll tell the others you’re exploring the island elsewhere.”

She jolted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But she did.

Koschei chuckled, but it was mirthless. Cold. “I used to freeze someone’s tongue in their mouth when they lied to me. Quite effective. Then I’d turn them into a snail or perhaps a spider. Sometimes only for a day, sometimes for a hundred years. Whatever suited my mood.”

She turned toward him sharply, her mouth hanging open. “Some guardian you were! That’s cruel.”

He crossed his arms. “That was back when I was the leader here. As a guardian, I couldn’t play anymore.”

She shook her head. Play? Who was he? Some of her pity for his plight faded. Maybe it was a good thing Koschei had his magic stripped away.

“In return for my hospitality, I have a request,” Koschei said.

Triska spluttered. “We saved your life. You owe *us*.”

His lips twisted into a smile, but it was only an echo of a smile, hollow and fleeting. “I’m called Koschei the *Deathless* because I cannot die. You saved me from a bit of pain, but I would have knitted back together over time and returned to,” he waved at himself, “this.”

She hoped Juri would tell her some tales about Koschei because she hadn’t heard any of them.

A large splash sounded over the water, and Arrow broke the surface, a fish in his mouth. In the hazy moonlight, his scales glittered black. Koschei pointed. “If you’re able to leave, will you help Arrow return to his own kind? He shouldn’t ... this place isn’t for him.”

Triska glanced at Koschei out of the corner of her eye. That wasn’t what she’d expected him to ask for. “If anyone can figure out where a wyre of zmey might live, it will be Juri. And he’ll know how to get Arrow there.”

“I never dealt with the vulk much. They’re rather single-minded, no? Protect Ulterra, kill spawn.” He shrugged. “The last I knew, your kind wasn’t much of a threat to them. So why haven’t you told him what you are?”

She stiffened, and her chin jerked up. “Juri isn’t single-minded.”

Koschei turned, and his penetrating gaze made her shift on the sand. He didn’t say anything, just waited for her to respond. She swallowed, her throat dry and tight. “You said you’ve met my kind before. Did they all ... eventually join the ocean? Forever?”

It might have been a trick of the moonlight, but Koschei’s fierce gaze seemed to soften. “Many shifted freely between their human form and seal form for a long time. But yes. At some point, they all took to the ocean to find their sacred lands. Never to return.”

“I’ve never taken my selkie form,” she whispered.

“I recognized the ache of your magic. It has a raw, needy edge. A desperation to be unleashed.” Koschei smiled his non-smile again. “My kind needs to shift as well. It frees us.”

She shook her head. “I want to remain in Ryba. I don’t want to take my seal form and forget my entire life.” It was the first time she’d talked about being a selkie with anyone other than her father, and with her father, she couldn’t speak openly because it gave him pain, reminding him of her mother and her secrets. How she’d joined the sea eventually, even if it was in death.

The inevitable end to her time on land was why Triska had never considered taking a mate. Every time she looked at her father and his haunted, pained expression when he thought of her mother, she saw the agony of what she might put a mate through herself. She would never do that. Even if it meant living a lonely life. Sure, she had friends, and her father, but she always kept them at a distance, afraid of how they’d feel when she left, never to return.

She rubbed her chest. She couldn’t let Juri close either. He’d only get hurt.

The tightness in her chest loosened, signaling Juri was close by. She sighed in relief, the ache gone. She’d grown used to his warm presence at her side.

Sure enough, Juri strode down the path from Koschei’s house, something slung over his shoulder. As he reached them, the lumpy bundles proved to have feathers.

“I killed a couple partridges for dinner,” he said. “You’re not going to tell me they’re from some prized flock and chase me around the island, are you?” Juri rubbed his ears.

Koschei raised a brow. “I hunt occasionally. Those birds are good eating.”

Juri glanced up at the sky. “It’s not raining, and the night is warm. I’ll make a fire on the beach and cook here.” He slung the birds onto the sand. “Don’t let that dragon eat our dinner.”

JURI DRAGGED the remnants of a tree trunk over beside the blazing fire. His claws lanced out, and he shaved off the damp outer bark, then dug out a small seat, leaving a bit of wood remaining as a back. “Here.”

Koschei stepped forward. “Ah. Not as nice as one of my thrones, but—”

Juri growled. “It’s for Triska. Get out of here.”

Triska grinned and settled into her chair. “Not bad.”

“I don’t work with wood much, but I thought this might be nicer than sitting on a wet rock. Are you warm enough?”

She nodded. Earlier while he’d prepared the birds to roast over the fire—knowing the others wouldn’t want to eat them raw—she’d waded into the water and gathered some wide, fat clams with black shells. She’d wrapped them in seaweed, and now he moved the bundle to bake in the coals at the outer part of the fire.

They’d fallen into an easy rhythm, Triska scraping off bits of bark for kindling so the fire would catch as he’d gathered larger pieces from the woods. It felt like he’d traveled with her at his side for years.

If he ignored Koschei, and the snoring dragon lying on its back a few steps away, he could pretend he and Triska were back in Ryba, enjoying a night on the beach. Many times, when he’d journeyed home to check on Ryba—and Triska—he’d seen couples sitting together on the beach. Holding hands or getting frisky on a blanket in their courtship activity.

Fergal shuffled down the beach into the light of their fire. “Any hint of the necromancers?”

Juri shook his head as he poked at the fire with a stick. “Nope. All I found was a small rift where the harpies must have come up, but it was already closed again. And more green smoke is floating from the charred circle up on the cliffs. Other than an old badger who chased me away from his hollow, the island is quiet and safe.”

Fergal settled on a rock. “Good. We need to be ready when they show up.”

Koschei crossed his arms and huffed. “If they’re using shuwt as their power source, it won’t be easy. When I was a guardian, no one could overtake me.”

Juri frowned. “They aren’t guardians. They won’t have the same power you did.”

Triska stood and put her hand on Juri’s arm. The warmth from the contact flooded through him at once, as if instead of the fire as the source of warmth, it was her. “Hoyt’s power is strong, I felt it.”

“Necromancers are the rejects of the magicwielding world.” But even to his own ears, what he’d meant to say as a statement, came out as more of a question.

Fergal waved a finger back and forth. “Rejects from their family, not from the magic world. That’s a huge difference.” Fergal glanced at Triska. “You know Hazel. Is her power weak? Poor?”

Triska shook her head. “No. She’s one of the most skilled magicwielders in Ryba.”

“Exactly. Her family is from a long line of sorcerers. When she was born a spellcaster, it didn’t matter that she was probably the most gifted spellcaster alive, she wasn’t a sorcerer, so they didn’t deem her acceptable to continue the bloodline of her family. Hoyt is the same. He was a skilled spellcaster, just not what his family wanted, and he was one of nine children. They chose another as the heir.”

Triska's hand tightened on Juri's arm. "And that's why their families cast them out?"

"As if they never knew them." Fergal turned toward the fire. "Back when I was dean and had some influence, I worked to change the ways of the elite. To help them see nothing but harm will come of this." He shook his head. "It created a schism, and they roused me from my position."

"You were right," Triska said. "It's causing harm now."

Fergal nodded. "Many magicwielders have been mistreated." He waved his hand. "That's why we have a bunch of necromancers running around seeking revenge. And this Dark Cabal."

Juri thought about all he'd seen back in the sewers. The way the unnamed man and Hoyt discussed power, and the way their voices dripped with their desire for it. "The man in the hood Hoyt met in the sewer wore one of the family rings." Juri held up his hand. "The kind used to make a seal in wax. Doesn't the heir to the family wear that?"

Fergal lifted his head sharply. "Did you make out the crest?"

Juri shook his head. "He was too far away."

"If he had a ring, then yes, he's the heir, or already the head of the family." Fergal scratched his chin. "That's interesting. You didn't see him on the beach during the attack in Ryba?"

"No. And ... there's something else." Juri described how Hoyt blew something into the air, making him fall to the ground. He'd hoped not to say anything about flopping to the ground like a fish in front of Triska, but it couldn't be avoided. "Do you know how he did that?"

"Inhalable magic. Clever ..." Fergal said. "Vulk have such heightened senses, it's the one way to get around their resistance to magic."

Juri growled. "Yes, that's why I told you. So you'd praise the asshole that blew dust at me."

Fergal poked one partridge with a stick. “Needs some turning here.”

Juri grumbled under his breath about how much he hated hanging out with magicwielders and flipped his birds. He poured more oil over them—oil Koschei had brought down from his house. Koschei said there was an old patch of olive trees near the meadow, and he picked the olives and pressed them. Or, more likely, the forest sprites did it for him.

The oil sizzled, and the pleasant odor of cooked meat filled the air. “How about a story?” Triska asked. She’d returned to her seat and sat leaning forward, her hands on her knees. Exactly as she used to when they were kids, and he’d jump up on a rafter in the barn and relate some tale he’d made up, usually swinging from beam to beam to mimic the pirates she loved hearing about most.

“What kind? Weepy? Dramatic?” He glanced at Arrow, who cracked an eye—most likely to check if they’d started eating yet. “Dragon-ish?”

Koschei settled on a rock, his lips pursing as he removed a dollop of seaweed. “Dragon.”

Juri remained standing at the fire so he could continue to check it. “All right. The Knight and the Last Dragon. It all starts with a knight who had to bring the head of the last dragon of the land in order to prove he was worthy of becoming a lord so he could marry a fair princess.”

As he told the tale to the others, Triska gazed at him steadily, the way she always had when they were kids. He described the knight’s long journey into the dark forest to find the dragon and the trials he overcame as he trudged deeper and deeper.

He paced in front of the fire, lowering his voice. “The knight finally chased the dragon to a lagoon, but it was a trap. There was only one way in and one way out.”

Triska gasped.

“The knight’s exit was blocked, for the dragon stood there, far too big and powerful for his measly little sword. It reared

up, and the knight threw his hands up, prepared to die. However, the blow didn't come. Instead, the dragon slipped its skin, revealing a young woman, her hair as scarlet as her scales."

Triska's eyes lit up. "A woman!"

He took the birds off to cool. "And naked as the day she was born, so how could he resist? He took one look at her and fell in love, even though it was arranged for him to marry a bride in a distant kingdom. A bride he'd never met but to who his parents had sold his heart. The selling of his heart wasn't metaphorical either. All magic was tied to emotion in that land, and the strongest of all lived in the heart. He'd given his heart and emotions to this unmet bride because all the knight cared for was the might of his sword and the strength of his arms. What need would he ever have for a heart? For magic?"

He continued on, and as more of the tale unraveled, he realized he'd chosen a story about a man willing to give up everything, even his life, for the one woman he loved. It was a story about a man who pursued his love endlessly.

The story continued as they all ate, and the fire dwindled to only a tiny lick over the remaining bits of driftwood.

"To free her from the curse demanding she live in her dragon form everywhere but in her lagoon, he had to find her three times. Each time she'd prove more elusive than the next. It was the ultimate game of hide and seek, and he had to make sure he won."

Triska put her hand to her chest, and her fingers closed around his ring. An awareness grew between them as if strong winds blew them together, yet the night's breeze was gentle. He no longer saw the others sitting nearby, it was only her.

He described how the first time the knight sought his dragon love, the strength of his limbs failed, and he had to use the strength of his mind. How the second time, he almost lost her because of trickery, but in the end, his loyalty to her, and his belief in her, helped him stay true. But the last time was the hardest. He had to find her because he loved her, and for that, he needed his heart. A heart he no longer had.

The only way to do that was to call it from its prison in the other kingdom. His intended bride fought him, and it was a long battle, one he had no prior experience with, for he'd only ever used his body to fight.

“He failed. But as he sat, thinking all was lost, he called upon his heart with everything in his soul, seeking its depths for the first time, and he spoke his words of love upon the open air.” Juri locked gazes with Triska. “He spoke out loud that his heart and soul belonged to her. That it was written in the stars before he was born. How even before he could understand, he knew she was his. For always.”

Triska didn't move. Her chest didn't rise or fall with her breath. “And he found her the last time?” she whispered.

Juri nodded.

There was a rustle of movement at his side as Koschei stood, and Juri turned, tearing himself away from Triska. “I'm going for a walk,” Koschei said, and stalked away.

Juri frowned. “What was that about?” Normally those who heard his tales begged for another, they didn't leave in a huff. He crossed his arms and glared at the dark shape of Koschei, walking down the beach.

Fergal stood and stretched, yawning. “No idea.” His gaze flicked between Juri and Triska. “I'm off to the boat. Good night.”

Triska rose and walked over to him, her hands landing on his stomach. Her fingers trailed upwards, kissing his skin. “It's just the two of us now.”

AS JURI TOLD HIS TALE, with the light from the fire caressing him, making every hard plane of the muscles along his chest and stomach stand out, she'd never wanted anyone or anything more. She'd become bewitched by his story but even more so by him. He truly became the mythical, immortal being she'd known he was—but hadn't quite understood. Not in totality, at least. She'd seen him as a vulk, known the path his life had taken, but at that moment, it crashed over her just what Juri really was.

Tales would be told about *him* in the distant future.

Ones about his strength, his power, how handsome he was, and how easily he slew his enemies. Yet he was also a bard who pet dragons to make them feel better. And he'd been the best friend to a lonely little girl, and when she grew up, purred for her—a secret, lulling sound.

Warmth bloomed in her chest. Maybe it originated from the ring, but most likely, it came from her heart. With each beat, it heated, a slow, steady lick of flame spreading through her veins. Each breath in and out was sweet nectar against her lips. The slight breeze from the ocean felt like gentle fingers caressing her.

She stroked along the waistband of his trousers, and he groaned. “I know you can't take a mate.” She also couldn't take a mate, but she would tell him the full story about that later. “I know our time together is short. But we have tonight. And we've known each other our entire lives.” Somehow, it felt like they'd always been leading up to this moment.

Leading up to them finally being together. “Let’s play for just one night.”

He lay his hand whisper soft over her heart. Over his ring. “I don’t want to hurt you. I’ll be able to return to Ryba, perhaps even freely show myself now, but I can’t ...” His hand lifted, and he cupped her face. “Already Hoyt knows about you and me. When he’s taken care of, I don’t want anyone else discovering you. If someone hurt you ...” His eyes went red. Not just a flicker this time, but pure, scarlet red. “I’ve seen what my enemies will do to destroy the vulk. They will use anyone close to us they can. And it would destroy me if they hurt you.”

She pressed up, her toes sinking into the sand, and ran one hand up his neck to his face. His eyelids lowered slightly, and he turned and nuzzled her fingers, his eyes fading back to gold.

“I know you’ll leave, and my life needs to stay the way it is, too,” she whispered. “But tonight, we’re both free, lounging on an island that doesn’t exist. We’ll chase Hoyt tomorrow, and we’ll win, but right now, it’s just you and me.”

She traced the muscles of his stomach up to his chest. “When we were kids, we played hide and seek. You always found me, exactly like the hero in the story you just told. And each time you did, you’d tickle me and I’d shriek and try to get away from you. You remember?”

“Yes.”

She edged closer. “Let’s play again.”

His eyes darkened. “If we play now, I won’t just tickle you when I find you.”

“And I won’t try to get away.”

He shuddered but didn’t move to touch her. “Playing hide and seek with a vulk ...” His voice was hoarse and gruff. He gestured toward the smoking ashes next to them. “It’s like playing with fire. I may lose control.”

“I don’t care.”

“Bedding a vulk is different from bedding a man. We’re more similar to wolfwalkers. You understand?”

Yes, she knew exactly what he meant. Chessa loved bedding wolfwalker males, and she’d described—probably over-described—how they knotted during sex. Since Juri *was* a wolfwalker, even if he’d turned vulk later, Triska had wondered if he’d be the same. She’d wondered ... and imagined.

And Triska had a touch of wolfwalker blood, too. Wolfwalkers and vulk were compatible, so if a wolfwalker went into heat she could have a vulk child. However, it wasn’t something they needed to worry about tonight—Triska wasn’t in heat—but they *were* made for each other. In more ways than one.

Heat kicked low in her stomach. Her fingers curled on his chest. “I understand.”

His pupils dilated. “Then go hide, Triska, and think about what I’m going to do when I find you.”

She knew where she wanted Juri to find her, but she wanted him to search for her first. Wasn’t he a tracker, after all? Her heart pounded as she turned and ran down the beach. The night took on a surreal quality as she ran. Each step seemed to float the way they did in dreams, hampering the dreamer from going anywhere. Except she made progress.

She lit a small ball of white light in her hand. Her magic came so sluggishly when she called it, it was like squeezing it through a sponge to get it to work. Using her bit of light, she snuck down the beach toward Fergal’s boat, past the dim light from his bulkhead cabin shining over the water. Past Arrow trundling in tidal pools. She ducked up the path they’d taken when they first arrived.

When she reached the meadow where they’d met the harpies, she sprinted along the soft grass to the path that led back to Koschei’s house, but first, she tugged Koschei’s baggy shirt over her head. Her bodice had been soaked by the earlier rainstorm, and she’d left it behind. Now, her upper body was nude. She tucked her shirt in a hollow beneath a fallen tree.

Koschei might not be pleased she left his shirt outside, but it would provide a temporary diversion for Juri.

Maybe.

She didn't know how good his senses really were. Clad only in her loose trousers, she ran back toward Koschei's home and hid.

As a child, she'd found inventive hiding spots, winning the game every time except if Juri was the seeker. However, she wouldn't hide in the misty, dark forest. When she and Juri finally tangled together, she wanted him in the cocoon-like room Koschei had lent them. So, she huddled inside the armoire near the dining tables, among a scattering of linens, and waited.

He didn't make a sound, and she didn't see the door open through the slats in the armoire. Yet, awareness rippled over her skin. The same charge as when the winds changed while sailing, right before the sea turned from gentle to dangerous. Her breath hitched in her throat.

Every moment she waited, the ache inside grew. The ache to have Juri run his hands over every inch of her skin and to do the same to him. His skin was soft over the hard muscles of his jaw and mouth. And velvety smooth. Were there other places on his body where his skin was a little more silken?

There was probably at least one.

A small smile curled her lips. She was going to find out soon.

A padded foot scuffed along the wooden floor, and Triska leaned forward to see better through the slats. Juri stepped farther into Koschei's living room, the shadows hiding him except for his glowing, golden eyes. A pulse of pure lust shot through her, and she throbbed between her legs. She sucked in quick gasps of air and hunched down. Cool air floated over her naked back, but she didn't shiver. No—she burned.

A purr shot through the dim quiet. It washed over her like a caress, and the tension in her limbs slackened. The throbbing

heat intensified, and she dug her fingernails into the side of the armoire.

His head swung, first one way, then the other, his ears twitching. His purr deepened, and she bit back a groan. Maybe she hadn't bitten it back because his head snapped around, and his golden eyes landed right on the massive wardrobe. "Found you." His voice was deeper, a feral bite to it.

She shivered. What he'd said about his instincts was true; he was pure vult right now. The mightiest immortal who walked Ulterra. And completely focused on her. His pupils seemed to have grown bigger as his eyes darkened to deep amber.

In the dim light of the moons shining through the cracked open shutters, she could make out his shadowy figure moving across the room. His steps soundless and sure, the confident gait of a stalking predator narrowing in on his prey. When he opened the doors, he took his time, revealing her inch by inch.

He opened his hand, and the shirt she'd discarded slipped to the floor. "Come on out."

She leaped and wrapped her arms and legs around him. His purring intensified, and she groaned, rubbing her chest against his. Juri growled and spun, crashing into a chair near the fireplace. It toppled onto its side, the sound thunderous in the quiet.

His arms wrapped around her tightly as his head lowered. He nipped at the junction of her shoulder and neck, and a shot of pure lust sizzled through her. Her head fell back. "Juri ..."

Her back slammed against the wall, and he shifted her higher, giving himself better access to her neck. "Good hiding spot." His breath fanned warm against her throat. "And imagining your breasts as you ran half-naked through the forest was a ... distraction." His tongue traced up the column of her throat, delicate and teasing. "You're still wearing too many clothes."

He shifted her in his arms and strode out of the living room. With a push of his shoulder, a door swung open,

revealing their small, private bedroom. She expected him to toss her on the bed and follow her down. Instead, he lay her down like a precious piece of porcelain. He took his time shutting the door, letting it close with a soft snick, then padded to the window and opened the shutters.

A silvery light filled the room. “Tonight is a tale for me alone, one I’ll never forget, and I want to see you with moonlight worshipping your skin.”

If not for his glowing eyes, she’d think him completely under control. But those eyes—the primal vulk inside radiated from their darkening depths.

Her pulse skittered. All those long, lonely nights when she’d wished for him, he was finally here. About to bed her. She’d never wanted anyone, or anything, more.

He returned to stand between her parted legs. Taking a long look at her, he shuddered, then bent forward, sliding one palm next to her face to prop himself up. His other hand cupped her chin, his thumb sweeping across her cheekbone, then sliding down to her jaw. He followed it with his mouth, tracing the line with small nibbles.

His fingers stroked down her throat, then feathered over her collarbones, each move lazy, slow, as if he had all the time in the world. Everywhere he touched stoked a fire, the likes of which she’d never felt before. Koschei’s house might erupt with the flames of her desire.

She whimpered and trailed her fingers down his chest to his ribs. Her hands were hungry, eager, with none of his slow seduction.

When his thumb flicked over the tip of her breast, she moaned and arched. “Juri, I need more.”

A grumble rumbled from his chest—a quick note of irritation. “We’re still playing hide and seek. I’m discovering you. What you like.” He rolled her nipple and her hips bucked. “What you love.” He lowered his head and sucked her nipple into his mouth. She gasped. When he used the edges of his teeth to tease it, she let out a strangled cry.

“I found you, and now you’re mine,” he said.

She groaned. “There’s something you have that I want to find, too.” She let her hand drift to his waistband. Let it brush against the thick bulge straining his trousers.

Juri chuffed and raised his head. His lips curled. “If I get one night with you, we go at my pace. But I’ll let you look your fill when I’m ready.”

She sucked in air, her chest heaving as she remembered to breathe. “You’ve always been bossy.”

“It’s a vulk thing.” He picked up her hand and nibbled her fingers. “But even if I’m the one leading, if you want to change your mind—”

“No!” She clutched at his back and tried to pull him closer. “I’m just saying, I’ve never let you tell me what to do.” She wanted to see all of him. Bolder now, she reached down and released the clasp along his trousers, then ran her fingers over his thick length straining to be free. He shuddered as he gulped in air.

“That’s what I’ve always loved about you,” he whispered.

Her head grew light. Was it because she kept forgetting to breathe, or because of what he’d said? *Love*. Desire raged through her, demanding attention, but she blinked heavy lashes coated in tears.

One night with him. Perhaps he’d been right to tell her it would put her heart at risk because right now, it twisted in her chest. Raw and sharp.

But he was hers tonight. Her vulk. Her Juri.

His mouth landed on her breast again, his tongue dragging over the tip and curling. She cried out and arched her back, offering him more. His tempo increased, his breath ragged.

He switched to her other breast and nibbled at the tip. She closed her eyes and let him sweep her away.

Juri took his time, using his fingers to stroke and roll the tip of her breasts as he switched from one to the other until she writhed under him and both tips jutted pink and needy. He

licked over one, paused, and blew a gentle breath over the tip, and she moaned at the sensation. From his *breath*.

She'd never felt anticipation like this.

Finally, finally, his fingers skated down her ribs and stomach, and he slid her breeches down over her hips, letting them slip to the floor in a rustle of fabric. His purring roughened, and his eyes flooded black as he stood over her.

Massive hands with their long, clawed fingers stroked from the soles of her feet up her calves to her inner thighs. He gripped her thighs and gently spread them wider.

His mouth landed on her, and she cried out a sharp, strangled note. Half tortured, half a plea. He groaned, and his purring filled the room. It lapped at her in the same way he did, coursing pleasure through her limbs, winding her pleasure ever tighter to bring her to the edge.

His tongue was slow, curling over the needy spot above her sex, but his fingers tightened on her thighs, and with one sudden flash, his tongue plunged inside. She yelped and rolled her hips, trying to give him better access.

He curled his tongue and it rolled, doing things she didn't know a tongue could do. He found a spot deep inside her, igniting a spark she hadn't known was there. She was going to combust. Erupt in a million sparks as he shifted his attention, teasing her inside and out with nips and licks.

With a muffled yell, she crested, digging her nails into the coverlet beneath her. Her climax rolled on as Juri worked her inside and out, wringing wave after wave from her until she shook, and a bead of sweat dripped down her temple.

Shock waves rippled through her, making her toes curl and her stomach clench. "I need you inside me." She clawed at Juri's forearms. More. She had to have more.

Eyes completely black, he stood and shucked his trousers.

Triska rose onto her elbows and sucked in a breath. At least a foot long and flushed a deep pink, his cock was massive.

She leaned forward and gripped him, sliding her hand down his length. The base throbbed under her attention, swelling slightly. She squeezed gently, and Juri groaned, slapping his palms down on the bed as he fell forward. His cock was just as silken as she'd expected.

Her heart pounded. A thread of nerves skittered in her stomach. He was so big.

Juri slid his hands under her waist and pushed her farther up the bed, following her and settling between her legs. "I'll go slow."

Black eyes focused on hers. He lined his tip up at her entrance and pushed. The heat of him pressing into her sex melted her tension and her nerves floated away. With one small roll of his hips, he eased inside.

She clawed his shoulders and buried her head in his neck. The size of him—his girth as thick as her wrist—stretched and burned.

He stopped moving to let her adjust. His lips caressed the hollow below her ear, and he whispered words in Vulk. They were soft. Soothing. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head closer to hers. Feather light, she ran her lips over his jaw and up his cheek. Triska tilted her hips to invite him deeper.

Slow pump after slow pump, he worked himself inside. She quivered, and her nails bit deep enough to draw blood. Soft, strangled mewling ripped from her throat. Damn he felt good. A bit too large, but she was getting used to it. All that mattered was Juri inside her. And she wanted more.

As he buried more of his thick length, the lingering discomfort eased. His strokes were slow but powerful. He dipped to her neck, and when he licked over the spot where it joined with her shoulder, she jolted. This was where a male marked his mate, and as Juri raked his teeth over it, without breaking the skin, she tilted her head, giving him better access. He purred, a claiming, primal note. She anticipated the slight sting of his bite, but it didn't come.

One hand slid beneath her hips and angled her upward. He nudged his length deeper and purred a low tone that shot through her like wildfire. She gasped. Gripping her hip, he plunged and with a claiming growl, slid all the way home.

She cried out, arching her back. A kick of pure pleasure shot through her veins, hot and insistent.

Juri rocked his hips, and all she wanted was *more*. Her sex squeezed him, pulsing to bring him deeper still. She dipped her hips to feel the delicious friction. The fullness.

He groaned. “You’re mine. You’ve always been mine.” And he moved.

Each pump brought a wave of pleasure. With each glide, he filled her so fully, he dragged along pleasure points she hadn’t known existed. She raised her hips to meet each thrust.

All his prior patience evaporated. He growled, pressing into her and pistoning his hips as if desperate to get even deeper. His strokes shortened and instead of withdrawing, he remained buried deep, using quick snaps of his hips.

Her skin slicked with sweat. Inside, her core fluttered around his cock. She was close to shattering again. The base of his cock swelled, pushing against her as his knot pressed for entry. She clawed at him.

And he gave her what she needed.

With one driving thrust, he knotted her. The intensity slammed through her. A fullness mixed with a connection deeper than she’d known could exist. When he locked into place behind her pubic bone, she wrapped her legs around him and let him take her away. Pleasure erupted in waves stronger than anything she’d ever felt, and she peaked, crying out.

Juri groaned, and the first wash of his release shot hot inside her. Triska clung to his shoulders and hung on.

His hips circled, and his cock throbbed with another release. That was all it took. She shattered again, his name falling from her lips over and over.

He held her close as she fell apart, and when she finally stopped shuddering, he began again.

HE LAY ON HIS SIDE, Triska facing him, her legs tangled with his and her arm clutching him close. He'd bundled the blankets over her, knowing how much she loved being swaddled. A few hours ago, when the milky wash of night faded to the soft light of dawn, they'd taken a break, and he'd purred soothingly until she floated off to sleep. He knew exactly how his purrs affected her now. The rough one he rumbled low in her ear stoked her desire to fevered heights. The gentle, calming one slowed her heartbeat and melted her against him.

A songbird landed near the open window and twittered loudly, announcing the morning. His lip rose up his eyetooth. The night had passed so quickly. Too quickly.

Triska nestled her face deeper into his chest and he cradled her close. Being with her surpassed anything he'd imagined—and he'd imagined it often. She'd molded to him as if she were made for him. All of him. And being sealed inside her was addictive. Incredible. Thank Perun-above she wasn't in heat because, with all the time he'd spent knotting them together, he'd have gotten her with child. *His child*. For one glittering moment, he imagined Triska holding their baby, and warmth flooded his entire body, but just as quickly, he tamped it down. He couldn't stay with her, and he'd never have a vulk child he'd leave behind. Never.

