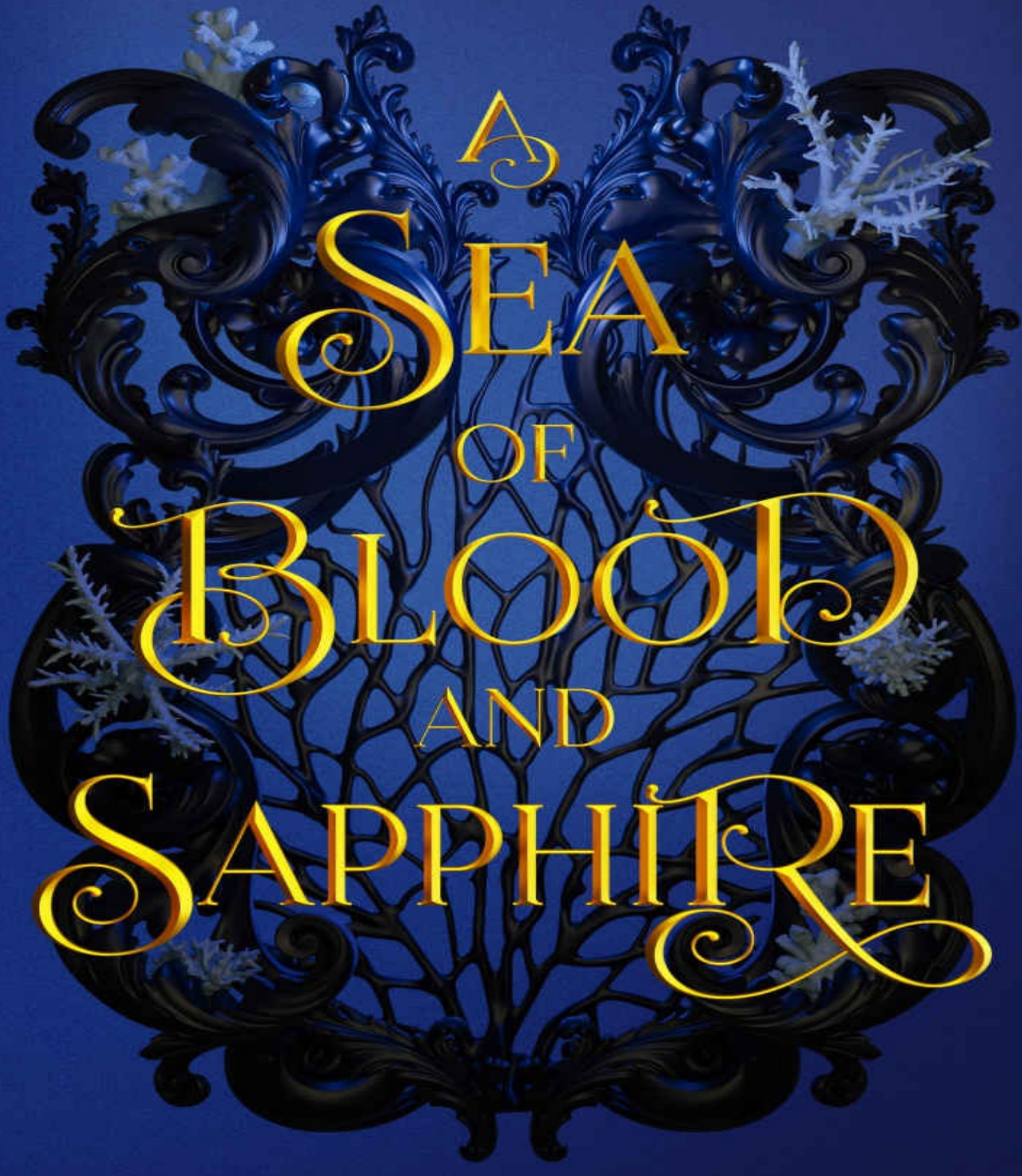


THEY WANTED HER DEAD  
SO SHE SOLD HER SOUL TO LEAVE



A  
SEA  
OF  
BLOOD  
AND  
SAPPHIRE

FLORENCE GRAY

# A SEA OF BLOOD & SAPPHIRE

BOOK ONE

FLORENCE GRAY

*OceanofPDF.com*

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# CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains multiple adult themes intended for readers 18 and older, including violence, gore, physical and sexual assault, and substance abuse. Mental health topics, such as suicide, self-harm, and depression. Listed below are the exact chapters where potential triggers could occur:

Chapter 1: Self-harm, suicide, gore, themes of death and war

Chapter 6: Mentioning of gore, themes of contemplation of death/depression.

Chapter 7: Physical abuse, specifically familial

Chapter 26: Substance abuse and attempted sexual assault

Chapter 31: Panic attacks

Chapters 36 and 37: Mentioning of poisoning, attempted murder

Chapter 45: Threatening of self-harm, minimal gore and violence

Chapters 50 and 51: Violence, gore, themes of war



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“She laughed and danced with the thought of death in her heart.”

-Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*

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# PART 1

## A SHIP TO WRECK

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# CHAPTER 1

## AMARIS

The sea was set aflame by the single strike of a match.

Quicker than lightning, the mermaids bolted, tearing through any obstacle between them and freedom from the burning ship. They clawed through the front lines of sailors, granting no mercy as their pleas cried out into the night.

The mermaids were captivating from the first chord that escaped their lips, and even among the burning sails, they sang. Meanwhile, the sailors persisted with sword and shield, stuffing their shirts into their ears as they fought to ward off the luring melody.

A futile attempt.

The man closest to me abandoned his weapon, the silver rapier hitting the deck with a loud clang. He fell before the mermaid, sinking further into her web of seduction. The temptress' lips turned upward toward the dark and moonless sky, her features plastered with triumph.

She sealed his fate with her murderous song, but the mermaid knew the portrait of love and sensualism she painted in his mind wouldn't transpire. There was only the promise of a savage, certain death. Her long, pearlescent talons sliced through his neck, and blood poured from the wound in crimson waves.

I turned away, unable to watch any further.

Until today, I'd only heard the rumors of what my kind could do. I hadn't the faintest idea that *this* was what they were capable of.

What *I* was capable of.

At the turn of a mermaid's eighteenth birthday, we surfaced to take our first prey, in what we called our Claiming Night. Tonight was mine. I should be eager to join my cove in the hunts. Still, something deep inside me twisted with disgust at the notion.

Smoke and flames invaded my senses, but fear held me to the spot. I was more terrified to join in on the feasting. The thought alone sent my skin crawling, from my neck down to the scaly tips of my fins.

Pounding footsteps approached me, disarming any plan of action I had.

Too late. I was too damn late.

A mass of damp, brown curls emerged from the smoke. Eyes stuck somewhere on the precipice of caramel and green caught my attention. The male's shirt was soaked with blood and sweat, clinging to his broad shoulders. At one time, the fabric had been white. Now, it was stained with blotches of dark green: mermaid's blood.

His eyes raked over my scales with a gaze as sharp as the dagger he fisted.

"You aren't singing," he said, more a statement than a question. His voice was rough, like sand coated his vocal cords.

I shook my head in answer, too fearful to peel my eyes from the dagger.

“Why?” he asked.

I took my attention off the knife long enough to meet his eyes. “I’m ashamed.” My voice sounded weaker and more panicked than I’d hoped it would.

His brow arched, skepticism contorting his face with harsh, brutal lines and angular features. He turned toward the blood-stained sea, and I felt my entire body decompress, soaking up its moment of freedom from the weight of his glare.

“Go slither back to your personal hell, then. I want to watch you leave without taking anyone with you. If you so much as open your pretty mouth —” He waved his golden dagger in front of my face, like some sadistic game of show-and-tell. “I’ll bury this deep inside your throat before you can even blink.”

For good measure, he gave me a wink that left me unsure whether my cheeks should drain of color or fill with it.

I choked, struggling to get a full sentence out, so I only nodded.

He leaned down to me, a wide, sarcastic grin revealing the dimples in his cheeks. From so close, I could make out little flecks of rust in his eyes, like someone had carved them inside. They were like coral reefs in a sea of hazel. Beautiful. He spat venom in his next words, his tone vicious and sharp. “And I never miss.” He straightened, adjusting his coat. “Now leave, before I change my mind.”

A shiver ran through me, and I whirled around, diving headfirst into the murky depths.

Screams of sailor and mermaid alike tore from the throats of those around me. The boom of a nearby cannon crushed a mermaid on impact.

“Amaris, watch out!” someone—one of my sisters—screamed. A glimpse

of silver propelled through the sky, straight toward me.

I plummeted into the water, putting as much distance between myself and the cannon as I could. Down, down, down I swam.

Flesh and bone crunched, and a blood-chilling scream erupted from above me. Even though the water muffled the noise, it was still deafening. The iron weapon had found its intended target in a member of the cove.

What if it was one of my sisters?

My heart sank in my chest. I beat my fins toward the surface, frantic at the thought of whatever horror awaited me. As I pushed through the froth, the tang of copper bombarded my senses, the foulness of the stench stinging my eyes.

I scanned the war zone. When I spotted my oldest sister, the blood in my veins turned to stone. She was on the ship, ignoring the scorching flames as she took down her opponents in a spray of crimson. To the sailor's misfortune, her hypnosis weakened them enough to give her a clear advantage.

A flash of gold raced through the air, and my sister cried out in pain.

My gut plummeted.

Lodged in her tail was a dagger, pinning her to the deck. Heavy streams of absinthe spilled from her opal scales. With a wound that deep, Azaliah would likely bleed out in minutes, even if her blood replenished itself.

My sister gripped her tail in agony. "Fall back! Take your men and fall back!" she ordered.

The mermaids didn't hesitate as they swiped their closest meal before diving back into the water.

Raw panic forced me toward the burning ship instead. I had to get to her. Right now, the better part of the ship was still intact, but it wouldn't be for

much longer, and my sister was trapped on it.

It was my only thought, my only motivation as I pumped my fins. Cutting through the choppy waves, I sailed to my sister, but I wasn't quick enough. I wouldn't make it in time to heal her.

Inch by inch, the ship succumbed to the dark, churning sea. Even the ship acknowledged the more powerful entity, and it was sinking to the mermaids' will. The men were no match for us, because as long as mermaids existed, the sea would fill with blood and the ships of the fallen.

Fires danced along the water, consuming the men jumping into the sea. I couldn't blame them. To choose death by fire or mermaid... I wasn't sure which I'd rather endure.

Grabbing a rung of the nearest ladder, I climbed abroad. When I raised myself onto the deck, the spot my sister had been trapped moments before lay vacant. I sagged with relief.

Dark, messy curls whipped past me, and I hid myself from view. The man—the one I met earlier—didn't notice me; instead, he ran into the heart of the fire. Blackened wood creaked beneath his feet, threatening to give way any second. I wasn't sure if he was suicidal or delusional, but what he did next proved that he was probably a mixture of both. In awe, I watched as he hurled an injured crewmate over his shoulders. The poor man's severed legs had deemed him unable to run from the fires. The man I met was *helping* him, risking his life to save someone else's.

Why would he do such a thing?

He moved to the other side of the deck, where sailors scrambled to board a smaller rowboat being lowered into the water.

“He'll bleed out, Captain! He'll never make it back in time!” someone shouted.

“Let the able-bodied men go first!”

“He lost his fucking legs!” the Captain yelled. “He couldn’t run, and I didn’t see your sorry asses willing to save him!”

“Just because you’re the captain doesn’t mean you get to choose who lives and who dies.” A member of the crew spat in the captain’s face, tainting his dark locks with specks of red.

“You knew what you were getting yourself into when you decided to sail with us, Fletcher.”

“Someone fucking sabotaged our other rowboat. I didn’t think I would be trapping myself here to die, Ezra.”

“*We’re not going to die!*” Ezra—the man I met—roared.

A mermaid leapt from the water onto the railing, and the crew readied to attack. Palming one of his blades, Ezra flung it straight at the head of the brunette temptress. With perfect, fluid grace, the sharp tip sunk between her chocolate eyes. I yelped; that could’ve easily been me.

He stalked over to the dead mermaid, plucking the knife from her head and wiping her green blood on his shirt, a motion far too routine and mundane to be his first kill tonight.

A crack sounded suddenly, and the gargantuan ship tilted headlong. Ezra, Fletcher, and the others tumbled to the floor of the bloody deck. They clutched the air and only a few managed to catch themselves, others falling to their promised deaths. Their tortured screams were a testimony for the others to survive.

But there were never any survivors.

Ezra pulled himself over the edge of the ship, and I realized I’d been holding my breath. Immediately, he began helping others hoist themselves upright. I didn’t understand him. He could’ve easily forced his way to the

front of the line of that lowering boat. As the captain, he could've left his men to die alone. Yet here he was.

None of my sisters would ever do what Ezra did for his crewmate tonight, not even for our own blood. And how many children did Ezra have at home, whom he would never see again? What was the name of the moss maiden he left behind to raise their children alone? What else in his former life had he abandoned?

Black smoke inched closer, threatening to suffocate them. Soon, the entire ship would be charred and burned, and they would have no choice than to jump into the infested tides.

“Fletcher, we have to jump,” Ezra coughed.

Fletcher shook his head, holding the knife out in his hand. “No. Ezra, promise me when you make it back—”

“We’ll both—” he coughed, “—make it. We’ll swim back, but we need to jump.”

“Promise me you’ll tell my kids and Mary how much I loved them.”

It was over before Ezra had time to reach him. The knife in Fletcher’s hand sliced deep across his neck, a pool of blood already surrounding his lifeless form.

Ezra rushed toward him, pressing his hands against the man’s self-inflicted wound, but no force could feed the blood back into his un-beating heart.

In seconds, he was dead.

An explosion sounded, and fiery debris flew through the air, painting the night sky in orange and yellow. Ezra shielded himself from the embers falling like snow. Clenching the dagger between his teeth, he leapt into a sea of blood and sapphire.



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## CHAPTER 2

### AMARIS

**H**e plummeted with such perfection, I couldn't help but admire his graceful form.

I dove deep, trailing behind him with a fit of questions that left my head spinning. What would I do once I found him? Would he hold to his promise, kill me the moment I approached him again? Would *I* attempt to kill him?

All these men... they were innocent. They did nothing more than attempt to sail the waters belonging to Mermaid's Cove. That didn't mean they had to die.

Turquoise scales whipped past me, Ezra's body coiled within her snare. The female, Serena, constricted her tail around him, like a serpent around its prey. She snaked her long fingers down his face, tracing the masterpiece of his full lips and unique eyes.

He thrashed against her touch, the weapon slipping from his bared teeth. It sank toward the sandy bottom, but Ezra caught it just in time. He swiveled

his powerful body, ripping his arms free from Serena's grip, and jolting through the water, he slashed deep into her cheekbone.

The female growled, wiping the blood from her beautiful face. Serena retaliated, swiping her long talons across his stomach. Ezra cried out in pain, and pockets of his vital air bubbled to the surface.

She canted her head to the side, clicking her tongue at him in disapproval. "Why do the pretty ones always have to be so difficult?" Serena slammed her head into his, knocking him unconscious. Blood trickled from his forehead, the current carrying it away.

I didn't know why, but I rushed toward them, eager to save Ezra from his impending death. Masking my intimidation with a sly grin, I said, "Serena, it isn't polite to play with your food, and it's even more impolite to play with someone else's food. This one is mine."

Serena's golden hair whirled around her head, her claws primed to rip into the face of her opponent. Upon seeing me, she stopped short. "I got to him first. Go find someone else to hunt, *Princess*." She spat my title with such hatred, I knew it for what it truly was: jealousy.

I took advantage of that.

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, Serena, but tonight is my Claiming. Don't you think I should get my first choice? Not to mention, I have been hunting him since the moment he jumped off that ship. I was merely taking my sweet time. And after all, I *am* the Princess of Mermaid's Cove," I said, giving her an award-winning grin.

I didn't use my title often to get what I wanted, so when I did, it was worth it, considering I disliked most things about being a princess.

Serena's pretty face contorted into a snarl. "The next time you get in my way, you won't have a throat to sing. I don't care if you're the godsdamned

princess or not.” She slammed her shoulder into mine before flipping away in a fit of rage.

Quick. I needed to be quick, or else this human wouldn’t be able to survive. I encompassed Ezra in my arms, a mirror to the way Serena had wrapped around him. Unsure of what to do next, I laced my webbed fingers into the tendrils of his long spirals.

Tenderly, I pressed my lips to his full, smooth ones. To anyone who swam past, the act would have been the portrait of two lovers kissing. Instead, I used the moment to push pockets of air into his lungs, ones I collected from above with my gills.

I brushed a loose hair behind his strong jawline. He looked so peaceful like this. The lines of his face that were forged into a scowl just moments ago were now soft, untainted. He couldn't have been much older than me.

I could kill him right here. All I would have to do is start my melody. Words themselves were moments away from spilling from my lips. The song of my foremothers pumped within my veins like a ship sailing the Sapphire. It *begged* to be released.

He would never have to wake from this nightmare to the reality of his slaughtered friends. Maybe I would be doing him a favor.

It would be easier to kill him, for my sake as well as his. I knew the consequences of refusing to take a mortal’s life.

With tonight’s hostility, this may be my one exception to coming back empty-handed. Would Serena profess my misdemeanor to the others? What about the next shipwreck? Could I take the life of another the next time a ship sailed through Mermaid’s Cove? The time after that?

Nothing about seeing this man before me made me want to kill him. In fact, the thought repulsed me. Ezra wasn’t only innocent like the rest of the

men—he was noble. Never had I seen such sacrifice from anyone before. His kind seemed so much more compassionate than mine ever was, so why was I to demolish people like him?

I sucked in a breath, and water filtered through my gills. Already, my tail was pushing me to the surface. There was no forfeiting this decision, because if the mermaids caught me now, I would be as good as dead. Then what difference would saving him have made?

I dragged him along as quickly as my body would allow, but pulling a grown man twice my size significantly slowed my speed. My blood pumped methodically in my ears, echoing to me that my time was up. With each swipe of my tail, the rhythm pulsed quicker, quicker, quicker.

*Get to the surface, Amaris.*

Seconds turned into minutes. I had moments before Ezra would asphyxiate and die.

*Just get to the top. Worry about who sees you later.*

I had to break the barrier. I *had* to. I couldn't be risking my life to save a man who was already dead.

My limbs screamed. They demanded for me to stop, as if, at some fundamental level, my own body was betraying me.

Flames and fractured bits of wood came into view. Luggage and debris floated around us, dotted between charred bodies. I was thankful for the stillness. It was a sure sign that no members of my cove were nearby.

I lifted his head above the water. Nearby, I spotted the largest scrap of wood I could find and swam to it. The wood barely held Ezra's upper body as I hurled him onto it. It would have to do.

Grabbing hold of the wooden raft, I pushed him toward the shore.

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## CHAPTER 3

### EZRA

**T**he suns began to rise in heaven. Morning light of pale pink and lavender danced across the cerulean water. The rich taste of salt was heavy on my tongue, and a gentle warmth pricked at my skin, wrapping around me like a cloak.

An angel sang over me, her voice the richest tone to ever grace my ears. Each chord of the celestial alto was deliberate and full, and so, so beautiful. I sank back into the ivory sand, allowing the cool waves to dance over my ankles.

The ballad could've lasted seconds or a lifetime, but I supposed here, it didn't matter. I had the rest of eternity to spend however I pleased.

When I opened my eyes, I had to squint from the angel's blinding magnificence. If this was the beauty that the afterlife bestowed...I genuinely didn't know how anything else could compare.

Her eyes were like a starry night, golden craters of light speckled on a backdrop of earthy green. Her dark hair fell past her full breasts, sweeping

the grains of sand in the morning breeze. She wore a bright, glowing halo, as if the first sun rose from its slumber only to adorn her.

I reached out, wrapping a piece of her long hair between my fingers. “You’re too beautiful to be real,” I whispered.

What could I have possibly done in my life to be here, in heaven, witnessing this beauty? The last I remembered, I was sailing the Sapphire Sea and...

Oh gods.

I shot upright, knocking my head into the angel perched over me. My blood drained from my body.

She was certainly not an angel.

Frantic, I felt my side for one of my daggers, but it was just me on the beach. With her. The mermaid I spared on the Temptress.

Why had I done that?

“Ouch!” she shrieked. Her webbed fingers rushed to her face to tend to her injury. Jade blood tainted her garnet lips, confirming my suspicions. “I saved your sorry ass, and this is how you repay me?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—you saved me?” I must’ve hit my head harder than I imagined. I wasn’t hearing correctly.

“You were drowning.” The mermaid looked down at my exposed abdomen. “I’ve been singing to you to heal you.”

Following her gaze to my stomach, I saw a faint pink mark, once a gaping, bloody wound.

“What have you done to me, demon?”

“Have you lost your memory, too?” Her perfectly arched brow raised in a rhetorical question. “I mean, one moment you call me beautiful, and the next, you call me a demon. Which one is it, then?”



“Both,” I rasped.

I stood, ignoring my shirt hanging in scraps across my chest and torso. Not that it mattered. I was sure this evil temptress had seen and done much worse. I was just another body for her to hunt and kill.

"Where have you taken me?"

"I took you to shore," she shrugged. "We're somewhere along the coast of Erison, I believe. I figured this was your home, since you were sailing from this direction. But since you don't know where you are, I suppose this isn't where you come from."

"No," I corrected her, shaking the remaining bits of confusion away. "I live here."

The mermaid turned to face the city. Something like awe sparkled in her emerald eyes as she examined the colorful houses and shops carved into the steep hills of Erison. Her gaze fixed on the terracotta and ivory marble palace nearest us.

I closed my eyes, listening to the waves behind me and inhaling my favorite scent of brine and sandalwood.

"It's so beautiful here," she whispered.

My lids remained closed, attempting to ignore her. Nothing could ruin my moment of gratitude for Erison. My kingdom. My home.

I never thought I would see it again.

She spoke again, shattering my bliss. "It wasn't a lucky guess. Not really," she turned to face me. "Most ships sailing through Mermaid's Cove come from Erison. No one else is foolish enough to travel through our waters."

"We have no other choice," I spat through clenched teeth.

Desperate. My kingdom was desperate to at least try. The only alternate route outside the Western Dominion was through the mountain range to the

east. The Moaning Hills were rumored to hold creatures that made mermaids seem like something out of a children's bedtime story. To journey through them, to even touch the outskirts of the Eastern Dominion, would take three months in harsh conditions. A century ago, the haunted mountain range earned its name because the dead were believed to haunt its forests, only a shell of moaning spirits left somewhere between heaven and the seven realms of hell.

“Why do you keep trying, if you know it’s suicide?” she asked. My fingers twitched for my dagger at her question. Where in the Almighty fuck was it, anyways?

“Why am I even talking to you about this? Don’t you want us to flood your territory so you can do exactly what you did last night?” I threw a hand out to sea, pointing to where the Temptress fell. Where my men fell, too. Their remains lay at the bottom of the sea or their ashes had scattered to the wind, while I was here alive and well. “Why did you save me?” Defeated, I sank back onto the sand, holding my head between my hands. “Is this some wicked punishment of yours?”

Her eyes widened. If I hadn't known better, I would've thought her completely naïve. “There isn't any punishment. You’re free to return home.”

To my surprise, her words held not an ounce of seduction in them; now that I thought about it, they hadn’t this entire time. The words she whispered to me last night echoed back to me.

*“I am ashamed.”*

She really wasn’t going to try to kill me.

I wished, almost, that she would so that I could die with my men. The men who had been brave enough to join me on my hunt. My men, who left their

families behind, people who expected their return. They were all dead now, except for me.

The mermaid shifted from the spot she'd claimed on the sandy beach. "Wait," I called out before she could swim away. "I want to know the name of the thing that saved my life."

*Thing.*

That's what she was to me. She was not an individual. She did not have a soul or a beating heart. She was dangerous, weaponized to appear a captivating woman. She reduced my kind down to nothing more than a hunting game. She wore the face of a beautiful woman, but underneath, she was a monster.

"Amaris."

My eyes met hers, widening as if taking her in for the first time. I wasn't scared anymore, though the idea of being polite to her repulsed me. She hadn't done anything to harm me, but that didn't mean her kind hadn't.

"Ezra," I answered back. For some reason, I only saw it fitting to exchange this bit of information with her. I didn't have the faintest idea why she was still here, other than to annoy me. If she was waiting for a thank you, she wouldn't get one.

I would never thank her.

Regret hung thick on my conscience. I had exchanged names with this creature, a creature I had no problem killing just yesterday.

What the hells was I thinking?

The affects of her song disoriented me more than I would've liked to admit. Her eyes traveled from my face down to my exposed skin, studying the date of one of my tattoos. It made my skin crawl.

"Well, what are you waiting for? The suns to cross?" I asked. "What are

you still doing here?”

A bark came from further down the beach, a raggedy sheep dog racing wildly toward me. Horses galloped down the beach, members of Erison's royal guard atop them. Lucy sprang into my arms, greeting me with slobbery kisses. Tears pricked at my eyes.

I didn't have much to live for. I didn't have a family of my own, nor any siblings. I no longer had friends; my closest friend had been on that ship last night. I did, however, have Lucy. I squeezed her tight, scratching her behind the ear.

I barely noticed as a green tail splashed back out to sea.

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## CHAPTER 4

### AMARIS

I released a gust of air, tiny little bubbles forcing their way to the surface. They were as eager to flee this gods-forsaken place as I was. I felt a tinge of jealousy at their successful escape.

Pushing through a wall of seaweed, I descended further and further into the jowls of Mermaid's Cove. Seven pearl spirals pillared high above the floor of the sea. Well-manicured shrubbery adorned the palace like jewelry. My eyes roamed to the tallest pillar across from mine.

All six of the Strauhn daughters had their own towers, this seventh one belonging to my parents: Nazaro and Thina Strauhn. For eighteen years, my father had been the only one to occupy that tower. My mother died shortly after I was born, though that didn't stop my father from trading out new concubines every night like a child trading out shiny new toys.

The concubines never saw the inside of my father's tower directly across from my own. No one had, for that matter, and my adventurous heart raced

every single time I looked up at it. I wanted to know more about what my father hid beyond those opaline walls.

Once I reached the base of my tower, I looked over my shoulders. Off in the distance, I was able to make out other mermaids and various fish traveling into the castle. No one could see me from this angle in the vines, but I still felt as if a pair of eyes were watching me. Then again, I always felt like I was being monitored.

Being a princess of the Six Seas came with the unfortunate burden of being watched with a chastising eye. It was always just a matter of time before someone would drop a scrutinizing hammer down on my crowned head for the tiniest step out of line.

I shrugged off my guilty conscience, turning to the loose patch of soil and digging. My nails scraped something hard, and I pulled up on the wooden handle. The chest opened with a click. Quickly, I stashed my dagger inside the box alongside my most recent prized possessions.

I had always expressed interest in the world above, although Father attempted to snuff out that fire at a young age. One day, I had been flirting with the idea of surfacing, traveling an inch above the designated mark of the previous day every morning. Something about that seemed less rebellious than full-out surfacing.

Then, my father caught me.

That was the first time he struck me, and told me that if he saw me close to the surface before my Claiming Night again, he wouldn't hold back from punishing me the way he punished any common mermaid.

So, this tiny box was my personal form of rebellion. After that day, I may not have been brave enough to surface, but I still collected items. It was a

way for me to honor the memory of the dead, saving some of their belongings. In a way, it felt like I was saving part of them, too.

My strict father may have tried to blast away the remaining bits of my curiosity with fear, but all he did was create a sneaky daughter.

The handle of the blade scratched at my palm, and I turned it over to inspect it. Engraved on the wooden hilt of the dagger were the letters E.A.

My mind was pulled back to Ezra like a current. I knew I would never find out, but it still didn't keep me from wondering what the A stood for.

Anderton? Artollia? Allison? Angelfish?

I stifled a giggle. Of course, his last name wasn't Angelfish. My ridiculous pandering was too ridiculous for even me sometimes. I buried the dagger in the sand along with the rest of my treasure and staked claim to the area with a small piece of driftwood.