Footsteps sounded outside the room, loud enough for non-vulk to hear as Koschei got up and walked down the hall. "I don't want to move," she mumbled.

“If you wanted to move, then I didn’t do something right.”

She stretched and drew back to look him in the face. “Oh, you did *everything* right. Only I didn’t get to look my fill like I wanted to.” Her lips twitched. “It’s my turn to be bossy, and I want to bathe with you. Then I can see everything I didn’t get a chance to admire last night. Koschei must have a washing tub or a shower.”

“Or we swim in the ocean, and I’ll tell Arrow he has to take off. No peeking at you nude.”

She laughed, and the light, tinkling sound was the best possible music. “He doesn’t know the difference, he’s a dragon.”

“You say that now. What if someday he shifts and shows he can take human form?”

Juri rolled the sheet around her, then slid off the bed, hauling her up in his arms. He let the sheet drape down over his waist—although he didn’t care if Koschei saw him naked.

Juri strode out into the hall and took a right, heading for the room at the end of the hall. He’d scented water, and as they entered, it proved to be the washroom. Along the back wall was a drain with thin, sandy-colored wood slats covering the floor and wall. From the ceiling hung a spigot with a long pull chain. He tugged on it and released a gentle cascade of water.

Tearing the sheet away, he kept Triska in his arms and entered the space. The water was warm, not quite hot, but pleasant enough. Triska closed her eyes and tilted her head, allowing the water to wash over her face. He shifted her in his arms, letting it caress each bit of her skin. A large sea sponge was hanging from one slat, and a lumpy bar of soap was next to it.

He put Triska down, then lathered the sponge. As he wiped it across her shoulder, she said, “You know, I can wash myself.”

Juri growled. “Not a chance.”

Washing her was courtship behavior. Actually, it was beyond courtship behavior—it was the way a male looked

after his mate—but he didn't care. He had her for the night. And this morning.

Her hands roamed up his arms, sliding across the wet skin. "All right. It gives me a chance to watch you as much as I want."

When he knelt to wash the smooth line of her calve, he bumped into the wall. He growled. They didn't build the shower for one his size.

His skin tingled as if the water had turned icy. His vision rippled, and he saw two of Triska. A moment of darkness swept over him as if he'd passed out.

"Juri!" Triska stared at him, her mouth falling open. "You're Look down."

The fingers spread along the shower basin weren't the charcoal gray of a vulk; they were the bronzed, more blunted ones of a man. He raised his hand and brought it to his face. A face without a muzzle. His mouth dropped open.

"How is this possible?" Triska asked. "I thought vulk only had one form?"

He stood and it wasn't the smooth motion of a vulk, but slower. Strange. The water cascaded over his back and chest, and it tickled without the protection of his vulk hair. He stretched, feeling his non-vulk limbs work. He was still at least a foot taller than Triska, but he felt condensed. "My Alpha can change form at will. He's been tight-lipped on why, but I always guessed it was because of the mating bond. Maybe because of our rune ..."

He lifted his hand, concentrated, and his vulk skin and hair returned. Huh. He could change form now? Why? He let his human skin return and studied his hand.

The essence of being a vulk was to protect Ulterra—that was why at twenty years old, they took their vulk form and never looked back. Yet here he was ... in his original form again.

He ran his hand over his face, pausing when he reached his mouth. A *mouth*. With lips. In one motion he picked Triska up

and pressed her against the wall. He lowered his mouth to hers.

He whispered his lips across hers, memorizing the plump sweetness of her lower lip. How her top lip curved in its bow shape. Then he melded his lips to hers.

His chest warmed, expanding with liquid heat. Desire was there, but this was something much deeper. Much more expansive. It clawed forward, demanding attention. Demanding *her*.

He'd known the risk of knotting her. Of feeling her tied to him in the way he'd only want with his mate. Yet he hadn't expected to be felled by a kiss.

He licked up her lower lip, and she opened for him. Finally, he tasted her. The fresh tinge of rainwater from the shower mixed with the sweet raspberry taste of her mouth.

"You taste so good," he murmured.

She leaned back, and her eyes glowed. "You're *kissing* me." She ran her fingers over his lips. "I can't believe you're in your human form." Triska ran her hands through his hair. Real hair. "You're blond."

He shook his head, scattering water everywhere, and she laughed. He studied his arm. Sure enough, the smattering of hair on his forearms was fair-colored. Running his hand over his face, he raised a brow. "How do I look as a man?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she rubbed her chin, studying him. "If I was walking down the street, I'd stop and look twice."

He growled, and his mouth crashed down on hers. This time he deepened their kiss, claiming her mouth completely. He sucked at her lower lip and feasted until they parted, panting for air. "Only twice?"

"If you passed me on the street, I'd fall over staring at you so hard. Not only are you the most handsome man I've ever seen, you're still massive. You'd tower over everyone else." Her gaze drifted to his waist. "And I'm happy to report that some other things haven't changed size."

Since he'd started kissing her, he'd grown hard. "Of course not."

"To make sure, I think I need to feel it, though." Her fingers wrapped around him, and his hips jerked involuntarily. She pumped a few times, the water making him slick. He groaned and slapped his palm on the wall, propping himself up. Her touch was just as potent when he was in this form. Just as addictive.

She hummed. "This isn't good enough. I need a much ... closer ... examination."

Picking her up, he pressed her against the wall, and her legs wrapped around his waist. He loved the way he could use his mouth as a man. His tongue wasn't as useful, but he could suck harder and not worry about his teeth cutting her. And his lips ...

He kissed up her neck, listening to her gasps as he rocked against her. Every one of her exhales told a story. When he rolled his tongue, her breath came short and fast. When he brushed his lips in short, teasing notes, her breath was longer, a bit more frustrated. And when he found the spot under her jaw, halfway between her chin and ear, and sucked, she held her breath and twisted under him, her fingers digging into his back.

As his cock angled into place, she was already wet, eager, and waiting. In one push, he was inside. Her head fell back, exposing her throat.

Damn. The heat of her. He'd taken her many times last night, and it still felt like the first time. Every stroke was bliss.

Juri growled, and his mouth landed where her neck sloped into her shoulder, his teeth grazing. She jolted, and he did it again.

She keened, a note that sounded more like begging. All he had to do was bite down, and their bond would snap into place. Or would it? Didn't they both have to choose the bond?

Sucking in a breath that felt like it tore at his throat, he claimed her lips once more. This time his hips snapped hard.

Insistent. Triska cried out, her hips circling to meet his thrust.

Deeper. More. She'd know he was made for her.

He angled so that with each stroke his body rubbed against the needy spot above the seam of her. She moaned and sucked hungrily at his mouth.

Her lips swollen from his kisses, she pulled back, locking her gaze on his. Stunning. Perfect. And she wanted *him*.

She crashed into her release, her body jerking and her sex milking him hard. He wanted to prolong this, but he also wanted to feel her pleasure fully. Gripping her hips to keep her in place, he thrust harder. His knot was already swollen, begging for entry, and with one hard pump, he slipped it inside.

Triska gasped. "Juri."

Even the way she said his name inflamed him. He thrust one last time to lock into position, and her body cupped him into place.

He took her mouth again as he lost himself. She pulsed. Squeezed. His own release took over, and he growled, a low, claiming note.

Again and again, he filled her. Fire banking, then flaming into a blaze again. She writhed, saying his name over and over like it was something special.

His kisses slowed. Both tender and possessive, soft, yet demanding. No one else would ever take her like this. Kiss her like this.

Their heart rates slowed and he stepped away from the wall to slide to the floor, keeping her in his lap. He traced his thumb over her face as the water rained down her back. He'd remember the small freckle by the side of her mouth. The exact shade of blue of her eyes.

He'd never tell their tale to anyone but himself, but now he knew how to describe her. Although words weren't enough to express her beauty.

They were only supposed to have one night, and dawn had come several hours ago, but it was like something inside him would die if he had to stop touching her. There was still so much more he wanted. To nestle beside her as they read the *Quarter Obol Dreadful* adventure stories. To see her face when he showed her his den for the first time.

He growled, and something twisted in his chest, cold and sharp. They'd never do those things together.

Sighing, he kissed her one last time. "Let's go protect Ulterra." He focused, and his vision wavered as his vulk form returned. While he could kiss Triska in his human form, only in his vulk form could he protect her the way he wanted.

She ran her hands up his chest. "You can change at will?"

"It seems so."

"How did it feel to take your human form again?"

He tilted his head. As a kid, he'd struggled to accept his fate, but now, he knew who he truly was. He was one of the ten vulk walking Ulterra. His creed—his life—centered on keeping Ulterra safe. His life allowed no mate. No family other than his pack brothers.

He hugged Triska close. Maybe *that* part he hadn't accepted the way he should, but he knew his true form. His real form. "My vulk form is who I am."

His night with Triska was over. Now it was time to return to what he was supposed to do. Save Ulterra. He wouldn't remain in his human form and explore how it felt. It represented his possible bond with Triska, and he couldn't let it tempt him or lure him into dreaming of a different kind of life.

He stood and pulled the chain to stop the water. "Let's go."

TRISKA BOUND her still damp hair up onto the top of her head. She stood in the middle of Koschei's kitchen, wearing her own clothes. A potbellied stove, scuffed and patched, hunched under a wide window, the shutters open to reveal the morning.

Juri growled and pointed at the stove. "This is what I always hoped to serve you for breakfast after we'd spent a night together. Gruel." The lumpy, brownish mixture lay thick in a heavy-bottomed pot, steam still rising into the air.

She stepped over to Juri and picked up two bowls. "Koschei made us breakfast. That's nice."

"I'm not sure I call this breakfast."

It had been strange seeing him as a man in the shower. Some things about him stayed the same in both forms—which she'd pointed out—but it wasn't just his thick length, it was also his eyes.

When he'd taken her in the shower, the way he'd looked at her ...

Triska shivered. Even though he'd been in human form, the feral intensity of his gaze shone through. He'd looked at her as if she was the entire world. As if she was *his*.

"What would you feed me instead?"

As Juri slopped porridge into their bowls, he glanced at her, and the same possessive heat blazed through. "It would depend on where we were. I'd love to take you to the vae territory for some of their food. They don't eat meat, which is

a major problem, but they have a honeyed bread and yogurt you'd love. And they make their own cheese. I remember how mad you were about cheese."

She nodded. She loved her cheese.

Rolling her shoulders, she winced. Having shaken with pleasure all night, a few muscles were complaining, and there was a tenderness between her legs. She didn't mind because every time she felt it, she was reminded of how she'd been claimed by a vulk. Properly, thoroughly, claimed.

She brushed against his side as they walked into the dining room, desperate to touch him again. As if she needed to keep reassuring herself he really was right there. Since last night, the bond in her chest felt ... like an actual presence. And it throbbed with a raw ache, too. Not like a sore muscle but like the sting of heartache. As if something was missing.

Triska rubbed her chest, Juri's ring rolling beneath her fingers. Hopefully, his bond didn't ache like this. She'd thought there was no harm in one night together.

Her heart hadn't listened.

Juri carried their porridge to the dining table and sat down. He pulled her into his lap and tucked her against him. With his giant vulk hands, he picked up a spoon and tried first one bowl, then the other.

"Hm. This one is better." He pushed the one he'd deemed superior toward her. "It's not as claggy as I thought it would be." He spooned up another helping and brought it to her lips.

She took a bite. He'd wanted to wash her, wiping over her skin far more gently than she'd treat herself, and now he was feeding her. Back in Ryba, it was common to see courting males, or sometimes a courting female, feed their partner in the tavern or restaurant. Others nearby would smile and comment that a mating bond was close, especially with the wolfwalkers. Wolfwalker males were a bit aloof except for when they had a mate in their sights. Then they pursued with a single-mindedness beyond compare. Juri was a vulk, but he

had wolfwalker blood, too. With that combination, his attention was heady. Intense. Consuming.

She really should sit in her own seat. Start the slow but inevitable distance between them. Stop feeding this need in her chest. But she snuggled closer and he hummed a short, pleased rumble. “Where’s Koschei?” she asked.

“He came in late last night and roamed around this morning for a bit, but left not too long before we showered.”

She twisted to view his face. “You heard all that?” Triska reached up and ran her hand over one of his ears.

“Aye.” The corners of his eyes crinkled the way they did when he truly smiled. “You know that ear you’re touching has a tale. I almost lost it to a mad chef.”

“Insult his cooking, did you?” She nudged the bowl of porridge with her spoon. “I don’t think Koschei would enjoy any comments about his cooking either.”

Juri growled. “It wouldn’t have hurt him to make muffins for you. Or toast. And lots of bacon.”

She swallowed another bite. “This is fine. And I didn’t see any pigs running around.” She barely tasted the food, she was too focused on the vulk holding her.

The front door opened, and a puff of breeze gusted through the room. “Your magicwielder has been on the beach since dawn, looking at a bowl,” Koschei said with no other greeting. “You need to check on him.” He turned on his heel, his cloak whipping around him, and left out the front door.

Triska leaned closer to Juri. “He’s grumpy this morning.”

“His bedroom wasn’t nearly as exciting as ours.”

They finished their breakfast and hustled down the path to the beach. It was clearer this morning, the mist only a fine sheen high in the sky, allowing the suns to shine brighter. The black sand glistened and small green birds with long orange beaks scuttled along the shoreline, peeping as they dodged the waves to peck at the sand. The birds in Ryba went crazy chasing after sand fleas. Did this island have them as well?

Near his boat, Fergal sat in the sand. Rising on a short base in front of him was a pewter bowl. *The scrying bowl.*

Fergal's eyebrows were scrunched together, and his eyes narrowed as he stared at the empty basin, Koschei at his side. "He's been sitting like this without moving for quite some time," Koschei said. "I thought he was dead, but he grunts every once in a while."

Triska shrugged. "He gets like this every time he's considering something." While he was training her, and they'd worked together to figure out her magic, he'd often go silent and absorbed. She'd called it his do-not-disturb-and-go-away pose.

Koschei scoffed. "Are magicwielders so weak these days that a scrying bowl paralyzes them with fear? Scrying is nothing. It doesn't take long moments of contemplation. All you need is a flat surface of water and a wisp of magic."

Juri shook his head. "Hoyt didn't only use this bowl for scrying, he created magic in it."

Koschei inhaled sharply, and his lips pinched together. "Are you sure?" He bent forward without waiting for an answer and ran his fingers over the edge of the bowl. He jolted. "Impossible ... but maybe ..." He glanced skyward, then turned the bowl as if turning the wheel of a ship, a quarter turn clockwise.

Fergal hissed, but it was too late. Purple flame flared inside the bowl, even though it was empty. Triska gasped and jumped back, losing her balance. Juri grabbed her waist and steadied her. An image appeared inside the flame, so detailed it was easy to make out sunlight streaming from tall windows into a dim room. A dark, scarred table took up most of the room, a large piece of paper stretched across it. From their angle, it appeared to be a drawing, maybe a map. Shelves groaning with books and parchment filled the opposite wall.

Juri stepped closer and peered into the flames. "I've seen this room before." He rubbed his head. "I just can't remember What is this? How did you activate the scrying bowl?"

“I wasn’t sure if it would activate since this island dampens most magic,” Koschei said. “And this isn’t a scrying bowl. It’s one of the five Herskala bowls.”

Juri’s mouth dropped open. “I thought they were all destroyed? Or lost?”

Triska gaped at the three males surrounding her. She’d never heard of a Herskala bowl; why did they all know about them?

Fergal roused, sitting up straighter. “He’s right. I’ve suspected this was a Herskala bowl since I picked it up on the beach, but I was still deciding whether it would be wise to use it.” He glared at Koschei. “Some haven’t learned to think before making a decision.”

“What is this bowl?” Triska asked.

“Do you see the notches along the rim?” Fergal pointed at the edge of the bowl. Barely visible, a notch was etched into the rim in four places. If someone drew a string between each notch, it would bisect the bowl vertically, then horizontally. “It represents the four points of the compass—north, south, east, and west. When you line them up, the bowl activates. It was primarily created to allow communication between those who owned the bowls. But these bowls have many secrets. I suspect there are many we still don’t know.” He nodded toward the image. “This bowl is communicating with another bowl right now. One sitting in an empty room.”

Triska’s brows shot up. “If someone was in that room, could we talk to them? Would they know their bowl is active?”

“We could do much more than talk to them,” Koschei said, and he spoke as if in a trance, his gaze still fixed on the room. “The most powerful sorcerer ever to live created these bowls, Herskala himself.”

Triska frowned. “Herskala Academy is named after an actual person?” She wasn’t a magicwielder, and while they lived in Ryba with her, magicwielders kept their own counsel on magic matters. She knew little about their education or their magical history.

Fergal nodded. “The academy is inside his old residence. He liked spires, apparently, and didn’t mind that they’re quite drafty.” He paused for a long moment. “By all accounts his power was remarkable, and we still discover spells or artifacts he created. Many of his spells are so complex, no one can use them, and these bowls ... as Juri said, were thought to be lost.”

Triska turned to Juri. “What were the bowls for?”

Inside the image, a shout rang out. Light shone across the table, and a door creaked. A group of guards swept into the room, hands glowing with magic. “Voices are coming from inside Princess Katisa’s study,” one of them said. Each guard had the top part of their hair braided along one side, revealing delicately tipped ears.

Triska gasped. “Vae.”

The guards turned their faces toward the bowl. The one in front pointed at it. “The bowl is active. Get the princess.”

Juri leaned forward. “Tell Caladin I say hi. Better yet, tell your chef I miss eating his dodos. He’ll like that.”

The guards yelled, and Koschei waved his hand. The image faded, but purple flames, edged with deep blue still leaped in the bowl. “What was that about? Who is Caladin?”

Juri grinned. “I knew I’d seen that room before. It’s in the vae palace, I was there last year. Caladin is their king, and their chef isn’t my biggest fan. Why did you extinguish the connection? The vae are all right.”

“You don’t know what this bowl does,” Koschei answered. “I’ve seen one in use before. Actually, it was the vae bowl, but back then, it was in a special room, masked with dampening spells to keep it safe.” He gestured toward the flames. “Now the vae have it tucked into a dusty study. They’ve grown careless, or they don’t understand it. They should keep it covered or masked. Always.”

A burble of frustration bubbled in her chest. Apparently, she was the only one who didn’t know the significance of these bowls. “Can someone explain what the Herskala bowls are?”

Juri dropped to a knee and wrapped his arm around her waist, drawing her back to lean on his bent leg so she had a kind of stool. “Of course. Legend says that when Herskala grew older, he wanted to pass his knowledge on as he had no heirs. He asked everyone with magical talent to come to his palace, and he’d choose one of them to become his heir. It didn’t matter if they were an immortal or a magicwielder. He opened his doors to everyone. He set up a test to see who was worthy, and all the applicants had to go through many trials, each more difficult than the next, until he’d whittled them down to four. These four, and these four alone, were given one of his specially made bowls, representing the four corners of the world.” He grimaced as if in pain. “This story would be much better if I could describe all the trials, but we don’t have the time right now.”

“Those trials became the cornerstone of our academy when we started the school,” Fergal said.

Triska rubbed her cheek. “But why four heirs? And didn’t you say it was five bowls?”

Juri squeezed her gently. “You figured out the problem right away. Yes, finding an heir was never really his plan.” Juri bent and drew a circle in the sand with a claw. “Each one of the magical talents he chose as an ‘heir’ stood for a distinct part of Ulterra. Alvic in the north.” He made a dot at the top of the circle. “Illstrand the Illustrious of the vae.” Another dot, this time to the east. “Sarka, one of the old gods, Queen of the South. And then Jareth the magicwielder, in the west.” He added both of their dots. “Those were supposed to be the four bowls.”

Juri drew two lines, connecting the dots so a large cross lay inside the circle. He stabbed a claw into the intersection of the dots. “They were supposed to be advanced scrying bowls, allowing all four of the heirs to communicate in the normal way but also to share magic. The legends say the heirs found they could do much more than that with the bowls as well. They could scry for things that happened in the past and even glimpse into the future.”

Juri settled her more firmly on his knee and continued, “What they didn’t know was that secretly, Herskala made a fifth bowl, this one able to view the others without notice. With this bowl, he could read the other’s innermost thoughts, even their intentions and motivations. And it could suck power from the four heirs, giving it to Herskala.” Juri frowned. “Hoyt told the hooded man that Morana fed him power and spells through the bowl. I should have thought of the Herskala bowls.”

Fergal snorted. “Why would you? All the bowls were said to be destroyed during the Deciding Wars.”

“How were they supposedly destroyed?” Triska asked.

Juri scratched at the sand, drawing his claw along the line from north to south. “Alvic and Sarka aligned together to overthrow all of Ulterra. They married, and their alliance was the last spark that ignited the Deciding War.”

Koschei leaned down and pushed his thumb into the dot representing Alvic. “Alvic, my father, was already married. He left our island to join Sarka. I was only a child when this happened, but my mother, and many of the people faithful to her, remained here on this island. They did not join the Deciding War.”

Juri stared at him a long moment. “Perun-above, how old *are* you?”

Koschei ignored him. “All the heirs were destroyed in the battle. Even Illstrand. I knew his son, that was how I’d seen their bowl in action once. It was nicer looking than this one, made of a smoother marble material.”

“Illstrand’s son ... Illarion? The Dark King?”

Koschei nodded. “He wasn’t dark yet, although far too powerful for his own good. He used to set things on fire a lot.” Koschei’s lips twisted, the closest to a smile she’d seen from him. “Illarion was a lot of fun back then. I heard he died in the battle as well.”

“No.” Juri paused. “He was bound in the southern Kuls for thousands of years. About one hundred and fifty years ago, he

finally broke free. I've met him. He performed the wedding ceremony for my Alpha and his mate. For a vae, he isn't too bad."

Koschei's lips thinned. "Why isn't the vae bowl in his possession? He'd know how to take care of it."

"He's sort of ... not the king anymore. Caladin is king. He has the bowl."

Koschei gazed out across the ocean, but Triska suspected he didn't take in the view of the birds diving for fish in the water. "I know nothing of the outer world any longer."

Fergal tapped on the bowl. "Let's see if more of these bowls still exist." He waved his hand through the purple flames, and another image appeared.

The image was oddly distorted as if looking through a window of a house with old, warped glass. A lush, red carpet spread on a floor; otherwise, all that was visible was a stone wall and narrow window. Overall, the room was dark; lit by a single torch in a sconce, and weak, filtered light from the window.

"Why does it look so strange?" she asked.

"The bowl is inside a locked display case." Fergal shook his head and chuckled, but the chuckle was short and mirthless. "I know *this* room. This is Herskala Academy's display room, where some of the ancient artifacts Herskala left behind are displayed. Including a golden chalice. I always thought that the chalice was far too large to be a cup he drank wine from. Although, I know some wine drinkers who'd welcome a cup that large, myself included."

Voices floated from the image, and Fergal put a finger to his lips.

A woman with white hair pulled back into a tight chignon entered the image. She wore the crimson red robes of Herskala Academy with an ornate golden crest on her upper right chest. A tall man strode next to her, his face in shadow as he remained turned away from the chalice. He wore a light-gray shirt trimmed with what appeared to be velvet. One of the

most luxurious fabrics according to Chessa. His trousers were black and perfectly cut. In the style of the Trulo kingdom, his clothing appeared simple yet expertly tailored. Chessa said that the wealthy liked to underplay the expense of their possessions, they even described their elaborate estates as cottages.

“This meeting is rather irregular, my lord,” the woman said, turning so her face was fully visible.

The tall man nodded. “I wanted to speak in private about the update to the Official Roll of the Magicarchy.”

“I suspected as much, but there is little I can do. The Barrington family has produced four high-level sorcerers in the past decade, and your family has ... well” She trailed off and looked out the window. “I apologize for being so direct, my lord.”

Next to her, Juri jolted, his arm brushing against hers. When she turned toward him and raised a brow, he pointed at the man. Did he recognize him?

The man waved his hand lazily, and that was when Triska caught the wink of gold, the sunlight from the small window bouncing off a ring with a family crest on the man’s middle finger. Like the one worn by the hooded man Juri described from the sewer. “Our family refuses to marry unless we’re certain the mingling blood will bring us what we want. We shouldn’t be punished for that.”

“Look at it more as the Barringtons are being elevated.”

The man turned even farther away, giving the woman his back. “The Barringtons are a fine family, but they don’t deserve to crack the top ten. They have no estate. Their money is tied up in trade. Are you certain their latest children are truly sorcerers? Perhaps they should be tested again.” He paused for a long moment. “There are rumors you’re raising funds for a new wing for the southern hall.”

The woman’s face remained smooth, without a flicker of surprise at the abrupt change in subject. “Yes, we need more classrooms, but I haven’t announced it yet.”

“My family would be glad to fill your coffers. No need to beg for money from a public already tired of donating, considering the last request for funds was less a request and more a demand. Your time could be better spent on other things.”

Now her brows rose a fraction. “That would save me quite a headache. It’s rather beneath my role as dean to beg. I wish the kingdom would set a decree for us to tax the humans of Trulo.”

The lord waved his hand again. “I agree. I can reintroduce that measure in our next council meeting. Of course, by freeing your time, you could also reexamine the trials of new sorcerers over the past year and determine if there were any ... inaccuracies.”

The corner of the dean’s eyes tightened. “You also need to marry. And marry well. The family needs another generation with strong magicwielders, all sorcerer level. You were the only one of your generation who reached that achievement, and that makes it look like your blood is diluting.”

The man stiffened and Triska suspected he didn’t get orders telling him to marry too often. Or perhaps she’d just insulted him. “A ... friend ... of mine has some thoughts on potential partners for me. I agree it’s time for me to find a wife.”

“I’m sure I can help you much better than a matchmaking friend. Let’s have tea. I know most of the eligible young women of marrying age and their magical aptitude. Of course, I usually charge for my matchmaking endeavors, but for you, there’s no need for such things.” The woman gestured toward the door. “And we can complete your generous donation.”

The two left without glancing at the chalice, and without revealing the man’s face.

The image faded as Fergal waved his hand, but the purple flames remained.

“Do you know who that man is?” Juri asked.

“Was it the hooded man?” Triska asked.

“In the sewers, the man spoke low. Sort of clipped. I can’t be certain if it was the same voice.”

Fergal stroked his chin. “If I’d seen his face properly, maybe. I think we can assume he’s from one of the ten families.”

“Ten families?” Triska asked.

“Yes. The magicwielding families are ranked by power. Everyone wants the top ten, and they fight viciously for it.”

Juri growled. “He wore the ring on the same hand and finger as the man in the sewers.”

Fergal waved his hand as if swatting at a fly. “Most of the heirs wear their family ring. What I want to know is, has Herskala fallen so low that the dean overlooked a chalice bursting with purple flames behind her?” He cackled. “Of course, she always was dim in magical matters. Shrewd in politics though, which is how she overthrew me.”

Juri set Triska on her feet and stood. “The Herskala bowls are interesting, but how does this all tie into Hoyt? How did he have this bowl in the first place?”

Fergal stood as well. “I’m not sure how he found one of the bowls. People have searched for centuries for them and without luck. But having this bowl allowed him to see he could channel magical power from shuwt successfully. Did Morana’s bowl come up to Ulterra with her?”

Juri paused for a long time before answering. “I can’t be certain, but I don’t think so. Hans described what happened when Morana reappeared, and he never mentioned anything about her having a bowl.”

“Did Hoyt mention anything about wanting the other bowl?”

Juri shook his head. “No.”

“Do you think he thought the bowl may be on the vanishing isle?” Triska asked. “Is that what he needs for the incantation?”

Fergal harrumphed. “We can check that easily. All we need to do is ask this bowl to show us where the last two missing bowls are.”

Koschei bent forward and waved his hand over the flame.

“Wait!” Fergal grabbed his arm, but it was too late, an image wavered in the flames.

JURI STARED as the image in the flames turned into the same one he'd seen in the bowl back when Hoyt first used it in the sewers. The light-colored walls, the wide window with the cragged mountains and dusty hills visible beyond it were all the same. A few trees hunched against the wind.

He peered into the flame. The landscape was none he'd ever seen, clouds of dust unfurling as the wind hit the tops of the hills. No suns shone down; instead a reddish-gray pallor spread in a monotone wash over the earth. "Peklo. The bowl remains in Peklo."

Fergal shifted closer. "That's what I was afraid of. Keep your voices down, we don't know where this is. Or who's listening."

Koschei pointed. "Don't be silly. I know where this is. Look, it's my crest." Sure enough, cut into the white wall was a gold insignia. "This bowl is sitting in one of the front parlor rooms of my home down in Peklo. I thought my home down there would have been destroyed like the one up here." He smiled slightly. "I can't believe it's still there."

"Morana must have moved in when she was stuck down there," Juri said. "And set up the bowl for her dealings with Hoyt."

Koschei whipped his cloak back. "She shouldn't have been able to enter *my* palace."