"I'll come back for you soon," I whispered to the box. I knew it was an inanimate object, but I felt pity for it. After everything the dagger had been through, it deserved a little sympathy. Without another glance, I fled the scene of the crime.

My bones rattled the closer I swam to the colossal gates of the palace. Inside was a bustling courtyard, dots of colorful fish parting for me in a haze of reds, blues, and yellows. The otherwise-stagnant water whispered around me in a slight breeze, meaning one of two things: either Father had called for a council meeting from the other five seas of Vale, or there was a celebration tonight.

My heart sank deep. I had forgotten about my oldest sister, Azaliah. Immediately, I began my prayer to the far-off gods that they weren't here for the funeral of the firstborn. And if they found out I didn't just save any human but the human who killed Azaliah...

I'd be torn to bits and fed to the sharks.

I attempted to tame my beating heart while I glanced around the courtyard. *This is just another day. Nothing more. No one is dead.*

As if by some answered prayer, I met my sisters' gazes from across the room. It wasn't Azaliah who beckoned me, but I was thankful to spot all five lounging on the carved granite sofas and chairs. I willed my face into a grin, as if I hadn't been guilty of doing some shady shit last night.

"Amaris!" The third oldest, Alto, twinkled her fingers above her head. I swore my fins filled with lead as I swam to greet my sisters.

All six of the Strauhn daughters' names began with the same letter. Azaliah, Adrienne, Alto, Alota, Ava, then me. We were each vocally gifted, on top of being known for our beauty, a different magic connected to each of our songs. Every mermaid had the ability to lure prey, but the princesses were doubly blessed.

"How was last night?" Adrienne winked a blue eye at me, and I was reminded of how much she resembled Father. She'd inherited Father's dark onyx hair, with a tail so midnight blue, it almost appeared black. Her icy eyes could cut through a male's heart with ease.

"It was... not what I expected, but it went fine." I gave an apathetic shrug, as if I could've been out picking current berries in the open water. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the full truth, either. I wouldn't flat out lie unless it was necessary, as I definitely wouldn't be able to keep track of the little white lies. I furrowed my brows in concern. "How are you today, Azaliah?"

"Fine. Where were your healing powers last night when I needed them most?" She gave me a knowing smirk. "Enough about me. How was your night with the captain?"

"He definitely wasn't the easiest one to lure for my first. From here on, I'm



sure it will be much less... difficult.”

My first lie. Every night from now on would be astronomically more difficult. How many more lies could I withstand until there were too many? How many more until the weight on my shoulders threatened to drown me in the deep well of my own deception?

She sat up straighter in her seat, and the others followed suit. Dear gods, they wanted to hear more.

“And then what?” one of them asked, their eyes glazed over with interest.

“Did you rip out his heart?”

“Drink his blood?”

“My personal favorite is to watch the life drain from their eyes as I—”

“I did none of those things,” I snapped, stopping their disgusting fantasies.

The twins gasped in unison, then turned to each other, giggling.

“Gods, yes, so funny, as if it doesn’t happen every day,” Azaliah rolled her eyes.

“Well, I’ll tell my story first while Amaris works up the courage to regale us her own experience,” Adrienne chimed in. “I didn’t even have to climb the ship. They had come prepared with a second one, much smaller than the first. They lowered it in the water and began to row away. Of course, we didn’t let them get very far—just far enough to think they got away before Gina, Trent, and I attacked.”

She smiled, continuing with her story. I clenched my teeth, hoping it would drown out Adrienne’s voice. Pure, unadulterated rage sizzled through me. Ezra had saved a man and placed him on that rowboat, and it had been for nothing.

Ezra could’ve been on that boat. Then I would’ve had no choice but to watch him die as Adrienne and her friends devoured them.

“What are you going to wear tonight for your ceremony, Amaris?” Ava asked, coming to my rescue. I didn’t miss it as the twins turned to each other with a nefarious smirk.

Shit. I had completely forgotten.

“Something green, I suppose.” Green was an easy choice. It was my favorite.

My father hosted so many damn ceremonies, I was surprised I wasn’t a party streamer by now. I owned at least a hundred different skirts I could wear tonight.

Ava cut her eyes to me, and we wordlessly exchanged expressions. We weren’t telepaths like Alto and Alota, but we might as well have been. Ava and I had a language of our own, and I was fluent in reading her faces.

“How about we go find you something to wear, then?” Ava asked, which translated to: *Do you want to get the hells away from here as much as I do?*

“Make sure it’s something revealing, Amaris!” Adrienne called out, giving her chest a shimmy.

“Morgin will be there, so try to impress him!” Azaliah’s shrill voice cut through the rest as another whistled a sing-song melody.

I gave them each a timid wave goodbye, then made a break for it. Ava glided next to me, hand-in-hand.

I expanded my gills to breathe, but all that flooded me was guilt and shame and fear. Why was I the only one who seemed disturbed by my kind? What was so fundamentally wrong with me that I couldn’t even kill a human, like every other member of my cove?



Light from the suns filtered through the palace windows. We glided side by side but didn't say much as we went. Ava detested the gossip our sisters often tangled themselves in almost as much as I did.

“How was last night with McCollum?” I asked, snapping the hinges of my tower door closed. My shoulders slumped a little now that we were alone.

The edges of Ava's lips turned upward. On instinct, she reached for her braid, twirling the light strands in her fingers. Ava had been courting a male shortly after her Claiming. She often traveled to see him instead of partaking in the hunts, leaving for weeks at a time.

Each Strauhn daughter was to rule over their own sea upon marriage. Ava would one day be the High Lady of the Amber Sea, where McCollum lived, an aristocracy of sorts.

“And your night?” Ava raised a flawless brow. “Your Claiming Night?”

As if she had to remind me of it.

I swallowed. “Horrible.”

*That was the understatement of the century.*

Ava clicked her tongue. “So I've heard.”

My blood thundered through my veins like liquid fire. “Really? What have you heard?” My voice sounded too high, too distraught.

“First, the shipwreck, then the attack, Azaliah almost dying by the man who could crack a mermaid skull with a single dagger's throw,” Ava ticked off on her webbed fingers. “Really, who was that man?”

I couldn't meet my sister's gaze. I was afraid the guilt was written on my features for her to read like a scroll. “Is that all you heard?”

“Was I supposed to hear more?”

I shrugged. Ava tilted her head to the side. “You looked like someone just passed over your grave. Are you okay?” Curtly, I nodded, taking a deep

breath. Ava's eyes narrowed. She didn't believe me. "Don't lie to me, Amaris."

"I'm not. It's just—I don't think I can do this for the rest of my life. I'm not made for this."

Ava didn't immediately speak. Instead, she continued studying me, as if to silently coax my secrets out of their shell. Could I trust even my dearest sister and friend with this kind of information? Would she find me worthy of death, too?

"You pity them." Ava's eyes roamed over my gleaming scales.

The room was painfully quiet, save for the raging storm of my conscience. This was a trick question. How could I possibly answer?

If Ava would tell me what she thought, I would know whether I could trust her with this information. Unfortunately, wishing was futile. Mermaids kept everyone at arm's length, even the closest of friends. To break the barrier of Ava's emotional walls would take the force of a thousand ships. No matter how hard I tried to sail those waters, it never would take me deeper than the surface.

"And what if I do?" I said at last, ignoring the screaming in my head. Everything I had ever been taught, everything I expected, was waging war inside me. All of it left me questioning what to think, what to believe, what to feel.

I was drowning in it all.

"It wouldn't be natural, to say the least." Ava crossed the room, snagging a seat on an ivory seashell chair. She stretched her fins out on the iridescent pouf crafted to resemble a pearl. "But it isn't something I am unfamiliar with."

I took this small shred of light into Ava's thoughts, and I drank it up like

water. She had never given me this much before. Finally, she was trusting me, opening up to me. It was more than I could ever say about the rest of my siblings.

Fearful of what to say next, I looked down to my tail as it swayed in the breeze, scales glimmering. I had to be delicate with my questions, lest I ruin the moment.

“Is that why you don’t go on the hunts anymore?”

She let out a slow breath. “There are more pressing matters than soothing my carnal appetite.”

Ava didn’t have to expand on that. Most mermaids near the Amber Sea worshiped the gods of the Eastern Dominion. She often went to the temple while she was there. I didn’t ask many questions beyond that; I wasn’t the religious type.

“Do you crave them, then?” I asked, my eyes wide with curiosity.

Ava’s amber eyes darkened. “I do. I imagine it’s like a drug: the more you partake, the more you crave, the more... desperate one becomes to taste more.”

“You don’t go anymore because you pity them, too?”

“I don’t go, Amaris, because I have no need to. I have a steady. One of which I intend on keeping.”

“Azaliah and the twins have steadies, yet they aren’t skipping out,” I protested.

Ava shot me a glower and I was clearly able to translate the expression: *and you’re not surprised?*

No, actually; now that I thought about it. I wasn’t surprised in the slightest.

Mermaids were exempt from the hunts, as long as they remained steady with their partner in the cove. The tradition stemmed from centuries ago

when the only two options were to either mate or hunt. The modern era was as fluid as the tides, but this one rule remained.

“Where is this coming from, Amaris? You’re acting stranger than normal.”

*Stranger than normal? Can you blame me?* I was expected to drain a man’s blood and smile as I did it. *I was the one acting weird?*

“They attacked us. They were ready for us,” I said.

“Can you blame them?”

“No.”

“And you shouldn’t. It was self-defense. It was very, very poor self-defense, given they don’t know what gives them advantage over us. A weapon is still a weapon, no matter what it’s forged of. Father will take it as an act of defiance.”

“Defiance? The hells does he expect them to do, be eaten like fish on a hook?”

Ava shrugged. “He doesn’t want them thwarting his plans. So, yes, he would want them to shut up and sail these waters with no thought of being slaughtered in cold blood.”

I thought of Ezra. His kingdom. Erison. Would my father retaliate simply because the mortals fought back? Would my father order us to do his bidding?

I had seen enough bloodshed in my lifetime.

“What do you mean, he doesn’t want them thwarting his plans?”

“Who do you think commands our attacks? Father knows whenever a ship is sailing in our territory, and he sends the orders for us to hunt. It is always the ones moving away from Erison he orders us to take down. Every single one.”

Holy gods below. Mermaid’s Cove stretched for miles, yet the odds of

traveling through the Sapphire and living were minimal.

“Enough about the hunts. You won’t have to worry about those for another week. I came here to tell you something else.” Her voice lowered to a whisper. It was a habitual and precautionary action, in case of any prying ears. “McCollum and I are getting married.”

The whole castle could have shattered on my head and I would have missed it. I was too busy tending to my wounded ears. At least with the castle falling, I could have moved out from under the landing blow. Nothing, *nothing*, could have kept me from this.

Ava was getting married. She was leaving Mermaid’s Cove.

“What?” I asked, begging her to repeat herself, praying to the far-off gods of the six seas for my sister to right her statement.

Unfortunately, she didn’t. There was only silence between us. I hated that silence. When the world was quiet, it allowed my thoughts to rage inside me like a hurricane. I needed a distraction from my pain.

“You’re leaving us?” My bottom lip quivered. “You’re leaving me with—”  
With no one. I’d be utterly alone.

“I’ll be leaving by spring, so we still have eight phases together.” Ava swam over, reaching out a hand in comfort.

“Why does it have to be you who’s leaving?” I sniffed.

Ava leaned in, taking my hand. “Why couldn’t it be Azaliah instead?” A small laugh bubbled from me. Maybe it was my need for consolation or a distraction, but I took it. It wasn’t enough to stop the tears spilling down my cheeks. The current washed away my tears’ existence almost completely. Almost.

Ava played with a strand of my auburn hair, her usual comfort move. “We still have time together, Amaris. Don’t forget, this was our reason for being.

The six daughters will rule the seas of Vale, but we'll see each other at council. This is our home, the one we built together. We'll always find our way back to each other. I'll always come back for you."

The crushing weight in my throat made my eyes sting, and I bit down on my lip to avoid the pain in my chest. Those were the kindest words anyone had ever given me.

Kindness wasn't a trait mermaids possessed. But no matter how much I wished for it, I could never grow legs and run far away from here. I didn't have a choice. We must either submit to the King of the Seas, a ruthless tyrant, or die by his hands.

My sister's amber eyes glistened with tears of her own. Ava cupped my cheek, gliding her thumb over my skin, and pulled me close. I closed my eyes. I had never known my mother, so this was the closest I'd ever have to that: my relationship with my sister. I imagined her touch paralleled a mother's in the way she held me.

Ava pulled away to meet my gaze, and I frowned. It was selfish, but I wanted more. She gripped my shoulders. "In our world, there is so much darkness, but we must look for the light in it. You can't escape the dark, you can only overcome it, which is a much more rewarding journey, in my opinion."





## CHAPTER 5

### AMARIS

The ornate doors blew open for the six princesses of Mermaid's Cove. A chiffon green skirt sat low on my hips, giving the illusion of a second fin. A brightly colored shell top hoisted my chest to the heavens.

I was thankful for this costume because tonight, I didn't want to feel like myself. Tonight, I wanted to be someone else. I wanted to be someone brave enough to accept her calling.

The hall stretched long into the throne room, the pillars lined with solid pearl. Yellow flames flickered in canisters above us, imitating natural fires. Golden streamers were intricately tangled throughout the entire open space. At the very center sat the sovereign himself: King Nazaro Strauhn, as stiff as stone save for his onyx hair that swayed in the current. On top of his brow rested a crown and in his right hand, the triton that controlled the tides, waves, and wind.

I masked the shiver that raked over my scales, and panic threatened to choke the water from my gills. As I entered, I stared at anything other than

my father.

“Silence,” Strauhn called out, his deep voice reverberating throughout the castle walls. Even after eighteen years, I was amazed to see the crowd of merfolk hush at the command. His kingdom bowed low, and my sisters and I followed suit.

“Mermaids of the deep, male and female alike, it is my honor and privilege to accept my youngest daughter, heir to the Emerald Sea, as one of our own. She has rightfully earned her position, and her bravery will not go unnoticed.”

I could have sworn a muscle twitched in his jaw.

Father continued, “Let us toast the first drink of many tonight, raising our goblets as one. May your hunts bring vengeance and honor, Amaris.” He cast a smile my way before bringing the goblet down onto his thin lips.

“May our hunts bring vengeance and honor,” the merfolk recited in unison. Bile rose to the back of my throat, but I ignored it as I lifted the goblet to my lips and drank.



The ballroom was a coral reef of emerald greens, lavenders, aquamarines, and magentas. Tails swished and danced, casting shadows along the mosaic floor.

Along the corner of the room sat an orchestra, a melting pot of sea creatures playing. I savored the music. I relished in the unique melodies, each musician's part equally as enticing as the next. Individually, they were distinct, but together, they blended with a beauty that brought tears to my eyes. I loved music, loved how it made me feel. Most importantly, I loved how it made me forget.

Hands circled around my waist, severing my moment of bliss. The smell of alcohol hung thick in the current. The voice of a masculine tenor whispered in my ear, “Who’s the lucky male you look this beautiful for tonight?”

I smiled, turning into his lips to feel his comforting warmth tickle my skin. “Myself, Morgin. I look beautiful for myself.”

“That’s a shame.” Morgin huffed a flirtatious breath in the shell of my ear, chills swimming down my spine. “I know someone willing to sing you high praises, but since you have yourself for that, I’ll tell him not to pursue you any longer.”

I pivoted, my gaze landing on the male who had been accompanying me to my tower for the last six months. His eyes were the same color yellow as his tail, silver paint embellished the sharp lines of his dark features. With all his angles and harsh artwork, he looked like a warrior.

“Tell him I want a real male who can pursue me without having to go through you,” I giggled, moving into his touch. His hands roamed the scales on my tail adorned with a single, gold, ceremonial ring. My first ring for my Claim.

Morgin playfully flicked it with his tail. “Luckily, my competition is dead now.”

I feigned a laugh. “There was never any competition. He was my Claim. You know as well as I we cannot love humans, nor be found with their items.” I shrugged, hating this was the direction our conversation moved into. If anyone could get my mind off Ezra, I had hoped it would be Morgin.

“Your first Claim. You’ll remember that for the rest of your life. How could I possibly compete?”

“I don’t know...” My words trailed off. Morphing my face into excitement, I grabbed his hand. “Come on, I love this song.”

I didn't give a shit about this song, but I needed an excuse to change the subject, to do anything but talk, for gods' sakes.

Untangling the coppery braids from the labyrinth on top of my head, I instantly felt freer. My hair tickled my lower back and arms as I danced, Morgin's hands holding onto my waist. Securing me. Weighing me down.

I needed more alcohol.

A fish swam past, a tower of drinks secured to its back. Snatching one of the goblets, I forced the liquor down my throat. I wasn't bothering to keep track of seconds or thirds. I had lost count of the vessels I had drained tonight. I needed to drown myself out from the world.

Faces of the males I danced with blended together like a medley of songs. As I gained a new partner, I ignored the flash of annoyance written on Morgin's face from the far corner of the room. At some point, I'd ditched him. He was a terrible dancer but that didn't mean he wouldn't be the one accompanying me in my tower tonight.

The instruments were suddenly snuffed out by the clinking of silverware on glass, the delicate hand of my oldest sister, Azaliah, holding the cup. Adrienne, the second oldest, positioned herself next to Azaliah. Her hands were behind her, as if holding a present.

"I'd like to make another toast to our youngest sister, Amaris." Azaliah's cruel eyes found me from across the ballroom. With a wicked grin, she continued. "I know we are all thrilled to welcome Amaris to the cove, but as the oldest, I believe she must prove her worth."

Her head snapped to Adrienne and nodded. The two of them smiled the biggest grins, and something told me that it was at my expense.

The light of the fires caught the reflection of a shiny, metallic object as Adrienne moved her hands to reveal a golden dagger.

Ezra's dagger.



The room was as silent as the grave my sisters had dug for me.

“You had no fucking right.” I bared my teeth. Every ounce of alcohol within me vanished completely. Adrienne and Azaliah betrayed me; they sentenced me to death the instant they flashed that damned dagger in front of everyone.

“Oh, but we did,” Adrienne purred. “You know, Amaris, how crucial it is that we stay away from humans. So, why was one of their items found buried near the castle?” Gasps resounded from the crowd.

“Outside of your tower, might I add.” Azaliah crossed her arms, completely abandoning her usual pinched voice for a much more dangerous tone.

One by one, I searched the crowd for each of my sisters. The twins, Alto and Alota, held my gaze with murderous rage. An equal amount of hatred echoed back from every single face in the ballroom, even Morgin's. I shifted my gaze back to Azaliah at last, poised next to Adrienne.

It was evident whose position they supported, and none of them would be siding with me. I didn't particularly care right now. I only shuffled through the people for one face—and she was nowhere to be found.

Where was Ava? I always counted on her to save me.

Serena's voice broke the silence, her words damning me. “It belongs to the captain of the ship. He cut me with it just moments before Amaris approached. She threatened me, said she already claimed him.”

“So, it's acceptable to do as you please, torturing them and gutting the humans at the bottom of the sea, but it isn't acceptable to save one who

doesn't deserve such a miserable death?" I challenged them.

A few shook their heads in disbelief, while others bared their teeth, calling for my death.

"There is no other way, Amaris. You cannot change our ways no more than you may change the tides." Azaliah said, her voice returning to her sweet, condescending tone.

"The tides can be changed, by the very hands of the King of the Seas." I pointed to my father. He held the golden hilt of the trident closer to him than the concubine on his lap. "At whose command must we go on torturing these innocent people?" I exclaimed, my voice stronger than I felt. After all, I would be dead in the morning.

Adrienne's blue eyes flashed. "How dare you speak of Father that way?"

King Nazaro Strauhn didn't need to shout. The crowd gave way as he stormed over to me. His eyes were molten lava as they bore into mine, yet I held his gaze. "Everyone but my daughters—leave. Now."

No one dared question the command. For the first time in my boring existence, I was thankful to be a Strauhn daughter. I only still breathed because of my pedigree.

Father's concubine coughed, looking between me and my sisters.

"Cerulia!" he barked. "Are you their mother?"

Cerulia's head dropped to the mosaic tiled floor. "No, my love."

"Then out."

She bowed, but I saw the way the words hit, saw the blunt force of agony. Cerulia, along with the other concubines, was in love with Father. It was something he took full advantage of, keeping them hooked on a sadistic line of seduction. It wasn't just female mermaids gifted with slaughtering fragile hearts.

In a flash of brunette hair and lavender scales, Cerulia exited the ballroom. Now, I was alone with no one to defend me against my sisters and Father.

Father's eyes were still fixed on me, and I swore I started to disintegrate under his fiery stare. Still, I held my head high.

"Is it true, Amaris?" he muttered. A final test. Did he already know the answer? Would mine determine my fate?

For the first time since yesterday, I spoke the truth. "Yes."

Father broke our stare first, and I resisted the urge to pump my fist high. To look away was a sign of weakness.

Then, he finally spoke. "You are my single greatest regret and a disappointment to this kingdom and our family, Amaris. From this day forward, I refuse to look at you." King Strauhn's eyes didn't meet mine, but I still felt the anger that rolled through his bones.

"Our family?" I whispered, reaching toward him. He recoiled from my touch, the gesture sending crushing weight through my chest. It was no surprise he would treat me like this after discovering what I had done, but to refuse to even look at me? I couldn't let him get away with this. He was my father, for gods' sakes.

I did what I do best. I cut into him with the best weapon a mermaid had—my voice. I spoke, hoping he would drink the poison from my words. "If this is what you call a family, I want no part of it."

To my dismay, he didn't so much as flinch.

"Then leave," Azaliah spat. There was nothing but coldness in her eyes. I scanned each of my sisters as they confirmed her words. I understood their body language perfectly. They wanted me exiled.

Adrienne spoke up. "Dad, I hate to be the bearer of the bad news, but isn't this a wicked sin only punishable by death?"

King Strauhn, still unable to meet my eyes, took a deep breath.

*He took a deep breath.*

The King of the Seas was contemplating the death of his own daughter.

“Twenty-four lashes for the twenty-four mermaids killed by the men she was so dedicated to saving. After that, the sharks can have her.” He turned impatiently, as if the conversation was only a routine council meeting on the level of the tides. He raised his arm, aiming the golden triton at me. I instinctively covered my face with my hands, cowering from the attack.

It never came. Only heavy metallic chains bound my wrists and tail, immobilizing me.

I was a prisoner of my own kingdom.

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## CHAPTER 6

### EZRA

**T**he bodies began to wash ashore.

I counted the bloated corpses that littered the shore, scattered like seashells. I lost all words to soothe the families. I had nothing left to offer as I went door-to-door, bringing the devastating news to their mothers and fathers, spouses, children.

After all these years, I finally knew what it was like to be left with only the remains of an impossible fate. I felt every ounce of the weight of my responsibility.

Was this how the healers felt the night they informed my family of my mother's illness seventeen years ago? They tried everything in their power to keep the illness from spreading, but it did, despite the elixir that wasted away her black locks that once hung down to her thin waist. The same black locks her only son inherited.

Did the healers mourn her loss, too? Would they have traded circumstances with her? Did they spend the rest of their lives in regret for

helplessly watching her waste away?

I wondered if the healers felt as powerless as I did. Even as I turned to the water and threw all my might and rage into my magic, I didn't feel powerful enough. The water parted under my will, casting enormous walls on either side of me as I relinquished every morsel of sadness and anger from my body.

Sand stung my eyes as it whipped past my face, flying to the central mass I formed at sea. If only I could travel all the way to Mermaid's Cove and steal the water straight from their hideous gills.

The mermaids killed a fully-armed fleet of archers and trained fighters. We even prepared canons, for gods' sakes.

They all fell like infants.

I would've traded my life for any of these men, fallen and washed up on the edge of this beach. I was more than willing to die if it meant their safety.

Instead, I was alive.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to be.



## CHAPTER 7

### AMARIS

**B**ronze: a mermaid's unparalleled weakness. Father wrapped me in the thick chains as swiftly as the jewelry he had sent to my room as a Claiming Night present.

Had that only been three moons prior?

I hated my poor excuse of a father. I hated all my sisters save for one. And after I was whipped, there would be nothing left of my body for Ava to bury.

Was she even worried right now, wherever she was? Why didn't she tell me she was leaving? Furthermore, why wasn't she back to witness my execution? Has anyone told her?

She would be worried for me if she knew...right?

Pain ripped through my chest as I realized I would never see her again. Maybe it was a grace our last conversation had been that night in my tower.

*I'll always come back for you.*

Tears flooded my eyes as I remembered the beautiful, hopeful promise, hope that was lost the closer I came to the whipping post. A crowd of

mermaids parted for my sisters as they led me to my doom, hissing and spitting at me as I drifted past.

My father lifted his triton, forging chains to bind my arms high above my head, my tail below. Waves rushed against my back, and I realized it was only the second time I'd been above the surface. It was a strict rule until the day of our Claiming. After that day, we had free reign to surface and attempt to lure as many men out to sea as our hearts desired. It was a shame I would never have the chance to see the world, or to experience life in any capacity, above or below.

A female with honey-blond hair and sharp black eyes emerged from the crowd. Serena's gaze filled with murder as she prowled toward me.

"It's a damn shame you let such a good one go to waste." She dug her claws into my face, and I had to grit my teeth to not cry out in pain. Father cast Serena a disapproving glance, and she retracted them from my flesh.

"You're right," I agreed. "It's a damn shame he didn't gut you when he had the chance."

Serena's nostrils flared, her gills expanding with them. "I will enjoy watching you die, *traitor*." She spit at me, wetness hitting my cheek, before she faded back into the crowd of merpeople, who sat perched on rocks along the coast.

"On the third night of the waxing crescent, the sixth heir of Nazaro and Thina Strauhn, Princess Amaris, committed a grievous sin that has forfeited her rights as heir and severed her citizenship of Mermaid's Cove permanently. She will repay the debt of twenty-four lives lost in the disastrous carnage. First, we honor the life of—"

My thoughts drowned out the monotone tone of my father's speech as he called out each name. It only served as a rhythmic countdown of my

remaining moments.

“Amaris, you have failed to bring both of what our tradition calls for: vengeance and honor. You do not deserve to be granted any parting words—”

“I don’t care what you think I deserve, Father.”

His muscles tensed, his spine straightening as he struggled not to obliterate me. As much as I hated to admit it, his answer wrecked me.

“You are no daughter of mine.”

“Is that why you won’t look at me? You’re ashamed of the thought of me? I’m ashamed, too. I’m ashamed of how you treat your subjects like bargaining chips. I’m ashamed of your *daughters* for the way they taint their souls every time they take another life when you know damn well it only benefits you.”

“*Enough!*” he bellowed above the roaring waves. He pointed his triton at me, and the water in my gills evaporated, instantly choking me. My body heaved against the bonds that held me powerless; I prayed this would be how I died. It would be a grace compared to what otherwise awaited me.

“Azaliah, Adrienne, Alota, Alto,” he ordered my sisters. “*Sing.*”

Their voices blended into synchronized perfection, enticing and enslaving me all in one breath. I bit hard onto my lip in preparation for the first blow, but nothing—*nothing*—could have prepared me for when he sent his whip flying. It cut down my spine with a vicious *crack*. Pain ripped through me. The taste of copper flooded my mouth, and I realized I’d broken through skin, but I didn’t cry out. I refused.

The second lash tore through flesh and scales.

I bit my lip harder.

The third blow came down like fire, and my skin screamed in agony. No matter how hard I tried, I bucked from the pain. Warm ribbons of water

streamed down my back as a wave crested and replenished the lack of water in my gills—but *gods*. The salt tore into my wounds, deepening the pain by a thousand as white clouded my vision. Laughter sounded from behind me, cutting and cruel.

*There's no way I could endure all twenty-four. I was not going to live through this. I wasn't strong enough, I wasn't strong enough, I wasn't—*

The fourth crashed down too quickly. I didn't have enough time to recover, time to recall the smell of my own blood as it stained the sea.

Five. Six. Seven.

A cry broke from my lips. White, hot pain throbbed through my back, my sorrow as deep as the sea. I opened my eyes, but everything was blurry, distant. The pain I felt—this *torture*...

The world around me swirled. Soon, the sharks would circle; nausea ripped through my stomach, and I vomited just moments after the eighth strike of the whip. Or had it been the ninth?

“Disgusting!” Serena's voice called out over the rest. I could've sworn I heard my sisters stop amid their song to join in, but I didn't have time to process the ridicule before the next lash came.

I blacked out before I ever felt the whip tear through my skin.

It could have been moments or several moons before I had any memory of waking. Waves crashed over my head as I lay on the shore like a scrap of gutted meat. My exposed back was raw and festering in the scorching heat of both the suns. I knew I had only days to find someone to heal my wounds, and then...

I had no other plan. I was going to die here, on this beach. Salt burrowed deep into the stripped muscles of my back. The burning pain only worsened with each pass of the tide on the shore. Again, again, again. There was no one

here to help me, to make the burning stop, to stop the wounds from bleeding and festering.

Again, again, again. Gods below, save me.

I laid there, helpless, broken, bare, waiting for the darkness to claim me.

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## CHAPTER 8

### AMARIS

If I wasn't in so much pain, I would've thought how I woke was strange. A sea serpent carried me, hefting me up from under one of my arms, its glowing scales the only source of light as we descended further into the depths of the sea.

Stalagmites crawled out from the belly of the floor, their arms reaching out like a warning. I didn't know where this snake was taking me, nor did I particularly care. Soon, I would face the death I was resigned to. Soon, I would return to the sand I had been birthed from.

When I woke again, I was surprisingly alive, not a snack for a pack of serpents. My eyes fluttered open, taking in my surroundings. I was in a cave, but the owner had decorated it with clearly the finest luxuries.

Fire from a nearby hearth warmed my skin, the magical element flickering in the current breeze. Two ebony chairs sat on opposite sides of the amethyst mantle, and crystals of every color, shape, and size covered walls, thousands



of them in every nook and cranny. Something small and green hopped onto the table beside me.

“*Ribbet*,” the creature’s throat bobbed.

I sat upright to inspect the animal, and a flood of agony shot down my spine.

“Please try not to move, darling. You’ll tear your stitches,” a feminine voice echoed off the walls of the cave.

The sound of my father’s cracking whip reverberated through my mind, and nausea rose within my stomach. My face must have shown it, because the female swam over, offering me a pearlescent cup. “Drink. The kelp tea will help.”

I looked up, taking in the face of my caretaker. Her hair was the deepest shade of onyx, save for a few silver strands that were a bold contrast in the sea of darkness. Her eyes glistened like bright rubies, the same color of her tail. On her thin neck, she wore a golden locket forged into a sea serpent, its body snaking around itself in a circle.

“Who are you?” I asked, hesitant to trust another merperson.

“I’m Nephtali, and I see you have already met Ribbet, the toad.”

“*Ribbet*,” the toad responded, his eyes wide as he shook his meaty head up and down.

“Does he know anything else other than *ribbet*?”

“Of course, he does. Never mind the toad, Amaris.” Nephtali gestured to the sea serpent that retrieved me from the shore. “This is my friend Elecktra.” The glowing snake bowed her head.

Her scales were purple, the size of a large fish. Fins stretched across her back as delicate as butterfly wings.

“A pleasure to meet you, Princesss,” Elektra hissed.

I frowned, averting my gaze. "I am no longer a princess."

Nephtali raised a brow, though she didn't seem to be surprised by my statement. "So it seems. After what I witnessed, maybe the gods gave you an opportunity to escape." The snake behind her nodded in agreement.

"Why did you send Elektra to save me?" I asked with an arched brow.

"From one outcast to another, I haven't seen such bravery in centuries. Though sometimes I wonder if time here passes by slower if only to drive me madder. Either way, it's been too long since I'd stopped expecting goodness from your cove. That is, until you. Elektra was very impressed by your bravery," the mermaid purred.

I hesitated. "You think I'm brave?"

Elektra's soft voice piped in. "I have sseen many thingsss come from the handsss of a mermaid, and I have never witnessed any rissking their livesss for otherssss, much lesss their mortal enemy."

"I saved him because I was scared to claim him," I confessed. "It was my first time hunting and I—"

"You couldn't bring yourself to torture an innocent being?" Nephtali finished for me. She took a seat on a rock to face me. "You are brave for choosing between what was easy and what was right. It is infinitely easier to be another fish in the current than it is to swim the other way."

"That still doesn't answer why you saved me."

Nephtali's slender hand moved to her neck to play with the tiny golden sea serpent. "I am the sea witch. I answer those in need of help."

I almost rolled my eyes at her remark. Was that supposed to be the answer to my question? I was exhausted from so many half-truths and jesting. Why couldn't someone just shoot me straight for once, instead of leaving me to fill in the pieces to an unmarked puzzle?

“So, you and your cohorts are omnipresent?” I asked.

“Elecktra.” The sea witch snapped her fingers, and the serpent stiffened to attention. She swam over to me, helping me into a comfortable resting position on my side as Nephtali refilled my cup with more tea. After thanking her companion, she turned her attention back to me. “What then, curious girl, would you like to know?”

I took a sip of tea. “How did you find me?”

“My magic is complicated, but my crystals show me the way.” Nephtali gestured to the collection of crystals around the room. “So, I am omnipresent, in a way.”

“You just...*saw* me in a crystal and decided to come to my rescue?”

Nephtali drew in a breath, seemingly searching for the words. “Each of the crystals are...fond of certain people. I cannot decide what I see, though yours has always been one of my favorites. Elecktra has a liking for you, too. Your unpredictable actions have given us much enjoyment.” Nephtali handed me a gem with lines of green.

“What’s this?”

“An emerald.” Nephtali’s eyes twinkled with pride. The way she held the gem with such tenderness gave me the impression this mermaid must have had a few valuable screws loosened throughout the centuries. “The color often illustrates the heart of the one it shows.”

My shoulders slumped. My heart? I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what this crystal said about me.

Nephtali continued, subjecting me to the explanation whether I wanted to hear it or not. “The green is a heart chakra. It provides peace, inspiration, and truth, both the giving and receiving of love. You’re worthy of love, Amaris.”

I blinked away the tears forming in my eyes. How could she possibly say

that? She knew nothing about me. I wasn't worthy of love. I wasn't worthy of anything. My family made that crystal clear.

She opened my palm, placing the gem in my hand like a delicate flower. It sparkled brightly as I shifted the little gem in my hand, and I let it distract me from my deepest insecurities, burying my thoughts like I did Ezra's dagger.

My entire life, this token had been dozens, perhaps hundreds, of miles away from me. Somehow, it knew my mermaid heart right to its terrible core.

"Nephtali, where are we?" I changed the subject, not wanting to think about what this little gem meant any more than I had to.

"Just outside of the domain of Mermaid's Cove. Two moons of a journey, if you were to return."

I definitely would not be doing that.

"Why don't you live with other mermaids?" I figured what her answer would be but needed to hear it from Nephtali herself. I needed the sea witch to confirm my thoughts.

"It is for the same reason as you do not," Nephtali replied.

"Did Strauhn attempt to kill you as well?"

"Do not speak his name," Nephtali snapped, her lips pressing into a thin line.

My cheeks warmed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry," I apologized, taking a gulp of my kelp tea to give my webbed hands something to do.

"Don't be. You're a curious girl," she grinned, her mood shifting once more. "That's why we like you. You've gotten yourself into some sticky situations, like when you were searching for collectibles, and you swam into the nest of a baby hydra."

Smiling, I thought back to the memory. I had been swimming on the outskirts of Mermaid's Cove when a sunken ship captured my attention. My

heart had skittered with joy at the thought of all the treasure I could find, which had led me to an inopportune encounter with a five-headed beast.

“You saw that?”

Nephtali nodded. “Elecktra thought it was thoughtful of you to find the man’s lost dagger.”

The thought of Ezra made my lips curl. “It doesn’t matter—I can’t change the past, Nephtali. My life is over as soon as they find out I survived. They’ll hunt me to the ends of seas.”

Nephtali leaned into me. “Then leave.”

I shivered, remembering the words my oldest sister spat at me. Azaliah had told me to leave, too. She had wanted me to be executed, but Nephtali...

“I can’t just leave the sea.”

Nephtali’s face danced with mischief. “Until moments ago, you didn’t believe it was possible for a crystal to be a spyglass into someone’s life.”

I shook my head. “No one has the power to do that, not even my father.”

Nephtali’s gaze clouded with suspicion. Between her scarlet nails, she clutched the sea serpent charm around her neck. “I cannot command the tides, but I do hold a kind of...different magic.”

“Have you changed merpeople into humans before?” My voice was full of hope.

The sea witch nodded. “I’ve granted many the opportunity to become what they desire.”

Frowning, I said, “I don’t desire to be a human.”

I didn’t particularly desire to be anything at this moment, other than alive and happy, though neither was an option in my current form. I would not—could not—stay in the seas. I refused to bow to my father. I let out a sigh. “I really have no other option, do I, Nephtali?”

She patted my hand comfortingly. “Dear Amaris, deciding this shouldn’t be done on a whim. Everything comes at a price, one you might find is too high.”

“Spoken like a true merchant, saving the price for the very last.”

Nephtali sighed. “Do you know how mermaids and humans became mortal enemies?”

I shook my head.

She sighed again, and I knew she was about to tell me. “A curious mermaid, much like yourself, was full of interest in the world above, constantly roaming the shore for seashells, lost artifacts, treasure... anything related to humans. Eventually, she met a man. It’s said by some he was fishing and caught her on his line. Others believe he was a swimmer she saved from hungry sharks.”

“Whichever way the story went, they spent much time together and a deep love blossomed between them. When they decided to marry, her betrothed sought a mage to change her into a moss maiden. Unfortunately, both her parents died, leaving her to inherit her kingdom. This infuriated her younger brother, who was jealous of her wealth and power. He felt she didn’t deserve it, because she would rather be a moss maiden instead.

“One day, a group of mermaids sent word to the human, claiming his fiancée was in danger. Meanwhile, the brother came to her, claiming the same thing. Each believed the other was in grave danger.

“When she surfaced to save her love, her brother locked her inside a cage. When her fiancé appeared, he was lured out to sea. As punishment for loving a human, she was forced to watch, powerless and manacled, as he was devoured. They’ve hunted humans ever since.”

After Nephtali finished her story, we were both silent for a long moment.

“What happened to the mermaid?” I asked quietly when I finally found my voice.

“She soon found out she was with child. If the legends are true, she died of grief, along with the babe inside her.”

A gasp broke from my lips. Somehow, I still managed to be shocked by the mermaids’ heartless actions. Three innocent lives were taken because of their cruelty, and many more since.

Nephtali’s words shattered the solemn quiet. “The seas have been cursed for a very, very long time, Amaris. Believe me when I tell you that everything comes with a price, and the risk is not always worth it.”

“What’s the price to leave?”

“The cost is very high—”

“What. Is. The. Price?” I repeated, emphasizing my words in a sharp staccato.

Nephtali sucked in a breath, hesitation thick on her tongue. “Something you deeply love. Something that, if you lost it, would take away a part of you.” I chose to ignore the warning in Nephtali’s tone. My mind was already made up.

I didn’t love many things deeply in this dark world. Other than my voice and my trove of old, vintage things, I had no clue what else the asking price could be, and seeing as my trove was back at the castle...

A thought occurred to me. I put a hand to my throat. To live without it would be a sacrifice, but to live as a free moss maiden...

“Must I bargain my voice?” I asked the sea witch.

“Not your voice, Amaris, but your soul.”



## CHAPTER 9

### AMARIS

**N**ear the mantle of Naphtali's cave, a floral scent bubbled from a cauldron. I resisted the urge to gag; not that the potion particularly smelled bad but...I was nervous.

Nephtali grabbed various bottles and jars and, one by one, she carefully mixed them into the cast iron pot. I recognized some of them: ragweed, elderflower, orange paprika. Others, however, I had never even seen before, but Nephtali seemed to know exactly what she was doing. If this were a dance, this mermaid had committed the intricate steps to memory.

Today was the first day my wounds were healed enough to get off the sofa. While she worked, I seized the opportunity to do something I'd been itching to do since I'd arrived.

The trove of crystals glittered in greeting as I eagerly inspected the endless expanse of color. Just as Nephtali said, a scene played out inside each stone.

One merman, a youngling, played a familiar game I knew to be "Mermaids and Minnows" near a reef with a school of fish. Another crystal held a naked



moss maiden laying on a bed, a man standing over her body and... My cheeks warmed, and I moved on, giving them their privacy.

The next belonged to a male named Zakheus M. Claire. His crystal was slightly larger, with shards of blue the color of solid ice. I hadn't seen ice, living in the Sapphire Sea my entire life, but I heard it described by my sisters, who had the opportunity to swim further north, closer to the Opal Sea and the Twin Seas.

Four smaller crystals lay next to this larger one, yet my eyes remained locked on the most enticing one. Inside, a scene played out of a man sitting lazily on a throne, a dragon next to him like a guard dog. I had to stop myself from giggling: it was almost humorous how lethal this scaly, onyx creature was next to the male on the throne, though it remained at the ready, looking to its master in submission. Zakheus stood to attention.

Seconds later, dark shadows sprung from his hands, wrapping around a helpless and bound commoner. The commoner's face contorted in pain, his eyes wide in horror as the shadows... The shadows didn't kill him. No, they *consumed* him.

I looked away, my stomach tightening into knots.

"Enjoying the show, dearie?" Nephtali chuckled, glancing over her shoulder. A mischievous smirk tugged at the corners of her crimson lips.

"How does it not drive you mad? Doesn't it get lonely to see everything but never actually be a part of anything?"

She chuckled again. "I have everything I ever need right here. You on the other hand... You wouldn't like it one bit if you were confined longer than a week." Nephtali dangled the potion in front of me. "That is why you are going to the surface."

My heart sank to my stomach. I had spent two moons with Nephtali, and I

felt as if I knew her more than anyone, including Elecktra. The days with Nephtali hadn't dragged by, as most did in Mermaid's Cove. On the contrary, it felt as if time bent to our conversations and passed in only seconds.

My time with her had come to an abrupt end.

I swallowed. "I could—" I began, thinking about the future. I truly enjoyed Nephtali. We were similar in so many ways; it was no wonder she liked me just from watching through her crystals. We had finished each other's sentences, laughed at all the same jokes, and even held similar worldviews. I could stay here, but I wasn't going to just invite myself into her life.

She raised an eyebrow. "You could what, Amaris?"

I let out a slow exhale before filling my gills back up with the salty water around me. "It's nothing."

"You're having regrets about the bargain?"

I shrugged.

"You can't stay here. If they found you, they would make you suffer."

Nephtali offered me her hand. "Take this potion to the shore and drink it. The guards will assume you are either an assassin or a spy. Tell them your name, that you were the only survivor from a shipwreck headed to port in Erison. You were a passenger from the Eastern Dominion, coming to seek refuge. You must be careful, Amaris. Do not share with many that you are not human. You have three months to complete your task: love your mortal enemy, and for your mortal enemy to love you in return. If you do not, you will turn into nothing but seafoam on the wind."

A cold shiver ran down to my fins. Deep inside, a small voice pleaded for me to refuse. Turn around and flee. I ignored my shaking hands as I plucked a small pin from Nephtali's hand and stabbed my thumb with the sharp metal tip.

Without another thought, I placed my bleeding hand over her necklace and let the blood drip down her chest. Its eyes glowed crimson, sealing my fate in my blood.

Nephtali caressed my cheeks, her eyes swarming with affection that pierced my heart. “The seas have been cursed for a very, very long time, but love, not hate, has the power to break barriers, bargains, and curses. If you succeed, you are free to remain on land forever. If you do not—you will die. I have seen many people take this contract, Amaris, and if I were to bank on anyone breaking the curse, it would be you. And if you're careful, perhaps more than one curse can be undone.”

Nephtali found my hand and gave it a tight, reassuring squeeze, transferring something to my palm as she did. I opened my hand to see the full potion bottle, the emerald gem tied around the lid.

“Nephtali, I can't take this.” These crystals were the only things she had—why would she so easily part with one?

She folded my fingers around the stone. “Take it, Amaris. It's yours, after all.”

“How will you find me?” I cleared my throat. “In case I'm in trouble again.”

Nephtali laughed. “I have my ways, darling. I'm sure you're not done causing your fair share of trouble yet, so I'll check in as often as I can.” Nephtali winked a crimson eye in my direction. “I want you to have it, so when the time comes, you can use it, too.”

My throat tightened. It couldn't have been larger than my forefinger, yet the tiny offering meant the world to me. I enveloped the witch in an embrace, wrapping my arms tightly around her. “Thank you. For everything.”

Then, I was off, pushing to the surface, the open water before me. Rays

from the suns glistened in the water of the Sapphire Sea and multiplied the columns of light like a prism. More than anything, I wanted one final glance at the sea's boundless beauty, but I ignored the pull in my gut. There wasn't time. Instead, I focused my attention forward, to the shore. To where hope was. To where I would turn over new beginnings like precious rocks. To where laughter, dancing, and joy would abound.

Sand met water around my fingertips, the view of Erison painted before me like a work of art. "To moss maidens and new beginnings."

I pressed the vial to my lips and drank every last drop.

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PART TWO  
MOSS MAIDEN

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## CHAPTER 10

### EZRA

“I came as soon as I heard.” I bowed low to my father. The reminder of last week’s carnage arrived in the form of a mangled, washed-up body this morning, except this one was female.

He didn’t wait for me to stand from my bow before asking, “Do you swear to me there were no females on that ship?”

Father’s otherwise kind expression was cold as stone. His features gave away nothing, but I’d become keen at reading between the lines. Panic. The kingdom had little room for the slightest error, and this alone was enough to tip the scales. We had enough spies and assassins to worry about.

“None.”

I knew that for a fact. Sailing into Mermaid’s Cove wasn’t something I was about to subject women to.

“Is it possible a swimmer was lost at sea?” I asked, but we both already knew the answer.

“No one is foolish enough to swim in those waters.”

It had been common knowledge for centuries that it was unsafe to swim in the Sapphire. The beaches had been vacant for as long as I could remember.

“Titus,” Father called to the captain of the royal guard. “The woman is to be brought here for interrogation immediately. Do not let her out of your sight, and do not speak to her unless absolutely necessary.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Titus nodded, marching from the room.

Within minutes, the captain returned, a blindfolded woman led by several guards behind him. Shackles bound her wrists and ankles even though she was practically dragged by two armored men twice her size.

Her feet moved to a foreign rhythm, her thin knees wobbling with every step. She was clearly in pain; she was in no state to walk, much less run. Still, we couldn’t risk trusting a mysterious, washed-up woman.

She appeared young, perhaps my age, if not a little younger. Her dark hair hung in wet strands just below her breasts. They’d wrapped her in a thick Erisian robe with the kingdom’s embroidered symbol in the corner, a ship below the two suns of Vale.

The guards halted before the throne, and Titus shoved the woman forward, her tiny frame nearly toppling over at the movement.

“Bow.”

The stern tone of Father’s voice was deafening. Even I was reminded of how intimidating he could be. Verin Anaforiene’s wrath was a well equal to the depth of his peaceful one, the one he drew from most of the time. Clearly, this woman wanted to get on his bad side.

“Do not disobey the King’s commands!” Titus kicked her between the shoulder blades and a scream erupted from her lips as she jerked forward.

Verin stood, rage swimming in his sapphire eyes. “At ease, Titus.” He turned his attention back to the quivering girl. “State your name, your title,

your occupation. One hesitation and you will be thrown back into the mermaid-infested waters from which you came.” The ice in his voice sent invisible claws raking down my skin.

“I can’t—” she panted. Her distinct accent was barely audible over the crashing waves beyond the castle gates. She opened her mouth again, but she still didn’t speak. The room bent to listen to her small, broken voice.

“Give the King your name, girl, now!” Titus shouted in frustration.

“*I can’t*—” Panting again, the woman turned into herself, her shoulders slumping in defeat as her shackled hands grabbed at her chest, not out of reverence for the king, but out of *fear*. She heaved, her strangled breaths sounding like a cry for help.

That’s when I saw the wound, the dark blood soaking through the back of her robe where Titus’s boot had been. I looked around to make sure no one else noticed the unnatural color of it.

*How was this possible?*

She wheezed again, as if that breath would be her last, as if the act itself was a foreign experience. It was as if she didn’t know how to do it at all as she lay on the cold marble floor. Of course, she didn’t. She had gills only last week.

“Father, she’s hurt. She needs a healer.”

“Her panic will pass, and she will speak—”

“She’s not panicking, she can’t *breathe*. She won’t be speaking at all if we don’t help her soon.”

My father searched the woman’s face, as if he was trying to put the pieces together. After a long breath, he finally spoke. “Very well. Summon a healer, but pick her up off my castle floor.”

Titus nudged her shoulder with his boot, but she didn’t move. Instead, she



laid there, unmoving. He bent low, craning his ear to listen.

“Your Majesty, she isn’t breathing.”

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## CHAPTER 11

### AMARIS

The first question that should've run through my thick skull before leaving Nephtali was, "what will happen if I drank this?" Instead, I tipped it back like a party girl the night of her Claiming.

Why hadn't Nephtali mentioned not being able to breathe, or that the process of growing legs would be extremely painful? Why wouldn't Nephtali warn me that it's especially difficult to convey the words "I can't breathe" when you, well...*can't fucking breathe?*

I drew in a breath and held it for a few moments, concentrating on the soft rise and fall of my chest in time with the waves outside. I exhaled, then drew in another breath. Even from this height, I tasted the sea on my tongue.

They had given me the quarters in the highest tower with only one way up and one way down, which translated to: *We have our eye on you and we're not allowing you multiple ways of escape.*

I couldn't be more pleased with my suite; at least he hadn't locked me in the dungeons. It was a kind mercy. Plus, it wasn't like I would be racing

down anytime soon. I would have to learn how to use my feet first.

I took a sweeping glance around my room and smiled. To my left was a floor-to-ceiling mirror embellished in bright mother of pearl trim next to a vanity with several drawers which I hoped held cosmetics. The thought alone made me squeal with excitement. There was another set of doors to an unknown corridor, but I ignored them for something I simply couldn't neglect any longer: the window.

Every shade of green filled my vision just below my tower, overwhelming me with the foreign beauty of the world above. Beyond that was an empty beach and sparkling waves of the Sapphire. The window had a ledge built in, perfect for sitting in the morning suns. I would use every opportunity to come here, prop my arms up on the ledge, and just *look*.

I was all too eager to make my way over, and for a moment, I entertained the thought, but I didn't have the first idea how to walk. Considering I had just learned how to breathe, I didn't care to test my luck. Instead, I remained enveloped in the warm and fluffy mattress until I managed to move on to the next task, which could be a while. I had three months to break a curse. Right now, I needed this moment wrapped in comfort, to lay down in peace with nothing to assault my senses.

A soft knock stole me from my slumber, and a petite woman entered the room. The woman couldn't have been much older than me, with dark skin and ebony hair falling to her waist in minuscule braids. Her eyes were welcoming and warm, the shade of glazed honey. She asked something in a language I didn't understand, and when she saw my confusion, she tried again.

"Sorry, I thought you spoke Palogian. Would you fancy some coffee?" The girl walked forward, carrying a tray to my bedside table. She sat down beside

me, crossing her legs at the ankles. "I'm Solana, but you can call me Lana. I'm one of the healers on staff." She leaned in, as if the two of us were about to exchange the best of secrets. "Don't tell anyone, but I'm the best one, and the least boring."

I tried sitting up in the bed, but Solana scowled. "I don't get paid to watch you do all the work. Here, let me help." She bent forward, adjusting the pillows behind my head.

Once she was satisfied, Solana sank back, resuming her position next to me. "I would've kicked the guard's ass for handling you like that today. If he wants to treat a woman like that, I'll show him how women hit back."

I only remembered bits and pieces of being dragged off the beach and brought before the King. I remembered the throne room, falling to the floor. I had been more focused on surviving than what was going on around me.

My nurse stared in anticipation at me.

"What?" I asked her.

"Don't you think it was pretty shitty how Titus threw you around like that in front of the King?"

"Oh. Right. I can't remember much, I guess," I confessed.

The nurse gave me an empathetic smile. "Unfortunately, that's what happens when you get a concussion. It wouldn't have happened if it weren't for Titus's brutality. I'm sorry for the way the King's guards treated you. I hope you'll find Erison is actually a wonderful place to call home."

She poured the tea into two mugs, dropping a cube of something chalky into hers before stirring, sipping, shivering, and adding more. When she was satisfied, she offered some to me. "Sugar?"

"Um. No, thanks."

She looked me up and down, as if silently judging my choice. "Very well."

She shivered again, handing me the steaming black liquid. “I don’t know how you drink it black. I need something to sweeten mine.”

I took a sip and almost spit it back into the cup. “I changed my mind. I think I do want... um, sugar.” I said the word in a hurry, hoping I didn’t mispronounce it.

“Do they not have sugar where you’re from?” She took the cup, dropped a couple of cubes inside, and handed it back.

“I don’t know. I never had it, so I would assume not.”

Solana’s eyes grew wide. “That’s dreadful! No wonder you left.”

I took a sip of the tea. “Much better this time, thank you. My name’s Amaris, by the way.”

Lana smiled. “Pleasure. How does your back feel?”

“Scratchy.”

She nodded. “They’ll do that as they heal. Just a few stitches needed repairing. As long as we keep the infection down, they should heal within the month.” Solana’s eyes grew suddenly concerned, her voice no more than a whisper. “I don’t know all of the details of why you’re here.” Her eyes flitted to my back. “I hope you find Erison to be much better to you.”

There was another knock, and the door opened without waiting for a response. A tall, masculine frame stepped inside, dark curls spilling onto broad shoulders. My heart lodged in my throat when his hazel eyes met mine, robbing my memory blind of my newfound skill of breathing.

The man I saved was here.

*Ezra.*

Solana rose to her feet, crossing her arms in a way that suggested she was angry, but her smile was light and playful. “Thank the gods you gave us

enough time to change before barging inside. Please, allow yourself in, Prince Ezra.”

I nearly choked. Did she say prince?

As if confirming my question, Ezra gave a small, mocking bow. “Thank you for welcoming me into my own home, Lana. It makes me feel as if I belong here.”

Ezra was the prince of Erison.

*What in the seven hells was he doing out at sea?*

Everyone within days of Mermaid’s Cove knew it was a death wish, and this imbecile just waltzed up as if it were a delightful swim out to the seas.

Granted, I *had* tried to squeeze the tiniest drop of rebellion into my days, if only to piss Father off. I never paid much attention to warnings of danger. If anything, I dove into them harder. But I had always known I would survive, and I never brought others into my adventures.

Well, there were a few times I barely scraped by with a few cuts and bruises, but that's beside the point. Still—I would never in a million moons purposefully swim into the jaws of a hungry shark.

“Is someone asking for me?” Solana asked the prince.

Ezra shook his head. “I was coming to relieve you. I’ll take it from here, if you don't mind.” His kind eyes flitted over to where I lay. I searched them for any shred of hatred, only to come up short. Perhaps he truly didn’t recognize me.

Solana turned to me. “I’ll leave the coffee here, in case you fancy more. I’ll be back in few hours with dinner and medicine.”

“Only the medicine will be necessary,” Ezra corrected. “The King has invited our guest to dinner with him instead.”

“As you wish, princeling.” Solana dipped into a graceful curtsy before

clicking the door shut behind her.

There was only silence between us for a long moment. Ezra crossed the room and sat next to me on the massive plush pillows. The smell of citrus and musk invaded my senses; it must have been his cologne, because *no one* had the right to naturally smell that good.

He closed the space between us, drawing in so intimately, I could see the daintiest hint of a freckle on his lower lip. For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me.