Fergal pointed. "Check the bowl again. We still have one of them unaccounted for."

Koschei waved his hand again; this time, only darkness shone in the flames. “Nothing. The last one must be destroyed.” He placed his palm flat down in the bowl, and the flame went out.

<You all right?> The voice rang in Juri’s head. *Hans*.

He stepped away from the group. Only their Alpha could communicate telepathically and over long distances with the other pack members. Juri could speak to Hans when Hans opened the link, but he couldn’t reach out to him on his own. <I figured I’d take a holiday. I’m basking on a deserted island.>

<That’s what Kyril said you were doing.>

“Och, Kyril can—” Juri stopped himself. He’d spoken aloud, and the others all turned and stared at him. He shrugged. “My Alpha contacted me. We’re talking.”

Fergal’s brows shot up. “Telepathic communication among the vulk? Really?”

Juri took another step away, frowning. How many vulk secrets was he going to reveal accidentally?

<Finn and I are in Ryba with Kyril,> Hans said. <One of the fishing boats tried to get to the island at dawn, but a squall rose and pushed it back to the harbor. The man sailing said his daughter was on the island?>

<Yes, I’m here with an odd magicwielder and Triska. Uh, the daughter.>

Juri told the others what Hans had said. “Did you see a boat? Or a squall this morning?” he asked Fergal.

Fergal shook his head. “No.”

Juri took a minute and filled Hans in on what had happened over the past couple of days, including the rune, his binding with Triska, and the absence of necromancers on the vanishing isle. <We know the necromancer wants to perform some kind of incantation, and Fergal suspects it’s linked to the power source here on the island, but we don’t know what that might be.> He explained about the island being an old junction

and a power source for those who lived on it. <Have you ever heard of a group called the Dark Cabal? They're magicwielders, and Hoyt joined up with them.>

<No, but I'll dig around and get information on them. The vae follow magicwielder nonsense more closely than we do. I can get a message to them and find out what they know.>

<Yeah ... about the vae. We have a bowl here that can communicate with the one in Princess Katisa's study.> He explained about the Herskala bowls and what they'd discovered and overheard. <They vae might not be aware of the power of that bowl any longer. And the man we saw in Herskala Academy might have been the hooded man from the sewer, but I can't be sure.>

There was a long pause, and Juri watched the gulls land on the water. They bobbed on the waves sleepily, but as one, their heads turned east toward Ryba bay, and they took off. Arrow was probably fishing below them. He shook his head. That dragon was a menace, but he liked him anyway.

<Katisa used the bowl to show me a sort of dream she'd had, so she must have known the bowl had special talents. When I get a chance, I'll talk to them about it.>

<Have you found the necromancers near Ryba?> Juri asked. <They must still be over there because I searched the vanishing isle, and they aren't here.>

<Not yet.>

Juri's hands clenched into fists. The longer Hoyt remained alive, the longer danger hung over Triska's head. Even though Hans wanted Hoyt alive—probably to kill him rather than question him—Juri wasn't taking that chance. He'd threatened Triska, so the necromancer's days were numbered. <How are you going to get us off this island?>

<I'm working on that. The fishermen here said the squall wasn't linked to the weather, so magic may be keeping others from reaching the island. Damn I'm going to need to disconnect. The mayor's talking to Kyril.>

<Kyril hasn't eaten the mayor yet?>

Chuffing came through, even telepathically. <Not yet, although there was a close call. With Finn here, I can put him on mayor duty. By the way, since when are the vulk protecting villages again?>

Juri rubbed his mouth. Shit, he probably should have run that decision by Hans. <Right. Only choice, really. Had to catch the necromancers before they hurt more people, and forming an alliance was the best way.>

<Mm.> There was a pause. <The female you're on the island with, you're truly runebound?>

Juri glanced at Triska. <Yes. We ... the rune showed up when we were kids. It didn't speak then, but two days ago, it appeared again, and this time when it spoke to us, it was like the poem you got last year with Briony.>

<Ah. Last year Baba Yaga told me you'd seen a rune before.>

Juri ran his hand over his head and stalked to the water's edge, letting the waves lap over his toes. The gentle pulse of waves had turned more violent, with the water sucking at his feet as it reared back, only to crash back on shore with a larger, churning force. Was there a squall coming? He couldn't tell because the mist blocked the horizon. <I should have mentioned it, but when we were kids, the rune didn't speak and ...>

He'd wanted to hide his connection to Ryba and Triska. Juri and Hans were the same age, and they'd joined the vulk pack, along with Zann—Hans's brother—around the same time. As Zann drifted apart, working to prove himself in the pack and move up the hierarchy to becoming Alpha, Hans and Juri grew closer. Kyril made up a fourth member of their group, but he was always a touch aloof, perhaps closest with Zann.

During those first decades of pack life, Juri snuck away to Ryba and Triska by himself. He was violating sacred vulk protocol, and he couldn't tell anyone. But one hundred and one years ago, they'd thought Zann had died, and the pack fell apart. Hans secluded himself, refusing to see anyone, and Juri

and Kyril often traveled together, visiting other pack members and killing spawn. It was then he'd started bringing Kyril with him to Ryba. Even after Hans returned to the pack and reunited it last year, Juri still hadn't told him about his visits to Ryba. Hans was Alpha now, the one who laid down the vult creed. Enforced the rules.

And as Kyril had pointed out, Juri kept breaking them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Triska. She faced him, speaking to Koschei and Fergal about the Herskala bowl. Her gaze kept flicking over to him.

<I should have mentioned it,> Juri repeated.

<No,> Hans said. <It's private. But there are a few things you need to know about what happens when you're runebound. But let's figure out how to get you off that island first.>

The muscles of his shoulders loosened. Hans was the only other immortal in Ulterra who knew what he was going through. He knew about the rune's choice. He knew how Juri's chest pounded and twisted, longing for the bond with Triska.

<All right. And I'll keep working here to make sure Hoyt doesn't perform his incantation.>

<Talk soon,> Hans said.

The slight pressure in Juri's head faded as the connection ended.

As Juri rejoined the others, Fergal frowned down at the bowl, then lit it again. "We can now use the bowl to find the island power source. It should be able to show us exactly where it is."

A rumble erupted from the island, and the ground shook. Juri whirled around and grabbed Triska. The trees along the shore rippled as the ground bucked again. "Tell me you have a bird who brings on earthquakes?"

Koschei scanned the shoreline. "Nope. This is new."

"Lucky us." Juri turned toward the water. The light from the suns, previously straining to peek through the mist, snuffed

out completely. Black drenched clouds punched through the air, appearing where only thin, milky fog floated before. The clouds hung low with heavy bellies of billowing dark that expanded rapidly. Their tops were flat, making the entire cloud resemble an anvil. The rush of wind filled the beach, whipping the waves into white caps.

“We need to get out of here and take cover. Now,” Juri shouted.

Triska cried out and pointed. A slender point had emerged from the dark cloud, and the water below it frothed. A funnel cloud was forming.

Juri picked Triska up and sprinted back into the forest. “Find somewhere inland,” he yelled over his shoulder to the others. “Somewhere safe.”

Triska clung to his neck, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she hung on. “Koschei’s house?”

They sprinted up the path, and Koschei’s home rose before them, the massive, moss-coated trees brushing against it. “No. If that waterspout hits land ...” He sucked in a breath of air and ran faster. Those trees could crush the house.

When he’d explored yesterday, he’d discovered the island was flat and lush, except for the cliffs where Koschei’s original house stood.

He needed a cave. Or even a ditch they could duck into.

Ozone flooded the air, coating his tongue with its dense tang. Not good.

He sprinted, the trees, the path, a blur. The path ended, and he burst out onto the open expanse of cliffs. He wheeled to a stop and scanned. “Didn’t Koschei say his people made homes in the cliffs?”

“Yes, but only a bird could fly in and out of them.”

He swore. The wind whipped, pushing him so hard he had to step sideways to steady himself. If he put Triska down, she’d fly into the air.

Juri turned back toward the path. Where were Koschei and Fergal? Had they followed him or found somewhere else to take cover?

Rain spattered the cliffs like tiny arrows, pelting him and Triska with sharp raps. He hiked her farther up his chest and hunched to cover her as much as possible. The rain pelted, the drops pinging off his arms and back.

Not rain. *Hail.*

He studied the storm above him. Anvil clouds like the ones overhead, were the harbingers of storms and signs always appeared before they did. A change in the wind. Drops in the temperature. This storm didn't have any of those. His stomach lurched. High in the clouds was the dark form of a large raven. An ala.

She was the source of the storm, and the hail.

"We need to find somewhere safe," Triska said, hugging him harder. "Do you think Koschei and—"

Wind hit them hard. Brush and ripped branches tumbled along the smooth cliff, swirling around the charred circle which puffed green smoke. It clogged the air with sulfur, stinging his eyes.

The funnel cloud reared up over the cliff, a thin mass of churning dark air. Green flashed from its center, and in one motion it spread out over the cliffs toward them. Juri wheeled around to run toward the center of the island.

"Juri, look!"

He whirled around. The funnel cloud had centered directly over the charred circle where Koschei's staircase had once been, circling slowly but moving no farther. And inside the cloud, Hoyt dropped to the ground.

He faced Juri and sneered. "Of course you're here." Green lightning flashed, a bolt whizzing past his arm. Triska screamed.

Hoyt flung another bolt, and Juri leaped, but it hit Triska in the chest. She slumped motionless in his arms.

Juri roared. His own chest burned as if he'd been hit too, and he staggered. His vision turned red.

“Triska! Speak to me!”

She moaned, but remained limp. He'd kill the necromancer. Tear him limb from limb. He cradled Triska against him and turned towards Hoyt.

Hoyt stood with his legs spread, battling against the wind. His lips moved, but Juri couldn't hear what Hoyt said over the whistling in his ears. Smoke puffed from the charred circle. It rippled and split open, revealing the staircase within. Hoyt leaped back, staying clear of the entry down to Peklo.

Not good.

Hoyt raised his arms. “Good. Good. See this, vulk? The channel from this realm to the underworld is open.”

He needed to stop Hoyt, yet he also needed to take Triska as far from here as possible and make sure she was alright. He bared his teeth and crouched. How could he attack while keeping her safe in his arms?

Another bolt of lightning flashed toward him. Juri spun, clutching Triska to his chest and it hit his arm. White-hot pain burned up his bicep. He gritted his teeth and glanced down at Triska's face. Her eyes were closed, and she was pale. Motionless. Did she still breathe? He had to get her to safety.

A second flash and he hopped sideways, the lightning hitting where he'd stood. The wind gusted, and Juri reeled, fighting to stay upright while Hoyt staggered backward.

Arrow crashed through the underbrush, smashing through a small tree. He held Fergal in his mouth, and Koschei ran at his side. Hoyt turned, his palms turning green. Roaring, Juri sprang forward, holding Triska tight.

As he slammed his shoulder into Hoyt, the necromancer released his spell. It missed the dragon and smashed into the ground. The blast was like a thunderclap, and rock sprayed into the air. A wave of air lifted Juri backward off his feet.

Juri twisted, trying to find his balance, but there was only empty air beneath him. No! He flung out one arm, but it was useless. They were falling backwards down the hole Hoyt had opened in the cliffs. Silvery blue flashed as Arrow leaped after him, Koschei hanging onto one of the large spines on his back.

They were all falling down the stairs into Peklo.

JURI ROTATED UNDERNEATH HER, taking all the impact for them as his back slammed into the ground. She bounced off his chest and air whooshed from her lungs, but she didn't hit anything other than warm, solid vulk. He rolled, placing her gently on the ground. "Triska, are you all right? Talk to me."

She sucked in air and clawed at her chest. It still burned like someone had stabbed her with a hot poker. She gasped and choked. "What happened?"

Juri twisted, peering up the stairs. A dark figure stood at the top, arms outstretched, his black robes whirling around him. "We need to stop Hoyt. Koschei, help Triska." He roared and bounded forward.

Koschei stepped away from Arrow and raced to her side. Juri leaped for the staircase as a green flash rent the air. The staircase—their only way back to Ulterra—vanished, but a swirling black mass, like a thick cloud, circled in a tight vortex where it once stood.

Juri flew through the now-empty air and landed in a crouch, staring upward. "He's gone, but what is that?"

Koschei raised his hands. Purple-tinged lightning streaked from his palms, and his eyes had turned a light eerie color. With one whoosh, he flung his arm at the whorls of black. Purple lightning snapped, and magic sizzled, scenting the air with ozone. Wind whipped around them, and a low boom shook the ground. The dark cloud exploded, and all the black drifted away. Koschei sagged, panting. "I don't know how he

opened the old junction, but no necromancer is going to have control of it. This is *my* domain.”

Juri stared up at the sky, his eyes turning red. “Can Hoyt return? Can he get down here?”

“No. My blast destroyed his spell which was keeping the connection between Ulterra and Peklo open.” He pointed at a faint, lavender cloud which shimmered where the stairs had appeared. “It’s sealed shut from this side. Hoyt can’t return.”

Juri strode back to her side. “Where’s Fergal? Hoyt hit her with magic hard, she needs healing.” He knelt at her side. “How are you feeling?”

The pain in her chest was fading, and she sat up, finally drawing in a full breath. The stench of rotten eggs hit her full in the face. She coughed, and her eyes watered. Koschei dropped to her side and put his hand on her shoulder. His hand lit up, warming her skin where he touched it. The lingering pain faded away.

Staring at Koschei, she said, “Your magic is back.”

Koschei raised his hands. “So it appears.” He studied her. “A bolt hit you that should have killed you.”

Triska reached up and pulled out the necklace from under her shirt. It glowed red. “It hit this.”

Koschei leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. “What is that?”

“A special ring.”

“A magic ring? It probably saved your life.”

Triska cradled the ring in her palm. Of course, it had. She’d always said it was a good luck charm. She and Juri locked gazes. “A special ring, anyway.”

Triska got her feet under her and stood. Juri put his arm around her. “Are you sure you feel all right?”

She nodded but leaned against him anyway, wanting to be close.

They stood at the base of a staircase inside a garden of sorts. A wiry grayish purple plant with long drooping leaves that looked more like bean pods than foliage, enclosed the space. Vicious thorns jutted out from its branches, promising pain to any who came too close. Almost hidden by the purple, thorned hedges, gates opened out of the courtyard into the wider expanse of Peklo. Beyond, a hint of red sand and the dark sea was visible, winking between the ornate bars of the gates.

Triska spun around. The grounds swept up to the back of a grand palace built of bone-white marble. Wide, curved stairs led to a small portico, and Arrow waddled from a copse of trees in front of it, Fergal still in his mouth.

Juri turned to Koschei. “Can you call the staircase so we can return?”

Koschei shook his head. “No. I’m no longer a guardian. I can’t call forth the crossing place any longer.”

Triska’s stomach dropped. They were stuck here?

Juri jerked his chin toward the palace. “This place yours? Can we make it secure?” His claws were still out, and his head swiveled left and right as he surveyed the grounds.

Koschei snorted. “Of course. My beautiful palace can take care of us.”

Triska scarcely noticed the swept, reddish ground filled with lush trees as they jogged to the palace. Koschei strode up the steps to the immense carved door with his crest in the center. He positioned his hand in the middle of the crest, and the door parted with a whisper of air.

A chilly air breathed out of the opening, and the interior was dark and silent. As they entered, water dripped off them onto the marble floor. The palace towered before them, with high arching ceilings. Opulent red rugs stretched ahead to beckon them forward. Large paintings in gold frames lined the walls, each one of landscapes, all foreign and strange. They hung between couplings of tall narrow windows, which were paired together to give the impression the two were one large

window. Koschei stopped, studying his surroundings for a long moment.

Arrow spat Fergal out into a crumple on the floor, then shook, spraying water everywhere. Triska leaped forward and grabbed Fergal's arm, helping him to his feet. "You all right?"

He stood, clutching the Herskala bowl in one hand. In his other, he held the dark sack he'd kept it in. Carefully, he wrapped the bowl back up, then placed it at his feet. He swatted at the dirt and saliva on his cloak. "I can run as fast as a damn sea dragon who barely knows how to walk without falling. There was no need to be carried like a kitten."

Arrow's head drooped. Triska walked over and petted him along his neck. "He did a good job. He kept you safe."

Koschei waved his hand and dried their clothing. He waved his hand again, and his clothing transformed into a black tunic with gold lining, matching pants, and a luxurious deep blue cloak fastened with a flourish around his shoulders. Purple flashed from his fingertips, and the door behind them swept closed. He snapped his fingers. "I've lit the fires, it should warm soon."

"I want to check every inch," Juri said. "If Morana got in here, other things may have too." He turned to her. "Are you sure you feel all right? The lightning hit you hard." A muscle ticked in his jaw, and his words were tight. As if he were angry with her.

She rubbed her chest. "It feels raw, like it's burned, but Koschei healed it. There's no pain. I'm fine."

"Have Fergal check again."

It wasn't necessary, but Juri's expression was so dark and foreboding she didn't argue.

Koschei waved his hand. "I should be the one walking through *my* palace, making sure everything is as it seems."

Juri growled. "I can do it best." The two of them strode a few steps away, arguing back and forth.

Fergal ushered her toward a low sofa against the wall. She sank onto the crushed velvet, wincing.

“What happened?” Fergal asked. Fergal hadn’t seen her get hit, and he was with Arrow up near the palace when Koschei healed her.

Triska pulled down the neck of her shirt, revealing blackened marred skin where the lightning had struck her above the rune mark. She told him what happened on the cliffs, at least what she could remember. When the bolt hit her, she’d blacked out for a moment.

He snorted. “The vulk was right to have me recheck.”

“Koschei already helped. And he said my ring protected me.”

“Even if Koschei’s magic is back, I’m sure I’m much better at healing than he is.” He squinted and touched the ring on her neck, rubbing it between his forefinger and thumb. “He was right about this, though. It’s powerful. This ring saved your life.”

“It was a gift a long time ago. Why would it have power?”

Fergal shrugged. “Some things can’t be explained. All right, let’s finish fixing you up.” He lifted his palm ... and nothing happened. His mouth puckered, and he cursed. “No magic for me down here.” Koschei was still arguing with Juri. Fergal waved at him. “Hey, royal emperor, get over here.”

Juri turned his back on Koschei and strode back to her side. Koschei scowled but also joined them. “You got my title wrong.”

“Pah, what was it? Your royal Deathless One? Has a real ring to it. Think you can manage a ball of healing salve?”

“I already healed her.”

Fergal glowered. “You’re rusty.”

Koschei raised his hand and shaped a small ball of white in his palm. He spoke a few arcane phrases. Fergal plucked it from him like it was a fluff of cotton. “Here, put this over the wound.”

Triska picked up the white ball, its warmth reminding her of the way her own magic flowed through her. The ball melted onto the skin of her chest, and the tight seared flesh smoothed except for one slim white line.

“I’m going to check the palace and make sure it’s safe now,” Juri said, his gaze guarded and cold. “You all stay here.” He didn’t wait for a reply.

Koschei crossed his arms. “I can give him a full report on *my* palace. Everything is secure.”

It couldn’t have been more than a half hour, but it felt like days before Juri tromped back to them. When their eyes met, instead of the flare of warmth she normally saw, his expression remained cool. Stoney.

Juri growled, his eyes growing an even darker crimson. “The palace is safe, but I don’t know what lies outside. Are you certain we can’t bring the stairs back to return to Ulterra?”

Koschei lips tightened. “I’m certain.”

Triska’s shoulders drooped. How were they going to get back?

Juri growled. “Hoyt is up there, with free rein to do what he wants. We need to get back. As soon as possible.” Juri paused, and his brow furrowed. “An ala was helping him.”

Triska sucked in a breath. “An ala? Are there any of them still alive?” Alas took the form of great ravens and were notorious for their foul temper. In human form, they took on the figure of a woman with light blue skin and white hair.

Juri nodded. “Yes. One of them is the guardian of the junction in Ryba. She lives in the Shaking Mountain. I’ve seen her create a storm like this before, only she didn’t hide amid the clouds that time. Koschei was a guardian, too. He must know her.”

Koschei’s lips pinched together, and he drew back. Two spots of color appeared high on his cheeks. “Are you sure you saw Calista—the ala?”

“I saw massive raven wings,” Juri said. “But she’s never roamed far from her mountain before.”

“You must have been mistaken. It can’t have been her. I told you before, as a guardian, we are bound physically to our junction. She can’t leave her mountain.” Rohant, where Juri had said the Shaking Mountain junction stood, was leagues away. At least a week-long journey from Ryba.

Juri frowned. “Why doesn’t anyone cross between Peklo and Ulterra? Aren’t the guardians supposed to allow the crossing between the realms? One of my packmates, Zann, fell through a rift into Peklo. We thought him dead, but he was actually stuck down there. He didn’t cross back up to Ulterra to return.”

Koschei’s brows drew together. “A guardian can see who belongs where, usually. And part of our magic allows us to sense intentions as well. Your friend should have been allowed to return home.”

“He wasn’t.” Juri’s hands fisted. “I don’t know why I never asked him. If the ala helped Hoyt, do you think she’s going to let us cross at the junction she guards? Of course, we’d have to get there first, and if Peklo has the same kind of landscape as Ulterra, it’s at least a week’s walk away.”

Koschei’s gaze grew distant, and he rubbed his chin. “Has anything changed with the vulk? Are you the same as always?”

Juri’s brow furrowed. “Yes,” he said slowly.

Koschei’s grim expression smoothed. “Good.”

“Why do you ask?”

Koschei didn’t respond.

Juri stalked to the front door and the wide, arching windows along either side. He opened the double doors and peered up at the sky. “If we can’t use a junction, we need to figure out another way to get back to Hoyt.” Triska joined him at the door, but he didn’t put his arm around her.

Before her stretched Peklo. The underworld. She gulped. “Wow.” The palace sat along a coast, a short walk from the beach. No suns beat down overhead, only a blanket of gray clouds, and a general reddish-tinged light. Remnants of a marble path snaked up to the front door, framed by fanning palm trees, but the long fronds were a deep olive green with magenta tips. Large, hanging, yellow fruit pulled the branches down with their weight.

Juri still glowered, and his words carried a hint of a growl as he said, “Even with Fergal’s help, Hoyt’s blast left a permanent mark on your skin.”

She placed a hand on her chest. “I’m fine.”

He turned away. “You shouldn’t have been near Hoyt to get zapped in the first place.”

“But—”

“Arrow, wait,” Koschei shouted, but Arrow galloped through the double doors, brushing her and Juri out of the way. She jogged forward after him, leaving the palace.

Arrow charged down the sloping front path to the beach and leaped into the ocean. Triska stared at the vast swath of water. It stretched out to the horizon, a cobalt blue color never seen in the Great Sea of Ulterra.

Come. Play. Find your true home.

An arm snagged around her waist, pulling her backward, and she flailed. She needed to get to the water. To feel it. Let it roll over her skin. Follow its slope below the waves and discover all that lay in its depths.

“Triska, what are you doing?” Juri’s voice cut through the whispers of the ocean, and she jerked. She stood on the beach, a couple of feet from the water’s edge.

She didn’t remember walking forward. “I don’t know.”

He tugged her gently. “We don’t know if it’s safe out here. Come back.” His ring around her neck pulsed.

As it always did, it grounded her. Helped her shake off the pull of the sea. But this time, in Peklo, the pull was much

harder to resist.

Thank the heavens her pelt was locked in a chest in her bedroom, far, far away. But the urge to walk into the sea, human form or not, remained.

A chill slid down her spine.

She followed Juri back to the palace doorway, turning her head away from the ocean and toward the landscape. “It’s not as desolate as I expected. And I thought there’d be spawn everywhere.” She shaded her eyes with her hand. “Should we call Arrow back?”

Juri tucked her against his side. “Look at him.” He pointed, and slowly, steeling herself against its pull, Triska turned to view the sea again.

Arrow leaped from the waves, rolling in the air, and she let out a small sigh of relief. Nothing called to her this time. *This time.*

His arm tightened around her waist as his muscles flexed. “I thought you were going to join him.” When she glanced up at him, she saw his jaw was tight, a muscle ticking in his cheek.

“I need to tell you something,” she said. He needed to know about her being a selkie.

“Can it wait until after I’ve patrolled the grounds?” He waved his hand. “Non-immortals perish down here.” With the same hand, he gestured toward the palace. “Magicwielders have no magic, so you and Fergal won’t have your powers. At least Koschei is of some use.”

“Sure, we can talk later.” Triska gazed up at the sky again. “There really are no suns here?”

Juri shook his head. “I think it looks like this day and night. A perpetual gray light.”

She wasn’t well-versed in the magic of magicwielders. All she knew was what Fergal had shared with her about how magicwielders tapped into the magic flowing from the second sun of Ulterra. Only when it was in the sky could they fill the

stores of magic they possessed. If their stores were extinguished, like in a battle, they had to wait for the suns to recharge them.

Her own magic came at night and, through Fergal's research, they'd guessed it flowed from the moons. She didn't store her magic; it flowed through her, but it had a cost. It sapped her inner warmth, and if she didn't stop and let herself recover, she'd pass out from the drain of her body's heat. Fergal said the way her magic moved through her was closer to how the vae used their magic. But the vae were secretive, and he didn't know much about it.

Juri ushered her back inside, but he didn't touch her any longer, and when she stepped to brush against him, he moved away.

Juri turned to Koschei. "Stay here with Triska. I'm checking outside." He spat the words out, bordering on rudeness. Without waiting for a response, he stalked away, his steps as clipped as his words.

When she was certain he'd walked far enough away not to hear, she asked Fergal, "What's wrong with him?"

"The vult are tough to read."

She frowned. She'd always found Juri pretty straightforward. An ache pinged in her chest, and she rubbed it. Something was wrong.

JURI'S VISION tinged red again. In deciding to run up to the cliffs, he'd almost gotten Triska killed, and now she was stuck in Peklo. Without a way out.

His hands clenched into fists as he re-entered the palace from the garden. The door opened and swung closed again after him on its own. He'd already explored the wings near the back of the palace earlier, with their ornate hallways with swooping arches leading into lavish bedrooms. The beds had overly filigreed headboards, all bearing Koschei's crest. The rooms, the stone walls, even the lush linens on the beds, had all been preserved as if time stood still here.

He didn't care if there wasn't a speck of dust. All he cared about was that the walls were still secure. What he'd found showed whoever built this palace and its grounds, worked with stone as well as a vulk did. Iron wove through the marble in delicate threads, noticeable only if one were looking for it. Iron even threaded inside the thick panes of glass and along the hedge and gates of the grounds. The iron may be thin, but threaded properly, no immortal could crash through the glass. Iron weakened most immortals and monsters. A palace of this size, with a vast supply of iron all in one place, would make it impenetrable. And if a monster tried to get in, it would weaken rapidly.

And the windows were so narrow even he couldn't squeeze through them. They were clumped together to give the illusion of being one large window, but they weren't. Someone built them for protection.

All of Peklo smelled of brimstone, but the palace had a sulfur smell all its own, and as Koschei already showed, the palace itself had magic within it. As long as it helped protect Triska, that was fine.

A snarl ripped from his throat, hot and burning. Humans didn't survive Peklo. Magicwielders punished to the depths of the underworld didn't return. Well—except for Morana.

He ran a hand over his head. *Uit*, even Zann spent one hundred tense years battling his way through the underworld, hanging on to his life, and he was a *vulk*. Zann didn't talk about his time down in the underworld much, but he'd described a few battles and mentioned how treacherous the land was.

At least Triska could sleep safely and in style before one of the spawn attacked her. And they *would*. It was only a matter of time.

The legends all said Peklo lay underneath Ulterra, a copy of the landscape above, and maybe the coastline was the same, but the land itself was far, far different. He halted and peered out one of the arched windows. The thin ribbons of iron were barely visible in the glass and didn't spoil the view of the expansive coast, rising and falling in dramatic crimson buttes like small, decorated hills of stone.

Juri squinted at the coastline. Was it similar to Ryba? Perhaps. A hook jutted out into the water, creating a bay like the one in Ulterra, but the water here was still. Eerily still, the waves slow and languid upon the shore. The water was dark as if holding secrets.

Most likely secrets that would jump out and attack them later. At least they had the Herskala bowl. They could use it to show them Peklo and possibly a way back up to Ulterra. Or at least speak to the *vae* and tell them they were trapped down here. The tension in his shoulders relaxed a fraction.

Thank Perun-above, Fergal took the bowl with him.

Juri returned to the others still near the front entryway and growled. "What monsters live near here? What do I need to

look out for?”

Koschei's brows shot up. “This was my territory. The others left it alone.” He waved his hand. “This is the forgotten borough. Not much lives here. It may have changed, but if you walk south from here, you'll find the Fenix demon stronghold. I never had any quarrels with them. They keep to themselves unless they're battling other demons.”

Juri's shoulders still clenched with tension. “What about spawn?”

Koschei shrugged. “They roam everywhere. The only ones of any actual concern are the bauk tribes, and that's because they have large numbers. But when I was a guardian, no one dared bother me.”