My human reflexes were too slow as a cold, sharp blade met the delicate flesh of my throat. Hatred found its way into those rust-flecked eyes, the same ones that were masked in kindness just moments ago.

With bitter loathing coating his deep, raspy voice, he murmured into the shell of my ear, “What in the fucking hells are you doing here?”



## CHAPTER 12

### EZRA

**S**he lay beneath my dagger with a predatory stillness no human could have possibly had.

Of course, she wasn't human, but she also wasn't the predator anymore.

I was shocked to see the *thump-thump* of a pulse where I pressed the blade to her neck. Mermaids didn't have hearts. Granted, mermaids didn't have legs, either.

I pressed the blade harder against her. "Don't make me ask again, fish."

"I didn't mean to come here." The mermaid's accent was warm and inviting, yet it lacked the sensual charm I expected. The effect was the same, though. She was beautiful, truly stunning.

Her hair was lighter now that it had dried fully. I could tell it wasn't brown as I had thought the first time I met her; instead, it was a dark auburn. Freckles dotted the bridge of her slender nose, her full lips rosy and inviting. The combination of her red hair and green eyes was almost too striking to be real, but the uniqueness only captivated me further.



“Please,” she swallowed. “I can explain.”

My lips twitched. Some vindictive part of me loved to watch her beg. For once, she was at the mercy of someone else. For once, she wasn’t the one holding the knife. “I’m not letting you out from under this dagger. I’m not stupid. Get used to speaking with this on your throat.”

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“Like hells you won’t.”

“I couldn’t even stand right now if I tried.”

“Is the little fish scared, now that she’s outside the big pond?” I mocked.

“No—she’s just trying to figure out how the hells she’s supposed to use these...things.” She flipped her feet, and her movement made me think of being on top of her. Our mouths were so close to touching, reminding me how she wrapped herself around my body and kissed me the night of the shipwreck. She saved me and wrecked me all in one single movement.

Every night since, my thoughts drifted back to her. Some nights, she was the one killing me at the bottom of the sea, chanting her song in my ear to keep me from fighting back. Other nights...

I straightened, forbidding her sensual affinity from making me lust over her. I took the dagger from her throat, but I didn’t tuck it back into its sheath. She stared at me in silence, her emerald eyes flickered between me and the dagger still clutched in my hand.

“So, are you going to explain yourself or not, fish?”

“How can I trust you?”

I snorted. “I could ask the same of you.”

A smile flirted across her garnet lips. “That’s fair, I suppose.”

“Did you come here to find me?” I asked.

She shook her head, her reddish-brown locks moving with her. “I had no

idea I would find you here. I didn't expect to ever see you again."

"Why else would you be here, then?"

"You're not going to believe me if I told you."

I rolled my eyes. "Try me."

She shook her head again, as if she had a choice. "No." We glared at each other with bared teeth, and after an eternity, she answered, "I changed into a human."

"You can't *change* into a human," I scoffed.

"I don't know how else you can explain this." She threw back the covers, hiking her robe above her knees to reveal impossibly smooth, impossibly attractive legs. Not even a hint of colorful scales tainted them. I ripped my gaze away from this sinful shell of a woman. Already, my thoughts began to betray me.

She raised her eyebrows at me expectantly, and another long pause passed between us.

"Well, are you waiting for the suns to cross? What are you staring at me like that for?" I snapped, growing impatient with her.

"I'm waiting, but not for the suns to cross, whatever that means." She looked down at the floor, drawing one of her legs to her chest. Even with unbrushed hair and a robe two sizes too large, she looked like a work of art. Better, even.

"What are you waiting for, exactly?" I tilted my head in question.

"For an apology."

"That won't happen."

She smirked as she nonchalantly inspected her nails. She was probably checking for blood underneath them from her last kill. "That's a shame. Even nobility know it's best to admit when one's wrong," she said, cutting her eyes

to me. “If you’re unwilling to do that, then perhaps Erison would be better off with someone else ruling in your place.”

“You know nothing,” I seethed.

“Do I? Maybe it’s you who doesn’t know the first thing about ruling a kingdom. You could’ve been killed that night. You’re Erison’s future, and you were so willing to give it up for a suicide mission.”

“Don’t try to reason with me when you don’t know the first thing about ruling.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Amaris sang in a mocking melody.

I clenched my fist so hard around the dagger, my knuckles turned white. “Then tell me, fish, how wrong I am.”

“My father is the king of the seas. My sisters and I were to rule our own sea, so I know a thing or two about nobility myself.”

“Clearly, your kingdom and mine have different standards. I don’t murder people in cold blood.”

My words must've struck a chord because she stood, her knees wobbling slightly. “Yet, you're still alive because of me. If this is how I knew you'd repay me, I think I would've preferred the alternative.”

Before I knew what I was doing, I rushed across the room and closed the space between us. Her back hit the wall of her bedroom, my dagger drawn. “Don't threaten me. You’re forgetting whose kingdom you’re in. *I’m* the one keeping you alive here. As long as you have legs, *fish*, you’re going to want to remain on my good side.”

“Oh please,” she spat. “I don’t give a damn about being on your good side, *prince*. Not when you can’t even give me a proper thank you for saving your sorry tail.”

As I stared the mermaid down, I noticed how tall I was in comparison. She

was at least a whole head shorter. Still, she threw her own deadly scowl at me, one that could probably obliterate entire nations. I could feel both our anger burning hot and dangerous, radiating from our bodies, twin suns fighting for dominion.

“You saved my life,” I gritted out, backing away from her. “It’s only fair that I respect this small debt. I won’t tell anyone about you, and you won’t have to worry about the court. I will tell them your ship was wrecked and that you’re the daughter of a nobleman, but I won’t help you any more than that. I want nothing to do with you.”

I sheathed my blade and left the room before Amaris could say anything else.



## CHAPTER 13

### AMARIS

**A** week ago, I didn't know Ezra existed, never mind that he was the prince of the Western Dominion. His words echoed through the cave of my mind all the same. He wasn't going to tell anyone, but he wasn't going to protect me, either.

For the rest of the day, I worked out the stiffness of my new legs, one at a time, flexing my feet and pointing them. I couldn't help but stare in amazement at each little toe and how they reacted to my commands.

Gripping the edge of my vanity, I forced myself upright. Trying to replicate the stance I saw Solana take when Ezra entered the room, I tested the low curtsy, bending my wobbly knees into place. Unsurprisingly, I failed, and the fluffy rug broke my fall as I toppled over.

"Stupid legs," I muttered, righting myself before attempting once more.

It still didn't make sense why the prince of Erison would put his life in jeopardy so readily by sailing through Mermaid's Cove. It wasn't a place fit for humans in general, much less the future king.

I shoved the curiosity from my mind and tried concentrating on the task at hand. In hours, I would come face-to-face with the King, and somehow, I was expected not to fall flat on my shining new ass.

Each attempt was slightly less awkward than the last. Slowly, I began to iron out the knots of this new, foreign body, but I wasn't sure I would ever feel truly comfortable. Not only was I adjusting to the feel of the legs, I had to deal with pressure of the world above. I felt so much heavier, like I had gained fifty pounds since being on land.

I gripped the edge of my silk nightgown, moving on to phase two in the process: adding grace and poise, two things I was sure I didn't have. This would be my last attempt until I met the King. I needed to rest if I didn't want to pass out in front of him. *Again.*

Pass or fail, I had one last curtsy in me before I would seriously drive myself mad. Right leg over the left, I ignored every scream of my muscles as I bent, waist first, then hips, and lastly, my knees. I wobbled before ever-so-slightly strengthening my core for support. Slowly but surely, I tucked my head, mimicking a bow.

It was the most perfect curtsy, as beautiful, graceful, and poised as any moss maiden could have attempted. It was perhaps even better than the one I had seen Solana perform this morning. Still bent in my curtsy, I committed this moment to memory. This was the first humanly stance I had mastered, and I felt like I had just climbed the tallest peak of the Moaning Hills.

I raised my head to admire my spectacular form in the mirror. There it was, graceful and poised. Suddenly, without warning, I was falling. I grasped around me at something, anything, before toppling headfirst into the gargantuan mirror. I slammed into it with a loud thump, the glass violently shaking from the sudden assault. To my astonishment, it held strong against

my crashing weight, and I rubbed my pounding head as I settled myself on the ground.

“Stupid legs,” I muttered to myself.

A terrifying burst of laughter sounded from the opposite side of the room, letting me know I wasn't alone. Solana clutched her stomach, laughing harder as she saw the fear and embarrassment on my face. She attempted to get out a full sentence, but her giggles interrupted every word. “You said—”

Giggle.

“Stupid—”

Giggle.

“Legs!” Solana burst out in a cackle I was sure reached Mermaid's Cove. If my family didn't know I had found a way to transform into a human, they certainly did now, compliments to Solana.

She dramatically wiped a stream of tears from her light brown eyes, “Oh, it hurts. I've never in my life heard someone blaming their legs for their own demise.”

I crossed my arms. “I didn't mean for you to hear that.”

“I know.” Solana covered her mouth, trying her hardest to keep from laughing again. “That makes it even funnier.”

“How long have you been in here?”

I could hear the grin in her voice. “Long enough to see you crash into the mirror and fall on your face.” Laughter erupted from Solana like a volcano. Gone was her attempt at masking her amusement; she had fully lost it.

“Creep,” I taunted, trying to gather the last scrap of my dignity off the floor. With a little wobble here and there, I stood without making more of a fool of myself. “I'm alright, by the way. Don't feel obligated to ask if I'm injured or anything.”

The comment sent her more into a frenzy as she made her way to me. “Oh yes, your big, bad legs are out to betray you again. Very dangerous.”

I cut my eyes to Solana, who barely reached my shoulder. “My big, bad legs could knock you over too if you’re not careful,” I said with a swipe of my leg.

“You wouldn’t dare!” she shrieked, dancing away from me.

“If I end up falling in front of the King, I am absolutely taking someone with me.” My tone was playful, though I may have been slightly serious.

“Speaking of the King, we have to get ready. Dinner is at six on the line.”

“How long do we have?”

Solana looked to the window and swore. “Gods above, that’s in twenty minutes.” She strode to the nightstand, scooping a few spoonfuls of sugar into a saucer. “Here. You may need this to take your medicine. I’ll find something for you to wear.”

She yanked the doors of the wardrobe open, and I nearly fell to the floor again at what I saw. The most lavish of dresses, skirts, and blouses hung back-to-back, seemingly unending, every shade of the deepest of crimsons and amethysts, the finest golds and silvers.

“What are you gawking at? Take the damn medicine and get yourself in the tub. Now!” Solana ordered militantly.

“Sheesh, no need to be pushy,” I objected, though I obeyed Solana’s orders. “Holy gods, Lana!” I gagged as I took a sip of my medicine. “This is disgusting.”

Solana didn’t look over her shoulder as she continued throwing dresses onto the bed. “Just shut the fuck up and take them.”

One by one, I drained the vials, using the sugar to mask the taste. When I was done, I searched for the washroom. Down a small hall and to my left, a



set of double doors materialized.

Gold lined the circular design, twin to the ornamentation in my room. Above me was a domed ceiling, painted to look like the Sapphire Sea. The churning waters of cerulean and azure were almost identical to the scene outside.

Somewhere along the way, Solana joined to appreciate the art with me. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Delantos himself painted it. His work is all throughout this castle.” She frowned. “It’s sad, knowing we can never venture into the waters again.”

I must have looked confused, because Solana crossed her arms. “Don’t tell me you don’t know who Delantos is. The most brilliant artist of his age?”

I shook my head. “Forget the painter. What do you mean you can’t venture into the waters?”

“I meant what I said.” Solana gave an emphatic shrug. “We don’t even go near the beaches out of fear of the mermaids.”

Interesting. I knew the Erisian people hadn’t been able to sail the Sapphire Sea, but I didn’t know they avoided even going near the beach along the coast of Erison, which explained why it was vacant for miles.

“What are you waiting for, girl? Get in, get in!” Solana scolded me.

My healer twisted the nozzles on the large porcelain basin and immediately, water came rushing out, warm and inviting. My eyes grew round in utter amazement at the contraption. Purple, bubbling products in the water smelled of sweet flowers, and I couldn’t wait to dip my toes inside. I stood idly by, waiting for Solana to give me privacy. Instead, she impatiently tapped her foot.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you waiting for the suns to cross?”

“No? Why does everyone keep saying that?”

A singular sable eyebrow raised in question. “Are you going to get in so I can bathe you or not?”

My eyes shot wider; Solana’s glare didn’t seem one to argue with right now. Still, I protested. “That won’t be necessary. Surely, I can bathe myself.”

She wordlessly pointed to the rushing water.

“Okay, okay.” I threw my hands up in frustration. “At least turn away so I can get undressed.”

Solana returned the gesture. “I am literally about to see you naked. What difference does it make, Amaris?”

“I don’t know. Seems a little...indecent.”

There were minimal times since becoming a human that I'd even see my own genitalia, and though it was still anatomically in the same place, it looked foreign to me—because it *was* foreign. What if it looked weird and somehow different from all the rest? Then again, I wouldn't know any better even if it did.

She laughed. “You’re silly. I’m a healer. I've seen plenty of naked bodies. I’m just glad you practice normal amounts of hygiene. That’s more than I can say for some of my patients.”

I sighed in defeat. Tugging my nightgown over my head, I stepped out of my undergarments on unstable feet. I discarded the clothes in a small pile before timidly submerging myself in the water, my arms wrapped over my exposed skin. Behind me, Solana stood with her back turned, foot tapping on the tiled floor, the methodical *pat pat pat* echoing sharply. She turned, clearly fed up with my stalling.

“Oh, come on, get your bare ass in the tub. I’ll have to bathe you so quickly, I won't even have enough time to tell you what I’m looking at.”

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## CHAPTER 14

### EZRA

**T**rapped.

That was the only word that came to mind as I spoke with the nobles of the Western Dominion. Stretched wide on the wooden table was a map of Vale, our only light a dim flame from an oil lantern.

“The cove of mermaids has moved their hunting grounds closer to the shores of Erison. The navy attempted to sail outside the Dominion and were immediately bombarded here.” I gestured to the map. “The wreckage is so great, we have to sail further west to get out to sea without the risk of wrecking on them.”

Marion Rutherford, lord of Zhargen, raised a gray brow. As usual, he gazed down his crooked nose at me and sneered. “In other words, a school of murderous fish are keeping you from sailing in your own waters?”

I gritted my teeth, stretching my arms out to rest against the table. “It sounds mad when you put it that way, but yes.”

“The legends are true, then,” Lady Priscilla Mayawell gasped, her chocolate eyes wide in fear. She and her husband, Izan, lorded over Azranth, but Izan was currently traveling to the Moaning Hills to try and stop the attacks.

Lord Rutherford scoffed. “Nonsense. The rumors are only meant to create fear. There must be a more logical reason these ships aren’t returning to Erison.”

“I’m afraid, Lord Rutherford, that the legends are true. The waters surrounding Erison have been terrorized by their presence for hundreds of years. But only within the last thirty or so have the purges become more frequent,” I explained. “Now, it’s nearly impossible to sail at all.”

“Why are we just now hearing of these increased attacks?” Rutherford asked, the other nobles looking equally as puzzled.

“It wasn’t common knowledge,” I shrugged. “We didn’t want to spread unnecessary fear.”

“I’d like to know on whose authority we’re going to believe such madness,” Lord Rutherford derided.

“On mine,” the King interjected. “Marion, what my son claims is true. He was leading the Temptress to hunt them down when the ship fell.”

“What of the rest of your crew? Are there others who witnessed the same account?” The lord of Zhargen looked down his long, crooked nose at me.

“The rest of my crew,” I snarled, “is dead. If you are unable to take my word as truth, then perhaps you should make a trip yourself. I’ll provide a ship for you.” My blood pumped hot in my veins.

“Ezra.” Father held up a hand in warning.

Flipping my arms up in frustration, I said, “We’re moving nowhere sitting around and debating what I witnessed off the coast last week. Are we all in

favor of moving on?”

Priscilla cleared her throat. “I second the motion to move on.”

Everyone gave a curt nod except for Rutherford.

He stared at me with distaste. “Let this be a lesson to you, Prince Ezra. You must keep your council up to date. We could’ve sent more troops or found another solution if only we’d have known.”

“We’ve already exhausted all other options. The rocks are so shallow in some areas near the coast, the ships scrape the bottom, so we cannot carry cargo on them. We’ve tried everything.” I leaned back in my seat, running my hands through my dark hair. Again, there was just no other word to describe the dominion's conditions other than trapped. It was how I felt, too.

Members of the council were already looking to me to solve unbeatable mysteries, to break impenetrable boundaries, and the weight of it all was soon to be dropped on my shoulders completely. When the Western Dominion fell to the East, everyone’s heads would turn my way.

“Are we to wait like sitting ducks while we are picked off by either the nightmares dwelling in the Moaning Hills or from our failing economy?” Ander of Silestone asked. I didn’t miss the flicker of fear in his large brown eyes.

Of course, he would be. Silestone was one of the closest regions to the Moaning Hills. People have gone missing in the middle of the night, and it's been rumored whatever is dwelling in the Moaning Hills is getting more comfortable leaving their caves to feed.

“Something needs to be done about this and soon. The silos are filled to the brim, and we have no more space,” Gorre of Cammesian chimed in.

*Thank you, captain obvious,* I wanted to shout, but I held my tongue.

Wheat and other important crops were grown in the northern regions and

were some of the Western Dominion's most profitable exports. Supplies were ported down the Aldetan river, then transferred to ships in Erison before being exported to other countries. Over the years, we've been less successful because our ships have been attacked by mermaids. Not only have we lost thousands of men, but a large amount of the kingdom's wealth as well.

"So feed the poor with it," I said.

Gorre's large features contorted into something between anger and disbelief. "It isn't that simple. The poor cannot offer us millions of sovereigns to pay for the kingdom's needs."

"The food will go to waste, will it not? We cannot export it without being slaughtered. How is it not simple, Gorre?"

Gorre stuttered, his chin bobbing up and down. He certainly hasn't been hungry a day in his life. With a bloodline blessed with agricultural affinities, it was nearly impossible for him to starve. Gorre simply lacked sympathy for those less fortunate.

After some time, Gorre hung his head. "Apologies, Your Highness."

"Good. All in favor of moving on?"

Even Rutherford nodded in agreement before he stood to take the floor. "It is my duty as the Court of Lords to present the most recent bill brought to a vote: whether or not marital status has a bearing on succession to the throne. The bill has been denied. It is my understanding that Ezra Anaforiene, as the King's only heir, must marry with the intention of possible offspring."

"What does that mean, exactly, Marion?" someone down the table asked.

Rising, Ander ironed out his tunic. The red fabric was at odds with his hair, his muted copper strands dramatically combed over to hide his obvious balding.

"It means," Ander spoke up, "that the tradition still stands. The prince shall

not be permitted to rule alone. To appease the gods, of course.”

*Appease the gods, my ass.*

The gods of Vale—otherwise known as the Fae—blessed certain humans with gifts of magic. It was minor compared to what the gods had. Some magic was more powerful than others, and, like all other things in life, the more powerful the gift, the higher ranking.

The Anaforiene bloodline had been gifted significantly, granting us longer lives and power over specific elements. I’d been blessed with gifts of water and wind. I could control my dagger’s blade with deadly accuracy, but not by a steady hand alone. What’s more, I could command others to do the same. Something we attempted on the Temptress, but the mermaids were too powerful.

I narrowed my eyes. “Since when did you ever care about that, Ander? We’re not the religious zealots of the Eastern Dominion. We can break traditions.”

Rutherford sighed, coming to Ander’s rescue. “Do not speak so negatively of our enemy’s religious practices. We may not believe in them ourselves, but they can be respected in many regards.”

I stood from my seat, pointing to the map before us. “Are you forgetting they kill others in the name of the king of Paglon? That they stake people on the city gates? They are murderers. They practice evil and mask it as virtue.”

Rutherford raised a gray brow. “Does King Zakheus send men to die at the hands of sinister mermaids? As far as I’m concerned, I see no difference.”

“You son of a bitch.” I flung myself at Rutherford, but Ander and Gorre held me back. “Don’t ever compare me to that wretch of a man who thinks himself a god. I am nothing like him.”

“Order! Order!” my father yelled. “Everyone, sit. What’s done is done.



Marriage is without question.”

Marriage wasn't the issue for me—it was marrying out of desperation. I could do more as king unwed than I ever could with a wife. Growing up, I saw my father sacrificing either too much or too little for our family; I didn't want to be that kind of father or that kind of husband. I refused to marry just to be the figurehead of the Western Dominion's monarchy.

I sank back in my seat. “So, what are we to do? Let me guess: host a ball to find me a wife?”

Seriously, who the fuck came up with these traditions? With the dominion as weak as it already was, the last thing on my mind was finding a bride. On our left, we were cornered by mermaids, and on our right, the creatures of the Moaning Hills.

“That is a *lavish* idea!” Priscilla squeaked in excitement.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

It was a lavish waste of time.



## CHAPTER 15

### AMARIS

I couldn't have been more pleased with what Lana picked for me to wear. She must've been proud as well, because her face would have put the suns' light to shame as she trotted arm-in-arm with me. Even my shoes were a perfect choice, though she noticed my stumbling and rushed to lend me her arm.

The softest emerald green material—a fabric Solana referred to as velvet—cascaded across the floor with pastel green threading together on the skirt to resemble a garden. The pattern was beautiful, enough to steal my attention away from my unstable knees.

My anxiety quickly melted away when we reached our destination. Terrifying stone stairs jutted one by one out of the wall, moving as if by some invisible force. One wrong step or malfunction in the magical contraption, and my face—along with the two guards in front of me—would be plastered on the floor.

Around and around we traveled, until stone once again met the ivory marble of the palace floor. “Well, now I can’t feel my arm,” Solana murmured, her lacquered lips quirking up in amusement.

My face skewed in horror. “I’m sorry, I—”

Solana waved her hand, dismissing me. “Just keep your eyes on the ground, will you? You’re going to trip if you aren’t careful.”

We twisted through the hallways, hooking a left and then a right, only to make three more turns, which led me to conclude they were intentionally trying to confuse me so I couldn’t replicate their footsteps. Little did the guards know that with each stride, I became increasingly more aware of my depleting strength. One more fruitless circle around the castle walls, and I would need to be carried into the dining hall.

After what felt like ages, we sat in front of a set of doors as tall as the ceiling. The leading guard swung the doors open with a strong push.

A long, expensive rug rolled out into the dining hall. At the center, the king of the Western Dominion greeted us. Black, messy curls decorated the top of his head, the sides cropped almost close enough to see his scalp. He was handsome, his face an echo of his son’s sharper features. The shadows under his eyes were more prominent with his age, a hint of gray spotting his beard.

Silver armor parted like a book, moving to my right and left in perfect unison. They bent low in militant synchronization. They must’ve practiced bowing in the mirror, too.

Solana gave my arm a quick squeeze before following behind the guards, dropping into an elegant curtsy. Once finished, she bounced on the balls of her toes, giving me a wink as she made her way to the side of the hall.

Now, it was my turn.

I shook from the tips of my fingers all the way to my knees. Even my voice

sounded wobbly as I stated, “I am Amaris Strauhn, born somewhere without honor. I traveled here to Erison to take the customs as my own. I pray you’ll welcome me as such.”

Here it was, the final test. I grabbed at the thick hem of my gown and crossed one foot over the other. Holding my core tight, I pressed down toward the floor and counted to three in my head.

One. I imagined Solana, how she gracefully sprung herself upward.

Two. Halfway there.

Three.

I rose like a dolphin springing out of the water. Before I knew it, I had righted myself, coming face-to-face to a set of gorgeous hazel eyes. They glowed in the firelight, trapping the flames around the dining hall inside like a prism. He smiled at me, but it didn’t quite ring genuine.

As if meeting me for the first time, Ezra bowed his head. Save for his eyes, there wasn’t a single trace of how he had shattered me hours ago, leaving me alone to pick up the pieces. He took my hand gently and kissed it. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Strauhn.”

Did he seriously kiss my hand? What kind of weird custom was *that*?

“Amaris Strauhn.” The King smiled slightly at me. “Welcome to Erison. Let us celebrate your journey from the sea, and the phenomenal tale of your survival. Feel free to join us as we dine tonight.” He gestured to the table to our right. “Please, sit.”

As if on cue, the room filled with churning excitement. The doors to the kitchen opened, and a steady stream of servers poured into the room. Some carried covered platters with elaborate silver lids, while others rushed by with pitchers of various liquids. The servers gave two men a wide berth as they carried in a huge, charred animal.

I sat where I was directed; to my right sat Solana, who was already deep in conversation with the woman next to her. Across the table was Ezra, though I only saw his upper half. The large—and hopefully dead—carcass sat between us, and he made no effort to look me in the eye.

The King spread his arms wide to begin a prayer to a far-off god of food and fruitfulness. I took the opportunity to peek out from under my lashes to take in the nobles around me.

They all wore formal attire, but nothing so incredibly ostentatious that I felt out of place. The men wore stately tunics of rich blues and silver, inlaid with gold or bronze stitching. The moss maidens wore dresses like mine: a form-fitting bodice, flowing free at the skirt. It was so unlike my father's court, where they wore exotic tops that exposed more skin than covered, with gaudy jewelry that embellished their waists, hair, arms, and tails.

The seat opposite the King lay empty, meaning one of two things: either the Queen found dining with a washed-up nobody unworthy of her time, or, as in my family dynamic, she was no longer living.

The King ended his pious invocation, and the room swelled with lively gossip and laughter.

“Mulled wine or champagne?” a server asked, pitchers at the ready.

I hesitated, unsure of which I'd like. I honestly didn't know anything about either liquid: I always snatched whatever was being passed around at the receptions back home.

“Oh, she will be taking the wine, Sandra.” Solana leaned toward me, as if we were sharing a secret. “It is literally to die for.” She winked at me before diving back into her conversation.

“Miss Strauhn, is it?” An older gentleman with gray hair peered at me. His nose was crooked, like it had been broken and wasn't set properly. His

weathered, chalky skin seemed to permanently hang in a frown. “Do you not have wine in the east?”

My heart beat uncontrollably. I had never traveled outside Mermaid’s Cove, let alone to the other side of the realm. I had no idea what kind of customs they had, what their choice of drinks were. How the hells was I supposed to answer any questions tonight?

I straightened my back, steeling myself for the incoming interaction. “No, my lord. I am not much for alcohol.”

That was a lie straight from the seventh hell, but this man didn’t have to know that.

“Pity,” he said cynically. “This wine is specific to the east—the way they ferment it is completely different from ours here in the western world. I can’t say I enjoy it more than ours, but it’s a delicacy. These bottles are thousands of years old.” He held his wine glass in the air. “Let us toast: to good wine and visitors from the east.”

Everyone drank to the toast, and I had hoped that was the end of our conversation, but alas, I wasn’t so lucky.

“So rude of me to forget. My name is Marion Rutherford of Zhargen. I look forward to getting to know you during your stay.”

A pianist filled the gaps of silence with a lovely melody as people grabbed their utensils and dug in. Awkwardly, I clutched the golden handle of what appeared to be a small trident. Mirroring the others, I thrust the weapon into the only part of my meal that looked remotely familiar to me: fish.

The meal consisted of blackened tuna, a mound of a thick white substance covered in a brown gravy, and an assortment of vegetables I had never seen before. I drank enough of my wine to take the edge off the conversation,

thankful that most of the attention wasn't on me. Occasionally, Lord Rutherford stole glances in my direction, leaving me unsure of my hands.

“Miss Strauhn, if you don't mind me asking, what part of the east are you from?”

I said the first city I could think of. “Valleydale.”

“Lovely city, although too entirely close to the Scorched Plains, if you ask me. Tell me, what are your parents doing these days?”

Easy. I didn't have to lie for this question.

“My father is back home with my siblings. We lost contact when I began my travels. My mother passed away giving birth to me.” My father had hated me because of it, too.

“I'm sorry to hear that. What does your father do?”

“Fisherman,” I said, gulping down the remnants of my wine. The server came by immediately to replenish it, thank the gods.

Lord Rutherford frowned in discontent. “Interesting occupation for a city that doesn't have much access to a large body of water.”

“He didn't spend much time at home,” I answered, which seemed to satisfy Lord Rutherford's suspicions.

“How long will you be here in the castle?” the lady in conversation with Solana earlier asked, saving me from more of Lord Rutherford's interrogation.

I hesitated, but thankfully, down the table, the King cleared his throat. “Until she decides she is ready to leave, Priscilla. We are in no hurry to be rid of her.”

She squealed loudly, a piercing sound I would pay to never hear again. “We never have visitors! It will be fun to have ladies in the palace, don't you agree? Other than me and Lucina, there aren't any female members of the

council, and it is dreadfully boring to be in a room full of men.” She said the last word with such distaste, I almost laughed.

If men were anything like males from Mermaid’s Cove, I sympathized with her.

“I’m Priscilla.” She stuck out her hand to me, knocking over a glass of red wine onto the tablecloth as she went. Servers dashed to clean up the mess, and one grabbed the fallen glass to replenish it.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Priscilla said, kindly dismissing the man.

“You’re not drinking tonight? Are you sick, Pris?” Ezra grinned.

The female’s olive skin deepened a shade darker as she smiled in embarrassment. “Well, I wasn’t going to call attention to myself tonight with our new guest, but…” She cast me an apologetic glance, but I couldn’t have been more relieved that the attention was away from me. “Izan and I are expecting!”

Solana jumped up and down in her seat. “Congratulations! That’ll be such a surprise when he returns home from his journey.”

“Believe me, it was a surprise to me as well,” Priscilla chuckled, placing a hand on the tiny swell of her belly.

“Congratulations to the new Mayawell,” the King smiled, turning to me to explain. “Izan has been away journeying to the Moaning Hills. I’m sure you know about the disappearances near the borders.”

The Moaning Hills were the mountain range separating the Western Dominion from the Eastern. I hadn’t heard of disappearances, but I had basically been living under a pearl rock for the past eighteen years.

“Disappearances?” I breathed. “How many?”

“Thousands. Very few have made it out alive, and fewer than that can speak of their experience. Now, it’s starting to infiltrate whole villages,” Ezra



explained, leaning back in his chair.

I shivered. *Whole villages?* Why was Izan and his group of men traveling there then?

“Being from the east, it’s strange you aren’t aware, Miss Strauhn. News of the attacks has been posted all over the town squares.” Lord Rutherford’s tone was almost accusatory.

I saw red. “Lord Rutherford, I am neither an eastern wine expert nor a news reporter. I am not up to date on the most recent happenings of the Eastern Dominion, and I do not wish to be interrogated about my upbringing. It isn’t pleasant for dinner talk, and I do not wish to be questioned any longer on a kingdom I don’t give a rat’s ass about.”

The room went deathly quiet, and someone dropped their utensil. My eyes widened with fear, afraid I’d overstepped. I examined the faces at the table, their expressions mirroring my own. Across from me, even Ezra’s lips twitched ever-so-slightly, but by the time I blinked, it was gone.

Laughter burst from down the table, sending my heart jolting from the sudden noise. I searched to see who the sound was coming from, and to my astonishment, the King was clutching his stomach, his eyes brimming with tears. He slapped Lord Rutherford on the back, though he didn’t look pleased in the slightest to be the evening’s entertainment.

“You sure speak your mind, don’t you, Miss Strauhn?” the King chuckled, staring at me with genuine amusement.

I smiled in return, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty.”

“It’s a good quality to have, and it certainly isn’t anything to be ashamed of. Please, Amaris, call me Verin. I am the king of Erison, but I am a man

nonetheless,” the King—Verin—insisted. “Thank you for your honesty. It’s not something many have these days.”

Respect. He didn’t demand it in the same way my father did, with brutality and force. Instead, King Verin spoke with kindness, and his subjects obeyed him without fear. He even spoke to me, an outsider in his kingdom, with joviality and understanding.

“Would you like to journey into town tomorrow, Miss Strauhn? Ezra would be more than happy to show you around and introduce to you the locals.”

Ezra shot him a glare. “Father, we have council tomorrow.”

Priscilla piped up. “Not all day, silly goose. It isn’t until the afternoon. You need a break, Ezra.”

“Priscilla’s right,” Verin said. “You’ve been putting too much on your plate recently. You know how much the townspeople love to see you.”

A muscle in Ezra’s jaw ticked, his knuckles white around his silverware. “I’m sure they’d be flattered to see how our kingdom deals with the current situation, instead of trotting about town like a prince on a date.”

“*Enough.*” Verin held up his hand. “You need time away.”

Ezra pushed back his chair, throwing his napkin on top of his half-eaten meal before stalking out of the dining hall, the room silent in shock.

Solana was the first to speak.

“Verin, I would be more than happy to escort our guest through the city. It seems Ezra has a lot on his mind right now.”

“Thank you for your offer, Solana, but Ezra will go with Miss Strauhn tomorrow. After recent events, he needs to decompress. Something tells me Amaris will be able to help.” Verin gave me a mischievous wink, the grin on his face genuine.

At least someone in the Anaforiene family could stand my existence.

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## CHAPTER 16

### AMARIS

“**R**ise and shine, cupcake. Big day ahead of you!” Solana threw open the curtains and light flooded across the room. I had hoped to sleep straight through the day so I wouldn’t have to face the prince but seeing as Solana had ripped the covers off my bare legs, *that* wasn’t going to happen.

“You have a date with the prince today!” Solana chirped, gesturing to a steaming breakfast tray on my bedside table.

I was going to protest, but the words were lost on my tongue. The most delicious fragrance flooded my senses, causing me to jolt upright. Slivers of reddish-brown meat and fruits sat on fine china, along with a dark liquid in a mug. I picked up each object, sniffing frantically. Where was that amazing smell coming from? I lifted the meat to my nose and sniffed. Jackpot.

I devoured the slice in a single bite. In between my loud chomps of bliss, I asked, “What is this slice of heaven?”

“Bacon? Don’t tell me you’ve never had bacon before?”

I shook my head. I would never leave Erison if I could have this every day for the rest of my life. Never again did I want to live a life without bacon.

“Don’t eat like that around the prince today, or he may think you *are* the pig,” she giggled, though I could tell she was slightly serious.

“What’s a pig?” I questioned, and it sent Solana into fits of laughter.

“*What’s a pig?*” Solana mocked. “Okay, now I’m starting to think you’re not of our realm.”

I laughed to hide my embarrassment. “That makes zero sense, Lana.” I scooped up the blanket that Solana so rudely discarded and wrapped it around my legs again.

“You not knowing what bacon is makes zero sense, Amaris. I know they have bacon in the Eastern Dominion, and pigs.” Solana crossed her arms.

I rolled my eyes before taking another bite of bacon. To exaggerate how much I loved it, I threw myself back on the bed and moaned.

“You go to town with the prince for me; I’ll just stay here with an endless pile of bacon.”

“Get over your obsession, Amaris, we don’t have time!” Solana said, playfully tugging the covers off the bed again.

“Hey!” I yelled, grabbing a pillow and throwing it at Solana’s head.

Solana picked up the pillow and frowned. “You got bacon grease all over the pillow!” She threw it back on the bed, smiling.

I climbed out of my mountain of pillows and strode over to the vanity. Picking up the wooden handle, I began detangling the nest that had formed along the back of my neck.

Solana gasped.

“What?” I asked.

“Your back,” she whispered. Her eyes twinkled with equal amounts fear

and astonishment. “It’s completely healed.”

“Is that not normal for you?”

Solana shook her head.

“Maybe the medicine did the trick.” I shrugged, attempting to conceal my curiosity.

I changed into a human. Shouldn’t my body be healing at the same rate? I made a mental note to wear dresses that concealed my back for a while so no one else would question the oddity.

“Right,” Solana agreed, but she quickly seemed to shake off the curiosity as she looked out the window to the sundial. “Amaris! Bathe, right now.”

“You’re not going to bathe me today?” I frowned.

“It was my understanding, when they said a near-dead woman had washed up, that I’d have an invalid on my hands. It was my job to help, but seeing as you healed practically overnight... I’ll leave you to it.”

“I need help turning on the faucet!” I yelled from the washroom.

“Coming!” Solana replied, jogging to my rescue. “Scratch what I said about having an invalid on my hands.”

I scrunched my nose, raising my voice to mock Solana. “*Funny.*”

Solana stuck out her tongue at me. “Five minutes, tops. I’ll have your clothes ready when you’re finished.”

Just moments later, I donned the ensemble Solana had laid out for me before sitting down at the vanity to braid my hair. Today, I wore a simple white dress paired with a casual leather corset. I was dressed in commoner clothing, nothing more.

A rap sounded on the door as the prince strode in, dressed in a tunic tucked into his belt. His pants clung to his strong thighs, his riding boots stopping just below the knee.

He was easily the most handsome man in Erison. I didn't have to see other men to acknowledge that. Still, if I had never seen the face of Erison's prince, I would walk right past him without making that connection.

A wave of relief came over me. I wouldn't have to pretend to be anyone other than the moss maiden I was. Oddly enough, I felt comfortable with Ezra, regardless of how uneasy I was about spending the day with him. He had promised not to give my secret away, which made him trustworthy to some degree—even if he wasn't that pleasant to be around.

And to prove my point, he made a scene of flashing his dagger underneath his cloak. A simple look of disdain would've sufficed, but Ezra was anything but simple.



## CHAPTER 17

### EZRA

“**H**ow did you sleep?” I asked. I didn’t particularly care; I almost despised small talk as much as I did the company of a mermaid.

“Fine,” she said, clearly as uninterested in conversing with me as I was with her. We made our way down from her tower, her gaze dropping to the moving brick stairs. She furrowed her brows as if in intense concentration. Only once we reached the final step did she ask, “How about you?”

*I dreamed of seeing my friends and family as your kind took them from our ship and drowned them.* “Good.”

“That’s good,” Amaris affirmed mindlessly.

Another painful, long silence stretched between us. She didn’t seem to mind the silence or care where we were headed. Instead, she intently watched her feet as she moved.

“This form of travel is still...*strange* to me,” Amaris explained, her cheeks reddening from the confession.



“You won’t have to worry about that for much longer.” I forced a smile. Gods, this was agony. I didn’t know how I was going to survive the next six hours.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.”

When we reached the stables, I went inside to retrieve my horse. For good measure, I bent down to inspect Ginger's hooves in case she was unfit to ride. Unfortunately, I knew that she wouldn’t be. I had shod her hooves last week.

Unlatching the door, I led her out of the stable. To my disappointment, Amaris wasn’t terrified of Ginger in the slightest. Instead, she strode right up to the horse, her eyes wide in amazement.

“This,” I gestured to Ginger, “is called a—”

“Horse,” the two of us said simultaneously.

My jaw dropped. “How did you—?”

“I was a mermaid for most of my life, Ezra, but I wasn’t born yesterday.”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. “Yet you don’t know how to eat with a fork and knife.”

Amaris’s eyes grew wide. “You noticed that?”

“I’m pretty sure everyone noticed.” I didn’t know if that was true, but I got a small sense of satisfaction when I saw the look of horror on her face.

“Was it that bad?” Color bloomed across her cheeks, and she covered her face with her hands.

“It was pretty bad. You didn’t seem to know whether to use it as a hairbrush or eat with it.”

“Oh *gods*,” she muttered into her hands.

My mouth quivered upward, and I clutched my stomach, trying not to burst out laughing in front of her. Even my bullying had its limits.

After mounting Ginger, I looked down at her expectantly, hardening my face into disinterest. "Well? Are you going to get on?"

Her blush deepened. "I need your help."

"I never thought I'd hear you say those words," I laughed coldly. "But I guess if you can't figure it out on your own, we won't be able to ride into town together. A shame, really."

She sighed, folding her arms across her chest. "I can't help it that your father made us do this together."

"You're wrong." Dismounting Ginger, I closed the distance between us. "You could've just stayed where you belonged. You had no right coming here."

"Some prince you are," she spat. "The true integrity of a prick, through and through."

"I don't care what you think of me." With a lazy shrug, I pivoted, pulling Ginger by her reins in the direction of the stable.

"Yeah, I got that." Amaris jogged to keep up with me, blocking me from moving forward.

I sucked in a slow, long breath. "Get out of my way."

"Or what?" She raised her voice. "*Or what*, Ezra? Will you hurt me?"

I steeled my expression into boredom, "You're my enemy. I'm sure when the time is right, that may happen, provided that the Court of Lords doesn't find you out before then."

Amaris side-stepped me once more, grabbing the edge of my tunic. I hated to admit it, but her touch sent chills down my spine. If she were any other woman I was attracted to, I wouldn't have any problem saddling her on this horse in front of me and kneading the delicate spot between her thighs as we

rode. But this was Amaris, my enemy. My tormentor. I shouldn't want her close to me.

Even so, I wanted her too fucking much.

“Gods, you are the worst!” she shouted. “Why the hells are you like this?”

The horrors from the shipwreck flashed in my mind, and whirled on her. “Don’t you fucking dare. You don’t get to ask me that when your kind is the single-most reason seventy-five men died. My best friend died because of you.”

She flinched, and I almost regretted what I said. Then, I remembered who I was speaking to. I continued, “If anyone should ask that question, it should be *me*. So why, Amaris, why the hells are *you* like this?” Now I was the one shouting, my vision blurring with rage that had been building up for a week now, maybe longer.

They’re the reason we’re trapped, but my father had me out frolicking around town with a bloody *mermaid*, the one thing stopping us from using our ships. Of course, he wasn’t aware of that minor detail. Still, it was an odd request, to ask this of me, to show a stranger the city.

“I didn’t mean—” She let out a slow breath, as if contemplating her next words. At last, she abandoned them, throwing her hands up in frustration.

“Whatever. I—I meant your heartlessness towards me.”

“And what about the mermaids’ heartlessness?”

“The fact that you’re still breathing is proof I am not like the rest of my kind.”

That wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough to bring Fletcher back. *I* wasn’t enough.

“I don’t care.” My nostrils flared. “I don’t owe you anything. I didn’t ask you to save me. A monster is still a monster, no matter your skin.”

Guilt stabbed my heart like the sharpest dagger the moment I said those words. She backed away from me looking so hurt, so godsdamned human, that even I was fooled by the tears flooding her eyes. Her soft features contorted into pain, her bottom lip quivering.

“Why didn’t you kill me with your stupid dagger when you had the chance?”

She didn’t wait for a response before pushing past me and walking the dirt path back up to the palace. I almost followed her, but I stopped myself. Once again, she had left me powerless to make a decision.

Isn't this what I had wanted, though, for her to stay away from me? So why was I contemplating chasing her down and asking for her forgiveness? Why had I even felt guilty for the way I spoke to her at all?

It was as if a small part of me was protective of her, but why?

I could've had her executed the moment I recognized her at my father's feet, yet I'd chosen to spare her just as I did the night of the shipwreck. I hesitated to kill her because from the moment I saw her, I *knew*, and in a moment of weakness, I lowered my weapon.

I couldn’t tell her why. Not now. Not ever.

On that starless night, something deep within my soul had sparked. A single word came to mind and perhaps for the first time, I was able to understand the meaning.

Crossed.



## CHAPTER 18

### AMARIS

**M**y body was shaking so violently, I collapsed on the stairs to my room. I didn't care what the guards thought of me as I slammed the door shut.

If the King wanted to reprimand me for not spending time with Ezra, I would tell him he raised a self-absorbed ass. The apple fell very far from the tree. And despite what Ezra may have believed, I knew very well what both of those things were.

I threw myself onto my bed, burying my face into the pillows to soak up my tears. To hells with the guards standing watch outside my door. Let them hear my sobs. They could tell Ezra, for all I cared.

*A monster is still a monster, no matter its skin.*

He didn't care if I cried, hated his guts, or jumped face-fucking-first out the tower. I couldn't convince him I was different even if I tried. It didn't matter that I had saved him from Serena. My near-death experience had been in vain.

Ezra was the only human who knew what I was, and if this is how he received me, how was I supposed to love my mortal enemy and be loved in return?

Maybe that was the reason Nephtali sent me here: to prove it is an impossible task. Humans and mermaids will forever be mortal enemies. At least he hadn't tried to kill me. Not yet, anyway.

Solana cracked the door open, carrying her normal tray with coffee and the canister of medicines, which had significantly decreased from yesterday.

"Rough day?" Solana asked in a low whisper.

I didn't move from my spot on the bed, my head still sandwiched between two pillows.

The bed shifted under Solana's weight. "I'm sorry," she sighed. "I hoped that taking you into town would help get his mind off the kingdom for a little while. He needs a break."

"He *needs* to quit acting like a dick," I mumbled.

Solana chuckled, crossing her ankles. "Yeah, that too. Give him time, Amaris. He's very protective over his kingdom and those he loves."

"I asked him how to mount a horse, Lana. You would've thought I was asking him to hang the moon for me." I rolled onto my back, hugging the pillow I had placed over my head.

"Well, that's a little...excessive."

"So yeah, I think it's probably a little more of a personal vendetta."

"Maybe." Solana's brows furrowed. "But what reason would he have to be cross with you?"

*Maybe the fact I was a mermaid.*

"I don't know," I lied. "Maybe he just thinks I'm here to hurt Erison and he feels threatened by that."

“What are you here for, then?” Solana asked.

I huffed, searching the room as if the right words were somehow hidden in a corner. How much would I be willing to tell her? Could I trust her? “To be happy,” I answered, my voice cracking slightly at the confession.

Even as I said the words, it felt like an impossible dream.

“Well, my last patient of the day is about—” Solana’s gaze dropped to the sundial in the garden outside. “—ten minutes away from being over. I’m not the prince of Erison, but it would be my honor to show you around some of my favorite places.”

A grin spread across my lips. “You have no competition, trust me. You could take me on a dip in the Sapphire Sea and that would be more fun than being with him.”

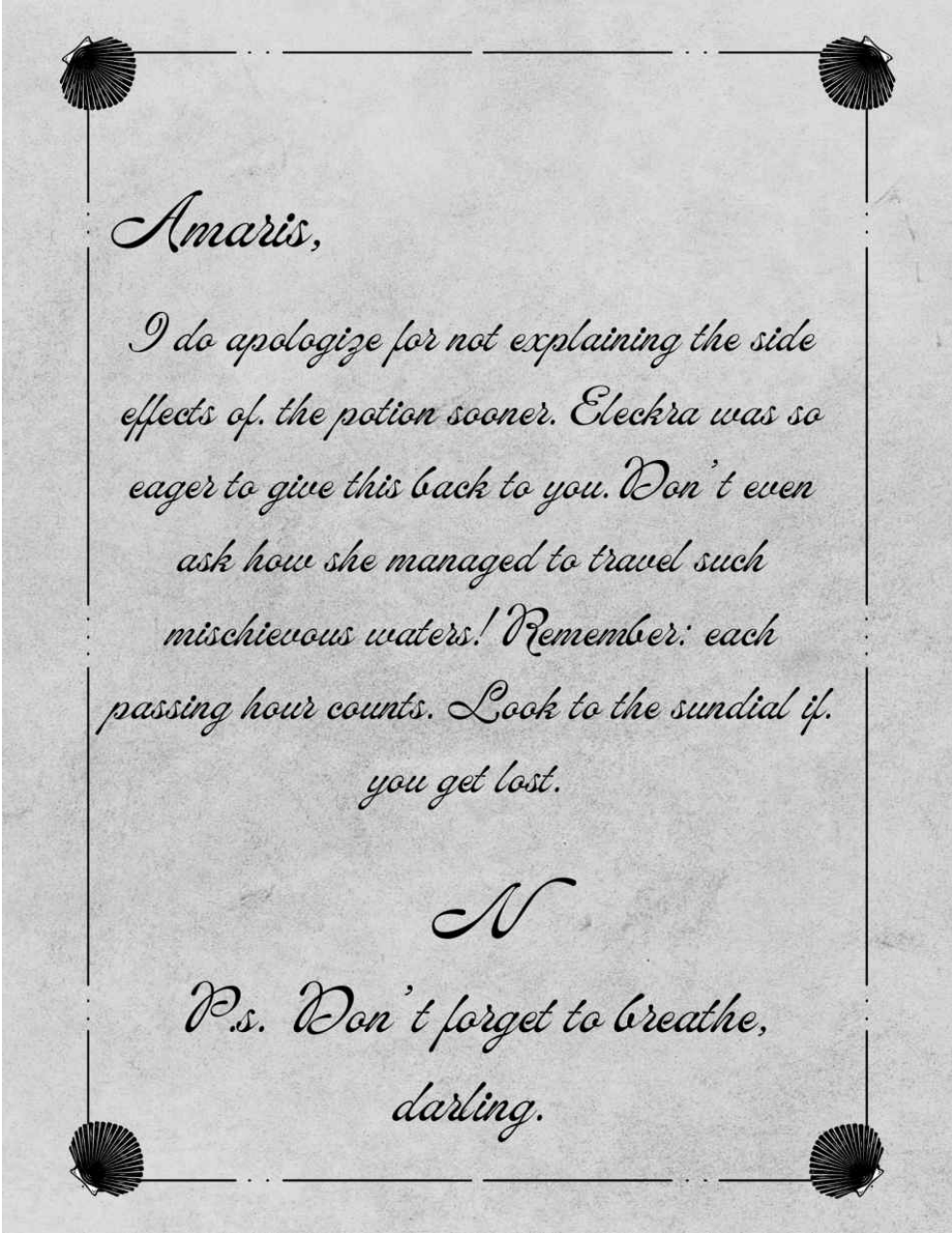
Solana threw her head back, laughing. “We’ll see about that. Let me go grab my cloak. I’ll be back up here in five.” Solana stood, brushing the wrinkles from her dress. “By the way, you received a package. There was no return address, but I sat it on top of your dresser for you.”

Curiosity struck the moment Solana exited the room. *Who could it be from?*

I leapt from my bed, knocking a mound of pillows to the floor. My feet slipped on them, and I plummeted to the marble floor.

“Stupid fucking legs.” I stood, rubbing my ass.

More carefully this time, I approached the vanity to see the gold letters of my name scribbled across an amethyst envelope, a box lying next to it. I tore the paper into ribbons, and when I saw the object, my heart nearly stopped. I didn’t have to touch the handle of the dagger to know who it belonged to. Who the hells sent this to me? With shaky hands, I ripped the envelope open with a sweep of my thumb.



*Amaris,*

*I do apologize for not explaining the side effects of the potion sooner. Electra was so eager to give this back to you. Don't even ask how she managed to travel such mischievous waters! Remember: each passing hour counts. Look to the sundial if you get lost.*

*N*

*P.s. Don't forget to breathe,  
darling.*



Crashing waves of the Sapphire Sea set the pace at which Solana and I strolled together through the heart of the city. I closed my eyes, inhaling the calming aroma of salt mixed with the late spring breeze. Birds chirped from nearby trees, their feathered wings batting in their nests.



Despite already having a better time with Solana, my legs still shook from the encounter with Ezra. At the thought of him, I leaned more into my friend to steady myself.

“There are so many places I could show you today. Where would you like to start?” Solana asked. “There’s the dance studio, a library, and—”

“Library!” I blurted all too eagerly. Eventually, I wanted to do everything, try everything. My adventurous mind practically spun out of control with the possibilities.

There hadn’t been books in the sea, for obvious reasons. There wasn’t a way to protect the pages without them turning to mush. Even with a spell, a book couldn’t remain intact for long, much less a whole trove of them.

Solana nodded, charging ahead to lead the way. We stopped only when necessary, allowing others to jostle around.

The sound of stringed instruments filled the air, open leather cases waiting to be filled with coins in front of them. Vendors of every kind lined the streets, some selling fruits and vegetables, others hawking honey, vibrant flowers, potions, jewelry. What struck me, though, was not the displays themselves, but the people who owned them.

They were happy. Children played on the bustling streets as their parents sipped wine at nearby restaurants. Even the most serious of faces looked relaxed, a stark difference from the scheming faces of mermaids.

My feet throbbed in my slippers. I wasn't sure if I could take much more before I couldn’t stand any longer.

“How much farther to the library?” I asked.

“Just a couple more blocks.”

I had no idea how long a *couple more blocks* was. When Solana pointed to the tall dome of the library in the distance, I realized a *couple more blocks*

was a considerable length away.

“Do you mind if we take a break? These shoes are killing me.”

The healer grinned. “I know just the place where we can rest.”

Pulling me behind her, she led us off the main road and onto a secondary street. Solana hooked a right, leading us down a dark alleyway. Almost instantly, the scene shifted from bright and busy to bleak and dismal. The light of the suns was blocked out, even though it was midday. Behind me, Solana let out an exasperated breath.

Wait. Solana was beside me. Our hands never unlinked from earlier. A quick squeeze confirmed my thoughts, so I peeked over my shoulder to find the alley vacant.

I shrugged it off. As we shuffled our way through the dark, my eyes adjusted slightly. I wondered how blind Solana had to be right now. Mermaids had a better sense of smell than sight, but even so, both senses had to be superior to the average human. Considering my blood was still somehow healing my body at an alarming rate, I wondered if I had managed to keep this strength, too.

Once more, something shuffled from behind and I whirled, readying myself.

Someone was following us.

“What are you doing?” Solana asked.

I gazed around in the pitch black, half-expecting someone or something to attack us. When nothing appeared from the shadowy depths, my shoulders slumped in relief.

“Sorry, I—thought I heard something.”

A barely discernible sign came into view, the words “Past and Present” inscribed in faded, dark ink. On the door, an orange eye greeted us with a

wink. The eye swept side to side, taking in Solana and me before settling on something in the corner of alleyway.

Solana banged on the door, the noise echoing on either side of us like a hollow cave. Several eerie minutes dragged by as we waited. I followed the eye to where it was locked on the space behind us. Either the alley was too dark and the eye saw something we didn't, or the eye was fucking with us.

I hoped it was the latter, but the movement I'd heard when we entered made me think otherwise.

If I hadn't been staring, I wouldn't have caught it. Something moved. The eye on the door widened too, and panic seized me. I was too afraid to move, too afraid to tell Solana, too afraid to run. I prayed to some far-off god that my eyes—and the eye on the door—were somehow being deceived.

Whatever was hiding in the shadows had to be real.

Another movement sent my heart lurching. The dark creature slowly rose from its crouching position near the base of the bricks and my mouth went dry.

By some miracle, I remembered how to breathe. I gripped my friend's arm. "Lana."

At full height, it stood at least twice as tall as me. Its long talons spilled from hands concealed under dark robes.

*"Solana."*

"Ouch! Stop that! What is it?" she shouted, rubbing her arm.

"Lana, we need to leave." I pointed frantically to the corner, begging her to listen. My voice was foreign even to my ears, too shrill with fear.

She squinted at the dark corner. "I don't see anything."

A small, breathy laugh pierced my ears, the noise louder to my heightened senses. Chills raked over every inch of me, freezing my body into solid stone.

We needed to run. We needed to—

Suddenly, the wall behind me gave way, and I fell back. A scream tore from Solana's throat and I tried rushing to my feet. Hands were on me, forcing me upright, and I didn't know whether to fight or not. I should scream for help, rush to Solana's aid, anything other than this.

“Well, that's one way to make an entrance.”

Behind me, an old lady chuckled, tapping me with the tip of her cane. My eyes lifted, and I met Solana's golden ones, her face contorted in concern.

A variety of burning herbs wafted into the alleyway from the shop. It was then that I realized Solana hadn't been the one screaming—it had been me. I fell because the old lady opened the door to Past and Present.

“Come in, come in!” she said, welcoming us with bright eyes and a weathered grin.

Solana, still bent down in front of me, whispered, “Are you okay?”

“I thought I saw something,” I muttered, flashing her a sheepish grin. She hoisted me upright, dusting my bum free of any grime from my third fall of the day.