Fergal wrapped his robes more firmly around himself. “Are we settling in this palace? Where are these fires you mentioned? Perhaps we can make ourselves more comfortable?”

Koschei swept his robes back and lifted his chin a fraction, and even though Juri had over a foot in height on him, he appeared to peer down his nose at everyone. “When I lived here, I had a proper staff who would have seen to your every whim. Every wish.” He sighed. “Once my footman would have announced you with your proper title, and there would have been much fanfare. This palace is built for guests, and you'll find clothing stocked in the bedrooms, fires that light with only a word, and our kitchen should stock what I require. Help yourselves. Now, let's repair to the east wing.”

Fergal rubbed his hands together. “Not too shabby. You know, I like my garments doubly lined for warmth. Tell the house that.”

“The *palace* will provide what you require.” Koschei pointed out a window as they walked past it. “And outside, it's hot. It's the *underworld*.”

Fergal waved his hand. “Pah.”

Triska sidled over to Juri as they strolled down the corridors, and his arm lifted a fraction as he went to wrap it

around her. He stifled the impulse and kept it at his side. The bond in his chest twinged with a sharp ache. *Soothe her.*

He clenched his jaw. Soothe her? He was the reason she was here. In a place where she'd most likely die if he couldn't figure out how to escape soon.

She raised a brow. "If this house was announcing my arrival, what do you suppose my proper title would be?"

"Triska of Ryba, daughter of Remi, top oyster fisher in all of Ulterra, albatross tamer, and great collector of *Quarter Obol Dreadfuls*."

"Hm. I think I need to do more things with my life to get a better title."

He shook his head. "No. You should live a happy life in Ryba. Doing the things you love." His hands fisted again.

The corners of her mouth turned downward. "I'm living, but I don't really feel alive, you know?" Her large eyes, a brighter blue with the stark white of the walls of the palace behind her, seemed to fill her face. "Well, not until the past few days."

His heart thumped painfully. He knew what she meant.

They followed Koschei into a small parlor, where bright swaths of the murky light shone along the marble floor. Fergal headed to the wide fireplace with a fire already blazing on wide, fat logs. Juri pointed to the crest inlaid in the mantel to Triska. "He wasn't kidding when he said he stamped his crest everywhere."

A large cherry-colored sofa and several chairs stood on a dark, wine-colored rug edged in gold in front of the fireplace. A bookcase took up one entire side, stretching all the way to the high, vaulted ceiling, with a set of movable stairs propped against it so readers could access books on the top shelf. Across from the bookcase, on a low table in front of the windows, sat the Herskala bowl. Koschei rushed over to it and laid his hand on the rim. "I didn't put this bowl here. It's never been in my possession."

No flames issued from the bowl, even after Koschei shifted it, presumably aligning the four poles. Fergal joined him, and they peered down at it.

This bowl differed from the other. While Hoyt's was heavy pewter, this one matched the sculpted marble look of Koschei's palace, the lines smooth and delicate, except it was solid black.

Fergal and Koschei muttered together as he and Triska joined them. They had both bowls side by side now, and neither was alight. "They aren't turning on."

Juri froze. "Morana used the bowl down here. We know it works."

Fergal shook his head. "I don't know why, but neither are working."

Flashes of purple lit up the room as Koschei waved his hand over the bowls. It might have only been a few minutes, but it felt like hours as he watched the bowls remain unlit.

Finally, Fergal slumped against the table. "I need to think. I'll keep working on this."

Juri bared his teeth. "Think quickly."

Fergal's chin shot up. "Do you know magic, vulk? These are dangerous and powerful objects. Most likely built with traps and tests no one understands."

Juri rubbed his head, then turned on his heel and paced across the room. "You had no trouble on the beach."

"We were doing little more than using the bowls for their original intention—talking to the others. Down here, we may have to use this bowl in other ways." He lay his hand on the marble one. "And I believe this is Herskala's own bowl. Using it isn't something to take lightly." He glared at Koschei. "This time, we will take our time before we activate it. But—" His glare turned to Juri, and if he'd been a vulk, his eyes would be scarlet. "I *will* figure out how to activate it."

Triska walked over to Fergal and laid her hand on his arm. "Yes, you will." Now *she* shot Juri a glare. "And I'll help you."

We all will.”

Fergal snorted and headed for the couch. Only then did Juri notice the magicwielder hobbled slightly. He sighed. Hoyt’s windstorm had tossed all of them around, and the others weren’t vulk and didn’t have his fast healing. He nodded at Fergal. “Let me know if I can help.”

Fergal leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes. “If I need fangs and claws, I know where to go.”

Triska rejoined Juri and whispered, “He gets grumpy when he’s tired.”

Koschei walked across the room to his bookcase, turning his back to the fire, and Juri replayed their conversation in the palace foyer. Why did what was happening with the vulk matter to the guardians? “What did you mean when you asked if things had changed with the vulk?” Juri asked.

Koschei caressed the spines of the books the way Juri caressed Triska, his fingers trailing gently over them. “Have you wondered why your ancestor, Wulf, the first krol, needed to enforce who remained in Ulterra and who remained in Peklo if there were guardians in place?”

“What’s a krol?” Triska asked.

“It’s like a king, but for the vulk, a krol also gains powers.”

The tales of Wulf were murky, but Juri had pieced as much together as he could. During the Deciding War, Wulf stepped in and brought the first pack of vulk together. With his pack, he’d killed the leshak, the souldrinkers marching across Ulterra, and killing all in their path. But many had fought on the leshak’s side or used their own strength and magic for ill purposes during the war, and Wulf decided who would be banished to the underworld as punishment. “Not much has been told about the guardians or their role.”

Koschei turned and nodded. “That’s the way it should be. The guardians were put into place after the Deciding War, but it wasn’t a smooth transition. Many of the guardians failed, and their junctions were destroyed. This was long before my

time as a guardian, of course.” Koschei did his look-down-his-nose gesture again.

Juri gritted his teeth. “Sure.”

“If you said you had a krol Alpha again, then I’d be worried.”

Juri froze, his mouth going dry. He swallowed. “Why?”

“It would mean the guardians can’t be trusted.”

A hollow, wooden sensation filled his chest. “Last year, Hans became the second krol the vulk have ever had.” The words echoed through the parlor.

Koschei’s eyes closed. “Then it’s entirely possible the ala attacked us. Although I don’t know how she’d break the bonds of her territory.”

Juri’s stomach lurched. He gazed at Triska, staring up at him. Until now, he’d hoped he hadn’t seen wings in the sky like he’d thought, and they could still walk to the junction in the Shaking Mountain and return to Ulterra. Now ... Triska would be a prisoner in Peklo, probably for the rest of her life. “When Hoyt attacked, I don’t think he was trying to come down here. He said he’d opened a channel to the underworld.”

“Yes, we saw the black cloud of his spell in the sky. That was what I blew up.” Koschei’s gaze grew distant. “It’s possible he is awakening aspects of the island for this incantation he’s going to try.”

“Hoyt trapped us, and he’s gotten on the vanishing isle to do whatever he’s trying to do. This isn’t good.”

“My island won’t relinquish its secrets easily. And since I sealed the staircase, he doesn’t have as open a channel as he’d like. We have some time.”

Juri squared his shoulders. “I’m going to explore outside again. You work on the bowl so we can find out how to get back.” Without another word, he left.

TRISKA WRAPPED her arms around herself, staring out as dawn spread across the underworld. Juri wasn't quite right about the light remaining the same all the time. It darkened by a few shades at night, and in the morning, lighter streaks of gray threaded across the horizon, marking the start of the new day.

This was the seventh morning she'd watched the dawn's light in the sky from her new bedroom in Koschei's palace. A bedroom far more extravagant than anything she'd ever slept in. Yet she longed for the small, cozy room on the vanishing isle or her own bed, where Juri held her while she slept. Down here, Juri prowled day and night, and she slept alone.

She drew in a long breath. *It was better this way.* Except every time they were in a room together, and she didn't get to touch him, or sit near him, or have him brush against her, something sliced deep inside. It didn't matter that her head said it was the right thing; her heart refused to accept it.

She opened the bedroom door and stepped into the hall. Juri sat with his back against the wall next to her door, his eyes closed. She cupped his cheek, letting her thumb sweep over his sharp cheekbone. His lids opened halfway. "Did you sleep here?" she asked.

"No." He leaned into her hand. "I was just resting a minute, waiting for you to wake up."

The ache that made her chest feel empty all week faded. She ran her hands down his neck and over his broad shoulders.

He picked her up by the waist, lifting her onto his lap so she straddled him there in the hallway where anyone could see.

Her throat grew tight. All she wanted was to sit with him like this whenever she wanted. Now. Tomorrow. Years from now. Yet it was impossible. Even after they returned to Ulterra, the call of the sea wasn't going to stop. And in Ulterra, her pelt was there, making the lure that much stronger.

Since she'd entered Peklo, the call of the sea demanded more. Maybe magic flowed hot and wild down here. Or maybe her time on land was simply over. While she had no pelt within her grasp, the song of the sea could still lure her like it had her mother. Where she'd walk into the waves and never return.

Triska bit her lip. Once they were back in Ulterra, the time would come when she'd need to put on her pelt and take to the sea. But they had right now. Desperate need shot through her. "Come inside my room."

His purring rumble started, and his hands ran under her shirt, his fingers trailing up her back. "Touching you consumes me. It's all I want. But I can't get distracted. I need to be focused on getting us back home, and watching for our enemies."

She froze and drew back. "We're in this together. You watch out for me, and I watch out for you. We're doing all right." She gestured around her with a wave of her hand. "Over the past week we've made the palace secure. And we *will* figure out a way back home."

He drew a finger down the center of her chest. The low neckline of her tunic revealed his ring and the skin below it. "If you weren't wearing this ring, you'd have died."

"You gave me this ring, which has magic in it because of you. *Your* protection." But he remained frozen under her hands, not reacting to her touch. She shifted her hips. Underneath her, he was thick and straining. She shifted again as if she were settling on him, but really she wanted to brush against him. Tease.

His golden eyes turned from hard and distant to warm. Heated.

“I’m not a distraction. I’m a break. You still need to sleep. To do ... other things.” She shifted again, and he inhaled sharply.

“This place is dangerous, and I don’t know anything about the creatures down here,” he said.

She ran her hand up his neck, and the tension in his muscles softened. “Koschei does. Let him help. Let him protect the palace for a bit.”

“He and Arrow are patrolling right now.”

Her head was telling her it was better for them to remain apart. That it would make things easier. But through their bond in her chest, she felt his frustration. His discomfort. She needed to soothe him. Needed to find the Juri who cracked jokes and enjoyed adventure. Not this tense, angry vulk who seemed a second away from roaring. She ran her fingers over his brow and up over his ears.

He shuddered, and his hand on her back drew her closer. She slid against his swelling length, and he groaned.

He needed her. And she definitely needed him.

She dipped her hips again, and his pupils dilated. In one smooth motion he flipped her under him on the floor, the marble cold against her back. He purred louder and his mouth landed on her neck. She clawed at him. “I want you.”

After tasting him for a night, being denied during the past week had been torture.

He ripped her shirt off with a claw, and one of his large hands landed on her breast. “I always want you. Every day. Every minute.”

Liquid heat pumped fast and hard through her. She bit his neck, and he growled. He pinched her nipple, rolling it just the way she liked. She arched into him, her head falling back.

He licked up her throat, the tip of his tongue applying a trail of pressure that danced up the column of her neck, under

her jaw, and swept over the hollow below her ear. She'd never thought her neck sensitive until him.

She trembled and gasped.

Juri plucked her off the floor. Remaining on his knees, he half-carried and half-rolled her back into her bedroom. The door slammed shut.

They didn't make it onto the bed. She clawed at him, and he growled, laying her on the floor to kneel in front of her. The marble cooled her heated skin as she ran her hands down his chest. She grabbed the waist of his trousers and fumbled with the fastening. More. More heat. More of *him*.

He had to help her, and with one flick of his thumb, his trousers came open. She tugged them down, finally freeing him. Juri remained on his knees, his length jutting forward. She wrapped her hand around him and couldn't completely close her fingers.

She pumped. Silky skin. Hot and thick.

Juri jerked and groaned. She slid her hand up and down, and his cock throbbed, the base swelling. She ran her fingers over it and squeezed.

Juri hissed and swore. Triska pressed up and took the tip of him in her mouth. It was all that would fit, he was so thick. He froze above her, his chest still as he stopped breathing. She ran her tongue over the tip of him and sucked.

"Triska ..." He groaned words in Vulk as he swayed forward, slapping his palm on the side of the bed to keep himself propped over her.

She sucked and gently squeezed the base of his cock rhythmically. "Do you like that?"

Above her, his chest heaved. He shuddered over and over as she worked him, his cock throbbing in her mouth, harder and thicker still. "You're a goddess. And you're driving me mad." Their gazes locked, and his golden eyes filled with black. He purred, but it wasn't his sensual, seductive purr. This was harsh. Feral.

An answering demand heated her blood. He was her vulk and she wanted him to take her. Remind her of the best reason she had for fighting the sea.

Juri plucked her off the ground and brought them both to the bed. In another motion, he flipped her onto all fours. Hot breath fanned the nape of her neck as he brushed her hair off her back. Teeth grazed her shoulder, and she whimpered. That was where he was supposed to mark her.

But he moved away, his lips brushing over her upper back, pausing above her right shoulder blade. He sucked at the spot, and one hand snaked under her. His fingers found her breast, rolling the nipple, first softly, then as his teeth nibbled, harder.

Her back bowed and her hips thrust upward, inviting him closer. Teeth grazed down her back until he found another spot. Sucked. Bit.

Each nip injected pure lust through her. He was marking her. Maybe not exactly the way she needed, but it was still a claiming, and it felt *right*.

He rolled her nipple in one hard twist. In one swipe, he tore her breeches down the sides. With another, he shucked them off her, leaving her bare. Fabric rustled, and his trousers landed on the floor beside her shredded ones.

A nip along her lower back and his fingers danced between her legs. She moaned and spread her thighs, giving him better access.

He growled, and the primal sound filled the room. If she was out in the woods and heard that sound, she'd know exactly what it was. A vulk, claiming his mate. Coming for her.

His fingers moved faster, toying with her how she liked. She shuddered and arched against him. His tongue replaced his fingers, and that was all it took.

She cried out as she shattered under him. Only Juri's arm wrapped around her, kept her up on all fours as he wrung every last bit of pleasure from her.

He kept her in place as he settled above her, his chest brushing against her back. His thick cock slid along her inner thigh as he found the place she needed him to go, but he didn't enter.

He needed to hurry and get inside. His teeth skimmed the nape of her neck as he brushed against her in teasing glides. "Please!" But he only stroked against her as she circled her hips, urging him for more.

Finally, he thrust inside.

"Juri!" She fluttered around him, already close to the edge again. He held her in place under him, growling low, as he slid all the way in.

He pumped hard, demanding she take more. She snapped her hips to welcome it. She put her hand over the one he had planted on the bed and wove her fingers in his. "More," she whispered.

"Hold on." His words were feral. They might have been on a bed, but it felt much wilder than that. Like what they were doing was a part of nature itself. An answer to his kind of call of the wild.

And his warning was right—she did need to hold on.

He thrust hard, the bed hitting the wall with each lunge of his hips. Their joining was all heat and fire. Unleashed frustration after a week of being apart. Her hands dug into the blankets, and she cried out.

She barely noticed when he tugged her to the edge of the bed, bending her over it and standing behind her. She mewled and writhed. "Deeper. Please." All she knew was how thick he was. How he filled every inch inside.

He held her in that position until she came again. Then again. Then he settled them both on the bed, laying her down on her stomach as he spread on top of her. He still didn't find his own release. He kept working her, and she was glad she was lying under him now because she was a puddle, her limbs unable to hold her.

Finally, his strokes shortened. He swelled, his thickening base pushing against her. In one lunge, he sank his knot deep inside her. A stretch, a brief burning flare, then it notched into place behind her pubic bone. Exactly as she needed.

This was everything. This was bliss. Her vulk, sealed inside her.

His head landed near hers as his first release flooded her with warmth. “You’re mine.” He wrapped his arms around her as he settled on top of her.

She wrapped her arms over his, pressing him as close as possible. “Yes.” Her lids fluttered closed, and behind them, sparks of gold appeared, swirling until they made the symbol of the rune. She clutched Juri tighter as a wave of pleasure washed her away.

It took a long time for her heart rate to slow. Even longer for their bodies to separate.

He shifted to his side, and she rolled to her back to see him. His gaze dropped to her neck, where her necklace lay against her chest. He thumbed the ring. His voice rolled out as a husky, low murmur. “I know I don’t have a soul, but if I did ...” his gaze locked with hers, “it was made the same moment as yours so they could entwine together for eternity.”

She couldn’t respond. Her throat wouldn’t work. All she could do was nod.

He trailed a finger down her neck, and when he brushed over the juncture of her neck and shoulder, she shivered. A zing shot through her veins, and her breath hitched. Awareness grew between them like an inhaled breath neither was sure they wanted to let out.

He was supposed to mark her there. Supposed to make her his for eternity. Then his fingers trailed down to the slight divot between her breasts, and he froze. “Your scar from where Hoyt attacked you hasn’t faded.” His expression turned to stone. “I almost got you killed.” He stood up and put his trousers back on. “I need to go back outside and patrol.”

“No Juri, Hoyt—”

“The only reason Hoyt is interested in you is because he wants to kill me and the rune connects us. The rune showed up because of me, too.”

She sat up, any lingering pleasure from their coupling disintegrating. “The rune showed up because of *us*. We’re ...” Words failed. What could she say?

He shook his head. “I’ll always be pursuing the evil from Peklo, and when I get you back to Ulterra, you’ll live the safe, happy life you’ve always had. All those around me who aren’t vulk suffer.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“No?” His eyes flashed red. “Have you ever seen my mother’s right arm?”

Triska jolted. Juri’s mom wore long-sleeved shirts all year, even in the summer, but she had seen her hike her sleeves up to her elbows while baking and seen the shiny marks marring the skin along her forearm. She’d asked her once about it, and Mrs. Doubek changed the subject.

“Those scars are because of me.”

“How?” He was across the room, looking out the window. As far from her as he could get. She patted the bed. “Come back and talk to me.”

Silence filled the room. He turned as if to leave. As if to walk away from her.

HIS HEART FELT FROZEN in his chest. “Hoyt is after you because of me. I’ve stayed away all these years to prevent our enemies from attacking you, yet it’s happened, anyway. They can’t attack the vulk, so they attack the ones we—” He closed his mouth. He’d been about to say, *the ones we love*.

Triska frowned. “Tell me what happened with your mother.”

He paced, unable to look at her. “We lived in Huska, it’s close to Hork. Your mayor said the town is trading with the eaglewalkers of Hork, yes?” He didn’t want to think about the eaglewalkers from Hork and the one who wanted to court Triska. He sucked in a long breath, willing his claws to remain withdrawn as much as possible.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Huska is a large village. A nice place, by a small, glacier-fed lake. I’d only been a vulk about six months, and I was ... homesick. I snuck out of the pack den to see my mother. As a new vulk, I was still training. I’d joined in on a few battles, but I hadn’t responded to any rifts by myself yet.” Did she understand what rifts were? “A rift is a place where spawn come up from Peklo. Normally they open and close briefly when the two realms rub together, but sometimes it’s long enough for spawn to come through. Or other creatures might make it up here, like the harpies we saw in the vanishing isle.”

She nodded.

“Well, a rift had opened near Huska. And the spawn that came out was the one kind that has no odor, so I didn’t know it followed me.”

He frowned as the day, so many years ago, rushed back.

It was summer but unnaturally hot for that time of year. In the center of town, there was a stone-lined pit for bonfires and clan meetings. Arranged along the outskirts were all the shops, and he’d found his mother underneath the awning of the shop she worked at. He’d strode up and surprised her. They were sitting on the stoop catching up when he heard the screams.

At first he’d thought it was kids playing, but then there were more screams. He shot up, leaping into the courtyard toward the direction of the noise. Stepping from the shadows of the forest was a shadowy figure, at least five feet taller than Juri. It looked like a man who’d wreathed himself in black flame, his features blurry and indistinct beneath the odd fire.

A shade.

Juri had inhaled sharply and drew to a halt. No sulfur floated on the air. Shades were skinless, there was nothing for the stench of Peklo to stick to. As it was the middle of the day, the fiercest clan warriors were out hunting or farming, but those in town ran toward the shade, clutching weapons.

Over the past six months he’d learned a lot about how to fight as a vulk, but this wasn’t a goblin or a bauk—the ogre-like creatures of Peklo. Juri clenched his hands into fists, and he crouched. What had Kyril said about shades when they’d discussed spawn the last time? They were rarely seen in Ulterra but extremely lethal. They grew stronger by consuming the dead in Peklo.

Great ... but how were they killed? Had Kyril said to fight fire with fire, or that fire increased a shade’s power?

The shade was focused on his mother, its red eyes burning.

“I think you took a wrong turn,” Juri said.

The shade turned toward Juri, and Juri let out a shaky breath. Good. Stay focused on him.

The shade tilted its head. “I followed you the past mile and wondered where you were going.” The shade’s voice was like the sizzle of a fire when water was tossed on it. “Who knew the vulk had family?” The shade raised its hand, and black flame streamed toward his mother. Juri leaped for her, rolling with her onto the ground, but her arm was ablaze with black flame.

In front of the shop was a hitching post for horses and donkeys. A water trough sat there, half filled with rainwater. He picked it up easily, even though it was the size of a large log, and doused his mother. The flame extinguished. He tossed the trough aside and reached for her, helping her to her feet. Her arm was seared and red, one painful mass of burns. “Can you run?”

She nodded.

“Get out of here.”

Several clan members ran up to Juri, brandishing their bows and swords. He nudged his mother’s non-injured arm. “Go now. Run to safety and then find the healer.”

She grabbed his shoulder and squeezed it. “Stay safe.”

Crackling and hissing filled the air, and Juri turned back toward the shade. Inside the flames wreathing its face, two burning eyes glowed. “I can kill a vulk and a vulk-bearer. My lucky day.”

His hackles rose. He ran in the opposite direction of his mother, leaping onto the courtyard, and sprinted. Every moment the shade spent after him gave his mother more time to get away.

This time when the shade hurled its flame, Juri was ready. He dodged, rolling on the ground. The shade stepped forward, leaving flaming footprints behind it. “The time of the vulk is over.”

Juri scrambled to his feet. The shop near him was the armorer’s place. Outside, a forge built of brick stood, coals blazing dark red. Along the road, gas lamps hung on iron hooks from tall posts, waiting to be lit for nightfall. Juri leaped

up, snagged a lamp hanging on its hook near him, and then dashed to the forge. Behind him, shouts rang out as the clan villagers attacked. A whoosh of flame blew hot breath along his back, and a spark singed his neck.

Without putting on leather gloves, he shoved his hand with the lamp into the coals. The ground shook as the shade stepped closer.

The lamp caught.

Juri sprinted, ducking around the porch of the farmers' market where several watermelons sat burning. He tossed the lamp into the bonfire pit.

The oil in the lamp splashed along the logs and flames flared over the wood. The shade turned, and even though its mouth was only a black gash, it was clear to see the lips twist into a sneer as it repeated, "The time for the vulk is over."

The shade threw a massive fireball at Juri's head. He dodged, but the edge seared his shoulder. A dark-gray figure flew by him and launched itself at the shade.

Kyril.

Snarls filled the air as fire licked over Kyril, but the other vulk dug his claws deep into the shade's neck and hung on. A high-pitched shriek sounded. The clan men stabbed with their iron swords, but Juri wasn't certain the shade noticed.

The shade staggered and stepped backward toward the fire. Was fire good or bad?

Juri crouched and barreled forward. When he reached the shade, he hit it along the side and back of its knees. The shade shrieked again and toppled.

As the shade fell into the fire, Juri grabbed Kyril's arm and yanked him back.

The fire hit the shade, turning the black flame of its body a vivid orange. It was instantly engulfed, seeming to liquefy into steam before their eyes. It shrieked again, "The vulk, your families ... it's only a matter of time before you're all dead."

With a last gasp, the shade evaporated into a puff of dark smoke.

The memory faded.

Juri sucked in a breath. Without realizing it, he'd joined Triska on the bed, and she tucked herself next to him, rubbing his arm. "You've seen the permanent burn marks on her arm. Simply because she had a vulk child."

"Juri—"

"Our Alpha, Anders, told me what happened with my mother was why the vulk take no mates and separate from their family. We put the non-vulk around us at risk. That's why it's best for us to walk alone." He swallowed. "I did eventually return to visit her, but it was always at night, and with a lot of precautions."

He ran his hand over the shiny mark on her chest where the lightning had scarred her. "Look at you. A little over a week with me and I got you imprisoned on an island, sent to Peklo, and almost killed. Anders was right."

Triska ran her hand up his chest and snuggled closer. "Your life is about keeping everyone else safe. But it's impossible to think you can do that alone. And the ... adventure ... we're on right now, it's not your fault." She cupped his cheek and tilted his face down toward her.

He heard her words but dismissed them. His entire existence was protecting Ulterra. Protecting *her*. And he'd failed.

"All those years," she whispered. "I would have liked you in my life."

His heart squeezed. He reached for her and drew her close. When her arms slid around his neck, he sighed. A sense of everything being right again washed over him. "Every time I touch you, it makes it harder and harder to imagine returning to a life without you in it. But I'm a vulk, and I have no soul. I can't offer you anything, even if I wanted to."

Triska stiffened beneath his hands, the muscles of her back bunching. He shouldn't have said the words out loud. They

had no future.

Triska let out a breath. “There’s still something I need to tell you—”

A loud rap pounded on their door. Juri growled. “Go away.”

“This is my palace, and I won’t be ordered around. Already I’m a messenger for Fergal, who requires your help but is too feeble or lazy to walk the short distance to this room.”

Juri ran his hand over his hair and surveyed the scraps of Triska’s clothes lying everywhere. “Do you need me to get you something to wear?”

She shook her head. “No, there’s a chest in here with clothes that fit. I’ll wash up and join you in the parlor in a minute.”

He nodded, started for the door, then wheeled back. He picked her up and held her close, running his jaw over her head. She hugged him back, her grip fierce.

He held her like that for a long moment, never wanting to let go.

“I KNOW how to activate the bowl.” When Triska joined the others, Fergal stood with his palms on the table, his expression grim. Triska’s stomach dropped; whatever he’d found out couldn’t be good.

The gray sky was darker today, with a purple smudge at the horizon. A smattering of rain hit like small rocks on the windowpane behind Fergal, and it was the only sound in the room for a long moment.

“Are you leaving us in suspense on purpose, or did you fall asleep?” Koschei asked. “I find it hard to believe you’ve found anything about this bowl that I haven’t discovered yet.”

Fergal pointed at the marble bowl. “I’ve figured out what this is made of.”

She frowned. “Isn’t it marble?”

Juri stepped over to the table. “And? How does that help us? We need it to turn on.”

“Come here.” Fergal patted the table next to him, and Juri walked over. He picked up Juri’s hand and ran one of his claws over the base of the black bowl. A scratch appeared, then just as quickly disappeared. “It’s a special stone. A gemstone actually, and one Triska knows.”

Triska sidled up next to Juri and leaned over the table with him. She ran a fingertip over the base—it was cool, colder than it should be.

“This bowl was made from something found only near Ryba.”

Triska studied the bowl. Her mouth dropped open. “No. There’s no way you could find a piece of it large enough to make a bowl.”

Fergal nodded. “I suspect he used powerful magic to shape many of them into this bowl. It would have been a tricky bit of spell work.”

Juri lay a hand on her back and shifted closer. “What is it?”

“It’s black pearl,” she said, running her fingertip up the bowl. “I’ve found three of them in oysters before. I bought my house with the first one, and it was smaller than the tip of my pinky.”

Fergal nodded again. “She sold all three to me, although you could have taken them down to Coromesto and gotten ten times what I paid.”

“I know, but I wanted you to have them.” She glanced at Juri. “An eaglewalker my father is going into business with told me the same thing. He wants to partner with me when I find pearls and sell them for a much larger profit.”

Juri growled, but it was so low she was probably the only one who heard it. Had Emil made it to Ryba? Was he trying to search for her up there, too? She’d barely given him a thought since Juri showed up.

Juri crossed his arms. “Why is pearl valuable for magicwielders? I sell gems when I find them in caves, but magicwielders have no particular interest in them.”

Fergal patted the bowl. “Even a small black pearl can absorb huge amounts of magic. So, a magicwielder can store it up for when they need it. Or they can use a pearl to magnify their magic. This bowl is powerful.”

Koschei whipped the cloak of his robe around himself. “You are quite wrong as usual, magicwielder. This bowl isn’t made of black pearl. It’s made of black nacre. What the entire vanishing isle is made of. Your oysters,” he waved his hand at

Triska, “must pick up a particle of sand from the vanishing isle occasionally and spin it into a pearl. Nacre is much stronger.”