But who's counting?

Inside, rows of burning candles sat piled on dusty books, crystal balls, and decks of glossy cards. A stick of incense burned in the far back corner of the cramped space, and the putrid smell assaulted my senses as thick smoke rolled from the embers and danced in the dimly lit area.

My mind wandered to the mysterious shadow once more, so I peeled back one of the velvet drapes to look outside. I frowned. The windows were completely boarded up.

“I'm BellaDonna. Is there anything I can help you find?”

I shifted my gaze to the woman, taking her in for the first time. Her hair

was wrapped on the top of her head in a tight bundle, resembling a bird's nest. Her aging body hunched over her cane, and around her frail shoulders, she wrapped a thick wool cloak, despite the Erisian heat.

“I offer crystals, incense, and books ranging from beginner to advanced witchcraft and anywhere in between.” BellaDonna gestured to the oddities in her shop. “I also have a few *spices* that many enjoy in their teas to help with stress.” She gave a mischievous wink, but I stared at her blankly, not quite understanding.

“We heard you offer readings. Is it true you’re a clairvoyant?” asked Solana.

“Hmph. It may be true, depending on how much coin you have.”

“Five sovereigns?”

My eyes widened, turning to Lana. I didn’t know how much that was in Erison’s currency, but I saw the silver she pulled from her cloak. Silver was expensive, above the surface or below.

“You’re in luck. Sit,” she ordered Solana. She whipped behind the table, moving a purple tapestry as she went.

“Oh, I don’t want to be read, madam, but I believe my friend does.” Solana stepped aside and gestured to me. The old woman stared at me, her eyes roaming my body, studying me, watching me.

“Come then, *girl*.” She said it with such emphasis, terror ran sharply through my chest. Somehow, this witch knew what I was.

I obeyed, sitting in the chair opposite BellaDonna. I attempted to conceal my shaky hands under the table as she drew a deck of cards from within her cloak.

“Take the first card from the top of the deck and flip it over,” BellaDonna demanded.

I turned the card over in my hand: a horned dragon with a seven-pointed star in one clawed hand, a key in the other. Reluctantly, I placed the card on the table.

BellaDonna whistled. “Not off to a good start, are we, dearie?”

Solana peeked over my shoulder and swore.

“What does that mean?” I looked wildly between Solana and the clairvoyant.

“That,” the clairvoyant tapped her finger on the card, “is the Leviathan of the seven realms of hell. Guardian of the underworlds.”

All the color drained from my face. “What does *that* mean?”

“You must cut the deck twice more for me to properly explain.”

“I’m not choosing another card. I’m not sealing my fate with any of this,” I said, sliding back from my chair to forfeit the reading.

Solana put a hand on my shoulder. “Amaris, if you stop now, you won’t get a proper interpretation.”

“I don’t give a shit. I’m not inviting the guardian of the *bloody hells* into my life.”

The clairvoyant leaned in, her black eyes peering into mine. “My dear, you already have.”



Fifteen sovereigns and a handful of copper pieces later, we began our journey to the library. “We *have* to try these candies sometime. Do you think BellaDonna was telling the truth about seeing more colors when we take them?” Solana asked enthusiastically.

I snorted. “She told me I made a deal with a devil and that soon, I would face judgment. So, no. I don’t believe half of what came out of that old hag’s mouth. It’s probably licorice laced with poison.”

Solana frowned. “I paid two coppers each for these. I better not have paid for my own death.”

“In that case, we should give them away to people we don’t like and see what happens. Does Ezra fancy licorice?”

“Amaris!” Solana swatted my arm.

“I’m *kidding*; he’s better left alive. I like looking at him too much.”

Solana’s reply was cut short when a male with gray hair and a dark cloak approached us. His tall, slender frame towered over us, his eyes starting down his crooked nose, and I resisted the urge to scowl. Behind Ezra, Lord Rutherford was the last person I wished to see.

“Lady Amaris.” The Lord of Zhargen stood over us like a vulture assessing its prey. I bit my lip, trying to contain the bubble of laughter forming in my throat at the uncanny resemblance. “What a pleasant surprise to see you venturing into town. Without Ezra, as the King ordered.” He forced a smile, although I wasn’t fooled.

“*Ezra*,” Solana cut in, “had other things on his mind than to be nice to our guest. So, I’m giving Lady Amaris a proper tour of Erison.”

“Hmph.” One of Marion’s bushy gray eyebrows lifted in suspicion.

“We’re on our way to the library. We want to arrive in time to see as much as we’d like before supper. So, don’t mind us as we step around...”

“Solana, you know this is not proper without a royal escort, particularly as Miss Strauhn is a potential...*participant* in the upcoming events.”

Solana lifted her chin in defiance. “Thank you for your concern, Marion. Please excuse us.”

“It is Lord Rutherford to you, Solana,” he snarled, but I was surprised to see him step out of the way for us to pass. “I will send a carriage for you at four on the line. Do be mindful to not be late.”

Solana dragged us both to the set of stairs leading to the library doors. “That man creeps me out,” I grumbled. Solana absentmindedly nodded in agreement. “Lana, what did Rutherford mean when he said I was ‘*a potential participant of the upcoming events?*’”

Solana grabbed the handle of the massive door and turned. “It means you’ll receive an invitation to a ball as Ezra’s potential wife.”

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## CHAPTER 19

### AMARIS

“**W**hat the—?” I swore colorfully. “Why in the seven realms of hell would they choose *me*?”

“You haven’t been chosen yet,” Solana corrected. “They are sending invitations to the unwed daughters of nobility and Ezra will get to choose, but the King is fond of you. You held your own against Rutherford *and* made him laugh in the process. I even saw Ezra crack a smile at your comment.”

My heart quickened, wanting to hear more. My voice was a high-pitched shrill. “Really? Why would that be amusing to Ezra, though?”

“Have you met Lord Rutherford? He’s an ass, and he doesn’t necessarily have the cleanest of reputations.”

“*Shh!*” A woman nearby glared at us from over her glasses. She firmly pressed a single finger to her lips, in case the audible warning wasn’t enough. I shot her an apologetic smile before returning to the conversation.

Solana threw one of her long braids behind her shoulder and whispered, “I don’t know the details, but he was courting a commoner from Zhargen, and

the council voted he must marry a noble instead. Six months later, his wife was found in their chambers, dead. She was poisoned, but they never found the killer. To make it even worse—” she leaned in close so no one overheard, “Rutherford didn’t even have the case investigated.”

Cold air prickled at my skin, setting me on edge. “No one questioned it?”

Solana shrugged. “The case was kept under royal lock and key. I don’t even have that kind of access, and believe me, I’ve tried. I do know they’re going to be hosting some sort of ball soon for Ezra to find a wife. I guess you’re one of the contestants.”

Sarcastically, I pressed a hand over my chest. “I’m honored they thought to include me.”

More aggressively this time, the same woman piped up. “*Shh!*”

I shook it off. I had better things to worry about than some zealous reader who clearly didn’t enjoy the company of anyone but her book.

“Ezra can’t take up the throne until his father dies, right? His father isn’t married, so why do they expect Ezra to be?”

“The King’s position in the Western Dominion is either until he passes, or until he passes the crown to the next eligible heir. Verin intends to spend the rest of his life in retirement. It’s often more revered than holding the position until death. History has proven it is far too easy for that kind of power to go unchecked, which I’m sure you’ve witnessed firsthand.” I nodded in affirmation on instinct.

“So, the King plans to give up the throne soon, making Ezra king? If he has the birthright, he doesn’t need to be married, right?”

Solana clicked her tongue in amusement, “So many questions today, Amaris.”

“Sorry,” I blushed.

“The Anaforienes have been in command of the Western Dominion since the Age of Desolation. Their blood is blessed by Lux D’Solois, the Queen of Light. In honor of Her gifting, there must be proof that the blessed Anaforiene blood is passed down from generation to generation through an heir. So, the lords and ladies of the Western Dominion mirror the command, too.”

Solana gave a sheepish smile as she continued, “Not every law is exactly up to date with the world’s standards, but making babies is what makes the realm go around. There are plenty of skeptics, who think it’s a ploy for the Anaforiene family to remain in power. Many don’t want Ezra to take the throne. He’d be one of the youngest kings to rule in a millennium. His father took the throne at thirty-two, and Ezra won’t even be twenty-five until summer.”

“That’s only a few weeks from now,” I pointed out. In fact, the ball would almost be one month to the date since my arrival.

“Exactly; it’s the same day they expect to hold the ball. Can you imagine taking over at our age?”

I let myself imagine it for a moment. It had never been anything I gave much attention to. With five other heirs before me, I had come to accept I would never rule all six seas of Vale. If I hadn’t been disowned, I would have governed a sea, but with five older sisters before me, I was never to be the Queen of it all. Plus, unless my father died, I knew the hells would sooner freeze than for him to give up that kind of power.

A piece of my heart ached that I couldn’t tell my friend about my life. I shook my head. “I can’t imagine it. That’s why I cannot—”

“Ladies, if you don’t be quiet, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” A woman rounded the aisle, shooting daggers at me through her turquoise

readers.

Solana spoke first, “I’m sorry. My friend has terrible manners. It’s embarrassing, truly. We will just be a moment longer.” I flashed a wicked grin at the woman before Solana pulled me from the aisle. Together, we darted away, climbing a set of stairs. Once we were out of earshot, we burst out in fits of laughter.

My breath came up short as we ascended the final stair. It was nothing like I’d ever seen before. Books, top to bottom on every shelf. Some of the spines were old and weathered, wrinkled and thin. Other, more colorful spines enticed me to pick them up and get lost inside the pages.

I studied every book that lined the first section I found myself in: *The Anaforiene Age*, *The First Wizards of Paglon*, *Sea Serpents & Snakes: Vale’s Deadliest, Creepiest Monsters*.

Curious, I picked up the clunky last book and opened it. I thumbed through the yellowing pages carefully, treating the book with ease. There were creatures as mundane as sharks, sea lions, and swordfish. There were mythical hydras, vampire fish, and—

*“Mermaids are one of the most powerful sea creatures. Taking on the form of a human from the waist up, they can be more enticing than a young harlot. Blessed beyond comprehension with beauty and grace, they melt away a mortal man’s soul with a single note.*

*“Bred for sport, they kill their victim by taking men and women from their ships and drowning them while—”*

I slammed the book shut, unable to read anymore. My mind immediately had been transported to the night I met Ezra, making me sick at the thought.

Clutching the book in my hand, I searched the endless shelves for Solana. I found her in a darker section of the library, where many of the lanterns didn’t

quite reach.

“What have you found so far?” I asked.

Solana’s spine straightened, shutting the book with a loud *thump*. She placed the book face-down on the stack of others before she turned to face me.

“Holy gods, Solana! Are you taking all of those?” My eyes flashed wide with surprise.

“I like to read,” Solana shrugged.

“Evidently,” I said, eyeing the generous stack next to her. I gestured to the tome she had placed face-down, “What’s that about?”

“Nothing important.” Solana’s deep skin blushed an even deeper crimson, her voice an octave above its usual soprano.

“Why’d you put it face-down?” I laughed, bending down to read the title. Solana dropped the book in her hand to snatch the other one away from me, but my reflexes were quicker. Flipping it upright, I quoted the title aloud. “*A Fae’s First Time*. Interesting. What’s it about?”

Solana pinched the bridge of her nose. “Tell me you’re not going to make me explain.”

My brows furrowed in confusion, searching between the book and Solana for the answer. I burst out in laughter when my eyes landed on the other book Solana had been so eager to hide from my eyes. The cover revealed a very handsome, *very shirtless* male, the tips of his ears pointing out from beneath his sandy hair.

“What the hells are you reading?” I wasn’t sure if I asked in amusement or interest.

“You’re in the bloody erotica section, Amaris. Can’t you read a sign when you see one?” I followed Solana’s finger as she pointed to the front of the

section. Indeed, a sign had been labeled, “*Erotica.*”

“What are *you* reading?” Solana snatched the book out of my hand, and she swore. “I leave you alone for five minutes and of all the incredible fiction novels here, you get a *textbook.*”

“I didn’t realize there were more *interesting* things to read about, like the size of a fictional male’s penis.” I held up my hands, defending my beloved textbook.

“I’d rather read about a fictional penis than stupid monsters. For gods’ sakes, Amaris, sometimes, I wonder if we’re from the same realm.” She laughed at her own joke, but my eyes grew wide with shock.

Solana didn’t seem to catch my embarrassment and fear as she continued to suggest a couple of her personal favorites: “*The Lady’s Dark Dreams,*” and “*An Affair of Spice and Spite.*”

“Try to say that three times quickly.” Solana winked, handing over the last book to me. I wasn’t sure how much of these I would enjoy, but I promised Solana I would give it a try—so long as the covers didn’t have drawings of naked men on them. Solana dreadfully complied.

We checked out our books from the lady with the turquoise-rimmed spectacles, who glared at me over them. Our friendship was off to a wonderful start.

The carriage pulled around the front of the library right as four bells rang out, just as Rutherford promised. The two of us didn’t speak much on the way back to the castle, as Solana was deeply invested in one of her new books. I attempted to read, too, but my eyes wandered the pages, comprehending nothing at all. Instead, my head swam with thoughts of how different I was from Solana—and not just in our taste in books. Her comment had bred anxiety in my heart. No, it was more than that.

I was *afraid*. I was afraid of the consequences of being found out. If Solana knew what I was, would she reveal my secret? Could I trust her to keep it?

On the most fundamental fronts, I was different. Ezra made it clear that I didn't even know how to use silverware, one of the most mundane tasks for a human. Solana believed I was an oddity.

I hated how insecure I felt in my own skin, but truly, it wasn't my own skin. It was only a matter of time until someone found me out, and when they did, would they call for my blood?

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## CHAPTER 20

### EZRA

**A**maris's voice rang throughout her chamber, stopping the blood inside of my chest. Gods, she had a lovely voice. It was the kind of voice worthy of a song. Perhaps that's why my feet fell into step so quickly toward the beautiful, definitely lethal, tune.

How many men had she lured to their deaths with that same voice? How many people had she drowned at the bottom of the sea?

Scanning the messy room, I searched for a suitable place to sit. To my horror, the bed was the only space vacant of her belongings. I crashed onto the blue silk sheets, folding my hands behind my head. The sweet smell of lavender assaulted my nose, and I shamefully breathed it in. Her clean, captivating voice reverberated off the tall, solid gold ceiling.

*“Make a bargain with the witch,  
That she may grant you one wish.  
Sell your life for just one night,  
And your soul for the right price.”*



*Claiming goodness, she may lie,  
An impossible task, you would die.”*

I ground my teeth so hard, I thought they might crumble beneath the pressure. There was no reason anyone’s voice should be that beautiful. It was surprising to me that the guards standing watch outside her room didn’t barge in and drown themselves in her bathtub. It was a shame such a gift from the gods was wasted on a feral monster.

The ivory door swung open to reveal Amaris, her damp hair tumbling down the curve of her breasts. A stark white towel was wrapped around her like a sinfully short dress, revealing far too much of her slender legs.

*There was no reason for anyone’s legs to be that beautiful, either.*

“Why are you in my bed?” Amaris’ eyes swam with confusion and something else. Nervousness? Desire? Disgust?

I propped myself up on my elbows, allowing myself one final glance at her practically naked body before hardening my eyes in disapproval. She may have been my worst enemy, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t appreciate beauty when it was in front of me.

“Considering a couple of drunk girls trashed the rest of this place, I couldn’t find anywhere else.”

“What did you expect to find in a lady’s room, right as she was coming from the washroom, Ezra?”

“You’re not a lady.”

It was more of a reminder for me than for her.

“Are you serious? You barge into *my* room, and somehow, *you’re* the one insulting me?” Her eyebrow twitched, the way it always did when she got irritated. It was mostly because of me, but I had seen it last night with Rutherford and had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing with her.

“Well, you’re not,” I deadpanned. She tugged on the gemstone around her neck, turning away from me, her naked feet slapping the marble floor as she walked. The towel was too short, exposing a considerable, and quite nice, amount of her ass.

The view from the window suddenly became my new main interest. I had never known how amazing the view was from this room before. Glowing in the moonlight were the waves of the beautiful beachfront. *She* was the reason I couldn’t go out there anymore.

I let that drive my anger. I was afraid of what I may try to do to her right now if I didn’t have something keeping me grounded in that reality.

“What do you want?”

“Plenty of things, I suppose. Why? Do you need ideas for my birthday gift?” I responded coolly.

“You know what I mean.” She rolled her eyes. “Tonight. Why are you here?”

Sitting upright, I lazily stretched out my shoulders. “Oh right, that. I came to escort you to dinner. Father’s orders. Plus, I am to give you this.” I pulled out the invitation from my suit jacket.

Amaris crossed the room to snatch the envelope from my hands. She raised her brow in question. “I’m assuming this is the invitation for the ball, yes?”

“Yes. Every unwed female born from nobility—wait. How do you know about the invitation?”

“Solana. She told me everything.” She crossed her arms, leaning against the door frame. The motion seemed so natural and fluid, so...human, and with her still in that towel...gods help me.

It scared me how much I wanted her. She was the last thing I should want.

“You are to wear black to the ball so I can spot those who are attending for

my hand.”

Amaris scoffed. “And what will you wear, prince? Will you get the choice of what color to wear? I’m surprised you even have to lift a finger to eat, let alone pick out your own attire.”

“I do plenty on my own,” I said. She had to know what she was doing when she cut her smokey gaze to me. I stiffened under the weight of her attention.

“Are you sure you put this together?” She motioned to my chosen outfit.

“Yes.”

“Oh really?” she challenged, sauntering over to where I sat, frozen on the bed.

She leaned down, and I was fully aware of how close she was, how easy it would be to rip off that flimsy towel...

Amaris plucked at my navy coat. “What’s this material called, then?”

I steeled my expression into hatred. “Don’t touch me.”

*Please don’t stop touching me.*

My supposed anger only seemed to ignite her more. She flashed me a wicked grin. “You don’t know, do you?”

We were so close, I could see the dainty freckles across her high cheekbones and slender nose. Her full lips were always stained with crimson—I would only have to lean slightly forward to taste them...

“Dammit, we don’t have time for this!”

Shooting to my feet, Amaris was forced to back away from me. I stormed over to the vanity, not for any particular reason than to get away from her and my incredibly wrong thoughts. “Just get dressed, okay? I don’t give a shit what material it is.”

Amaris’s reflection came into view in the vanity mirror, still in that

fucking towel. “Only if you ask nicely.”

As soon as she said it, I knew those words would haunt my dreams. I gripped the chair so hard, I swore I left permanent indentations in the wood.

“*Please,*” I said.

“There we go.” She gave me a mocking smile before turning on her heels.

After what felt like an hour of agony, she stopped digging through her wardrobe and pulled on the dress she’d chosen. Before I thought it couldn’t get any worse, she discarded the towel straight to the floor.

I snapped my head around and began examining the beauty products, trying to calm my raging heart. But all I could think about, all I could imagine, was her, naked, right behind me. The temptation was too much. It only made me hate her more, for the way that she used her beauty and sensuality against me.

When I lifted my head back to see her reflection again, my lips parted open. A navy dress hugged her body in all the right places. The most surprising thing should have been the slit, revealing her incredible legs, but it wasn’t. No, her dress matched my coat perfectly. She didn’t just coordinate with me. The shades of blue were identical.

“Velvet,” Amaris whispered.

“I’m sorry?” I realized how to speak again.

She gestured to my coat once more. “That’s the name of the material of your coat.”

I looked down at my coat and cracked a smile. “Oh. Right.”

The bells of the sundial rang outside. “We better go,” I said. “It’s five. After what I heard in the washroom, something tells me you won’t want to miss tonight.”

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## CHAPTER 21

### AMARIS

I had taken one look at his dark navy coat and known exactly what I was going to do. If Ezra wanted to find all the ways to humiliate me, well... two could play at that game. Since his court of royals decided to make me one of his suitors, I might as well look the part standing next to him.

But what I didn't expect were two things. First, his usual scent of citrus had been mixed with the musky hint of something else: arousal. Had he wanted me? If he did, he had an odd way of showing it.

Which brought me to my next thought: he *smiled*. A genuine one. The moment quickly expired when he opened the doors to my room, stiffening back into a sculpture of hard lines and stoic demeanor. He hadn't looked back once to check on me as we traveled down the long, miserable stairs.

My dinner was served by Sandra, a moss maiden dressed in simple garments. She uncovered the platter to reveal a sizzling slab of meat on a bed of rice, seasoned greens, and fresh plum. I thanked the woman's familiar face as she scurried back into the kitchen. A violinist struck a chord, enveloping

the air in a sweet ballad. Then, the bright tone of a soprano filled my ears to accompany the stringed instrument. My jaw nearly dropped, but I managed to hold it in check. I didn't even realize there was music this beautiful above the surface.

Priscilla leaned in, squealing her excitement. "Isn't she wonderful? I can't believe Verin hired Marcella Lovelace to be here tonight. Solana is going to be pissed when she finds out she missed her performance."

I held back a laugh, thinking of Solana with her pile of borrowed books. "Don't you worry about her, Priscilla. She's very entertained tonight."

"You went with her to the library today, didn't you?"

"I'm assuming she does that often?"

Priscilla gave me a pointed look. "I'm surprised there are even books left in that dark and dusty section for her to read. She burns through a new one every other day. I can't say I blame her. Romance is always better in books, especially the smut." She winked, leaving me unsure of what to say next.

I had nothing to compare it to besides my casual fling with Morgin. We had been nowhere near calling each other steadies, let alone making it public knowledge. Plus, I'm sure having sex with a pufferfish would've been more enjoyable than that experience. Yes. The books had to be better.

The song ended and nobles clapped, expressing their gratitude. I joined them all too eagerly—this girl had deserved every ounce of the accolades. She had the voice of a mermaid.

"Solana told me you were quite the singer yourself." Priscilla bumped me with her shoulder, and I nearly choked on my wine.

Ezra cleared his throat. "She is quite terrible, Priscilla. We should leave it up to the professionals like Madame Lovelace."

My cheeks burned. Why had I not pushed him down the stairs when I had

the chance?

“That’s not what I was led to believe, considering you barged into my room practically begging to hear more,” I shot back. He could burn in the seventh hell if he thought could insult me and get away with it. He had no right to embarrass me in front of people I hardly knew.

Ezra laughed, and I tightened my grip on the knife in my hand. “I came into your room to kill the screeching cat before I realized it was you. Now, please, let’s enjoy our guest as she continues singing for us.” His hazel eyes locked on the woman’s lovely face, and he smiled apologetically, as if I were a child whose dream needed to be crushed first for the show to go on. I bit on my cheek so hard, I tasted blood.

Had he really come into my room to stop me from singing? I knew I was good, but I hadn’t been particularly serious in the tub earlier. After all, I wasn’t expecting anyone to be listening to me. Did he have to be so embarrassing?

Priscilla laid a hand on top of my shaking one. “I’m sure it isn’t that bad, Amaris. I’m terrible at almost everything I do, and everyone tells me I do a wonderful job. I’m sure if you were that bad, he wouldn’t be so harsh about it.”

“I’ve had plenty of dreams shattered for me before. I simply was telling the truth so she wouldn’t get any ideas of trying to perform and make a fool out of herself. I was only trying to help.” Ezra shrugged. He crossed his strong arms and leaned back in his seat to admire the gorgeous performer.

Without thinking twice, I sprung from my seat, sending it toppling to the floor. The violin came to a shrieking halt, along with the voice accompanying it. I drank from my goblet of wine, downing the remaining bits before stomping over to the violinist, making sure to swing my ass as I went.



If Ezra wanted a show, he'd sure as hells get one.

Taking the platform, I dismissed the singer with a wave of my hand. *Madam Lovelace* may be world-renowned above the surface, but she wasn't me.

Her large blue eyes widened with shock at the King. My mouth twitched upward. Was there a twinkle in his eye?

I snapped my fingers at the violinist. "Do you know '*The Tempest of the Night?*'" The violinist swallowed, his white hair quickly moving up and down as he nodded in affirmation. I smiled. "Good. You may begin whenever you're ready."

His shaky hands lowered the bow onto the strings, and I was surprised the notes didn't waver. As soon as the music spilled into the hall, the violinist seemed to relax a little. I drew a breath, eager for the same kind of release.

Music was the only thing I was good at. It gave me purpose. I would not allow him to take that privilege away from me. I winked at the bastard as I parted my lips. "This is for my dear friend, Ezra, who loves to hear me sing so much, he tried sneaking into my quarters to listen."

Ezra stuck a vulgar finger at me, and I smiled sweetly at the prince. "If you wanted to hear me sing so badly, *darling*, all you had to do was ask."



## CHAPTER 22

### EZRA

***H**er voice echoed in my mind, enchanting me. Enticing me. Nauseating me.*

*My thundering heart slammed between the bars of my ribs as I stepped toward the singing woman. Amaris was still in that damn matching dress. Her leg peaked out from the dangerously high slit, sending my thoughts feral with desire.*

*Inching closer to her, I brushed the long tendrils of her ginger hair away from her slender neck. Her emerald-green eyes fluttered shut, but she continued singing, her song growing breathier, more pleading, as she gave in to my touch.*

*The thin bridge of her nose was dotted with the daintiest freckles, and at last, I looked to her full lips. I wanted to know how hers felt on mine, to smell the lavender of her hair and skin.*

*Amaris tilted her head towards the moon, beckoning for me to close the distance. Her pulse quickened as I slid my teeth across her neck, a small*

*moan escaping her throat. The sound was my undoing. Tangling my hands into her thick hair, I pulled her flush against my hard body. She breathed her sensual song into my ear as waves of sweltering heat coursed through me like a spreading fire.*

*When my lips found hers in the dimly lit chamber, my breathing grew heavier. Hungrier.*

*“Only if you ask nicely,” she breathed. I nearly took her right then and there. For her, I would do anything. She would never have to question how much I wanted her.*

*And Gods, I wanted her.*

*I buried my face into her breasts, kissing her skin, grazing my teeth over the softest parts of her flesh. She didn’t smell sweet like I expected. Instead, she smelled of copper, the salt of the Sapphire Sea.*

*My eyes opened, widening in horror at what I saw. I pulled away from Amaris, only to find it wasn’t her. The music turned sour, as if all the wrong notes were played. The room spun and my stomach churned, except we were no longer in the dining hall—we were on the ship.*

*A line of gills formed along Amaris’s neck and cheekbones. Her eyes darkened with lust and murder as long claws extended from her webbed fingers. She slashed my neck open in a single swipe and I fell back, slamming into something hard.*

*Fletcher’s unseeing eyes stared up at me, blood pooling from his freshly sliced neck. For miles, the water was littered with floating dead bodies of my crew. I saw their faces, charred from the fire, still bent in agony from their screams. Others were half-eaten, abandoned for the next predator to take whatever flesh remained.*

*She dove after me, dragging me with her to the bottom of the sea. The*

*world grew black as I bled out alongside my crew.*



I grabbed at my neck, ensuring it was still intact. Breathing in deeply, I counted to three before releasing it in a whoosh. I repeated the steps, attempting to calm myself, convinced of being attacked moments prior.

Shaking the fear from my body, I traveled to the bathing chamber and started the faucet, but I didn't get inside. I never would again. Since the night of the shipwreck, I rinsed myself off with a rag like some whore after a finished task. Kneeling beside the basin, I cupped the warm water in my hands and began to scrub away the grime of my most recent nightmare.

I could still taste the blood. I *felt* the slash as her razor-sharp nails tore into my flesh. I saw the bodies—Fletcher's body. Fletcher, who I had been friends with for years. He loved the sea as much as I did. We met one morning when I was ten or so. I had been playing in the sand near the shore when Fletcher sat down and offered to help me build a sandcastle. He used my home as a guide, shaping a smaller version of it in the sand. He had told me how lucky I was to have the life that I did. Even then, I wasn't sure if I agreed with him.

Every time we played, new bruises and scrapes appeared on his skin, and at the time, I thought he was a clumsy kid. Now, I knew his wounds were from something else.

When we were eighteen, he didn't even cry when his father died. After the funeral, we had a couple drinks, cheering Fletcher's freedom from his father.

His freedom had meant nothing. He died because of me. They had all died because of me. I was the one who was foolish enough to send them. I was the one who trained them, commanded them, only to watch them die. Their blood was on my hands, and no amount of soap and water could cleanse me of it.

I laid back in my bed, ignoring my body's aching desire for release. After dreaming of Amaris again, I was surprised I hadn't woken with more of a mess to clean than just sweat. My body wanted her, there was no denying that. My mind and soul did, too, and I knew better than to believe it was just because she was an untouchable mermaid-woman.

I recalled the story my mother would read to me before bed. I knew the words from memory. Slowly, my mind began to drift as I turned the pages in my mind, my body finally lax enough to rest.

I shot up in bed.

In the realm of Vale, it was common law that upon the marriage of two nobles of different kingdoms, a treaty would be signed stating that while the marriage stands, neither kingdom could oppose the other.

Amaris's father was the King of the Seas. If we could keep it secret long enough for me to marry her, it would seal the treaty between both kingdoms. Mermaids would legally be bound to let Erisian ships pass without conflict. The fate of Erison hung on this bit of information.

I was going to ask a bloody mermaid to marry me.

Gods strike me dead.



## CHAPTER 23

### AMARIS

**M**y skin prickled with excitement as I assessed my reflection in the mirror. Vines of black lace snaked from the floor up to the neckline of my dress. When I turned to see the back of the dress, I sighed with relief. The same fabric webbing covered the scars on my spine, just as I requested.

The *ding* of the sundial rang out seven times and Solana swore. “Are you finished yet, or are you still admiring how great you look in your dress?”

Smiling, I said, “Nope, I’m not finished yet. Why? Was there something you needed?”

“Yes, actually,” Solana said. “Can you help me tie my corset?”

I frowned, hating the idea of having to walk away from the mirror. I did it anyway, though, grabbing the two strands of navy silk from Solana’s dainty hands and shoving them into their respective eyelets. After I was done, Solana moved to the mirror to make her own finishing touches. “Now, grab your mask so we can head downstairs,” she said.

“You go on, I’ll be just a moment.”

Solana shrugged, turning from the room. Once I heard the door click shut, I scurried over to where the dagger lay hidden underneath the couch cushions and attached it to the straps of my garter belt.

Tonight was Ezra's birthday, and despite how much I didn't care for him, I couldn't staunch the excitement that bubbled up inside me. A part of me couldn't wait to see his reaction when I told him how it had found its way home.



I had taken one look at the handsome man at the center of the ballroom and felt instantly sick to my stomach. The space was spilling over with dark petals of expensive black gowns. Dressed in gold and beige, Ezra was at the very core of the withering flower.

He danced with the performer from last week, Marcella Lovelace, who also dressed in midnight black, her choice of jewelry a set of authentic pearls. Even for royalty, pearls were a rarity, sacred among the mermaids.

I looked down at my own dress and frowned. There was nothing special about me compared to her. No one knew of my bloodline or accomplishments. I had nothing anymore, yet I was here to dance with the prince and play into formalities? What good would it be if I knew I wasn't going to be chosen? I shouldn't have come here. This was a mistake.

"Amaris, you don't look too well. Is everything okay?" Solana put her hand on the back of my arm to steady me. Sometimes, my legs still were wobbly, and right now, they felt oddly like the gelatinous dessert served at dinner last night.

"I'm fine." I bit my lip. Ezra threw his head back at something Marcella whispered in his ear, and I gripped my mask so tight, I heard a *snap*.

The stem of my mask was broken in two. It was still long enough for me to hold up to my face, but I was tempted to throw the damn thing away entirely. It was a poor attempt at concealing my identity from Ezra anyways.

I squared my shoulders. One last time. I would play the game one last time before I kissed my days of living in this palace goodbye. One more time before I would move into an apartment in the city. That way, Ezra would never have to cross paths with me again.

And then what?

A tall male masked in crimson stepped into my line of sight. He held out his hand. "Would you care to dance, my lady?"

After taking it, I stole a backward glance in Solana's direction as she approached the dance floor with her own male in tow. She gave me a reassuring wink before her petite body was enveloped in her partner's arms.

My partner turned and drew me close. His deep blue eyes roamed over me with desire, sending me blushing under my mask. He took the first step, leading me in the solid sway of the music. I stepped on his toe, and he grimaced. I blushed harder.

"Sorry," I breathed. "I'm practically the worst dancer you could've chosen tonight."

He smirked. "There are worse things to be than a bad dancer. Just follow my lead. I like to take control, in more ways than one."

"Is that so?" I raised a brow. "I'm intrigued."

His eyes darkened and he leaned into me, whispering into the shell of my ear. "Do you promise to be honest with me tonight?"

I looked down at the floor, unsure of both my steps and the question.

"I think so," I said.

He smiled. "Good. Then I'll be honest, too. There are a lot of beautiful



women here tonight, but you outshine them all. It isn't fair they made you wear this silly mask." He curled his finger underneath it, flicking it up playfully.

"I'm certainly thankful for it. You've made me blush more than I care to count already."

"Well, you're honest at least," he chuckled, his low baritone rattling the cage of my chest. "It's one of the best qualities a female can possess, in my humble opinion."

I barely heard the man I danced with as I passed by the center of the room. Ezra did a double-take when he saw me, his hazel eyes flicking between me and the man in disapproval. I rolled my eyes at him, catching Marcella's as well. She leaned closer into Ezra, still eyeing me with an icy gaze.

"What did you last say?" I asked my dance partner, forgetting the conversation entirely.

He laughed, shrugging off my neglectful behavior. "What's your name?"

"Amaris."

"That's lovely. Is it a family name? It's unique."

I ignored his question. "What's yours?"

The man I danced with responded, and I pretended to listen as I looked around the ballroom. Unfortunately, the only man dressed in beige and gold distracted me from gazing anywhere else. Ezra laughed with Marcella, her blonde hair falling in soft waves to her collarbones, leaving plenty of space to show off her perfectly sculpted breasts.

"Please excuse me," I breathed.

The man—Banks—nodded, although his eyes flicked to the center of the room in suspicion. "Of course. I will find you again." He kissed my hand,

then bowed once more. I smiled briefly before making my way over to the refreshments.

I spotted Solana, who held her dress up over her knees, a small rag tossed across her bare foot. I giggled as I grabbed a flute of bubbly alcohol from the endless supply. “What happened?”

“My damn dance partner is what happened,” Solana grumbled, cutting her honey eyes to me.

I wrinkled my nose. “Maybe your feet were just in the way.”

“I don’t think so. He was even worse than you are at walking.”

I fisted my hand, pretending to punch Solana’s shoulder. “I’m not that bad.”

“You’ve gotten better.” She shifted the conversation. “Are you having fun?”

“I don’t think any of the ladies can when Ezra keeps dancing with the same godsdamned woman,” I said, crossing my arms.

“What does Ezra keep doing?” A voice came from behind and Solana’s eyes grew wide. I whirled, coming face-to-face with the object of conversation.

“Don’t act like you truly care.”

“Believe it or not, Miss Strauhn, I do.” His eyes narrowed into slits as he kept his mask positioned on his high cheekbones. I lowered mine to show him the disdain on my face.

“It seems the only one you care about is the one you keep dancing with. What’s the point of inviting other women if you’ve already made your choice?”

His lips curled up towards the golden chandelier, revealing the dimples of his cheeks. “I didn’t know you had such an interest in dancing with me.

Forgive me for not asking sooner.” He stuck out his palm and my mouth went dry. I blinked a few times to ensure I wasn’t hallucinating.

Once. Twice.

His hand was still there, upturned and waiting for me to accept the invitation. He rolled his eyes. “I know you would’ve sooner expected the hells to freeze over before I chose to dance with you. Consider this a mercy of mine, Little Fish.”

I mocked a laugh. “Maybe if you got your head out of Marcella’s ass long enough, you’d be able to dance with plenty of others who are *much* more interesting.”

“Like you?” Ezra puckered his lips, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I opened my mouth to respond but was interrupted by an array of expensive pearls and blonde hair. She wrapped a slender arm around Ezra as she flashed her crystal white teeth up at him. When she spotted me, her smile vanished under her laced mask. “Oh. Am I interrupting somezing?” she said with a sensual accent. Her eyes flitted nervously between Ezra and me.

“Not at all.” Ezra gave her a reassuring smile, taking her hands in his. I wanted to smack their clasped hands away. “This is Amaris; she recently moved to Erison.”

Marcella perused me, up and down. “Yes. She is ze one who sabotaged my performance.”

“Pleasure,” I gritted out. “Don’t let me keep you. I’m sure you have much more to talk about.” I started to turn around when Ezra caught my forearm, sending little fires down my body at his touch.

“I actually came to ask you for a dance,” he whispered, and I whirled to look at him. His eyes held no hint of deceit, only a hopeful glimmer in the

flecks of rust. My attention shifted toward Marcella, who looked thoroughly pissed by Ezra's decision.

"I'd be delighted." Out of spite, I accepted Ezra's offer, giving Marcella a playful wink as he swept me away to the center of the dance floor. Hundreds of eyes followed us, and I reveled in their surprise, even if I was the most hated female in the room right now.

I closed the space between me and the prince, pressing my body into his. I breathed in his glorious musk and citrus scent. Dammit. It would be a lot easier to despise him if he didn't smell like a god himself. I pretended to smile up at him. "This is nice."

Ezra scoffed. "Don't lie to me."

"You're right. I should be more honest with you. I only accepted because I didn't want to embarrass you in front of everyone who wishes to marry you." He twirled me and I followed his lead. My feet cooperated, thank the gods. "Although, it's a shame. Someone should warn them they're trying to win the affections of a prick."

He chuckled. "Are you sure it wasn't to make Marcella jealous?"

"Absolutely not."

"Good. Jealousy isn't a very becoming look. It certainly won't win the affections of any of the other men here tonight."

"It seemed to work just fine for me so far."

"So, you *are* jealous, then?"

I almost snorted. "Not in the slightest."

"Who was the man you were dancing with earlier?"

"None of your business," I snapped.

"It is my business, actually. Just because I'm gracious enough to give you a place to stay doesn't make you entitled to secrets."

I pursed my lips. "Are you sure? Because if I were to take a stab at why you're asking, I would say that you are the jealous one."

"You *are* wearing black. Which, by the way, I never required of you. So, one would assume you have your sights set on marrying the prince. So, hypothetically speaking, what if I am a little jealous?"

The air was forced from my lungs at his words. Was the room growing smaller? "Well, hypothetically speaking, then, what if I said I have a birthday gift for you?"

He pulled me closer, his breath tickling the side of my neck. "Then I would hypothetically want to know what it is, right now."

My eyes flicked around the ballroom, making sure we weren't being watched as I pulled aside the slit of my dress. I knew Ezra wouldn't have to see his initials carved on the wooden handle to recognize the elaborate detailing of the dagger.

"Where did you get that?" His eyes sparkled with interest and...something else.

"I went back that night. It's—" I stopped myself, almost contemplating explaining the full story. My sisters finding the buried dagger, exposing me at the ceremony, the scars that mangled my back because of it.

No.

I refused to give him more ways to hurt me. I didn't have any desire to share this part of my life with him.

"It's...?" Ezra raised a dark brow.

I shook my head. "I understand if you don't want it back, if the memories are too strong."

"Keep it. It looks sexier on you than if it were strapped on my thigh." Ezra winked, schooling his face back to neutrality, but I saw through the cracks of

his performance. I had shaken him, even if just for a moment.

I huffed, giving him a look of disapproval. “I’m trying to dance. Would you please stop talking to me so I can picture myself dancing with someone other than you?”

“Who exactly would that be, Little Fish?”

I scrunched my nose in revulsion. “Don’t call me that. You’re trying to taunt me by dancing with you when we both know you hate me.”

He nodded. “That may be true, but what if I said I was dancing with you for other reasons?”

“What do you mean?” My brows wrinkled in confusion.

The kingdom had been planning this ball for a month, the only objective being to find Ezra a queen. Everyone knew that. What kind of *other reasons* could he have?

“You showed your ass last week, and you’ve been fearless in more ways than one. Some other choice words the council would use to describe you would be ‘stupid’, but—”

I scoffed. Last week at dinner, Noraline, Lady of Silestone, commented on the poor pushing themselves into the Western Dominion, expecting others to spoon-feed them. I understood the passive insult had been directed at me, so I not-so-kindly reminded her that not everyone had come out of the womb with as much power and privilege as she had. I may, or may not, have added that I’d rather be poor and helpless with empathy than an old, heartless bitch. Needless to say, her reaction was priceless.

“Get on with it,” I demanded.

His next words simultaneously made me want to blush and punch him. “You’re no doubt the most beautiful woman in this room tonight. I hate you,

but I've recently learned there are more benefits to a relationship than just love."

"Ezra, what the fuck are you trying to say?"

He ran his fingers through his dark curls. "I'm saying that you make decisions like a queen. You are confident and you follow through. It's a good quality to have, and when trained properly, it's something I need in a wife."

The room spun at the implication. I stared at Ezra with wide eyes, expecting him to burst out laughing at any moment. I waited for the punchline, but it never came.

*What had been in my glass earlier?*

"Are you asking me—?"

Ezra ignored me. "Your father would be forced to honor our union, to stop the attacks in the Sapphire. It would give you the freedom you deserve and protect my people. Before you object, think about it. Please."

My eyes nearly popped out of my head in shock. Ezra had *kindly* asked a favor. It was a form of etiquette most would have been taught at a young age. Then again, Ezra wasn't like most people.

"We'd be married. To each other," I echoed. I had to hear the words point blank.

"Yes. We would be married in every regard. For contractual purposes."

*In every regard? Oh, fuck no.*

He continued, "We would essentially be council members. You would accompany me to meetings to discuss business, make new laws and abolish old ones. You would be the queen.

"Sounds amazing," I said flatly. "For you. What's in it for me?"

"Anything you want."

I hesitated, thinking of my bargain with Nephtali. For a moment, I

entertained the idea. Ezra had reached a new level of desperate if he was entertaining it, too. I would be safe, protected. I would have to *marry Ezra*. I was still in shock that we were even discussing it, to be quite honest.

“There is one thing I need.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Love.”

Ezra almost gagged. “You and I both know I can never give you that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not from you, idiot. I need it to remain a human. I need someone to fall in love with me.” I swallowed. “Someone who knows what I am.”

He hesitated, thinking for a long moment. He must have been weighing the shame he would feel, sending young bachelors my way to keep me alive.

At last, he released a slow breath. “I can try to make it happen.”

“You’d be okay with people knowing I had concubines?”

“And you don’t think I will?” Ezra asked. I could picture his handsome features contorting into confusion under his mask.

I nodded. “Good point.”

“So will you marry me or not?”





## CHAPTER 24

### AMARIS

**O**f all the ways I ever dreamed of being proposed to, last night was definitely not one of them.

I was going to marry the prince. I was going to be *married*.

He didn't bother with the public announcement, as he simply exited the ballroom without a final glance in anyone's direction. Some small part of me sagged a bit with relief when Marcella didn't follow after him. She had no doubt been warming his bed, and the idea made my vision blur with anger. Not that it should matter to me.

We were only going to be married for the sake of his kingdom, and in return, I would gain security, my future as a human. So why did it make the deepest part of me burn with such distain?

I rounded the steps of the library and surveyed the shelves, searching for what piqued my interest.

*Where do I even begin?*

Against a backdrop of dark and mysterious covers, a hot-pink binding popped out from the rest. My skin prickled with excitement as I read the back.

*“What’s love got to do with it? Everything! Spice up your love life with these quick and easy recipes for love, including potions, serums, perfumes, and so much more!”*

Sadly, the book of love potions had nothing that even hinted about such an intrusive potion existing. The book had only been filled with tips and tricks, along with diagrams of... *positions* that promised to “*hook your partner forever.*”

That sort of information was useless to me. At this point, my sex record was so clean, I should be made a saint. It had been almost a month since I had arrived, and in just two more, I would seal my fate in sea foam and salt if I couldn't find anyone to break the bargain.

I slid the book into the crevice of my elbow. The least I could do was educate myself on how humans fornicated—that is, if it was ever in the cards for me.

Once more, I lost myself in the labyrinth of books, finding more sections that caught my eye. It was probably wrong of me to judge the contents based on their outward appearance, but I did it anyway. Not many other things in life seemed to follow that rule, so why was it taboo when it came to reading? One was blue with silver binding, while the other was black with intricate crystal artwork.

I slid the blue and silver one back into its place, whispering, “I’ll come back for you soon, I promise.” It was ludicrous to feel sorry for an innominate object, yet I did.

My limbs grew unbearably tired from the weight of my stash, so I darted

over to where a sofa lay vacant by a large window overlooking the city. Claiming a seat on the comfortable leather, I made myself at home, even propping my feet up on the ottoman in front of me.

Sorting through my treasure, I opened the one I was most excited about and instantly dove in. My head spun with magic, power, color, and vibrancy as the characters in the story came alive, as corporeal to me as Solana or Ezra. Some characters I loved, while others, I detested.

How could a piece of fiction have so much truth to it?

A bell rang out, and I swore. Had it really been six hours since I began reading? I looked down and realized I had only seven chapters left before I found out what happened to the queen and her love interest. I sighed, bookmarking my place before reluctantly shutting it. I walked back down the stairs and made my way to the large desk to check out my books.

“How’d you find everything today?” the librarian asked sweetly. We both looked up in time to see the other’s reaction. Peering at me behind her turquoise-colored glasses was the woman who threatened to expel me from the library that day with Solana. She stared at me in annoyance, her lenses enlarging her brown eyes as they narrowed into slits. “You again,” she grumbled.

“Me again,” I giggled nervously. “Here to check these out.”

“Name?”

I cleared my throat, “Amaris Strauhn.”

Although she raised an eyebrow at the book about love potions, she thankfully didn’t say anything else as she wrote down their titles before slipping me a piece of paper with their due dates. I didn’t waste any time as I scurried out the doors and down the bustling street.

As I passed by the alleyway to Past and Present, I stifled a shiver. Two

innocent-looking buildings stood on either side that I didn't notice until now. My skin prickled with anticipation as I spotted a store near the alleyway. Visible through the window was an endless supply of silver, brass, and vintage things.

I bit my lip. Solana and I had dinner plans this evening, and if I went to explore inside, I might get lost for hours...

Mindlessly, my feet guided me across the cobblestone, and I didn't object to the call as my hand connected with the door handle. I swung it open and it chimed, giving away my presence. Out of the corner of my eye, a hooded figure swept past. My heart lurched as I recalled my visit to Past and Present and the similar form I'd encountered down the dark alley.

My eyes fell to the sleeves, searching for any sign of abnormally long claws, but instead, I found normal-looking hands. As if sensing someone's gaze, the man threw his face over his shoulder, looking right and left down the street. His head spun again towards my direction, and I threw myself behind a wooden shelf. The unmistakable face of Lord Rutherford stared back at me. For a moment, I was convinced he had seen me. Instead, he pulled his cloak tighter around his tall form, and without another glance, he headed into the alley.

What was he doing here?

My curiosity got the better of me as I exited the building. The dark of the alley swallowed me as it did before and I froze, blinking a couple of times for my vision to catch up with the adjustment.

My heart thundered in my chest, every muscle in my body beckoning for me to turn around, but I had to know why he was here. Had it been Lord Rutherford following us that day?

I crouched behind a pile of trash as he turned to the small shop with the

orange eye. His bony knuckles rapped on the door in a rhythmic tune before the door swung open. “You’re late,” BellaDonna beckoned. “Come in, quickly.”

Several long moments passed in near pitch blackness. What could Marion Rutherford possibly need from BellaDonna? Was she someone to be trusted? She knew my secret. Would she sell me out to the Lord of Zhargen?

My thoughts came to a crashing halt when the door swung open. Rutherford’s skeletal body dipped underneath the door frame, and I held my breath as he walked past my hidden position on the ground. Only when I saw him lower his cloak and step into the light did I stand.

When I finally breathed in again, the most horrid smell had wafted my way in the alley. At first, I assumed it was the trash that I had used as a hiding spot only moments ago. But the closer I got to Past and Present, the smell became stronger and more pungent.

“BellaDonna?” I rapidly knocked.

The looming, hooded figure etched in my memory made me rap on the door harder. I was fairly certain it had been Rutherford but doubt still crept in at the edges of my mind. Whatever it was, I didn’t want to see it again.

She opened the door, the old woman hunched in the frame. She gave me a look of disdain, as if I was the last person she wanted to see.

BellaDonna perused me up and down. “Still with legs, I see.”

I held up a money bag, the jingle making BellaDonna’s head snap to it. “May I come in?”

She stepped aside in answer. “What is it you seek, my dear?” Her tone was much nicer now. With the tip of her finger, she lit the fire in the hearth. I couldn’t help but openly gawk at the casual form of sorcery. Shouldn’t it

have already been lit from Rutherford's visit? Was BellaDonna trying to hide the fact he was in here just moments ago?

"I need you to tell me everything you know about love potions."

She raised a thin, white brow. "Is that what you really seek?"

*No. I wanted to ask you about Rutherford, but now that I'm here, I'm scared.*

"Yes," I lied.

She seemed unconvinced, but answered, "They exist, but even your bag of money would not be enough. Not even six of those, I'm afraid."

"What about seven?"

BellaDonna whistled. "Desperate to make the prince yours, are you?"

"I—that's—" I stuttered. How did BellaDonna know that? It wasn't public knowledge that Ezra and I were courting each other. Was Marion selling her information?

"Why do you believe it's him I seek affections from?"

"I am a Clairvoyant. I have connections with those who would make your skin crawl."

I sneered. "And would some of those connections be council members, Madam?"

Her icy glare was stiff as a frozen pond as she assessed me, giving nothing away. *Dammit.* It was a mistake to come here. I had no true intention of using a love potion, even if my life depended on it. I would be no better than a mermaid if I used magic to bend someone's will to my own.

My eyes lit up, remembering the potion for self-love. "I was actually seeking a potion to use on myself. I checked out this book from the library just now, and I figured you would have the components for it." I pulled the book from my satchel, showing her the page.

“Self-love? Having confidence issues in your new skin?”

Ducking my head, I looked to the dusty floor and feigned a look of embarrassment. “I—I am. I want to feel more confident whenever I speak to Ezra.”

BellaDonna nodded, seeming convinced. “Feel encouraged, my dear. Many have come to me with the same concerns. Perception, the first sun, is currently in retrograde, although a lesson on astrology is not what you came here for today.” She shifted the book back into my hands. “The components are simple enough. Allow me to find the ingredients for you.”

She limped around the cramped space, pulling down random vials and jars. The glasses clinked against each other on the shelves, and I seized the opportunity to look around, pretending to aid in the search. Scanning the shelves, I looked for anything out of the ordinary, anything to provide further clues that could lead to Rutherford’s demise.

A small bottle caught my eye, *Hexsenic* written on yellowed parchment attached to its body. Quickly, I picked it up to further inspect the colorless liquid. This bottle smelled exactly like the acrid scent that wafted past just moments ago in the alleyway. Was this what Rutherford came to purchase from BellaDonna today? If so, what did this foul-smelling potion do, that would make him desire to take it?

BellaDonna’s cane cracked down on my shoulder, sending pain shooting through my arm, and I dropped the bottle in my hand.

Instead of hearing it crash to the floor, I realized BellaDonna had caught it with a gust of wind, just in time. It floated into her bony fingers on an invisible breeze.

“This is not for sale,” she grimaced. “Now, get out of my shop.”

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## CHAPTER 25

### EZRA

**A**maris shuffled through the main doors of the palace, and I managed to stifle my laughter as she tripped over her feet. She looked around the large foyer to see if anyone noticed, and when her gaze caught mine, her eyes widened in horror.

“Growing pains?” I mocked before I could stop myself.

The look of horror expanded by a thousand as she gazed around the room to see if anyone had been listening. She slouched a little when she noted everyone seemed to be shuffling through the castle without paying us a second thought. Of course, it wasn’t every day that our mortal enemy would grow legs and infiltrate the palace.

“That’s not funny, Ezra.” She rolled her eyes in annoyance, setting her heavy stack of books on a nearby table.

“To whom, exactly? Because I am very amused right now.”

“I really want to punch you sometimes.” Amaris groaned, rubbing her temples.

Sauntering toward her, I came so close to her beautiful face that I saw her dainty freckles peppering her nose and cheeks. I stopped myself before taking a section of her hair and twirling it around my finger. “It’s too bad you can’t, Little Fish. I *am* the future king. As the future Queen, that would be very unhealthy for our marriage.” I winked at her while taking her in from head-to-toe. She looked good in blue; it complimented her hair. She would look better in that towel...

“Don’t play with me.” She crossed her arms. “It’s just an agreement and —”

I stole the breath from her lungs as I kicked the closet door beside me open. Grabbing her by the waist, I forced us both inside.

When I shut the door behind us in the dark and cramped space, I dropped my hands, unsure where to put them. My mind had plenty of ideas, but I stopped myself from being ensnared in her web. I had to get a hold of my thoughts and remember what she truly was if I had any plans of winning the Sapphire Sea back. Without her, the plan wouldn’t work.

There was no way in hells I would allow my lust for her to interfere with that.

“What was that about?” she heaved, dragging my thoughts back to reality.

“We may have an agreement, but you can’t just say that whenever you want.”

“Yes, I can! And don’t *ever* use your power to shut me up. If that’s how you think you can get away with treating me, then I will make your life so, so godsdamned miserable, Ezra. Don’t touch me again.”

I quirked up a brow. “Ever?”

Amaris hesitated a moment before answering. “Ever.”

Leaning my hands on either side of her head, I closed the small distance

between us. “I can’t promise that,” I growled. “I said I couldn’t give you love...not that I couldn’t touch you.”

Her breath hitched, and lavender wrapped around the dark room like a cloak, reminding me of how she wrapped around me in my dreams and moaned my name like a song.

She was my own personal form of torture, mixed with the best fantasies.

“We at least have to make the courtship believable.” Slowly, I trailed my hands down the length of her arms. Her skin was hot to the touch, and for a moment, I swore she leaned into my caress. If I was going to be tormented by her every time I looked her way, it was only fair that she was tormented, too.

I smirked. “Although, your mouth is just as clumsy as your feet. So really, you should thank me.”

“*Thank you?* How could I ever in my life be so stupid?”

“Because I saved you from making a fool out of yourself, just like I did last night when you were jealous of Marcella,” I shrugged.

She huffed, and I could practically hear her eyes rolling around in her skull. “For the last fucking time, Ezra. I wasn’t jealous.”

“Annoyed, mad, jealous... It’s all the same, really.”

“I don’t have time for this. I have somewhere to be.” She turned around to open the door, but I caught her hand midair, swiveling her body back to face me, her breath hot on my chest. Why did that make me think of five different ways to take her in this closet, right now?

“Where are you going tonight?” I asked.

“I would say *none of your business*, but I know your nose can’t stop sniffing around in my life. If you must know, I have dinner plans.”

“You’re skipping dinner at the palace?”

“Is that a problem?” Amaris shot back.

Yes, actually, it was. I was going to announce our courtship to the Court of Lords so they would quit breathing down my neck about my decision. It had only been a day, but people were already growing anxious.

“Who are you going with?”

“Solana. Is there anything else I can do for you, Your Majesty?”

“Careful, Little Fish.” I smiled devilishly. “I like it when women call me that.”

I felt her body shiver.

“There is one more thing,” I said. “Don’t get any ideas of going out with men in public. If you decide to have a romantic encounter, please inform me first.”

“What? That’s ridiculous! You’re not my father.”

“Do you think I enjoy knowing who you’ll use to remain human? It’s only to keep my kingdom safe. I need to know who, in case any disappearances happen.”