Juri whirled from the table and paced across the room. “Why won’t this powerful bowl work in the underworld? Or the other bowl? Either one would be fine. As long as we can scry for a way out of here.”

Fergal pointed at the other bowl—the pewter one. “I think this one won’t work when it is nearby its master.” He pushed it aside and drew the nacre bowl forward. “I know how to wake this one up. It will demand something from the one who wants to use it. Something big. A sacrifice.”

Triska froze. “What do you mean? Will it demand ... death?”

Fergal drew in a long breath. “I don’t think so.”

“I’ll do it.” Koschei laid his hand on the rim. “I have nothing left to lose, and it can’t kill me.”

“You may be stripped of all your magic again,” Fergal said.

Koschei closed his eyes, and his palm glowed purple. “I lost it before, and I survived.” The bowl crackled, black sparks spraying out of it over the table. Koschei yelped and snatched his hand away.

“Rejection!” Fergal said. “Interesting.” He smiled slightly. “Can’t imagine you’ve felt that too often before.”

Koschei glowered and shook his hand out. “The bowl shouldn’t be picking and choosing. It’s a bowl.”

Fergal waggled his fingers, closed his eyes, and put his hand in the bowl. Another shower of sparks. He snatched his hand back and cradled it to his chest.

Koschei sneered. “Rejection. Can’t imagine you’ve felt that too often, either.”

Fergal cackled. “Aye, I deserved that. You’re right. Maybe I’m wrong about what the bowl wants.”

“Morana used it. Could she have put a curse on it?” Juri asked.

There was a long moment as Fergal and Koschei studied the bowl, both still rubbing their hands. “Doubtful. Morana was an enchanter. In school, they divided education in magic by hierarchy. An enchanter wouldn’t have known advanced magic.”

Juri growled. “Yet she taught Hoyt spells and fed him power.”

Fergal shrugged. “Power, yes. But how would she learn—”

“She gave Hoyt advanced spells like the hex he put on my Alpha.”

That made Fergal pause. “You’re right. The Morana I taught with back in Herskala Academy isn’t the same Morana you knew. It’s hard for me to alter my thinking.”

Triska gaped. “You knew her?”

He nodded. “Yes, she was a teacher for many years. I noticed she took a certain notice of some students. Students like Hoyt.” He waved a hand at Triska. “And like your friend Hazel. I wasn’t at the school any longer when Hazel was there, but she fits the type Morana would have gone after. Those rejected, but still with power. And angry.” He sighed. “I should have tried harder to understand the extra training she was doing with them. And why.”

Triska sucked in a breath. “I can have a go.” She reached for the bowl.

“No!” Juri grabbed her hand right before she touched the marble. But Juri’s hand made contact, his palm brushing against the rim.

The bowl burst into black flame, and it reached a single flickering tendril up toward Juri, licking over his arm. He jolted, and his eyes turned red.

Everyone stared at him as he stared at the bowl. Nothing else happened, only the flame whispering over his skin, but not singeing him.

Triska gasped. “What is it doing? Juri, are you all right?”

He didn’t answer. The room grew warm, the scent of sulfur clouding around them. Magic coating everyone. Everything.

Her gaze drifted to the window. To the rolling sea stretched beyond. The room seemed to pulse like the air had a heartbeat. Pushing her forward. Seducing her onward. *Come. It’s time to join the waves.*

Triska crumpled forward, the urge like a kick to her gut. She caught herself on the table, propping herself up with one hand. She needed the cool water to wash over her. To lap against her skin and make her feel buoyant and happy as she twirled amid the seaweed.

“Triska,” Juri whispered. And with one wrench, he twisted his hand away from the bowl. The flame went out with a whoosh, and he wrapped his arm around her. He was hot—he always ran warm, but this was much hotter than usual.

Triska peered up at him. “What happened? What did the bowl do to you?”

“The bowl ... spoke to me. I know what it wants me to give to use it.” His eyes faded back to gold. “And I won’t.”

Koschei snorted. “The vulk have no magic. What could it want?”

Triska’s gaze lowered to his chest. He had magic. Their rune.

Juri ignored him. “We’ll find another way. Don’t use the marble bowl.” And he turned and left.

JURI'S EAR twitched as the birds nearby squawked at his approach, their calls similar to a baby wailing the word 'cheery.' With feathers of brilliant blue and red, the birds fluttering in Koschei's gardens resembled the parrots of southern Ulterra, but were turkey-sized and far fiercer than any birds he'd encountered there. When he'd stalked one, thinking to have it for dinner, the other birds in the flock dive-bombed him, using their entire body to slam into him. So far, he'd yet to sneak up on any of them, despite their lumbering ability to fly, but he hadn't tried hard. After all, it wasn't every day a bird used its body as a weapon.

He wasn't Kyril, and he found birds kind of interesting. Besides, food was plentiful.

The air was more brackish today, with the breeze stronger off the ocean. Brimstone coated every inhale, shrouding Peklo to make sure no one ever forgot they lived in the underworld. However, depending on where he walked, he'd learned the strength of it changed. Near the beach, the salt of the ocean bled through. In the strange forest with its twisty trees spaced apart as if wanting to accommodate monsters walking beneath their limbs, the rich sap from the trees, with a more familiar pine scent, wove through.

He walked with Koschei while Triska meandered ahead, picking some of the yellow fruit from the palms. "What about looping in the north? Could we get to the junction at the Shaking Mountain there?" he asked. "Would the paths there be easier?" Another week had passed, with Koschei and Fergal

having no success with the bowl, and he'd had no luck finding other ways up to Ulterra. Going to the only junction he knew about might be the only way. If he had to defeat an ala so they could use her junction to get to Ulterra, he would.

Except if that way worked, Zann would have used it during his hundred years roaming Peklo. He ran his hand over his ears. Why hadn't he ever asked Zann about it?

"You'd still have to circle down the mountain range. There is only one trail in and out of the ring of mountains containing the Shaking Mountain, and it's in the south."

Juri nodded. "The land down here *is* a replica of Ulterra. Our mountain range containing the Shaking Mountain also only has one trail in and out, too. Well, only one official trail. The vulk and some of the peltwalker clans know other ways through those mountains."

Koschei shrugged. "If there are other ways through the mountains down here, I don't know them. And most of the mountains have rock demons or trolls guarding them. Or worse."

Juri nodded. There was no way they could go that way. Not even with a powerful guardian and a vulk. The monsters of Peklo were dangerous, and he wouldn't put Triska near them.

He sighed. Every day, every moment, gave Hoyt more time to work on his plan. At least Hans was in Ryba. Hans wouldn't let Hoyt succeed—but Hans didn't have all the information Juri did, and his Alpha hadn't contacted him mentally here, but Juri hadn't expected him to. If Hans could contact vulk down in Peklo, he would have known Zann lived.

He and Zann had always spoken mentally. Bit of a pain when sparring against the two of them. Or betting against them in card games.

Triska stood on tiptoe to pluck a fruit from the tree overhead, but it was a few inches beyond her reach. Juri hastened his step and snagged it for her. He dropped it into her hand and let his fingers brush against her palm. "Here."

She leaned against him the way she always did. The way she'd always needed physical contact, even as a kid. "Thanks."

A great searing lurch twisted in his chest. Even though they were in Peklo, and nothing was going right, he'd been ... happy this past week. Every night everyone in the palace retired to the parlor after dinner, and in front of the fire, he told one of his tales. Afterward, he carried Triska to her bedroom and spent the night spinning tales of pleasure.

He hadn't changed form again, even though he felt certain he could call his human form forth. He wanted to kiss her again, but he wanted the strength of his vulk form more. Every moment, every day, he worried about her. He couldn't stay at her side all the time, and while he trusted Koschei to guard her, Koschei wasn't him. Koschei didn't feel for her the way he did. Koschei didn't think her life was the most valuable thing in this entire world.

Triska lifted the fruit he'd handed her and raised a brow. "Well, this one has an interesting shape."

Instead of a squat oval, this one was elongated, exactly like a ... He coughed. "It's pickle-like."

Koschei walked over. "It's a dick."

Juri growled. "I chose a Triska-friendly word."

"I'm sure she's heard worse."

"I was raised by a sailor and sailed on his fishing boats, trust me, I've heard a lot of terms for a willy."

He raised a brow. "Like what?"

She waved the fruit in the air. "Like the Kraken's favorite tentacle. Or the one-eyed monster. A twig and berries. A pizzle. A great man-root. Or," she waved her hand at Juri and grinned, "a vulk-root."

Juri tripped, almost sprawling on the sand-swept grounds, while Koschei laughed—actually laughed. And Triska joined him.

It was the first time he'd heard her laugh in days. Last night, even though she'd wanted more, he'd only taken her once. She needed to sleep. She had, but the dark shadows smudging below her eyes only worsened. And when she didn't think he was looking, her gaze seemed hollow. Haunted.

Was Peklo draining her somehow?

Juri frowned. Fergal seemed fine. Other than ranting and raving about Herskala bowls and scolding Arrow every time the dragon snuck up on him and scared him—a game the dragon was good at—he was his normal self.

Something was wrong with her.

Fruit thumped onto the ground, rolling over the sandy stone. Triska stood, looking up at the sky, her arms at her sides, the fruit she'd collected forgotten. She pointed up into the gray haze. "Juri ... it's Al. The Ryba albatross."

He squinted. Sure enough, a massive white bird soared high in the sky. "It can't be your bird. Maybe there are albatross down here, too?"

The bird circled and cawed, the sound echoing down the beach. It dove right for them. Juri grabbed Triska and tucked her under his arm, expecting to get a repeat of a bird slamming itself into him.

Instead, the albatross dropped onto the ground, stumbling on its large, webbed feet. It bobbed its head and brayed.

Triska yelped. "It *is* Al!" She bounded forward. The albatross opened its mouth, and out came a high-pitched cackling. His beak rubbed on Triska as he searched her pockets.

Juri stared. "How is he here?"

Triska held her palms out. "Sorry Al, I have nothing for you. Unless you want fruit." Triska picked one up from the ground and broke it open, scooping the innards out. Al scraped it from her hand, his head bobbing up and down.

"How well does he understand speech? Can we ask him to show us how he got down here? There must be a rift, and

maybe it's still open.”

Al turned, one beady dark eye glinting as the bird seemed to size him up. Al cackled, then launched into the air.

“I think that's a yes. Let's go.” Before he could stop her, Triska dashed to the gate.

He swore and shot after her. “Wait, let me make sure it's safe.”

She paused as she hit the beach. “There's no sign of anyone. The same it's been every morning.”

He stepped past the gate and joined her, Koschei at his heels. Nothing stood on the beach, not even Arrow, but his hackles rose. The air was more brackish than he'd ever scented before, unlike the salt spray off the ocean, more like the marshes of Ryba at low tide. Yet the winds weren't coming from a new direction, they stirred off the water, as always.

He stepped closer to Triska and scanned down the beach. Al flew south, and from his explorations, Juri knew there were more of the towering reddish buttes bordering the water, with crullocks living in the crevices of the rock. Crullocks weren't of much concern. They resembled crabs but were about the size of a mule, and only ate dead things.

“Stay between Koschei and me.” Juri let his claws extend.

SCANNING the beach and the gray sky above her, Triska proceeded down to the sand. The water before her rolled in dull, slow laps onto the shore. As they'd settled into a routine living in the palace, she'd walked the short path out to the beach every day with Koschei and Arrow to catch fish for dinner or watch Arrow play in the waves. Not one creature had appeared. Not even birds pecking at the clumps of seaweed strewn along the tide line.

So why was Juri on the tips of his toes, his claws out a few inches as if ready to attack?

She surveyed the water. There was a flash of movement among the limpid waves. Was Arrow out there? She'd thought he was roaming around the front of the palace since Fergal was preparing breakfast, and he liked to make sure they knew he was nearby anytime they ate, but maybe he'd followed them.

The sand was a reddish hue, and from a distance, it appeared like a smear of dried blood, but up close, different hues of ocher and red wove together in layers, with tiny grains of clear sand that sparkled like diamonds when the bit of light overhead hit it right.

She was barefoot, and the sand was rougher than the sugar-like sand of Ryba but not as rock-filled as the shore of the vanishing isle. Her flowing pants skimmed the beach, and she hiked them up to her knees. Juri was so sure-footed she wasn't about to trip and slow him down.

Chessa would know the era of the style they came from. The pants were baggy and loose—yet the tunic-style shirts nipped in at the waist. All Triska cared about was that they were dry and comfortable.

Koschei, on the other hand, always wore his guardian robes. Right now, he walked next to her, his blue cloak billowing behind him.

Water splashed. As she caught the motion from the corner of her eye, Juri snarled and whirled.

Standing knee deep in the water a few paces away, stood six ... what? They had facial hair of dark tangled beards, the black hair striking against the algae-green hue of their skin. They didn't wear much, only short trousers that didn't reach their knees. The kind of thing children wore to school. They must be close to as tall as Juri, lean and wiry, with slits fluttering behind their ears.

Gills?

“Vodnik. Water demons,” Koschei muttered. Juri moved to stand in front of Triska.

Koschei opened his arms. “Are you here to speak with the guardian? He's available.” His palms glowed purple.

The one in front cocked his head but didn't seem alarmed at Koschei's magic. Other than the skin color, he looked almost human, but his eyes were large, the iris dark and filling all the space. Cold, reptilian eyes. “The guardian left these lands a long time ago.” He tilted his head again, resembling a lizard eyeing a passerby. “I haven't supped on non-fish flesh in a long time.” His gaze flicked to Triska, and he licked his lips. When he raised his hands, his fingers were webbed.

“Sorry but you won't today either,” Juri said. In one surge, he leaped. They smashed together, the water turning frothy around them, but when Juri raked the demon's throat, his claws skated over the demon's skin as if they ran over rock, the vodnik barely reacting.

The vodnik punched, and Juri twisted, the blow glancing off his shoulder. Juri leaped out of the water for the creature,

his muscles bunched and flexing, his claws slashing, but none of his blows did any damage. “Run back to the palace,” he shouted. “Get behind the gate.”

Icy panic gripped her chest. Leave Juri and run? Stay? She wanted to help, but what could she do? Her magic didn't work down here.

She remained frozen for a beat, maybe two. Enough time for the rest of the vodnik to stop watching the fight and race toward the beach.

Koschei blasted one of them, but the demon shook it off and kept coming. A shadow flew overhead, and a large, red form landed in the water next to Koschei. She caught wide, leathery wings and golden horns before the red figure launched itself at a vodnik.

One of the remaining water demons slipped past the three fighters, aiming straight for Triska.

She turned and ran back toward the palace. The sand sucked her down, slowing her progress. She'd never run so slow. The harder she dug in, the slower it seemed she went. Icy, slippery hands grabbed her arm, yanking her backward. She screeched and scrabbled. A piece of shell stuck out of the sand, one side jagged, and she grabbed it.

She swung, and the shard of shell slashed across the creature's throat, skimming the same way Juri's claws had until she reached the gills. Here the flesh was unprotected, and her shell weapon snagged on the flap of flesh. She rammed her shell into its softer flesh as hard as she could.

The creature roared. His mouth opened to reveal small, triangular shark-like teeth. He grabbed her wrist, crushing the bones together and snatched her shell weapon. White-hot pain lanced up her arm, and she screamed. She kicked, catching the creature in the side of his knee.

He grunted and staggered, loosening his grip. It was enough. She jerked, her wrist exploding in pain again, and slipped free. Could she make it to the gate? Was she fast enough?

She dug her toes in, sprinting forward. Clammy fingers closed around her ankle, and she fell. The creature lay on the sand, holding on. She kicked at his face, spraying sand, and he hissed, grabbing her other ankle. He got on his knees, dragging her backward. She clawed at the sand. She must stay up on the beach.

The last thing she heard before slipping under the water was Juri's roar.

Rocks bit at her stomach and arms as the water churned over her head. Slippery black seaweed passed by and she grabbed at it, but it came out of the sand in clumps. The creature kept dragging her steadily backward. Down.

The ocean. She stopped struggling and let the water stream through her fingers. Underneath the waves, everything became muted. Hushed. Except for the faint heartbeat of the sea, the slow thumping of the waves on shore.

The steady beat of the water had called her with more intensity every day. Begging her to join it. And finally, she was here. She wasn't in her seal form, but even as a human, she could hold her breath a long time. *Enjoy being here. Go deeper.*

She was jerked downward, and she frowned. Why was this green monster touching her? He pulled her to the sand and moved over her, releasing her feet. He bared his small, sharp teeth and moved toward her throat. She kicked, and the monster's eyes opened wide in surprise right before the heel of her foot jutted into its gills. The demon jerked back, and she was free.

Quick as an eel she shot forward. Her clothes flapped in the water, slowing her down, but she raced forward in long strokes, anyway. The water here wasn't clear, it was murky. Dark. She twisted and turned, getting as far from the creature as possible. Grinning, she did a fast turn.

Her lungs ached, nudging her for air. Frowning, she glanced up at the surface. Why couldn't she stay under for longer? She didn't want to go to the surface. She belonged *here.*

An arm snagged her waist and hauled her upward. She kicked and squirmed. No!

The arm was warm, so warm. Her head broke the surface, and she sucked in a lungful of air. "Let me go," she struggled, flailing blindly. Clawing to get back under the water.

"Triska, it's me. The demons are dead. I've got you."

She stilled. That voice was familiar. "I need to swim. The ocean needs me."

The arm tightened around her waist, and in long, smooth strokes, she was dragged to shore. Her head was fuzzy, like she was in a dream. The insistent pull to go deeper into the waves turned into hard stabs in her chest.

They reached the beach, and she lay cradled in powerful arms, staring up at a vulk. She reached up and put her hand on his cheek. She shook her head, clearing it. *Juri*.

"Are you all right?" His expression was grim as his gaze searched her face. "You were under so long I was certain you drowned. You're so pale." He rubbed her arms. "Something's wrong, we need to get you back to the palace."

Everything faded except for his face. It was all she saw. The pull, the painful tug, to return to the ocean faded. She slumped against him. "There is something wrong. I'm a selkie, *Juri*."

“WHAT?” His mouth dropped open, and his stomach clenched. Something was really wrong with her. “No, you aren’t. You must have hit your head.” He shifted to sit up, bringing her farther into his arms. Into his warmth.

Impossible. Absolutely impossible. Selkies were seal shifters, and he’d never seen her take seal form. She’d have to have a pelt. Did she have a pelt? Why on earth would she say she’s a selkie?

It was his turn to shiver.

Koschei came into view. “You all right?” He brushed his palms against each other, and sand rained down onto Triska’s face.

She flinched, and Juri growled. “Stop being a pest and see if she’s injured. She’s saying strange things.”

Koschei glanced at her and waved a glowing purple palm over her. He pointed at her wrist. “She’s all right except for that.” Magic licked over her wrist, healing the torn flesh.

Juri clenched his teeth. They’d lost the bird, and something was wrong with Triska. She lay in his arms barely moving—barely breathing—even after Koschei had healed her. She shivered and closed her eyes. His heart stopped. “Let’s go back to the palace.”

The red demon joined them as Juri stood, keeping Triska in his arms. His hackles rose. He was a vulk, yet he’d missed the water demons sneaking up on them because their scent was the same as the damn water, and when he was fighting them,

he hadn't known how to kill them. Vulk knew how to kill everything.

This red demon—a demon! —had helped show him to target the breathing flaps on the side of their necks. But why would a demon help him?

Koschei gave the demon a brief nod of hello. “Ah, a warrior fenix demon. Well met.”

The demon studied Koschei, and his eyes widened. Despite having large, curling horns rising in a smooth arc above his head, he looked like a man. A red one, almost as tall as a vulk, and scarred. Several faint slash marks marred the demon's bare chest. They appeared similar to the marks a vulk's claws made, or perhaps a sword. His wings were tucked behind him, becoming nearly invisible. He bowed his head several inches in greeting. “Well met, guardian. Have you returned?”

“Have we met before?” Koschei asked.

The demon straightened. “No, but my father is king of our people and knows of the guardian. I'm Rordan, second in line.” He turned to Juri and gave the same brief bow. He gestured toward the bloody water, stains of black floating in the waves behind him. “I'm sorry. The vodnik never have had much to recommend them.”

“Thank you for helping,” Triska said, her voice weak. She turned to Juri. “I can walk.”

He cradled her in his arms more snugly. “Just rest.” He let out a small, secret purr, and she murmured and sank farther into him.

Rordan watched them without expression. His irises were a golden-red color, and they flickered in the gray light. “The vodnik hunt in the dark, where they can sneak around and grab people unawares. They don't normally attack like this.”

Juri searched the beach. In his time in Ulterra, he'd noticed monsters and spawn seemed to sense rifts when they formed. Perhaps the vodnik had as well. Perhaps Rordan had. Even if

this demon had helped them, he wasn't letting anyone else cross back up to Ulterra. "We need to get back to the palace."

Triska jerked in his arms and peered up at the sky. "Al's gone."

He sighed. "I know." The rift was most likely gone as well, but he didn't tell her that. He started back down the beach, not waiting for the others. Triska needed new clothes and warmth. Now.

"Come with us to the palace," Koschei said to the demon. "I was always on good terms with the warriors of your kind, and I'd like to hear the news of the lands down here." He glanced at Juri. "It could help us."

Juri growled low in his throat. "Koschei that's not a good idea."

Koschei's chin jerked up. "Which one of us used to live down here? I know these demons."

"Things have changed." Should he let the demon stay with them? "What do you want? Why did you help us?"

Rordan stared at him. "The vodnik are the enemies of my kind. Any who fight them, I consider allies." He glanced at Koschei. "And I'd like to resume our alliance with the guardian."

Triska shivered again, the chills racking her entire body. Time to go. The demon *had* slaughtered two of the vodnik. "Fine."

The demon kept pace with him easily, his wings completely gone now. Juri wanted to ask him how wings worked—the vae had secret wings he'd always been curious about—but he didn't. Instead, he only watched him. One wrong move toward Triska, and this demon would feel what a volk could do.

The clawing inside his chest was like shards of ice ripping into him. Triska wasn't all right. And she was so cold. He needed to fix it, fix her, as soon as possible.

"What is a fenix demon?" she asked.

Juri opened his mouth to tell her to just rest, but she'd gotten a little spark back in her eyes, and he bit back his words. Triska always wanted stories when she was ill. He never got sick, not even when the entire class had the flu one year, so he'd bring Triska soup and tell her tales or read to her. Although he always embellished the stories in books to make them better.

Rordan's stern expression softened as he glanced at Triska. "The easiest way to describe us is to call us a fire demon because we have the power of scorch."

"Scorch?"

"They can call fire when they want to," Juri said. "But they have trouble controlling it."

Rordan stiffened and his gait became more stilted. Fenix demons were one scourge of the Deciding War. Not because they fought with the leshaks in the battle against the vulk, but because they couldn't control their power of flame, and they'd burned large swaths of Ulterra.

Koschei stepped between them. "That was in the past. The fenix demons were always courteous guests of mine, and they never set anything on fire." He turned to Rordan. "What have you seen flying overhead? Any unusual activity?"

"The boroughs have been quiet. There's peace right now. Although, with the vodnik here near my lands, there must be something brewing."

Triska stirred in his arms, sitting up a bit more. "Boroughs? Koschei called this area the forgotten borough last week. What does that mean?"

Rordan's shoulders relaxed. "The underworld is divided into boroughs, with the deceptive lands in the middle." He waved his hand. "This area is the forgotten borough because it's never been claimed."

Koschei nodded. "When we return, I'd like to look at the map together so you can tell me about any changes." Koschei had drawn a map of the underworld for them, and they'd poured over it in the parlor many times in the past weeks.

“Do you remember the faint lines on the map?” Juri asked Triska. “I should have pointed them out to you. They showed the different areas of Peklo. Down here, they’re called boroughs.” Zann had told him about living in one of the northern boroughs for most of his time in Peklo.

Rordan’s shoulders tightened again. “I may be the second son of the king, but I’m a fenix warrior and I’ve lived most of my life on the battle plains. The mudri of my people are the ones who rule and keep counsel with the lords of the boroughs. So I won’t have as much information for you as you’d like.”

Triska shifted farther up in his arms, holding onto his shoulders better. “The mudri?”

Rordan nodded curtly. “There are two classes of fenix demons, the mudri and the warriors.”

After that, Rordan fell silent, scowling, and Juri focused back on Triska. He needed to get her alone so after she felt better, he could talk to her about what she’d said.

The walk seemed to take years, but finally they reached the palace. He brought her up to the washroom near their bedroom. He ran a hot shower for her and washed the sand out of her hair. Her skin pinked up from its dull grayish color, and her eyes regained some of their luster. “Okay, I can finish up.” She made a shooing motion. She’d let him take care of her until now with scarcely a word, leaning on him and letting him run his hands over her skin.

Some of the clawing panic had faded, but still, her words rang in his ears. ‘I’m a selkie’. The thought made his blood run cold, and he was grateful for the hot water. He knew the legends of the selkies. Shit, he’d told them over the fire to others a time or two.

He ran his hand over his head. All the tales about selkies were sad and sorrowful. In every one, a man fell in love with a selkie woman and hid her pelt, trapping her on land and forcing her to remain with him. But in the end, she got her pelt back and returned to her seal form. Forever. She never returned, forgetting all about the life she’d had on land.

His hands turned to fists. Not Triska. This couldn't be Triska. He'd never trap her on land, but he wouldn't lose her to the ocean either. "I'll wait for you in the bedroom. Then we can talk." And he left the washroom. He'd never dreaded a conversation with Triska, but right now, his feet were as heavy as lead.

TRISKA ENTERED THE BEDROOM, fully clothed but still using a towel to dry her hair, and her pulse skittered. Juri sat on the bed, his golden eyes watching her. “Tell me why you said you’re a selkie.”

No preamble or easing into it. She sucked in a breath, her stomach plummeting to her feet. “You weren’t the only one who discovered something about your true self in the time we’ve spent apart.”

He leaned back, his brows knitting together. “You found out you’re a selkie?”

Her gaze remained steady on his. “I learned my mother was one, and so am I.”

Juri ran his hand over his head. “But ... a selkie’s time on land is fleeting because they want to remain in the sea. They live in their secret palace among the waves.” He scanned her face as if searching for the truth. “Are you sure what you learned is correct?”

A sob welled up in her chest, but she fought it down. “When a selkie drops their pelt and comes on land, it’s usually brief. Except for tales like my mother’s where ...” she swallowed hard, “they fall in love and remain. But you know the tales. Those who fall in love with them are doomed to only feel pain. Because a selkie will never stay on land long.” Her words dropped into the room like stones.

“But you’ve lived in Ryba for one hundred and eighty-seven years.”

She nodded. “I know. I’ve worked really hard to push my selkie side away. It may be easier for me because I’m only half selkie.” She swallowed. “My mother left me a journal about selkie life.” Triska kept it tucked away with Juri’s letter and her drawings of him. “When she met my father, she burned her pelt, thinking it would help her conquer her need to be in the ocean.”

Triska lifted her chin. “She said a selkie can only have one love, the ocean or her mate. She chose my father, and tried to make sure that was enough. When my father was home, it was easy. Her love for him kept her grounded and at ease, but the sea owned him too. And when he was gone, well, you remember how she’d get.”

Juri nodded. “She wandered the beach and left you alone a lot. That’s why you stayed with us so often.”

Her mother would get a certain look in her eye, one Triska recognized even as a child. When that happened, her mother roamed, losing all sense of what she was doing. Only Triska’s father could bring her back. “My mother wrote that losing her pelt was overwhelming. The lure of the ocean never really stopped.” Triska’s chest tightened the way it always did when she thought of her mother. “She got more and more reckless swimming and boating in the ocean. Trying to feel the connection to it she’d lost.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she wiped them away with a quick slash of her fingers. “When I was fifteen, my father showed me my pelt. It appeared the day I was born, swaddling me, and he’d kept it safe for me. He told me what I was and gave me her journal.” Her lips tightened. “I knew how she’d died—she’d fallen overboard—but he told me more details. He told me the day she died, she’d taken one of his small sloops out of the bay into the proper ocean. Alone. She wasn’t a strong sailor, and the sloop was best with two people manning it. A squall came up and took her.” Triska swallowed hard. “You know how it is with bonded pairs. If one loses their mate, the other often dies, too. But he didn’t.”

Before her mother died, her father was away a lot, but when he came home, he’d loved to read pirate adventures to

her at night. He had a loud, booming laugh that filled their small cottage, warming up spaces she hadn't realized felt empty when he was gone. "He became a shell of himself. I mean, he survived, maybe because of me, but I saw how much he suffered. I won't do that to someone else. Even if they are my mate. Especially if they are."

Her father rarely laughed anymore, and his smile never quite reached his eyes. He didn't speak of his sorrow, but when nor'westers blew in, and the waves grew choppy and white-capped, he stood on the beach, and she suspected he spoke to the sea as if it were her mother.

Juri still stared at her, unmoving. "Have you ever taken seal form?"

She shook her head. "No. I think it's made it easier to resist going into the ocean but ..." It was like a dam burst. The sob stuck in her chest broke free. "It's so hard. Especially down here. Down here ... it's unbearable."

Finally, she could speak about the constant pull she lived with daily. In between shaking sobs, she told him everything—the unrelenting ache, the whispers from the sea, the way she never felt present, no matter what was going on. How she worried she was like her mother, always looking at the horizon and missing her real life, longing for another. As the words burst forth, sour on her tongue, Juri grabbed her and hugged her close. He stroked up her back. "The sea always calls to me, even when I'm quiet and happy. At night, sometimes I have dreams about dark, cool water."

"You feel the pull right now?"

She kept her head buried in his chest, his heartbeat the only thing she focused on. "It's better when I'm with you." She sucked in a shuddering breath. "Eventually, Juri, the water will take me, just like it did my mother. Either in seal form or not. We need to ..." Her breath hitched. "We agreed on just one night, but selfish me, I wanted more." She lay a hand on his cheek. "But it's only going to make it harder for you when I leave. We don't have many days left until the full moon. I

can't choose you, even if I want to. I'm not leaving you here with a broken mate bond. A shell of who you are."

"That won't happen."

"I know. I know you won't bond with me because the vulk don't take mates, but I ... I can't either. And I just had to tell you why."

"That's not—"

"It's fine." She stared down at her hands. "If I wasn't a selkie ... " Normally, she refused to live thinking about what might have been. It made things so much more difficult. But for one moment, she let herself picture what a future with him would look like.

Juri would be next to her by the fire. She'd be snuggled up close the way she always sat next to him, letting the rumble of his voice thread through her as he told one of his stories. He'd nuzzle her neck and get the expression she loved on his face—the one where his golden eyes deepened into amber. The one where she knew how much he cared about her.

There would be children nearby. Mischievous boys with their father's grin. Clever girls who knew their father would give them whatever they wanted. A big family. One she'd never have to worry about breaking up. Or that she'd one day leave.

Inside her chest, her heart pounded like a bird desperately beating its wings, trying to get out. Frenzied panic.

Triska gazed up at Juri. It wasn't her emotions she felt in her chest. It was his.

Her feelings were buried much deeper, locked away like her pelt, but in that moment, they broke free. She covered her face with her hands and bit back more tears. The pain lashed through her, driving away her dreams for the future.

Juri leaped to his feet. "You need to leave Peklo. The magic down here ... it's affecting you badly. You can't think clearly right now."

On her chest, the ring warmed. She clutched it. “I was fuzzy earlier, but right now everything is crystal clear,” she said. “We can’t take what the rune offers.”

*First, a rune will bind,
But only a bite permanently entwines.
With true love, it must be done,
Or two will never be one.*

“We can’t choose for ‘two to become one.’ I won’t do that to you.” Her heart felt like stone, and she wanted to sleep. To curl into a ball and remind herself this decision was right until it sank in, and the pain lashing through her stopped. Until the bond stopped telling her how panicked Juri was.

He took her hand. “We’re leaving Peklo. Right now.”

HE TUCKED her hand in his even more carefully than usual, his heart pounding like he was running full tilt. This place was dangerous for her. He needed to get her away from it. Immediately. Protect her from the urges telling her to go into the ocean the same way her mother had.

Was he really going to do this? Would he lose what he sacrificed to the bowl forever?

It didn't matter. He'd do it for her.

After she'd told him about being a selkie, pain lashed through his chest so strongly he'd lost his breath. *Her pain*. A deep, all-encompassing pain pushed out any other feeling until it swamped him. It was far past sadness—it was sorrow. True, overwhelming sorrow.

Triska had lived with the knowledge she was a selkie since she was fifteen, knowing someday her time on land would be taken away from her. He clenched his teeth. How did he fix this? There must be something he could do so she could live her life the way she wanted.

The lightwielder hears the call of the sea,

Beckoning her to flee.

Her life has never truly been her own,

Will the right path for her be shown?

He'd assumed it meant her life in Ryba, staying by the sea and not following a vulk around Ulterra, living in dens, but

now it all made sense. All this time, he'd refused to consider the rune's choice for him, but now that it was taken away ...?

These past few weeks his only solace in his decision to keep them apart was that she'd remain happy and safe in Ryba, living her life as she chose. Once Hoyt was dead, no more threats would stalk her. If his thoughts of her in the future didn't include her marrying and having children with another, well, he didn't want to think about that.

But now that he knew she wasn't happy. That her life in Ryba would end ...

He growled low under his breath. She wanted to keep them apart to spare him, but it wouldn't matter if he chose the rune's bond or not. He'd always want her. Always long for her.

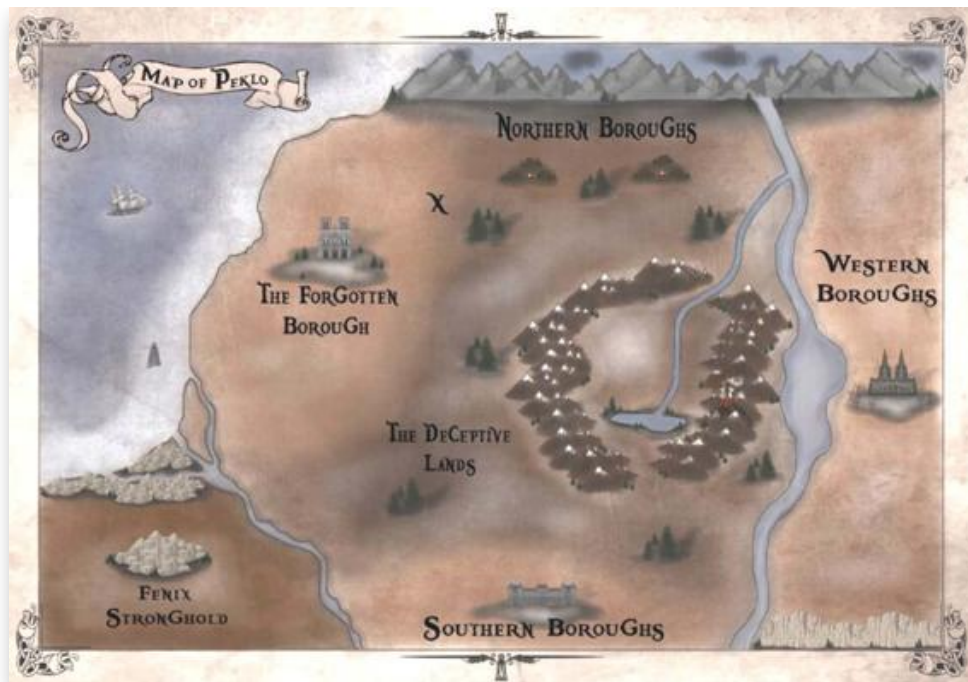
All this time he'd stayed away, thinking he'd kept her safe when he could have been at her side. Making her happy. Helping her. They'd always been stronger together, not apart. Why did he have to understand this now when it might be too late?

If she entered the sea ...

No. That couldn't happen. He'd get her up to Ulterra and destroy Hoyt. Then things would get better. Then they could decide about the rune.

When they swept into the library, Koschei had a map of the underworld spread out next to the marble Herskala bowl. Rordan leaned over it. "This is a good representation."

"Of course it is," Koschei said.



Rordan brushed his pointer finger along the southern coast. "Although you've missed some of the sand pits here. Stay away from that area. They're treacherous."

Juri joined them, Triska at his side, and he skimmed a claw over the mountain range in the center of the map. "Are there any junctions to get out of Peklo other than the Shaking Mountain?" Rordan flew overhead; maybe he'd seen something Koschei didn't know about.

Rordan shook his head. "There is no way out of Peklo, even the entry to Ulterra in the Shaking Mountain is closed. The ala has appointed a guard for her mountain, and no one comes or goes." He lifted his chin. "Some of my people believe our time down here should be over." He glanced upward. "Many of us would like to see the suns again."

Koschei frowned. "There is a new guardian?"

Rordan shrugged. "I stay away from that part of Peklo, but I don't think he is a guardian. The rumors say he holds great power because he sups on the essence of the dead."

Triska glanced at Juri, her brows shooting up. "Have you seen him? Does he wear a black cloak and have a scar on his face?"

“I’ve seen him in both his human form and his jackal form. He does not wear a black cloak. He has a breastplate of sorts, a headdress, and odd kind of ...” Rordan frowned and patted his thigh. “Pantaloon.”

Juri stared. “An incubus?”

Rordan shook his head. “No. The incubi live far to the west, in their borough. Their leader also has a jackal form, but his power is not the same. That one, he’s all right. I’ve fought with him before, and he’s a good fighter. And he doesn’t bother those he shouldn’t.” He studied them for a moment. “How did you all get down here?”

“Did you see anything earlier today? Near where we met? A rift or maybe a large white bird?”

Rordan stared at him as if he thought Juri was crazy. “I saw none of those things. There are no large white birds living down here. If I saw one, I’d have noticed.”

Juri turned his focus to the bowl. “Then we need to activate the bowl to find the rift.” He swallowed and moved the bowl to the center of the table.

Triska squeezed his arm. “No, Juri. We can find another way—”

They locked gazes. “You’re not spending another day down here.” He placed his hand in the bowl. Black flame flared, and the same cool sensation he’d felt the last time licked over his skin. Whatever magic lay inside the bowl sucked at him. Whispered what it wanted.

He fisted his hand and let the bowl take it.

His vision dimmed. The room tilted. Triska cried out and wrapped her arms around him as if worried he’d topple. His fur retracted, and the bronze skin of his human form appeared.

He let out a shaky breath and looked down. He was in his human form, his trousers a touch loose since he wasn’t as tall or quite as wide. At least he was still as tall as the demon and Koschei.

Triska ran her hand over his bare chest. “What have you done?”

The bowl flickered with iridescent flame; the black gone. “I gave the bowl what it wanted, and now it will give me what I want.”

“But ... you traded your vulk form? Will it come back?”

His shoulders tensed. “I don’t know.” He glanced at Fergal.

The magicwielder stood frozen, his mouth agape. “This magic is old,” Fergal said. “Dark. Unforgiving. But so is the line of the vulk. I’m not sure.” Triska let out a small cry.

Juri straightened and fisted his now clawless hands. He’d let the magic take his vulk form expecting it may not ever return because right now, all he needed was to protect Triska. If he lost his strength, it didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting Triska back up to Ulterra the only way he could. He waved his hand over the Herskala bowl. “Show me where the rift is.”

A flash of the ocean spun past as the image in the bowl raced forward, then it halted before a small opening in one of the crimson buttes along the shore. It was like the shades of a window had parted a fraction, letting in a slice of morning sunshine. The bright sunlight from Ulterra shone into the gray of Peklo, glittering over the sand. The image sharpened as an albatross came into view and swooped to the gleaming entrance to Ulterra.

Standing in the center of the opening was a vulk.

“Get out of here, you damn bird.” Kyril swatted at Al. “Birds aren’t supposed to be this big.”

Juri barely breathed. “Where is this? How did Kyril create a rift?”

The image panned out, showing a slope of the beach and another vulk walking up the shore to join Kyril. *Hans*.

“Did you find anything?” Kyril asked him.

Hans growled. “No, nothing to the west but rock. A few bauk, but I took care of them.” He shook his arms out. “Anything down here try to get through?”

“Just this pesky bird.” Al dove through the rift, returning to Ulterra.

“I’m going to search another hour, maybe two, then we can return.” The image wavered into a red blur, then changed into a flickering flame, fading entirely.

Juri rubbed his mouth. “Hans is *here*.”

“How is that possible?” Triska asked.

“Ever since he became krol, we discussed the possibility he’d be able to walk between the two realms just like Wulf did, but ... he hadn’t tried.”

Triska nudged him. “He came for you.”

He swallowed. Triska was right. Hans had ripped a connection between the two realms to find Juri. Triska was going to be fine. She’d get back up to Ulterra and the pull of the ocean would cease.

He put his arm around Triska, and the movement felt slower, not the smooth action of a vulk any longer. Her blackthorn blossom scent still washed over him, but it was duller. His senses no longer attuned at a higher level.

He straightened. He’d get used to it.

Juri turned to Rordan and pointed at the bowl. “Do you know where they were? How far away is it?”

“Yes, it isn’t far from the beginning of fenix territory. It’s about a half mile south of here.”

If Hans was in Peklo, could they speak mentally now? As Alpha, Hans was the one who opened the connection, but ...

He placed his hand back in the bowl and pictured Hans. A slight buzz formed in the back of his mind.

<Juri!>

He let out a long breath, and his shoulders relaxed. <I know where you are,> Juri said. <I'm coming to find you. Wait for us.>

<I've tried to reach you all day. How did you know I was here?>

Juri glanced at the bowl. It must be the reason why they could speak to each other, and once he stopped touching it, he'd lose the connection. <I'll explain later. Once I start on my way, I won't be able to speak any longer, but we're coming. Don't close the rift.>

<I'll wait as long as it takes.>

He swallowed. <I won't look like myself. I'm not in vulk form.>

There was a long pause. <You can't switch back and forth?>

<No.>

<I'll know you.> And the communication faded.

Juri nestled Triska closer under his arm. "Are you all right for a little longer? I'd like to scry for what Hoyt's doing."

"Yes, of course."

Fergal frowned. "Why wouldn't she be?"

Juri ignored him and studied her face. She wasn't pale, and while the dark smudges under her eyes remained, she didn't have the haunted, vacant look she'd had on the beach. The one that stopped his heart.

He nodded and waved his hand over the bowl again. "Show me Hoyt."

The image this time was dark. Rain pelted, and mist hung over the ground like a shroud, dark and gloomy even though it was morning. Hoyt sat hunched before the smooth cliffs, a few cut branches with long leaves set up in a lean-to above him. A small fire smoked and spat, and farther down, green smoke billowed from the circle of charred earth.

A taller man walked over and sat across from him, his hood pulled up over his head, and his cloak wrapped tightly so only the tip of his nose appeared. "I've asked one of my brethren with skill at reading the older arcane tongue to come. I released the storm spell so they can take a boat over here."

"Pah." Hoyt jammed his finger down on his lap, onto a book with rough-cut pages. "Tell them not to bother and put the spell back immediately. The fishermen from Ryba are always circling around, which means the vulk are nearby, trying to get to us."

"You're taking too long. We need someone who actually *knows* arcane. A sorcerer."

Hoyt's eyes glittered. "I know ancient arcane better than those trained at the academy." He shook his head. "What I didn't know was how Herskala encrypted this spell. He didn't write backward like he did in other sections of his grimoire." He clutched the book closer. "Don't worry. I finished the translation earlier, and I've started the incantation."

There was no response for a long moment. Then the hooded man shifted. "I'm still sitting in the rain on a damp cliff and my magic hasn't increased, so forgive me if I have a hard time believing you. Show me the grimoire, and let me see what you've found."

"Not a chance." Hoyt bent farther over his lap as if protecting it.

The other man hissed. "You promised me an incantation and power. Instead, I've been rained on constantly, and I'm living in mud. *What* has started?"

"Oh, the poor lord, whatever will you do?" Hoyt shuffled closer to the fire. "Because of that damn vulk, my link to the shuwt of the underworld failed. Without that steady source, I've had to use only bits of shuwt from your followers to try to tease out where the source of the power of this island lies. I finally found it today, but it doesn't recognize us, and it doesn't respond to our kind of magic well. Herskala suspected it wouldn't be easy to tame, and he was right. However, I'm making progress. Tomorrow, at dawn, I should be finished,

and we can complete the incantation and embrace our new powers.”

The other man stood. “It better work. If you thought the wrath of the Dark Lady was bad, mine is much worse.”

Hoyt’s chin jerked up. “You think to threaten *me*?” His lips twisted into a snarled smile. “Try it, *my lord*.”

The other figure didn’t move.

Hoyt rose and waved his hand. He shot a ball of magic at the charred circle, and green smoke poured out. The ground shook. Hoyt and the hooded man both staggered but remained standing.

“I think we both know my magic far outstrips yours.”

But the hooded man didn’t appear to be focused on Hoyt any longer; his dark hood was turned toward the charred circle. “This doesn’t seem right.”

Hoyt shrugged. “I had to force the magic to my will. The island is awake now, but the magic isn’t responding well. I can contain it enough to complete our incantation, but afterwards ...” Hoyt waved his hand toward the camp, with the fires blazing in the darkness. “Eventually, the magic will consume everything and destroy the island and anyone who remains on it. The blast may even destroy part of Ulterra. But on the plus side, I’ve broken the spell that lay over this island, dampening all the magic.”

The hooded man raised his hands. “We can use portals? I’ll portal out and call the rest of the Dark Cabal.”

“No. I’ve put the dampening spell back in place. If you can portal, so can others. We can’t take the chance that any magicwielders show up. Now, if you won’t suffuse me with praise, I’ll be finding some lunch.” Hoyt strode off, but the image didn’t follow him; it stayed at the fireplace and the hooded man.

The hooded man was silent a long moment, rain dripping off his hood in a steady stream. “He may be entirely mad. I need to set up my own preparations.” And he walked away.

The image wavered, then disappeared.

Juri stared at the bowl. “We have until dawn tomorrow,”

Koschei’s lips thinned. “He’s right about the island. The magic will consume it, most likely in a great explosion.” His gaze met Juri’s. “One that will most likely reach the nearby towns as well.”

Ryba. There was a lurch in his stomach. His mother. His half-brothers. The best town in all of Ulterra. They had to stop whatever Hoyt had started.

Fergal gestured at the bowl. “Ask to see what Hoyt activated.”

Juri nodded and focused on the bowl.

The flames flickered, and the image before them showed the coast of the vanishing isle as if they were a bird flying above it. Then they plunged directly down, bursting through the waves into the ocean.

Next to him, Triska gasped. He drew her closer to his side. The flames turned navy blue as the image continued down into the ocean. A dim light appeared in the distance and grew more powerful as the bowl streamed forward.

Fish flitted by in quick snatches of colorful scales as an orb appeared in the water. Its color was like captured lightning, the palest shade of white. It rotated slowly, flinging hazy waves of magic that looked like scarves wrapping around a head. A fish swam by and got stuck in the current, flailing desperately as it was caught in the surge around the orb.

“It’s down deep in the sea,” Triska said, her voice tight.

Juri tugged her closer. “Can you figure out how to call it? Or destroy it?” he asked Fergal. “How can we make sure it doesn’t explode?”

Fergal stared at the image. “I’ll need to think on it. This is old, old magic.”

Juri removed his hand, and the flames winked out. He sucked in a breath. “Time to get back to Ulterra.”

“We’ll need these.” Fergal grabbed the pewter Herskala bowl and put it in his sack. But when he reached for the second bowl, Koschei laid his hand on it.

He whipped his robes back and looked down his nose. “I’ve decided something.” His expression wavered, his chin falling a fraction. “I’m going to remain down here in Peklo.”

“What?” Triska said. “No! Why would you do that?”

He waved his hand. “My reasons are my own, but, for one, Arrow can’t fit through the rift, he’s too large.”

“We’ll make it larger,” she said.

Koschei flashed a genuine smile. “I know my punishment for what I did in the past, and it’s not over. Down here, I have magic, but in Ulterra? I would still be bound. One day, I’ll get my chance to return to Ulterra, but I’ll wait down here for it.” His finger tapped the rim of the bowl. “I’d like to keep the bowl, though, so I can still speak to you. I *will* get it to activate for me.”

Juri turned to Fergal. “Do you have a good reason to keep the bowl?”

Fergal sighed. “I can handle it better than him, but it’s probably safest down here. If the magicwielders knew about it, there’d be blood spilled.” His dark eyes flickered. “I suppose he *is* a guardian. He’s used to guarding things.”

Koschei turned to Triska. “I asked you for a favor.” He pointed out the window at Arrow, flopped on the sand with a fish between his front feet. “I don’t need that favor any longer, but perhaps I can ask another?”

She’d bitten her lower lip and appeared to be on the verge of tears. “Of course.”

“Can you send a message to Illarion and ask him to use his old bowl again? I’d like to speak with him.”

She frowned. “That Dark King you spoke with Juri about? I don’t know where he lives, but I’ll do my best.”

Juri put his arm around her. “I’ll help her. I know where he travels to.”

Koschei lifted his chin. "One day, I'll return to Ulterra." He smiled at Triska. "And in the meantime, use Fergal's bowl to check in on Arrow. He'd like that."

Triska slipped out from under Juri's arm and gave Koschei a hug. The guardian's implacable expression slipped for a moment. He patted her awkwardly on the back.

Rordan had stood back during the entire work with the bowl and their goodbyes to Koschei, but now he stepped forward. "I won't be able to get it sanctioned by my father, but my warriors and I will protect the palace. We'll spread the word the guardian has reclaimed the forgotten borough and isn't to be touched." He glanced at the bowl. "We'll help you keep this hidden. And if there is a chance for us to return to Ulterra ... I'd like to know about it."

Koschei gave him a nod. "And stop by again." He turned to Juri and Fergal. "I don't do goodbyes." Then Koschei strode out of the room.

The four of them stood for a moment, then Juri ushered everyone out the back door and through the garden. At the gate, Rordan halted and touched it with one finger. "Even the gates are iron." He dropped his hand. "I have a high tolerance to it, but it's time for me to go." He nodded at the three of them. "Fare well. Good luck in your journey." He launched into the air and flew upward until he was only a red dot against the sky.

Juri grabbed Triska's hand and raced forward, Fergal huffing next to him.

THEY FLEW DOWN THE BEACH, her bare feet digging into the sand. Even though Juri was in human form, she was certain he could run much faster than she, yet he kept his pace matched with hers and helped her along.

He kept glancing at her as if he expected her to leave him at any moment, and his hand remained wrapped around hers. They ran along the water, and the grayish blue of the sluggish waves beckoned her. The sea lapped toward her, trying to snare her, trapping her into joining it.

Juri had given up his vulk form to get her out of Peklo, but it wouldn't matter. Nothing he did could remove her selkie blood. What did the loss of his vulk form mean for him?

Her chest burned, and it wasn't from running.

She'd leave him behind. No longer a vulk, and no longer with her. "Do you," she sucked in air, "see anything?"

Fergal huffed, his face the color of a tomato. "We've been running forever. We must be close."

"It's only been fifteen minutes." Juri wasn't winded.

They raced off the sand and around a boulder. The rift was in front of them with Kyril and Hans standing in the entrance.

One corner of Hans's mouth turned up, and he stepped forward and clapped Juri on the back. "It's damn good to see you." Juri kept her hand snugly in his, but with his other, he copied the gesture and clapped Hans on his shoulder, too.

Kyril raised a brow. "Your human form is unattractive."

Juri glanced down at Triska. “He’s always had a tough time accepting I’m the handsome one.”

She smiled. “Vulk or human, you’re the most attractive male walking Ulterra.”

Kyril waved his hand. “Pah.” He walked over and clapped Juri on the shoulder too. “I’m glad you’re back.” Juri took the lead in introductions as Hans led them through the narrow passage. They had to walk in single file, Hans first, Juri in front of her and Fergal behind. Kyril took up the rear.

Next to her, Juri slid sideways to get through a narrow point and helped her through. Arrow definitely wouldn’t have fit. Juri pointed at the jagged rock walls and asked Hans, “How did you do this?”

When Hans answered, it was in Vulk. She pursed her lips. Why couldn’t they speak so she could understand? The two spoke rapidly for a few moments and when they stopped, she asked, “Will Hans be able to come to Peklo whenever he wants? Could he help Koschei? Or Rordan?”

Hans paused and looked back over his shoulder at Juri. “Who’s Rordan?” Juri gave him a summary of meeting the fenix demon warrior earlier, and this time they spoke in the common tongue.

Ahead of Juri, Hans rubbed his head while he turned to get through another narrow part of the passage. “Opening a connection between the worlds is dangerous, but it may be something the vulk need to do going forward. Things are changing.” Hans’s tone was ominous, and she gripped Juri’s hand more tightly.

“How did you know Juri was down here?” she asked.

Hans chuffed. “I got an interesting message from the vae. They told me the vulk who ate all the king’s dodos spoke to some guards through a bowl. I guess the guards alerted the princess, and when Katisa went into her study, she used the bowl and saw you running up a cliff, then falling down a staircase into the earth.”

Fergal was in front of him, and snorted. “I was holding the bowl while that fool dragon carted me around like a dead fish. She must have seen us then.”

Hans switched to Vulk again, and he and Juri spoke back and forth for a few moments.

Triska frowned. “What are you saying?”

Juri squeezed her hand. “Nothing much. He’s just saying he couldn’t sense where I was, but he knew I wasn’t dead.”

Kyril growled. “Don’t tell her pack stuff.”

Triska turned her head. “The first thing I’m going to do when I get back to Ryba will be to stand on a bench and announce every single vulk secret I’ve learned.”

Juri chuffed, and the tug in her chest loosened.

Sunlight streamed into the passage as Ulterra spread before them. They’d made it.

Everyone tumbled forward onto a beach, and the rock snapped shut behind them. The noise was what struck her first. Waves crashed, and gulls filled the air with their cries. Gads, she’d missed the way the ocean up here sounded. Down in Peklo, the waves were quiet, and there were few birds along the shore.

Fresh, brine-filled salt air swept across her face, and she inhaled deeply. *Home*.

Triska squinted, shaded her eyes with her hand and scanned the beach. The five of them stood next to an escarpment near the high dunes north of Ryba.

Juri squeezed her hand. “How do you feel?” He jerked his chin slightly towards the ocean.

She swallowed hard and jerked her gaze away from the water in the bay to the shore. To him. “I’ll be fine.”

Hans jerked his chin toward Ryba. “Let’s head into town and you can catch me up on everything that’s been happening.”

Juri slung his arm around her as he filled Hans in on the vanishing isle and what he'd seen down in Peklo. He'd just gotten to using the Herskala bowls to return when they walked up the boardwalk steps onto the main street and met another vulk. This one wore a shirt and light-colored pants with lots of pockets. His fur was a little lighter gray than Kyril's.

The fourth vulk's eyes widened when he saw Juri. "Your human form is not an improvement."

Juri growled. He might not be a vulk, but his growl was still loud. "This is Finn. Ignore him." The other vulk bared his teeth, but Juri waved his hand at him. "How about you go see what the mayor needs you to do, eh? Isn't that your duty these days? Town babysitter?"

Fergal pointed at the tavern. "We need to make a plan. Might as well do it over a pint."

Juri leaned down to her ear. "I knew I liked this magicwielder. Do you want to eat? Or do you want to go home first?" His gaze trailed to Hans, standing next to him. "You think it's all right if we go into the tavern as vulk? And I don't have a shirt on."

Finn growled, shrugged his shirt off, and handed it to Juri. "Here. I was only wearing it so the ladies in town stopped ogling me." Juri responded with something in Vulk, and Finn laughed.

Jerking her chin up a fraction, she gripped his hand tighter. "Of course it's fine for you to come into the tavern. For all of you." And she plowed ahead.

As Juri slipped Finn's shirt on, he bent to her ear again. "Four vulk enter a bar ... it sounds like the start of a human story designed to frighten children out of their wits."

"I think it sounds like the start of a wonderful adventure." When they were kids, they'd loved the tavern with its inviting hearth, vigorous fire, and its knife-scarred tables crafted of dark, soft wood. He'd tell her they had to sit at the bar like the grown-ups, and Hildegard, the tavern owner, would give them

the same pint glasses the townsfolk drank their beer out of, only pouring her homemade root beer instead.

Conversation halted as the sprinkle of patrons huddled over their pints at the back turned toward them. Hildegard stood behind the bar, frozen in place as she reached toward the taps. Her gaze flicked over the vulk.

Triska stepped forward and gestured at the largest table. “Juri, Hans, Kyril, Finn, please sit.” She said all their names loudly. They weren’t beasts, they were four intelligent vulk, and they belonged here. She turned to Hildegard. “Can we have an order of fish and chips for all of us?” She glanced at Juri. “Two orders for this one.”

Hans raised a brow. “She knows you well.”

“Aye.”

The patrons at the bar turned back to their drinks, and their conversations resumed. Hildegard bustled back to the kitchen, and they took the table in front of the fire, sprawling in their seats.

Juri tucked her beside him on the tavern bench. His lips brushed the top of her ear. “Four vulk, a magicwielder, and a selkie sit down together. Now that’s a better sentence to start a story with.”

As Kyril sat on Juri’s other side, the bench creaked. Juri’s brow went up. “Didn’t have to worry about breaking the bench back when we were kids.”

“You’re a bit ... bigger now.”

She looked to the head of the table waiting, then shook her head. She’d gotten used to Koschei being around all the time acting like an emperor, now he was suddenly gone. Juri had never gotten around to telling her why he was called the Deathless One.

Juri rubbed his stomach and nudged Triska’s shoulder with his arm. “Good call on the fish and chips. I haven’t eaten that since ... well, probably since I left here. Although I’m not sure two orders will be enough.”

She poked him. “You’re never full.”

His gaze lingered on her face, and he sobered. “You all right?”

No, they may have left Peklo, but ever since she’d come out of the water, there was a chill in her chest. And her bond with Juri fluttered the same way it did when they were far away from each other. Yet she wasn’t far away—she was right here. And they had one more week until the full moon, so the bond shouldn’t be fading yet. She nodded. “I’m fine.”

Hildegard carried mugs over on a tray and passed out pints. After she’d set a beer in front of everyone, she paused, frowning. “I assumed you’d want an ale. Was that right? Or do you drink something else?” She glanced at Juri. “Heaven knows you used to try to get into the beer as a kid often enough.”

His lips twitched. “Aye, and I think my ears are still burning from the way you cussed me out for sneaking behind your bar. Beer’s fine.” As Hildegard marched away to the kitchen, Juri took a long sip.

She was sitting in the tavern, having a beer with Juri. Something Triska had wished for many, many times. Yet the full moon was a week away. Their time with the rune would soon be over, and she’d no longer be linked to him.

He put his mug on the table. “What’s going on with the necromancers and the island? What have you seen up here since we left?”

Hans leaned forward. “I looked into the Dark Cabal. They’re some kind of secret society of magicwielders. They don’t seem to be afraid of using darker magic, but they aren’t trying to tap into the magic of death like the necromancers do. But there are rumors of assassinations, all of them hushed up, where a red handprint was left on the walls.”

“The Cabal got to the island.”

“Yes, a boat from the north came through the day after you left. We have tried to follow, but anytime we get close to the

island, a storm tries to capsize our ships. One actually did smash to bits, but Triska's father rescued everyone on board."

Juri turned to Fergal. "Will you be able to get us through the storm spell?"

Hildegard returned with their food, and the table fell silent until she departed again. Fergal snorted. "Of course. I'm surprised Hazel hasn't conquered it. What we need to worry about is how to take out the orb."

"What are you talking about?" As Juri told Hans what they'd seen in the bowls earlier, and the risk of the island blowing up, Triska stared down at her plate.

An orb deep in the ocean. Magic that needed to be doused. Cut off.

She swallowed, the chips sawdust in her mouth, and looked up. "I can do it."

ICE SLID down Juri's spine. Everyone stopped talking. Fergal gazed at Triska for several long moments. "Your particular magic would be best, but we'd have to go to the island at night, and then my magic would have limits." He wrapped his hands around his pint glass and studied her. His gaze became vacant, the way it did when he got lost in thought.

Juri slapped his hand on the table. "No. You're not getting anywhere near the island."

She turned, and her face was smooth and expressionless. "I'm in this fight, too, Juri. And my magic will negate the orb Hoyt activated."

"You're not going near Hoyt so he can kill you this time." He stared out the window at the bay. *Or go on a ship over the water.* "I'm not in vulk form, I can't protect you." He shot a glance at Hans. "I may not even be able to fight." Would Hans tell him to remain behind because he wasn't a vulk anymore?

She raised her chin. "Oh, don't be daft. Even if Hans says no, you'll still go, and so will I. This time, I'm the one who needs to help you. And the rest of the vulk."

His mouth opened and closed. Of course he'd still go. Hoyt needed to be taken care of, so that he never threatened Triska again. That didn't mean Triska had to be there. "No."

"If Hoyt started the incantation, I can stop it."

He growled. "We'll take care of Hoyt, not you."

She glanced away, not meeting his gaze. “You need help. Help only I can provide.”

He shook his head. “No. The vulk will make a plan, the way we always do. We don’t need your help.” He turned to Hans. “Help me out here.”

Hans remained silent, his gaze flicking from Juri to Triska. “Briony fought Morana last year at my side. Her magic saved me.”

Juri switched to Vulk and swore violently. Kyril’s brows shot up. “Wow, Ryba brings out your saltiest language.”

“You can stick my salty language up your arse.” Icy shards speared into his chest as he turned back to Triska. He opened his mouth, then closed it. Briony *had* helped them last year. She’d even designed protective armor for the vulk to wear. And now Triska wanted to enter the battle and do something similar.

“Will her magic work?” he asked Fergal.

Fergal rubbed his chin. “I don’t like going over there at night when my magic is weakest. And there will be a considerable distance between Triska on the island, and where the orb is underneath ... but I can bring stores of my magic and bolster hers. Then it should work.”

Juri put his arm around her and pulled her closer. “*If* you come, you stay far, far away from the battle and Hoyt.”

She nodded. The ice shards in his chest grew. There was an expression on her face he didn’t recognize. A distance to her gaze like she saw through him. It was eerily similar to the look she’d had when he’d pulled her from the ocean in Peklo.

Triska stood. “I’m going to go see my father. He probably hasn’t heard we’re back yet.” Triska didn’t wait for an answer but strode to the front door. Juri shot to his feet and followed her.

Outside, the suns had become covered by thick clouds, making the street dull and gray. Even the last flowers of the season growing in the pots lining the street appeared muted. “I’ll come with you.”

She shook her head. “No. I need to be alone.” She waved toward the door of the tavern. “And I’m sure your pack needs to talk to you.”

Something wrenched hard in his chest. Dried leaves skittered across the cobblestones and snagged on his feet, fluttering to be freed. If she needed to be by herself, that was fine, but the way she’d said it ... her words sounded ominous. Like she was speaking about much more than today.

Words died on his tongue. His shoulders tightened. Her words from earlier rang in his ears again, ‘we can’t take what the rune offers. I won’t do that to you.’ She wasn’t his.

Her hand rose as if she wanted to touch him, but instead, she gave him a small smile and turned away.

The primal beast still inside roared. No. He was going with her. He needed to hold her until this feeling calmed.

He stepped forward to follow her when a hand clamped on his shoulder. Hans. “Let’s take a walk.”

Juri jolted, then whirled. “What? No, I—”

“We should talk.” Hans jerked his chin toward the beach. Juri followed Hans down the boardwalk, but he could only picture Triska walking away. Silence fell between them as they strode together along the sand until Hans halted suddenly. “What’s going on?” he asked Juri.

“She’s a selkie.” Everything tumbled out. He told Hans about what the rune said, Triska almost dying, and how she’d revealed her true nature earlier that day. “I’m going to lose her.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I’ve stayed away from her for ages because I knew she was safer without me. Now I think about all those years ...” He turned and met Hans’s gaze. “I could have been with her. We’ve had a rune mark—a bond—between us since we were kids.”

Hans rubbed his mouth. “There’s something I learned last year I haven’t shared with the pack. The choice you face with Triska, about making her your mate, it’s not the first time vulk have had to choose.” Hans paused. “Many years ago, the vulk

became the strongest beings on Ulterra, but they gave up their souls.”

He knew the vulk had no souls. That was how they slew the leshak—the souldrinkers. Only the vulk were immune from them. But he hadn’t known it was a choice.

Hans crossed his arms. “The vulk knew when they did this, they could never find, or take, a mate. Ever again.”

Juri’s mouth dropped open. “The vulk knew?”

Hans nodded. “Last year, when I traveled to the old vulk den, the memory of that moment replayed for me. Wulf rejected mates for all of us. For eternity. He knew there were zorzye—the lightwielders—out there, one made for each vulk, but he chose to become invincible instead.”

“What? Why haven’t you told me this story? Or told the pack?”

Hans stared at him a long moment. “Baba Yaga told me I was the first to find my mate, but I wouldn’t be the last.” He gazed into the distance. “The rune gives us back our soul for a month. Our humanity. It’s why you can retake human form. Each of us needs to make the choice if we want to keep it. I thought it best to let each vulk discover their path on their own.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “But we’ve always been told a soul makes us weak. And if we take a mate, or have families, they’ll be targeted by our enemies. Hoyt tried to kill Triska because it would affect me.”

“Those we love *will* be in danger. But you’re forgetting a few things.”

“What?”

“You’ll have an entire pack at your side, protecting your mate. And we’re paired with lightwielders because they’re special.” He touched his chest. “They’re tough in their own right.”

Juri rubbed his mouth. Triska had remained at his side through every part of their adventure, and she’d fended off

Hoyt's attack on the beach. Last year, Briony fought and defeated Morana.

His mouth opened and closed a few times. Finally, he said, "You chose Briony, and you chose to keep your soul."

"That's right. And I'm stronger than I've ever been." Hans spoke quietly, but his words seemed to echo down the beach. "I have a mate and children to protect, but I trust our pack. I trust Briony. I'd like to see anyone try to get at our kids when she's around." His lips curled upward a fraction. "Don't underestimate the power of a vulk and his mate. But you need to choose what is right for you."

Juri stared at the water. The treacherous, beautiful water. Even now, that water spoke to Triska, begging her to leave her life behind. "No selkie has ever come back," Juri said.

"No selkie was also part lightwielder."

The darkness roiling inside him quieted for a moment. He gazed over the bay, until he landed on the vanishing isle surrounded by its mists.

He put a hand to his chest. Selkie or not, she was his, and he was hers.

The wind swept down the beach, ruffling his hair. He'd been bonded to Triska since they were ten. Maybe it started as only a ring made from a nail, but it became much more powerful. No way was he going to turn his back on that again.

TRISKA SAT ON HER BED. The covers were still ruffled from the night Juri had slept over. It seemed like a lifetime ago. However, his cedar scent still lingered, teasing her with each inhale. Her father had been at home when she'd called, and the last few hours with him had been wonderful, but she'd told him about the pull. About how she didn't think she'd remain on land much longer.

She'd had to tell him. To give him the warning he hadn't had for her mother. He seemed to shrink in front of her eyes, but he'd nodded. Understood it wasn't a choice.

Whether it was going down to Peklo or because her time on land was over, the ocean wasn't waiting for her anymore. She sucked in a deep breath and walked over to her closet.

The small chest was made of dark wood with a carved design on the top. Holding the chest one way, the design resembled waves, holding it the other, it looked like swirling wind. She sat on the floor and slid the top off.

Inside, her pelt lay on green silk. For the first time, she took it out. When its dense fur trailed over her fingertips, her hands tingled. A rush of salty air blew through the room, scattering the papers on her desk.

She inhaled deeply and spread the pelt out. It was designed like a cloak; if she put it around her shoulders, she'd transform.

Why now? Juri had just returned to her life, why was it striking now? All she wanted was a little more time with him.

More than a stolen night—or a stolen week—of lying in his arms. It was selfish of her, but he was *Juri*. It felt like he was a part of her. Half her heart.

She'd had plenty of men court her over the years, some she'd even had short, enjoyable affairs with, but she'd never let any of them get close. Like with Emil. She'd never considered him, and a strong part of the reason was because she'd never take a mate. And it was a good thing she and Emil hadn't started a relationship. Earlier today, her father had told her Emil had found his bondmate during a recent trip.

Bondmates. She sighed. There'd always been a secret, hidden reason why she'd never let anyone close. She traced the rune mark on her chest with a fingertip.

Juri.

She'd always known she'd see him again. Her breath hitched in her throat. She'd finally found him, and their time together was almost over.

She stroked the pelt. Once she turned into a selkie, her mind wouldn't be her human mind. She'd be transported into a different life, one of the ocean and the deep underwater home where the selkies lived. In her journal, her mother wrote about how as a human, she barely remembered her life as a selkie. She wrote over and over about wanting to remember what it was like streaming through the water as a seal. Wanted to remember the special place of the selkies at the bottom of the ocean, a place only they could reach. That was what drove her mother back to the sea.

When Triska became a selkie, she wouldn't remember her human life. She wouldn't remember her father or Ryba. And she wouldn't remember Juri.

Or how much she loved him.

She sighed and retraced the rune. She'd always loved him. Everything brightened when he walked into the room. Her stomach flipped, and her insides turned to fizz. When he touched her, she couldn't get enough. When he curled around

her, the entire world disappeared, leaving only the two of them.

She wasn't certain how long she stared at her pelt, but the light cast long shadows through her window when she focused again on her room. She shook her head and folded the pelt up into a tight square.

Quickly, she dressed in her usual oyster fishing gear of oiled breeches, boots, and a form-hugging wool shirt. When she put on her oilskin smock, she tucked the pelt into her inner pocket, the one she normally kept an extra pair of gloves in.

She could make sure Juri was safe—that all the vulk were safe—from Hoyt forever.

She knew what she had to do.

TRISKA STOOD near the back of the boat with Fergal, the magicwielder standing with his eyes closed. The vulk stood together along the bow, pointing at the distant island and speaking in their own language. The best sailors from her father's crews had volunteered to take them. They had strict orders to shove off if anything went south and spread the warning to evacuate.

Her father wanted to join them, but she'd told him no. He needed to remain on shore and make sure his ships were ready. Just in case they lost the island and they needed to get everyone out of Ryba. He'd remained behind with the rest of the magicwielders except for Hazel and Fergal. They'd wanted the majority of the magicwielders to remain in Ryba, prepared to fend off any attacks and help keep the town safe for as long as possible if the island exploded.

She inhaled sharply. They wouldn't lose Ryba.

Next to her, Fergal quietly chanted spells, and his cloak glowed faintly white. Before they'd left, he'd opened his cloak and shown her how the black pearls he'd bought from her were sewn inside.

He nodded and pointed upward. The glowing stopped. “The light is almost gone, but I’ve hoarded a lot of magic today. If we stick to our plan, I’ll have enough magic to take care of Hoyt and to also feed to you to wink out the orb.” He squared his shoulders. “You must stay away from the battle and hoard your own magic. It’s going to take everything you have, and everything I can give you, to take the orb.”

The last streaks of the day’s suns faded from the sky, and the waning moons, about three-quarters full, peeked above the ocean. She nodded. While the moons replenished her magic at night, it was finite, and the process took time. If she burned too much magic, she wouldn’t have enough for the orb.

Hazel was in the stern with them, but standing apart, watching the last of the sunset, too. Triska suspected Hazel wanted to be as far from the vulk as she could get.

As the boat entered the waters of the vanishing isle, the mist swirled around them. The evening had been calm, the wind pushing them in smooth puffs toward the island, but now silvery mist clouded in, coating the deck until it was tough to see beyond a few feet in front of her.

A fierce gust of wind tore across the deck. It beat at the sails until they flapped wildly. The surrounding sea writhed, and a loud whooshing filled the air. A high wave crashed into the boat, sending water spraying over them.

Shouts rang out. Triska grabbed the rigging and held on.

“Here we go!” Fergal shouted. Blue light flashed. Another wave crashed, and the boat tipped sideways. Fergal cursed, and more cobalt light lit up the fog. He raised his arms. “This storm enchantment they’ve got is much stronger than I expected.”

The whooshing sound increased. “We’ve got a waterspout aiming right for us!” Juri yelled.

Hazel skidded across the deck. “I’m helping.”

Triska let her magic flood through her. “Me too.”

Fergal pointed at her. “No. You need to save your strength.”

Another wave, this one even higher, crashed over them. Triska lost her footing. She clutched at the rope and kicked her legs, trying to find purchase. An arm snagged around her waist and pulled her upright.

Juri held onto the rope, his clothes sodden and his hair flopping in his face. He tucked her in front of him. "Every single boat I'm on ends up in the sea."

She blinked saltwater out of her eyes. "You've got a real gift with boats."

Kyril clawed across the deck toward them, clutching at the ropes. "Waterspout here in ten seconds!"

Hazel raised her arms. Blue light floated across the deck, but the sea raged as if focusing its fury on the boat. A dark shadow dipped below one cloud.

Triska jolted. Had she really seen something? Or was it a trick of the night? "Fergal!" But the magicwielder didn't hear her.

"Five seconds!"

No one except her knew the ala was up there. The ala might be working against them and they could capsize before reaching the island. She had to do something.

Triska focused her magic and let it soar upward. Her range was limited without Fergal's boost, and she'd drain rapidly, but if there was an ala up there, someone needed to take care of her. She let her magic pour into the sky.

Her skin cooled, and she shivered, but Juri was against her, his warm chest pressed to her back.

The boat tipped sideways again, but she barely noticed. She shivered harder, and her magic slid against another's. She concentrated, letting her magic grow a little bit more. In the back of her mind, she was aware of just how much she was burning through, but she kept on. Her magic coated another blue blast and doused it.

A loud caw cut through the wind. Sapphire light erupted in a sea of sparks, and the wind died. The boat righted with a

great lurch, the wood beneath them groaning. The surrounding waves swelled once, twice, then the bay quieted.

She sagged against Juri, who wiped salt water from her brow.

“I’m never getting on a damn boat again,” Kyril said. He stood a few paces from them, holding on near the helm. He shook his head and sprayed water.

“Well, you didn’t fall overboard,” Juri said. “Which is good because no one was going to fish you out.” Juri wrapped his arms around her, and she warmed.

Kyril growled, then stalked back to the bow to join the other vult.

Hazel bent at the waist, clutching the deck railing with white-knuckled hands. The silvery light of the moons made her face even paler. Triska slipped from Juri’s arms and joined her. She put her hand on her arm. “You all right?”

She nodded. “I’m okay, but I used a lot of magic.” Hazel straightened. “I heard an ala.”

Fergal wrung out the bottom of his robes. “We should have guessed the ala may still be around.” He eyed Triska and frowned. “You doused her?”

She nodded. “Enough to make her stop doing whatever she was doing.”

“How much did you burn?”

She swallowed and glanced away. “Not much.”

Juri joined them, standing next to her. “I’d like to know why an ala is helping a necromancer.”

In the distance, a dark shape flapped away to the north. Hazel pointed. “She’s gone now.”

Triska nodded. “She won’t have her magic for a while.”

Fergal brushed his palms against one another. “Time to get to work.” He turned to Triska. “You ready?”

She nodded, her throat tight.

The sails filled as the wind picked up, guiding the boat toward the island again.

“BRING IN THE SAILS!” one sailor cried as Hans clapped Juri on the shoulder.

“It’s time for us to kill some necromancers,” Hans said.

Juri glanced at Triska, and his heart rate doubled. Delivering her into danger felt wrong. Everything about tonight felt wrong.

It was like she was here, yet not here. He’d kept a close eye on her as they sailed, and she hadn’t seemed to lose herself in the water, so that had made him feel better, but still, something felt ... off. Ever since she’d come to the boat after seeing her father, she’d had an expression on her face he couldn’t understand.

Juri glanced at her one more time, then nodded toward the side of the boat. “You ready?”

She nodded.

When they reached the beach, he led the way to the cliffs. The vultures sped like shadows, flying soundlessly down the path. He kept Triska at his side with the magicwielders bringing up the rear. As the trail ascended and reached the edge of the forest before the cliffs began, Juri slowed. Campfire smoke trickled on the air, and voices carried through the trees.

A single trill from a bird rang out overhead, and a rush sounded through the leaves. Rain. Drops pelted his face. “Damn rain drinker.”

Next to him, Kyril wiped the rain out of his face. “What?”

Triska pointed upward. “It’s a bird that calls the rain.”

Kyril growled. “Of course it’s a damn bird.”

They crouched under a tree and scanned the clearing in the cliff near where the staircase once appeared. The scorched circle now bubbled with green smoke, but in the rain, it hissed and didn’t rise far into the air.

“I think that bird is trying to help us,” Triska said.

Hans pointed. <There are five necromancers here, including the leader with the red hand on his chest. Our plan will work. Kyril and Finn, you take the three on the left. I’ll protect Fergal and get him to Hoyt, then help Hazel with the leader.>

They’d discussed Juri’s role earlier. He wanted to help destroy Hoyt, but Hans pointed out that Juri didn’t have a vulk’s immunity, or claws, any longer, and he’d be best suited guarding Triska.

Staying behind made him burn inside.

When he was ten, he’d learned he was a vulk. There was no choice involved. At twenty, he’d turned into his permanent form whether he wanted to or not. All these years, he’d accepted it, although he’d kept one part of himself behind, in Ryba. He’d always been proud of being a vulk, and his pack was his new family, but late at night, when he was alone in his den without Triska, without the rest of his family in Ryba ... he’d yearned for that life.

Now he was no longer a vulk.

His shoulders set as he gazed through the trees at the cliffs beyond. No. That wasn’t true. He knew exactly who he was. He was a vulk who didn’t believe the vulk walked alone. His claws, his strength, were there to protect Ulterra but also to protect those he loved. Back when he was twenty and his mother was injured, he hadn’t understood that. Or maybe it wasn’t until this exact moment that he truly understood what it meant to be a vulk.

He wanted his true form back. And he wanted Triska.

Fergal shuffled through the underbrush to join them. "I've taken out Hoyt's spell dampening the magic on the island." The magicwielder's face was red and sweaty, and he panted. Was he going to be all right? Fergal continued, "Since the necromancers will think the island is still dampening their magic, it will give us an initial advantage. The more you can surprise them and get rid of them, the less magic Hazel and I have to perform. I need as much as possible for later." He glanced at Triska.

"Hoyt should run out of magic too, right?" Juri asked. "If we don't surprise him and take him out right away, he'll run out, won't he?"

Fergal nodded. "Yes, he will if we don't allow him to perform any spells where he siphons magic off anyone else. It's best we destroy him as quickly as possible."

Hans stood. "Then let's go."

As one, the vulk surged forward. Juri remained in the trees with Triska, watching.

Finn and Kyril peeled off to the far side of the cliff with Hazel behind them, and Hans and Fergal circled in the other direction. Hoyt sat by his fire huddled over his lap again, and spotted them first. He leaped to his feet. "Vulk!"

A flash of white light zipped from Fergal's hand directly at Hoyt. In a sea of sparks, the blast hit Hoyt in the stomach. The necromancer fell backward into his tent, the sticks and scrap of fabric toppling on top of him.

The collapsed tent lit up in emerald flames. "Did Fergal do that?" he asked Triska. Another necromancer yelled and leaped towards Hoyt. Hans whirled and the two locked into combat.

She shook her head. "No." Juri pulled her back farther into the shadows of the tree.

Hoyt stood, kicking a stick out of his way. He raised his arms, and green flames licked over his skin as he turned to Fergal.

"What the hell is that? Why isn't he burning?"

Triska clutched his arm. "I don't know."

Hoyt's voice boomed across the cliffs. "Dean Abernathy, what a delight. Oh, excuse me, you aren't the dean anymore." The surrounding flames blazed up toward the sky. "As you can see, I have more skill than I did back when you taught me."

Fergal's expression didn't change. "Would we consider necromancy a skill? I'm afraid I've thought of it more as dabbling in death."

Hoyt palmed another ball of magic. "I studied things others didn't dare." The necromancer had to be depleting his magic stores, but he didn't appear fazed.

"I don't remember you being much of a student." Fergal sent another arrow of silvery light at Hoyt.

Hoyt grinned and tossed the ball of light. When Fergal's arrow hit it, the fire encasing Hoyt exploded. A boom shook the trees, and a tide of flame burst across the cliffs.

Juri flung himself to the ground on top of Triska as the plume soared toward him. It scorched over his bare back, leaving a blistering trail. He raised his head. The vulk and Hazel flew backward toward the trees, and across from him, Fergal landed on the bare rock in a fiery heap. He didn't get up.

Juri leaped to his feet and helped Triska to stand next to him. She let out a cry of dismay. "We need to help!"

"I'm going after Hoyt. Don't go out there." They locked gazes. "Don't go out there," he repeated.

She shook her head. "I'm going to go help Fergal."

He growled. "Hoyt must have used a lot of magic creating that explosion. I'm going to wear him out. All you need to do is wait a few more minutes."

"Everyone could be injured. Or dying!"

He scanned the cliffs. Hans was already on his feet, his eyes scarlet and his claws out. He roared and leaped toward the nearest necromancer. Bits of black robe flew into the air. "Don't worry about the vulk. Stay here."

He moved forward, but Triska stopped him. She pulled the necklace from her neck. "Here. Take this. It's good luck."

He slid it over his neck and stepped out of the trees.

Across the cliff, Hoyt turned toward Hans. Juri sprinted out of the forest and yelled. It was time to end the necromancer.

Hoyt whirled and faced him. "Who are you?" A faint trace of flame licked up his arms, much weaker than the flames that covered him before.

"I'm a barber." He spread his arms, and a smattering of rain hit his face. "I heard how unfortunate your facial hair was and came to offer my services."

Hoyt narrowed his eyes, then flicked his hand lazily. A thread of flame jerked out like a whip. Juri leaped sideways, and it barely missed his thigh.

A tight smile twisted Hoyt's lips, making his scar turn whiter. "Golden eyes? You're that vulk with the rune. And in human form." He shook his head. "The rune really is a weakness." He pointed across the meadow at Fergal. "The magicwielders are no longer a problem. And now the vulk are turning back into men. This is almost too easy."

From the charred circle on the ground, a great puff of green smoke blew into the air. It rose around Juri and cut off his vision. The sulfur stung his eyes, and he coughed.

A green ball of magic soared out of the smoke and slammed into his shoulder. He spun hard and fell back to the ground. White-hot heat spread from his shoulder through his limbs as if he'd been struck by lightning. His fingers curled, and his legs twitched. The pain intensified. Once again, he couldn't move. Could barely breathe.

Hoyt stood over him, bouncing a ball of emerald light on his palm. He bent and his gaze drifted to Juri's chest. The simple shirt he'd gotten from Finn was in tatters, and his chest was visible. "Yep, there's the rune." The necromancer shook his head.

Hoyt drew his arm back and shot his ball of magic directly at Juri's chest.

Darkness enveloped him. Pain seared through his limbs, but it was far away. He was floating, and in the air in front of him was the beautiful golden symbol of the rune. It winked once, twice, then the edges faded, turning crispy and black.

"No!" If he let the symbol leave, he'd never get it back. Never have Triska as his own. She was his mate. The only person in the entire world made to be at his side. Forever. He'd known it when he was ten. He'd known it when he'd leaped for her on the beach three weeks ago. And he knew it even more now.

Juri touched the symbol before him, letting its magic wash through him—and chose.

Golden light flowed through him. The pain disappeared. The ring around his neck warmed. His hand, coated in the gold of the rune, darkened into a vulk's fur and claws. The symbol winked once more and shot into his chest.

Juri gasped. The surrounding darkness faded, and he lay on the ground in the meadow once more as rain pelted his face.

"What? How are you still alive?" Hoyt's mouth twisted into a grimace, and he hurled another bolt at Juri. The ring glowed and surrounded Juri in golden light. It heated on his chest. Hoyt's blast of green magic clashed with the golden light and snapped back, hitting Hoyt in the head.

As Hoyt was lifted off his feet, he screamed one tortured cry. The necromancer cartwheeled through the air and landed in a heap on his side. Juri ran forward, his claws lancing out to their full six inches. He roared.

Damn it was good to be a vulk again.

Before he reached Hoyt, a black-robed figure with a red hand on the chest sprinted toward the fallen figure. He ripped Hoyt's robes open and grabbed something out of it. The grimoire! As Juri sprang for him, the man created a mass of swirling air and vaulted into a portal. It snapped shut.

Juri roared again, but it was too late. Hans and Finn leaped to his side, but the only thing left to see was the life draining from Hoyt's eyes.

The necromancer was dead.

The three vulk stared down at him. Rain dripped from Juri's muzzle in a steady stream. "We lost the leader." He scanned the cliff. The other Dark Cabal members lay dead on the stone.

Hazel, holding her hand to her side, stood with Triska by a now seated Fergal. Juri sprinted across the cliffs and joined them.

He put his arm around Triska and hugged her close. She put a hand to his face. "You got your vulk form back!"

Fergal's face was pale, his cheeks sunken. "What happened?"

Hazel pushed a lock of her hair out of her face. "The one with the red hand on his chest got away. He" She frowned. "My magic was spent, and he had the upper hand. He could have ended me, but he didn't. He portaled away."

"After taking Hoyt's grimoire," Juri said.

Fergal lurched to his feet, wincing. "Then we have no time. He could get more of the Dark Cabal and return. Let me gather my remaining magic together. We need to destroy the orb."

Triska stepped forward, letting Juri's arm fall to his side. "Use your remaining magic to set up a dampening spell so they can't portal back here." She turned her head to view the cliffs. "I'll take care of the orb."

"You need my magic for the orb." Fergal sagged, and Juri reached forward to steady him.

Triska shook her head, and Juri's blood froze. He knew what she wanted to do. "I'm going to enter the water. I won't need your help because I'll be able to get close enough."

"No," Juri said.

Rain slashed down at them. Triska's blue eyes flashed. She pointed at the water. "Do you want the island to explode? To destroy Ryba? Maybe kill everyone we love?"

His chest throbbed like his heart was working too hard. "I can't lose you."

"This is my choice." She swallowed hard, her graceful neck flexing. "When I turn into a selkie, I won't remember what's going on. I need you to use our bond and help me remember. Focus for me. Show me what I need to do. Use the telepathy you use with Hans."

It was like a dagger driving deep into his chest. Time seemed to stand still. Time seemed to race forward.

Biting her lip, she drew back. "It's our only chance."

He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. Hugging her close, he brought his lips to her ear. "Come back to me."

Putting her hand to his cheek and looking into his eyes for a long moment, she said nothing. Then she turned, flung off her smock, and pulled out her pelt.

"Triska!"

But she'd run for the cliff edge. As she leaped off it, her form changed. He raced after her, and when he reached the edge, he caught the brief splash of a brown flipper sliding below the water.

No! He crouched to jump after her.

A hand landed on his shoulder and reeled him back. He snarled, his vision crimson. Hans pulled him backward, forcing him to step away from the edge. "She's saving us. Let her. Do what she said and help her."

Juri's chest heaved. Over the past month, he'd felt her in his chest. In their bond. Sometimes clearly, sometimes only a whisper, but he'd known she was there. It was a tether—one he didn't want her to sever. And right now, the sense of her ... presence ... was fading. He fisted the ring and let it bite into his palm.

He had to make her remember.

THE TENSION she'd lived with for ages melted away. She twirled underwater, the surface and the dark blue water blurring into one. Bubbles floated past her whiskers, tickling them, and she opened her mouth in a grin.

A fish flashed past, and she snapped at it. It darted away, and with a swish of her tail, she raced and caught up to it. Heavens above she was fast. This was where she belonged, in the cocoon of the ocean, its lapping current humming in her ears, its slick coolness sliding across her pelt.

She dove, circling slowly. A school of fish moved to the southeast, their motion lapping small whirls across her whiskers and making them tingle. Time to chase them.

She glided south, but as she did, warmth trickled through her chest. Triska halted and listened. A man ... a vulk ... spoke to her, his words floating through the water. His voice a low rumbling purr. That was a pleasant sound.

There was ... something she was supposed to do.

She flipped up to the surface and when her head broke free she bobbed vertically, floating along the waves. Mist licked over the ocean, and her nose twitched. This was a strange mist with an odd tang to it. She didn't like it.

A high cliff loomed before her, and on its edge stood a vulk. He peered at the waves, but he didn't see her. Her chest throbbed. She wanted to get back onto shore and let him touch her. For a few long moments, she bobbed.

No.

She was wild, like the ocean around her. Vulk and their ilk weren't for her. She turned away from the island.

With several long, fluid strokes, she headed toward the open ocean. This time of year, she needed to head to southern climes where the sea wouldn't frost over with ice. Or she could dive deep and find the trail to her home. The one with secret air pockets far beneath the waves only her kind knew about.

A ripple of warmth bloomed in her chest again.

More words whispered in her ears, and this time wisps of memory drifted in. Once, arms had held her tight. Made her feel cherished. *Loved.*

She broke the surface again and turned back to the island. She studied it. A rush of images raced past. Danger. Vulk. An orb deep below the surface. The man with the rumbling voice needed her. He needed her to go below the island.

She gulped in a deep breath, then submerged, rocketing at top speed toward the bottom. When she opened her mouth, the water tasted richer. Here would be good fishing. She eyed a large red fish with speckled fins, then shook her head. No, now wasn't the time. She needed to find ... something.

Deeper and deeper she swam until a dim light appeared in the distance. A current swirled around her, drawing her closer. As she approached, the current intensified. Ahead of her, a vortex swirled, and in its center lay a glowing orb. It spun slowly, a funnel of water tumbling around it. Another red fish, this one almost as large as she was, flipped desperately, creating a flurry of bubbles as it tried to free itself from the swirl of water.

A dark shape emerged from below her.

Easily ten times longer than she was, it flicked its tail and effortlessly swam up the column of water and swallowed the red fish. Large spines lay along its back, floating lazily back and forth in the current.

Vedogon!

It opened its mouth, and rows of teeth winked in the orb's light. She froze. It was larger and more terrifying than a shark.

So far, it hadn't seen her, but it circled the orb as if drawn to its light. Or the easy meals it provided.

Was she going to be one of those meals?

She studied the orb. That was what she needed to get. But once she entered the funnel, could she even swim? If she was stuck in there, she'd be an easy meal for the vedogon.

She turned toward the open ocean again. Who cared about this orb or this funnel of water under the sea? It wasn't for selkies. She flipped her tail to get away. Once. Twice.

He needed her help.

Golden eyes set in a vulk's face appeared in front of her. Golden eyes that softened into a look only she ever got to see. She knew those eyes.

She studied the orb again. Her kind remained hidden in the depths. They didn't take orbs or tangle with vedogons. But something nudged the back of her mind. She was *more*.

She charged ahead, straight at the light.

The current was much stronger than she'd expected, and it rushed into her, pushing her sideways into its wake. She twisted, stretching forward. Light brightened around her. Not from the orb, a few feet away, but from *her*. She glowed.

From the murk beyond the rushing water, a dark shape with spines flashed past.

She flapped her tail and shot upward in the vortex.

Teeth snapped, and she twisted out of the way so they only caught empty water, narrowly missing the tip of her tail. Another snap and she flapped, propelling herself away. She flipped upward, straining forward. The orb twirled faster, the vortex churning and swirling and sweeping her up in its current, spinning her away from the orb.

No! She needed to extinguish that orb.

Pouring all her strength into her tail, she flapped hard. Inch by inch, she surged forward. The dark shape hovered outside the vortex, waiting for her. She flapped harder.

A cool rush slid over her pelt. It was like the water around her, but not. It was something old. Ancient. And it was coming from inside her. A white glow threading around her. It was part of her, suffusing her fur and shining into the water's darkness. The orb paused in its orbit, and the current stilled.

With a flick of her tail, she grasped the orb in her mouth.

A chill flooded over her, and she froze. Her blood seemed to turn to ice. It felt like the ocean was sucking every bit of warmth out of her. She sank like a stone. The vedogon snapped at her again but missed, and it didn't pursue. The light from her skin, from the orb, was fading.

Down, down she plummeted to the bitter cold. She shivered as the orb winked out. Then the light surrounding her faded, too.

She flattened, stopping her descent. There was nothing around her. Only deep shades of blue and the underlying hum of the ocean as it moved in its quiet way toward shore. She spat out the orb. Now it looked like a bubble, and it didn't light back up again. It bobbed a moment, then sank toward the bottom of the sea.

She'd snuffed out the power of the orb. Exactly what she'd needed to do.

Her lungs ached—she needed air soon, but the cold kept creeping over her. She shivered again. Her lids fluttered. Maybe she should rest here for a bit. Just for a bit.

Warmth trickled along her chest. It spread outward, like someone with a warm hand stroked her. Golden, buttery warmth. Words floated to her ears. "Come back to me."

He was the source of the warmth. She kicked and flipped upward to the surface. She wanted to find him.

When her head emerged from the water, the mist was gone. The clear, briny scent of the sea flooded her lungs. Past

the last rocks of the bay, the open ocean lay before her like a welcome mat. *Come. Find your home.*

Her home? Where was her home? Her whiskers twitched. Why did she picture a vulk when she thought of finding home?

The sea beckoned, glistening in the moonlight. An entire universe, all hers to explore. Triska flicked her tail and headed out into the vast ocean.

JURI SAT in the sand in the cove that was once his and Triska's. He'd sat here every day for the past week since returning from the vanishing isle, watching as the moons swelled a bit more toward full.

Tonight, they were full, signaling the last night for him and Triska to choose their bond.

Triska had succeeded. She'd gotten the orb. She'd saved Ryba, and probably a good swath of Ulterra. But whatever link they'd had to help her remember to take the orb, hadn't helped her remember him.

She hadn't returned.

Every day his mother had come and sat with him awhile. She'd brought him food, then took it away untouched. Hans came and sat next to him, too. Whenever he was there, they spoke no words to one another. They didn't have to.

When he wasn't in the cove, he was sailing with Triska's father into the open sea, letting the wind push the boat out to the swelling depths. But there was no sight of a sleek, dark seal's head bobbing above the waves.

His chest burned. The clawing inside was now the despair of a bond searching for its mate as their link faded. She didn't feel him. She didn't remember him.

Juri's breath seized in his lungs, and he bent forward. The bond burst through his chest again. Soon, it would snap entirely.

Over the past week, he hadn't slept. Hadn't eaten. All he wanted was her. To see her face and hear her throaty laugh one more time.

Staring up at the full moons, he thumbed the ring, letting it slide between his thumb and forefinger. His chest burned hotter.

The wind grew cold and bitter, but he didn't stir. The waves grew choppy and loud, rising up the beach until they were a few inches from his feet, and he still didn't stir.

Only when the moons sank toward the horizon, signaling the last hours of the night, did he rise. He looked at the ring in his palm. "This was always yours, and it belongs with you." He tossed it into the sea.

Maybe there was a chime as it hit the water, flashing in the moonlight, but maybe it was only in his head. Once again, he'd come to Ryba, looking for Triska. And once again, he couldn't reach her.

He sighed. It was time to go.

A small whorl formed amid the waves, making the silvery moonlight dance. What was this? More magic?

Dark hair broke the surface, and Triska rose from the waves, her pelt draped around her shoulders like a cloak.

Juri stared. This wasn't real. He'd sat here too long and fallen asleep. "Is it really you?"

"Juri!" She ran to him.

He stepped forward and caught her as she leaped into his arms. He held her tight. She was all cool skin and wet hair. He'd never felt anything more glorious. "Triska." He couldn't say anything else. He buried his face in her neck. No dream could replicate her sweet scent of blackthorn blossom with a hint of salt.

He hiked her up higher on his chest and wrapped her as close as possible. He nuzzled her neck as she kissed his jaw, his throat, anything she could reach. "You came back to me," he whispered.

His heart pounded.

“I’ll always come back to you.” She drew back and held up her hand. His ring lay in her palm, the chain dangling between her fingers. “I caught this beneath the waves.”

“I wanted you to have it back.”

Triska stepped back and slung her pelt more firmly around her. “Come with me.” She turned back to the ocean, and his heart hitched in his chest, pulsing with one violent throb. Was she only here to say goodbye?

She held out her hand for his, and he took it. When they reached the ocean, she knelt and cupped some water in her other hand. He joined her, kneeling at her side.

The water pooled in her palm. “I’ve made my peace with the ocean. I chose where I belong. It won’t call for me anymore.”

He cupped her cheek. “Are you sure?”

She pointed out toward the Great Sea. “As a seal, my mind is different, you know?”

He didn’t, but he nodded anyway. His mother had once tried to explain what it was like when she took wolf form, and he imagined this was similar.

She let the water drizzle from her fingers, then traced her fingertips over his face, peering up at him as if she was seeing him for the first time. “Part of me was elated to have the freedom of the ocean. I wanted to play in the waves and let seaweed tickle my belly. But the farther I swam, the sadder I got. There was an ache, here.” She put her hand on her chest. “And I kept seeing you. Laughing. Eating. Kissing me. They were ... memories of my human life. Ones I shouldn’t have had. And I heard you.”

He ran his hand over her wet hair. “I called for you with everything in my soul. The soul that returned because of you, and that I chose to keep. And I spoke words of love on the open air.” He repeated the words from the story about the knight and last dragon. The ones about how the knight had found his love when he’d thought everything was lost. Juri

locked gazes with Triska. “I spoke out loud that my heart and soul belonged to you. That it was written in the stars even before I was born. How when I was only ten years old, before I could really understand it, I knew you were mine. For always.”

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted a fraction. “I knew you were what I really wanted to swim toward. There wasn’t anything else in the world more important than being with you. I didn’t have to choose the ocean or you. I could have both.”

They stood, and Triska put her hands on his chest. He didn’t feel the wind any longer. All he felt was the warmth coming from her.

He brushed his thumb across her cheek. “I always thought being a vulk, and being with you, could never happen. I thought it was best for you if I stayed away.”

She pressed herself against him, her head still tipped back to see his face. “I was so afraid of being a selkie, I didn’t allow myself to consider having a mate.”

He smiled for the first time in days. “You want to be my mate?”

She held up the ring and smiled. “I said yes a long time ago. And I’m saying yes again. I love you, Juri. I choose you.”

His chest expanded, and he purred. “You’ve always been the one I chose.” He put his hand over the rune mark. “I chose you again last week. I love you.”

The rune chimed, and a soft golden light filled the cove. Warmth spread through his chest and nestled over his heart as if someone snuggled their head there to sleep—the exact way Triska always did. The rune shimmered, then slowly faded, but the tattoo on his chest remained.

They were bonded.

With his claws, he wrenched the ring wide enough to fit on her finger and slid it on. He lifted her into his arms. “How about we go home?”

She nodded into his neck. “I’m already home. You’re my home.”

He rubbed his jaw over the top of her head and walked out of their cove to start their life together.

EPILOGUE

JURI'S warm hands slid away from her eyes, and Triska blinked. In front of her stood a modest mountain, one scalable within a day. They stood along its left flank. Triska peered at the mountain, but all she saw were the rich green pines scattered along its base, their pointy tops reaching toward the sky. "I don't see anything."

Juri put his arm around her. "Then I did a good job with my mountain." He pointed. "See that one tree with the wonky branch?"

She squinted; Juri didn't always remember her vision wasn't as good as his. "Yes."

"Behind there is the door. Come on."

He took her hand, and she gripped his tight. They'd been in Ryba the last few weeks staying at her house, but their families had finally let them leave today. Juri's mother would have thrown them a full mating celebration, with the entire town in attendance, except the weather had fully changed to winter. A scattering of fluffy snow dusted the surrounding trees, and the top of Juri's mountain was solid white. A hint of ocean brine drifted through the air, as well as the metallic note of more snow to come.

There *was* going to be a large celebration, but it would have to wait for the spring. The mayor had declared it would be the wedding of all weddings, and he and Juri's mother had sat at the tavern writing things down for hours.

If she wasn't so blissful, she'd be petrified. They were going to merge the human wedding tradition with the peltwalker mating ceremony traditions and then at night, say their vows in vulk.

They'd slipped away this morning for the half-day walk to Juri's den, bringing a large pack that Juri wore on his back. Here, they could do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, without fear of Juri's wee brothers barging in. Or Hazel and Chessa, who were just as bad.

Kyril had joined them for the start of their journey before peeling off to investigate some news about the Dark Cabal. The walk was mostly silent, and when Kyril did speak, he used the common tongue, which was a pleasant change.

Juri said Kyril was being an insufferable ass to everyone. He figured it was because now two vulk had mates, and the pack dynamic would change forever, but Triska wasn't sure Juri was right. For one, Kyril had warmed to her—when Juri was busy with pack business and Kyril was free, he'd spend time with her.

While he wasn't the friendliest vulk and swore a lot, she didn't think he was upset she was Juri's mate. In his own way, he seemed to be trying to get to know her. And a few times, she'd caught him watching her and Juri together, an odd expression on his face. Juri would never believe her, but she thought Kyril was lonely.

A distant braying rippled across the small clearing. She shaded her eyes and peered upward. "It's Al!" He was high in the sky, and as she watched, he dipped his wings and circled once. Another albatross, also only a speck of white, sprang into view, floating on the thermals near Al. This one was a little smaller, a hint of gray at the edges of its wings. More braying sang through the air as they cooed to each other. Al dipped again, then the two turned to the south and flapped away. She smiled.

Juri gestured toward the birds. "He's smart, he didn't wait to join the one he wants most in the entire world."

“I hope they come back next year and have their family near Ryba.” She wove her fingers more tightly in his and studied the cragged rock for any hint of a door. Nothing. It looked like the side of a mountain. “Is Hans going to visit us here?”

Hans left a couple weeks ago to return home to his mate, but she knew he and Juri were speaking mentally.

Juri nodded. “I spoke to him while we were walking here. He said to expect him in a week or two with Briony. He found Illarion, and Illarion will portal them here, so they don’t have to travel over the snow. We can give Illarion Koschei’s message in person. And we can ask him to officiate our wedding in the spring. Unless you had other plans?”

She squeezed his hand. “No, that sounds good.”

“He said something else interesting, too.”

“What?”

Juri had a strange expression on his face. “He said he’s going to honor my pact with Ryba about it being a frior town.”

“What does that mean?”

Juri swept the crooked branch aside, and explained, “It means the vulk will continue to have a presence in Ryba. Frior is an ancient term for a person, or a place, under vulk protection. We’ll ... have a sort of extended home there and make sure the town is always safe. Hans said I’m off duty for a while, but when we want to emerge from our den, we can go back to town and talk to the mayor. He thought you and I might want to be the ones to figure out how to make this work.”

An alliance with the vulk—permanently. They’d be able to live in Ryba whenever they wanted. She felt like she was floating. “What do you think?”

He slung his arm around her. “I think we won’t emerge from my den for a good long while, but I’d like to create a town where the vulk are welcome.”

They gazed at each other for a long moment. She wanted that too.

He smiled. “All right, time to show you my den. Our den. Our other home.” Juri placed his claws in a few holes in the stone and a slab of lichen-covered rock slid open without a whisper of sound. He leaned forward and ran his fingers over the wall near the entryway. Light flared forth at the top of the passage, casting a warm, orange glow.

She gasped. “How did you do that?”

“Vae light. The magic lets you light it at a simple touch.”

Triska moved to enter the den, but Juri stopped her. “Aren’t I supposed to carry you across the threshold?” He swept her up in his arms.

Triska wove her arms around his neck, over the straps of the pack, and studied her vulk. *Her* vulk. Forever. She trailed her fingers up the back of his neck, and he purred. His jaw brushed against the top of her head.

After a gentle slope, the den spread before her, and Triska gasped. She’d expected something nice, but not like this. He settled her on her feet and went to the fireplace, coaxing it into flame. Triska walked across the lush woven rug on the floor. Made in Stok, it was quite rare, with vivid blue and yellow in a design so intricate only the best craftsmen could make them. But the rug paled in comparison to the stone arching around her.

Triska walked to the wall and ran her hand over it. Perfectly smooth. The inner stone of the den was a soft gray, but ribbons of white threaded through it, and in some places, the white took over, making it appear that the stone flowed like water. “How did you do this?”

“The vulk know stone.” He stood in the center of the expansive living room, watching her.

The space was all Juri. A large sofa of black leather nestled against the far wall, its lines simple, yet attractive. A massive fireplace dominated the other wall. The kind for roasting game. Large game.

“Hans said he’s making us rocking chairs as a wedding gift. I thought they could go in here.”

She nodded. “Absolutely.”

A gentle slope led to the next room, and she peeked her head in. “Your kitchen is larger than your living room.” She laughed.

“Of course. I spend the most time in there.” He crossed the room and put his arms around her. “Maybe not anymore, though. The bedroom is about to get a lot more use.”

She raised a brow. “We won’t just be using the bedroom. I want you in every room and on every surface of your den. I want my scent mingling with yours.”

He grinned. “You don’t need to mark my den, you’re already here.” He pointed to above the mantel and led her over. Etched into the stone was an elaborate carving. A beach, a tree, and waves. “This is our cove. I etched it in here. And come with me.”

He led her out of the living room, and down a wide corridor. She caught glimpses of more rooms down the hall, but he took her into the first one on the right. “This is your room.”

“My room? What do you mean?” It was a small circular room with a squashy armchair and matching ottoman, a floor lamp, and shelving. On the shelves were several *Quarter Obol Dreadfuls*, their covers sealed with a special wax. She gasped and ran forward. “Where did you find these?” Gold lined the upper right corner, marking them as rare special editions.

“I traveled a lot. When I found one, I bought it.”

Her heart squeezed. “But you never knew if I’d see them.” She took in the cozy space—a perfect room. “You built all this without knowing if we’d ever be together.”

“I wanted to feel like you were a part of my life. And the rune mark never went away, so deep down ... I hoped.”

She smiled and took his hand. “Now, you come with me.” She led him back to the living room and over to the pack he’d

left near the front passageway. From the front pocket, she withdrew the sheaf of papers she'd hidden earlier. "I've been wanting to show these to you, but every time we're in my bedroom, we're doing other things."

She handed them over. Would he like them? She pointed at the pages. "Those first few I drew when I was younger, wondering what you looked like all grown up. First as a man, then when I learned you were a vulk, I tried to picture you as a vulk." She pointed to the last one. "This I drew last week when you were out with the pack."

He'd gone so still his chest didn't even move to show he breathed. "These are incredible," he finally said. He stared at the most recent one. She'd drawn him sitting back in a chair in vulk form, his expression relaxed and his eyes ... well, they held the special softness around the corners they only got when he looked at her. "This is really how you see me?"

She nodded, and his eyes took on the softness she'd drawn. "I kept you with me all these years, too." She reached for the pack again. "One more thing." She drew out his note from all those years ago. At the bottom was the smudge from what he'd erased in his letter to her. The one she'd fretted over for years. "What did you write here?"

Juri set her drawings down on a side table like they were made of glass, then he reached for her. "I wrote some words in Vulk. The same words I'll say to you when we say our vows under the full moon during our wedding."

"What are they?"

He wrapped his arms around her and bent his mouth to her ear. "No other will ever own my heart. I am eternally yours, and you are eternally mine." As his mouth dipped to her neck, she ran her hands up his arm. His ring glistened on her fourth finger, and her *mate* was touching her. Showing her his—their—den.

She felt so light she might float up to the vaulted ceiling and never come down. "I love you." He led her a few steps until they stopped in the glow of light created by the fire. His mouth trailed up her neck, and her blood heated. Whenever he

touched her, her blood kindled like this. She yanked his vest down his arms, and he tugged her shirt over her head, then unclasped her pants, so they pooled at her feet. She stood only in her underthings.

Juri knelt before her, and his gaze trailed up her body. “Perun-above, look at you.” He leisurely untied the laces of her knickers, leaning forward and tracing his mouth up her inner thigh.

She whined and dug her nails into his shoulders. “You’re teasing.”

A clawed finger dipped down her chest to her bodice, feathering over the top of her breasts. Her head fell back, and she groaned. He slipped her bodice down, and cool air kissed her breasts. His knuckle skimmed the puckered tip back and forth. One, then the other.

“Juri” She whimpered, and he purred.

His tongue replaced his fingers, and she jolted. It tore a trail of heat through her, and all she could do was moan again.

“I’ll never get enough of this,” he whispered. “Never get enough of hearing your cries of pleasure.”

She wouldn’t either. His purr was like air for her now. She needed it to live. His touch, the way he sealed himself inside her, it was all she craved day and night. And his love ... that was what guided her days, encompassing her in silken happiness.

She’d never thought she’d have Juri like this. “You’re still wearing too much.”

“So are you.” He untied the lacing along her side, and her bodice fell. Another tug and her knickers followed. “Spread your legs.”

She obeyed but whimpered. “I won’t be able to stay standing.”

His hands circled her thighs. “Yes, you will.” He feathered his breath over the most intimate parts of her. She throbbed

with need, and dug her fingers into his warm flesh, trying to anchor herself for his onslaught.

At the first stroke of his tongue, she almost fell backward. Only Juri's grip on her legs kept her up. Fast, slow, each laved a searing torment. When she neared the edge, she pushed at his shoulders. "Wait." She wanted to drag this out. Have him deep inside her when she finally shattered.

He pulled back and stood. Her hands zoomed immediately to his waistband, where the front of his trousers bulged. Pure temptation. She ran her fingers over him, and he shuddered. In one motion she'd pushed his trousers down his hips.

Everything about him was mouthwatering. The way the muscles strained in his arms, the way black flooded his golden eyes as he lost control. The way his chest heaved as she encircled him and pumped.

In one swoop, he had her on the ground, her back cushioned by the thick rug. He nipped up her neck as his hips lined with hers, as his hand took her wrists and pinned them above her head. She arched against him, but he still held himself back, thick and hot against her thigh.

"Please."

He rolled his hips, but it was a tease, not what she needed. She whined and tried to angle her hips upward, but he had her properly pinned. "I need you as close as you can get. Until there isn't any space between us."

He drew back, and they locked gazes. Slowly, inch by inch, he sank inside. Her lids fluttered, and she went still as she absorbed each lick of flame traveling from where he glided into her. He growled. "Look at me."

As he surged all the way home, she lost herself in his eyes. The pressure was perfect. Exactly what she wanted. He stayed buried inside her for a heartbeat. Two. Sweat slicked her skin, and she quivered.

Then Juri moved, and she was lost.

She didn't think he'd ever slid so deep into her. Filled her so *full*. His mouth roamed her throat. Kept returning to the

slope where her neck joined her shoulder and nibbled.

Her lids flew back open. They'd been together all this time, been bonded by the rune, but he hadn't sealed their mating with his mark on her neck like bondmates did.

The flesh where her neck met her shoulder tingled. That was all it took for her to lose herself completely. When he let her wrists go, she clawed at his neck, his back. She moaned his name.

Each time she got close, he paused.

Her entire body shook. She was right there. He took her right to the edge of rapture, then kept her perched in exquisite frustration as he gentled his thrusts and didn't let her fully fall over the edge.

Finally, finally, she climbed to her peak. She shouted, and as she shattered, Juri held her hip and pushed his knot deep inside her, following her in his release. He was deeper than he'd ever been before.

She wound her arms tightly around him as he filled her, the warmth of his release hitting her deep inside. She groaned. It felt exquisite.

Juri's head dipped. He licked over her shoulder, and the tingling there intensified. He growled one short, claiming note, and bit down. Triska's back bowed as spears of brightly colored light danced behind her eyelids.

The full force of Juri pushed into her chest through their bond. She felt ... *him*. And how much he loved her.

When she'd been in selkie form, she'd caught hints of what he felt for her, but this flooded her in its entirety. In its intensity.

The rune had given them a month to choose each other, and they had. But a bonding bite—this was theirs alone to create and entwine their souls forever.

She gripped him harder and held on as wave after wave of pleasure rippled over her. She didn't loosen even when their

skin cooled and their breathing returned to normal. When he softened enough so they could part.

“I love you,” he whispered in her ear.

She put her hand on his chest, over the golden tattoo of their rune. Her ring glistened even though no light hit it. “I love you.” She wasn’t ever going to tire of seeing his ring on her finger. Or spending long, quiet winters in his den, just the two of them. Until they decided they wanted to be more than two. “How many bedrooms do you have?”

A pleased rumble thrummed through his chest. “You’ve only seen a small part of the den so far. There are three.”

“That’s a good start, but I want a big family.”

His mouth landed below her ear, and he nibbled. “We can watch my brothers for a weekend. You may change your mind.”

“I was afraid my entire life of having my own family because I didn’t want to have a selkie child who’d have to leave. Or grow up without his or her mother when I left.”

Juri stilled. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore. Our child will be part vulk and part lightwielder, too.” He nuzzled her neck. “That means if they are a selkie and go into the ocean, they can light their own way when their vulk heart leads them home.”

She cupped his cheek. “I’m never leaving, and they won’t either.”

He ran his hand through her hair. “You can have everything you’ve always wanted.”

She leaned up and kissed his cheek. Left her lips there and nuzzled him. “All I want, is you.”

Juri drew back, and his golden eyes softened in their special way. “You have me for the rest of eternity.” Since he was immortal, now that they were mates, she would be too.

“Good.” As he wrapped his arms around her, she held him close, letting his purrs wash over her. There was no pull trying

to force her away from her life on land. She could be totally in this moment, here with her Juri.

Her Juri.

She put her head on his chest. Finally, after all this time, she was exactly where she was meant to be.

WANT MORE?

Want the latest news on when Book 3—Kyril’s Book—comes out AND get a free book that also takes place in Ulterra?

[Sign up for my newsletter](https://jocelynmontana.com/free-book/)

<https://jocelynmontana.com/free-book/>

I’d also love it if you left me a review. For independent authors reviews are as valuable as gold! Even if it’s only a line or two, it helps other readers that love werewolves and monster/human romance find my book.

Stay tuned for Kyril’s book—coming summer 2023!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jocelyn Montana is a fantasy and paranormal romance author focusing on her two series featuring the world of Ulterra. She lives outside of Boston, Massachusetts with her boyfriend of ten years and her chiweenie Marcus, also known as The Dog Who Will Do Anything for Ham.

She loves werewolves, demons, and all sorts of fun supernatural beings. She'd like to thank Disney and their movies: Beauty and the Beast, and Robinhood (animated version) for showing her that handsome heroes don't always look like men.

For her books and updates and to sign up for her newsletter

www.jocelynmontana.com

Hang out with her on Facebook



ALSO BY JOCELYN MONTANA

Fate Awakened

Monsters Before Men Anthology

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my writing partners and writing friends: S.J. Primrose, and Sherry Bessette. You read my story as it was taking shape and helped me craft it to be as compelling as possible. Your patience and insight was unparalleled. Thank you to my critique group partners who gave me insight on the early version of this book.

It takes an incredible team to help bring a book into top shape. I want to thank my fantastic beta reader Sue McKerns of Otterville Overhaul. And a big thanks to my wonderful editor Lynne Pearson for finessing my story and making it the best possible version.

Thank you to my boyfriend Tim who always supports me. His love for eating found its way into this book.