She let out a long, frustrated breath but didn’t answer. Instead, she turned, yanking the closet door open and shutting it behind her, leaving me alone in the dark.



## CHAPTER 26

### AMARIS

“**R**emind me to never check out that many books again,” I gasped. The heavy stack of books hit the coffee table with a thud. Solana, who was sprawled out on my couch, didn’t lower her book at the noise.

Throwing myself down on the chair opposite her, I massaged my calves from the long, winding steps to my room. “Sorry I’m late. Are you ready to go?”

“You’re late?” Solana looked toward the sundial, catching the time. “I didn’t even notice.”

I looked between her and the book in her hand, noting the very explicit cover of a Fae male with a woman straddling his legs. They weren’t clothed, but the extravagant font covered their more indecent areas. “I swear, you need a book sleeve.” I nodded to the book. “Some people get secondhand embarrassment, you know.”

She hardly looked up from the pages as she replied. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“In a good part, I take it? What are the characters doing now? Or should I ask: *who* are the characters doing now?” I snorted at my own joke.

Clearly unamused, Solana cut her eyes at me over the edge of the book and snapped it shut. “That’s it. You’ve ruined the scene.”

“Good. We were supposed to be at dinner over an hour ago. You need a break from the fictional world of penises.”

Remembering the incident from earlier today with Rutherford, I decided to change clothes. The last thing I wanted was for him to recognize me by my clothing if he happened to see someone trailing him. I jumped out of it, fishing for another from my endless supply of dresses. Turning to my friend, I eyed her plum-colored dress that clung tightly to her athletic build and the heels that gave her an extra lift. “Is that what you’re wearing tonight?” I asked.

“Mhmm,” she replied mindlessly.

“Oh, come on. Don’t be short with me just because I ruined the moment for you. I had to cut it short with Ezra so that I could get to you at a decent time.”

She seemed to perk up at the mention of him, the corner of her lips twitching into a mischievous smile. “Oh? How did that go?”

I stopped fumbling for a dress in my wardrobe, instead weighing the risk of telling her the truth. Solana was my closest friend. I had spent almost every day with her since I came to Erison. She knew how I felt about Ezra. I couldn’t just tell her we started courting without telling her why. I had to make her believe it, too.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t bring myself to meet her gaze as I lied. “Last night with him was actually fun. He caught me at the entrance of the palace today, and

we... He said that he'd like to take me out to dinner sometime. Just the two of us."

Solana shot to her feet. "*What?* After last night, I thought he would surely tell the council he was interested in marrying Marcella."

"Marcella is irrelevant," I snapped.

Solana's eyes narrowed into slits, and she quirked an eyebrow at my sudden outburst.

I began again. "It's just that she's bland, okay? She sang beautifully, but she was just lacking this...this *style* about her, you know?"

Solana raised an eyebrow again. "You are talking about *Marcella Lovelace*, right? The best singer in the Western Dominion?"

I shrugged, pretending I didn't know her full name. "I think that's the one, yeah."

Solana's face screwed up in skepticism. "Are you sure you're not just jealous she danced with Ezra for six songs last night?"

"*What?*" I shrieked. Why would he dance with her for six songs and only with me, his fake-fucking-*betroted*, for two? And he couldn't even stand my presence long enough to completely make it through the last one before stalking out of the room.

I wasn't jealous of Marcella, but gods, it was annoying how much he worshiped the ground she walked on. I saw the way he looked at her, and it drove me nearly mad knowing she was definitely screwing Ezra while I had to go through *him* to do anything. Where was the equality in that?

"Never mind," I said, rubbing at my temples. "I don't care to hear about Marcella Lovelace any more than I already have. I don't want anything about today to ruin my mood."

Solana didn't need to know it had already been ruined by catching

Rutherford in some suspicious transaction and then getting bossed around by a self-serving prick. Biting back a groan, I was reminded that soon, I would be saying my vows to that same man.

I shuffled my half-naked body into a form-fitting pair of leather pants, a black shirt, and leather boots. Taming my hair into submission, I brushed it back into a ponytail before checking my reflection. Once I liked what I saw, I turned to Solana. “Ready?”

She gave me a once-over and whistled. “Let’s go tear up the city.”



Random bursts of chit-chat filled the space as Solana and I made our way inside Beer-in-Tin. Out of Solana’s choices, this bar sounded the most interesting. It hasn’t disappointed me so far, as a middle-aged man with a warm smile and a thick accent offered me a drink from behind the counter.

“What does the pretty lady want?”

My eyes scanned the menu, reading each ingredient. “I’ll take the Frog’s Mead, please.”

The man’s bushy eyebrows furrowed, shaking his head in disapproval. “That puts hair on the chest. Too strong for a pretty lady.”

I widened my eyes in faux apprehension. “The gods know I don’t need any more of those.”

The bartender’s round belly tremored as he chuckled. “She’s funny *and* pretty. For you, Frog’s Mead, on the house.”

“Black and Gold for me, Vlade,” Solana piped up from behind me.

The bartender’s green eyes looked past me, settling on Solana. “I knew I recognized you. From the castle! One day, you leave with a man, and the next, you leave with a woman.”



Solana gave a cool shrug. “I like to keep my options open.”

Vlade gave a toothy grin. “Black and Gold, on the house.”

We got our food and drinks before settling at the back of the bar where fewer seats were taken. Dropping our plates, we tore into the fried potatoes, roasted chicken, and greens with little strips of bacon in them. My mouth watered at the sight. I wasted no time as I devoured the greens first.

“Bar food has always been my favorite,” Solana sighed, shoveling her own dinner into her mouth. “Don’t get me wrong, I love the palace food. I’m even more thankful to live there, so I don’t have to cook every night, but nothing beats home-cooking.”

“You mean moss—” Abruptly, I stopped myself. I had almost said *moss maiden* in front of Solana. Clearing my throat, I started again. “They don’t have maids to do it for them?”

Solana shook her head. “Oh, you nobles are so interesting. How do you think normal people eat every day? Do you think they can afford the comforts of having their meals cooked for them?”

I guess I’d never thought of it before. Most meals in the sea were mainly raw. Even as royalty, we ate fish, fresh seaweed, and ripe berries.

The door of Beer-in-Tin burst open and sent my heart leaping. A tall figure with sandy hair leaned over the counter. Vlade greeted the familiar man with a grin, the two diving into conversation like old friends.

“Are you listening to me?” Solana asked, waving a hand over my eyes.

“No. The guy I danced with last night just walked in.”

“What?” Solana chirped, craning her neck around. Her lips sensually quirked up as she purred, “Ooh, well, he looks like a tall, cool drink of water.”

“Stop it! Turn around,” I ordered.

She obeyed, thank the gods. “So? Are you going to wait for the suns to cross to tell me about this handsome man of yours?”

I rolled my eyes, leaning in close. “He is not *'my man,'* Solana. We danced with each other once at the ball.”

“I don’t understand. Where’s the problem?”

Letting out a slow breath, I replied, “It’s a problem because Ezra says it is.”

Solana’s gaze flitted around the bar dramatically. “Well, I don’t see Ezra Anaforiene’s ring on your finger yet. Do you?”

“No, but I can’t just—”

She shushed me before I could protest. “Yes, you can. Let’s not ignore the fact that he’s definitely sleeping with Marcella in his spare time. He clearly isn’t saving himself for whomever he courts, so why should he expect you to?”

My stomach dropped. Suddenly, the food turned into lead in my stomach as Lana confirmed my suspicions about Marcella and Ezra.

Vlade poured the clear liquid straight into four small glasses, offering Banks a round of shots. Banks reached for his coins, but the bartender waved him off. “This one is on me. It’s the least I can do for the regulars. You keep my cash flow steady, I give you steady drink.”

Banks smiled. “Thank you, Vlade.” He turned to the crowd. “Who wants to do a round of shots on me?”

Men and women, including Solana, sprung from their seats. They elbowed past one another, eager for free alcohol. From the looks of it, Vlade wasn’t shy when it came to sharing his selection with others. Maybe that’s why Beer-in-Tin was filled to the brim.

Vlade pointed at us. “Ay! Two pretty ladies in the back. Come take a

shot!”

Banks’s eyes found mine, freezing me mid-drink. He leaned against the bar with ease, canting his head to the side in invitation.

“What are you waiting for?” Solana rose, grabbing my hand. “Come on.”

In protest, I gave a small groan, but my lips quirked up nonetheless. As we made our way to the bar, hollers exploded from different tables. Gods. It was only eight in the evening and half these people were already toasted.

“Amaris, right? From the castle?”

I nodded, still trying to control my breathing. “Banks, if I recall correctly?”

“You recall excellently.”

Banks was handsome, although I already knew that. Without the mask hiding his bone structure, I saw him in a whole new light. His cropped golden hair made his face seem more severe somehow. His captivating blue eyes sparkled, reminding me of the Sapphire Sea. He looked exactly like someone I would find myself using as a distraction. I frowned, remembering the deal with Ezra.

“Amaris.” His azure eyes roamed over me. “You never cease to amaze me.” His hand landed on the small of my back and heat surged through me at his touch. My cheeks warmed.

Vlade grabbed one of the small vials of alcohol. “Tip your glass back on my count. One. Two. Three!”

Our glasses met with a *clink*, and I tipped the contents back and swallowed. The liquid heated my core, severing most of my anxiety about Ezra. Solana was right. Ezra wasn’t informing me about other women, so why should I do the same?

Tomorrow. That was a question I would demand he answer tomorrow. Tonight, I wouldn’t worry about Ezra’s stupid double standards or faux

courtship.

I focused my attention back on Banks, who grinned at me. “You were supposed to wait for me to write you.”

I nervously toyed with my necklace. “I didn’t realize you were interested. I came here with my friend; she’s showing me around the city. I’m sorry.”

Solana slapped her forehead, but Banks just chuckled. “Don’t be sorry. It makes sense why I’ve never seen you here before. Although, I do recognize your friend.”

Solana raised her pint in a salute. “How can I pass up good beer and dancing?”

“Dancing?” I echoed, looking around at the ordinary bar void of instruments and a dance floor.

“Solana hasn’t shown you yet, apparently.” Banks leaned in close, like he did the night of the ball, except tonight, he let his hands roam down my body more freely. “Lucky for you, I’m willing to show you how commoners dance. Something tells me you’ll be much better at it than what they do at formal events.”

An equal mix of excitement and nervousness prickled my skin as Solana led the way to the back of the bar. I half-expected to hear booming music, but it wasn’t until Solana opened the door that it finally hit me. Music poured from the space, the buzz of bass instruments heavy in my chest.

The room was dimly lit, save for glowing orbs of blue and green. Men and women danced in cages hanging from the ceiling. Others on the stage wrapped themselves around onyx silks, swinging the fabric and their hips to the beat.

We passed by several leather-covered booths, and I noticed at least four separate couples getting very... acquainted. I kept my gaze locked on

Solana's back while Banks took my hand from behind.

"I had no idea this was here!" I beamed. "From the outside, you couldn't even hear it."

Banks craned his head to yell in my ear over the music. "That's the point. They keep it relatively quiet so it doesn't get overcrowded like the rest of the bars." I nodded, walking in silence the rest of the way. Solana found us a table on the balcony, far off from the other spectators.

Once we claimed the seats, Solana jumped up. "I'm going to go grab another drink. You two have fun!"

"Are you sure?" I asked wearily. "I don't mind if you stay."

"I know one of the dancers." She winked, not needing to say more.

Eager, I led Banks to the dance floor. He grabbed my waist from behind as I began moving my hips to the music. Instantly, I felt freer. Maybe it was the extra help of the alcohol heating my blood, but it pumped through me, leading me in the motions. Banks's hands trailed over my curves, sliding to the front of my hips, guiding me where he wanted me. I felt exactly how much pleasure he was getting from this.

He growled as his hands roamed my ass, and a spike of heat rippled through me. I leaned my head back to meet his solid chest. One of Banks' hands glided up the length of my arm and tangled into the mass of my auburn hair, his touch leaving goosebumps in its wake.

"Meet me in the booth in five minutes," Banks ordered. "I'll go grab us more to drink."

Solana made eye contact with me across the dance floor as she mouthed *everything okay?*

I nodded. When we went out together, sometimes Solana would go back home with someone. I had yet to do that, but I figured if it happened tonight,

Solana owed me. She never made me feel left out while she mingled with her dates, though. I usually got the cue and would leave early to get out of their hair. Judging by the looks she and the brunette performer were making at each other, I would bet on her staying here until after the dancer's shift ended.

Banks slid into the booth next to me with two drinks in hand. Both looked the same, but the one he offered to me smelled slightly different. It was as if he specifically requested something more suitable for my taste.

"Thank you. How much do I owe you?" I asked.

He leaned back in his seat and wrapped an arm around me. "I'm much like Vlade in that I don't mind pretty women bumming alcohol off me for the night." Banks flashed me his perfect teeth.

I resisted the urge to frown. I heard what he said as clear as the Sapphire Sea. *For the night*. Honestly though, what else was I supposed to expect? Banks to just sweep me off my feet with another romantically fake proposal?

If I was going to eventually find love, I would have to look harder for it. Just because he wasn't willing to commit to me didn't mean I couldn't change that.

Shaking off my nerves, I took large sips of my drink. Heat immediately filled me, causing my cheeks to flush and the music to drown out as the room spun in dizzying circles. "Would you like to dance some more?" Was I slurring my words?

Snatching the glass from my hand, he pulled me on top of him so I was straddling his lap. "Actually, I'd like to stay right here."

"That's a shame," I giggled nervously. "You're a really good dancer."

"I like having you here instead. That way, you can't step on my feet."

"Hey!" I swatted his shoulder, and he caught my wrist.

His eyes bore into mine, and I saw what he was going to do before it happened. Our mouths were so close, I could practically taste the liquor on his lips. My hands carded through his hair, across the scruff along his jaw, down his chest. Fire burned low in my stomach, the effects of the alcohol stronger than before.

His hungry eyes roamed over my cleavage. Licking his lips, he asked, “Are you going to kiss me, or not?”

My eyes narrowed. “Forgive me if I’ve gotten you mixed up with someone else, but I thought you told me the night of the ball that you liked to take control. Unless you don’t think you can handle it.”

He chuckled. “We’ll see who can handle what.” Then, his lips were on mine. The sharpness of his breath assaulted my nose, his hands sliding to my backside and gripping his fingers in hard. My core clenched, sending sparks of warmth lower in my belly. Banks’ tongue speared into my mouth in bold strides, leaving me breathless.

I ground into him as he forcefully kissed down my neck to my collarbone. A small gasp escaped my lips as I forgot where I was altogether. It felt like the world was spinning, and the only way I could find stability was by feeding this pounding desire in my stomach.

“Let’s go,” he demanded, grabbing my hand and jerking me upright from the booth. His movements were harsh, as if he were in a rush to breakaway from the club and go somewhere more secluded.

I stumbled, catching a whiff of citrus and musk. “Gods,” I groaned. “You smell so damn good.”

“Thank you,” two males said in unison. I didn’t have to look to know who the raspy voice belonged to. Banks said the exact thing I was thinking.

“What the fuck are you doing here, prince?” He pulled my limp body into

his, a wolf staking his claim on his prey, his claws wrapping tight around me.

The lights flickered from blue to green to purple and back again, too fast for my mind to keep up with. Getting dizzy by the minute, I laid down in the booth and closed my eyes.

Ezra's words were full of hatred. "What the fuck did you do to her?"

What did he mean? Why was Ezra so angry? I was too tired to care.

"I was going to walk her back home," Banks explained.

"She isn't going anywhere with you."

Why was Ezra here? Why did he care who I was making out with at a bar? Didn't he have better things to do than sneak up on me when I was clearly in the middle of something? If this is how marriage with him would be, then no thank you.

"Why not?" Banks protested.

"I saw what you put in her drink at the bar. You drugged her."

*What did Ezra say?* Hands were on me then, delicately pulling me from my slumber. I groaned.

"Come on, Amaris. I'm taking you back home."

"We were in the middle of something," Banks said.

Ezra's growl was full of warning. "The only person Amaris is leaving with tonight is me, so kindly move the fuck out of my way."

"What if she doesn't want to?"

Ezra's hands moved from me, leaving my skin uncomfortably cold in his absence. I wanted him to come back. "What do you think we should do, ask her? She can barely walk. Next time you want cheap entertainment, go to a brothel instead."

Banks laughed coldly. "You're right. I'll find prettier ones there anyway."

A crash erupted inches just above my head, jolting me from my stupor.



When I opened my eyes, the world was dark and blurry and—Banks' face was smashed on the table, blood pouring from his nose. Had it been crooked earlier?

Ezra grabbed him by the collar, bringing him up to snarl in his face. "Don't you *fucking* talk about her like that." He was a full head taller than Banks, broader, too. I had seen how the prince fought the night of the shipwreck, and I knew if he could hold off an immortal mermaid, he was going to rip Banks' throat out.

"Like what?" Banks smiled, his teeth coated in garnet. "Like how she's nothing but a common whore?"

The next thing I knew, Ezra's fist connected with Banks' face. A *crunch* exploded, even over the music, and I screamed as Ezra threw punch after punch, Banks buckling on the floor.

"Ezra, stop!" I yelled, scrambling to my feet. As if they had been tied together, I fell to the wet floor, fire ripping through my hands. I looked down, and what I saw made me scream in horror. Shards of glass had lodged themselves deeply in my palms, and green blood gushed from the wounds.

Ezra whirled, his hazel eyes meeting mine and softening. He rushed to my side, throwing his cloak around me. "Conceal your hands," he whispered.

My world was rocked on its axis as I was hoisted in the air, strong arms cradling me. *His* arms. His scent rushed through my senses, and I groaned again, leaning into him for support. Ezra's body was so warm, and I could hear his heart beating wildly in his chest. His dark voice flooded my ears, and tremors of fear raked through me.

I realized his wrath wasn't directed at me, but toward Banks, who was slumped in the booth, holding his face. "If there is *ever* even a sliver of a rumor about her, I will not hold back from sending your body to the creatures

of the Moaning Hills, and I will laugh as they rip you limb from limb. Do you understand?”

Banks made an inaudible noise, which seemed to satisfy Ezra, because he backed away from the man.

The beat of his steps lulled me into a deep sleep.

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## CHAPTER 27

### AMARIS

“**S**on of a—”  
“Shh. I know, I know,” Ezra’s deep voice whispered, raspier than usual.

“Ezra,” I breathed, feeling his warm hands pinning down my wrists. Pain throbbed through my hands as he plucked the glass shards out, one by one.

A knock came from the door. “Good. Now zat she iz awake, we can go back to enjoying our night. Shall we summon ze healer girl?”

*Why was Marcella Lovelace here?*

Ezra rose from beside me, his hands abandoning his work and leaving my skin missing his touch. The door clicked shut behind him.

It could have been moments or hours later as I drifted in and out of sleep, but when I woke again, Ezra was back with a small vial. He pressed a hand to my shoulder. “Drink this, Little Fish. You’ll feel better.”

Sitting upright, sharp pains tore at my flesh. “Try not to move. I’ll help you sit up.” His hands delicately moved to the small of my back, stabilizing me. I

had never heard his voice so gentle, his touch so sweet. A part of me almost wished to remain injured, if only to hear him speak to me like this all the time.

“Where am I?”

“We’re in the infirmary. You fell on broken glass at the bar. I couldn’t risk any of the healers seeing your blood, so I’ve been stitching up your wounds myself. Do you remember much else?”

Memories of the bar flooded my mind, fractured bits and pieces trickling in. Banks. The flickering lights. The strong cocktail.

*Ezra.*

Why had he been there?

“I—Solana and I went to Beer-in-Tin. Then I went dancing.” My cheeks heated, remembering Banks’ hands roaming up and down my body as I straddled him. “And then you were there.”

“I was.” Ezra nodded, wrapping a bandage around my hands. His jaw was set in concentration as he worked, binding my wounds as if he’d done this a hundred times before. I spotted the dainty freckle on his lower lip, and suddenly felt the urge to reach out and touch it.

“You were out with Marcella, weren’t you?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw, and he stopped wrapping. “What does that matter?”

I swallowed back the bile in my throat. Ezra was with Marcella tonight. Why did I have a problem with it anyways? Our marriage was strictly a contractual arrangement. This was bound to happen.

Still...he touched Marcella with those hands tonight, the same hands that pulled glass from mine and bandaged them. Marcella got to laugh with him and kiss him and dance with him and...

I snarled in disgust and rose from the bed. The world swayed violently, but I used the wooden frame to steady myself.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Don’t pretend like you want to help me.”

I knew I was acting out of jealousy, but I didn’t particularly care. To hells with being prim and proper and a good little moss maiden. I wasn’t about to let him placate me by wrapping my wounds. He was clearly entertaining someone else’s company. He refused to play by the rules of his own game. It wasn’t fair that I wasn’t given one night with Banks, but Marcella could waltz up into his bedroom at any turn. *And he thought that was okay.*

“I’m not pretending.” He reached for my hand. “Is there something I did to upset you?”

“Yes, actually. Tell me why it’s okay for you to see whomever you wish, but I can’t? Whenever I disobey your commands, you come to pick me up from the party like you’re my godsdamned father. How is any of that fair?”

“I never said you couldn’t see others, only that you couldn’t see them in public.”

“You get to,” I mumbled, “yet you don’t extend the same curtesy to me. Everyone knows you’re with Marcella. That might as well be public knowledge.”

He met my gaze. “Did you hear that from others, or from me?”

A long silence passed between us. I broke his gaze first, unable to stand the heat in his eyes. So, they weren’t sleeping together?

He kept his voice calm, but it was impossible to mistake the irritation in his tone. “You may not like every decision I make, but that doesn’t mean you can refuse my help just because you can’t keep your emotions in check.”

My face heated, in anger and embarrassment at being admonished like a

child. “My emotions? You just beat the shit out of a man tonight because he was kissing me.”

“The man drugged you, Amaris. I wanted to protect you from exactly what happened tonight, or worse. That’s why I followed you. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

My eyes shot wide, the ground shifting beneath my feet as the last puzzle piece clicked into place. Now it all made sense: why I couldn’t remember certain details, why I was immediately wasted after a single cocktail, why I was so lethargic. Why I had allowed Banks to touch me so willingly.

It wasn’t willingly. He *drugged* me.

Ezra hadn't pulled me away from Banks to control me. He had been protecting me.

My knees buckled and Ezra raced to guide me to the bed. “Amaris, you’re safe now. I sent guards to his door to arrest him. I couldn’t allow him to get away with what he did to...” Running his hands through his dark curls, he let out a heavy sigh of frustration. “I meant what I said. If he ever so much as speaks your name again, I will kill him myself.”

Warm wetness trickled down my face. I thought I could trust Banks, and he had...he had almost tried to...

What would’ve happened to me if Ezra hadn’t stepped in? How could I ever trust another man again?

*I was doomed.*

As if sensing where my thoughts were going, he shook his head. “Not all men are like that, Amaris. Just as there are ranks of evil in your kingdom, there is also evil in mine. Don’t concern yourself with people like him.”

“Who should I be concerning myself with then, Ezra?”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Well, for starters, someone

trustworthy. Someone you can laugh with easily, someone who's willing to cherish that laugh like the most beautiful sound they've ever heard. When you find them, you'll know. You'll know because...you can be yourself around them. If they truly love you for who you are, they should see past your flaws."

"Being a mermaid is quite the tragic flaw," I scoffed. "I'll make sure to hit them with that one from the get-go."

"You can if you'd like. Love comes from vulnerability. You're safe, here, Little Fish. With me."

For a moment, I forgot that he was talking about our future marriage. Maybe the drug was still lingering, but a small part of me hoped his words had meant something else.

"Will it harm me? The drug, I mean."

Ezra pressed his lips together. "No. It's—it's a drug only used for sedation. It has no lasting effects on the victim." He shook his head, his eyes hardening as he stared at the stone wall of the infirmary. "It still doesn't make it right, though. You're okay now, Amaris. I gave you the antidote. That way, you're no longer under its effects."

"Ezra?"

"Yes?"

"I—Can I go back to my room?" I asked.

Ezra opened his mouth, as if wanting to say something else, but he closed it. He rose from the bed, holding out his hand to help me up.

The hallway was dim, with candles lit every couple of feet. We walked in silence for most of the way, and only when we reached the second floor did he turn to face me. We were so close, his breath tickled my skin. His eyes

searched mine, and something akin to sorrow flickered in them. “Would it be impossible to believe I was worried for you tonight, Little Fish?”

Footsteps clicked down the hall, and dread filled me. I didn’t want this moment to end. And now we were standing close enough that no one would possibly mistake us for anything but lovers. Ezra closed the small distance between us and brushed his lips across the base of my neck. My cheeks flared with anger, embarrassment, and a little bit of interest.

I took in the strong smell of Ezra’s citrus scent mixed with his usual musk, and my eyes fluttered shut. His body pressed into mine, my knees growing weak from his delicate touch. For that small heartbeat, I had forgotten that this—whatever *this* was—was an act. Tomorrow, it would be easier to tell his court that we were seeking a moment of privacy rather than explaining the actual events of tonight.

I shuddered, blocking earlier from my mind and focusing on this moment alone. I even hardly noticed the tall frame of Lord Rutherford as he rounded the corner. Of all people, he was the last one I was hoping to catch us having a romantic, albeit fake, moment.

But the way he kissed me could have even fooled me, like he truly desired me. Maybe some twisted part of me was a sadist for desiring him, too, or maybe I had just been extremely deprived of physical touch since being on the surface.

Either way, I didn’t care, and that’s what scared me most.





## CHAPTER 28

### EZRA

“**H**ave you come any closer to making your decision, Ezra?” Ander of Silestone asked. A dozen eyes darted to me from around the table.

I willed myself to smile. “I have, although we wish to have an engagement period before we say our vows. She also requests that members of the council refrain from following us down random passageways in the middle of the night.”

Rutherford smirked at me in amusement, but his narrowed eyes suggested otherwise. “Forgive me, prince. I wasn't expecting to find you and Lady Amaris down the *random passageway* that led to my quarters, or else I would've taken a different route.”

Small gasps sounded from around the room, and I held my hand out to stop them. “We do not wish for this to be public knowledge yet. I am very fond of Lady Amaris, and I would like for us to court in the proper way. My decision to marry is not solely based on who I can breed with to carry on the Anaforiene legacy, but also on finding a wife I love.”

I almost choked on the last words but was surprised to hear how convincing I sounded.

“She has no magic in her veins, does she? She isn’t fit for the throne,” Ander objected. Others around the table whispered amongst themselves.

“She does, actually,” I corrected. “She is of nobility from the Eastern Dominion. Her family was blessed. By what god, I am not sure, but I know she has magic. I’ve seen it.”

Rutherford furrowed his brows in skepticism. “Would you like to share? We are all waiting with bated breath.”

“Would *you* like to tell us what your gift is, Marion? If not, I wouldn’t mind telling the others for you.” Rutherford’s eyes widened, and my lips quirked up in amusement.

Rutherford’s “gifts”, other than poisoning his lover in the middle of the night, was the baffling ability to shapeshift into a tiny door mouse, which was really quite cute. It wasn’t particularly polite to talk about your giftings, or to tell of another’s. It was considered boastful, uncomfortable.

Still, I’d give up every ounce of my “blessings” to live a life free of endless council meetings, fake marriages, and run-ins with Lord Rutherford. Shit, I’d almost be willing to give up my gifts altogether to never have another run-in with him alone. He combatted me at every turn, watched my every move like a vulture. It was ironic how much he looked and acted like one, considering he couldn’t shift into one.

“When shall we expect the wedding, Ezra?” my father asked from the head of the table.

“One week from the Surpassing Day festival. I’m a traditionalist by heart, Father. I want a month to court her.”

“Pish, posh,” Ander said with a wave of his hand. “There is no time for

that.”

I pursed my lips. “Just because you had an arranged marriage does not mean I have to.”

Ander’s face reminded me of a tomato as it turned the same coppery tone as his hair. It was one of my favorite pastimes: to see how red in the face I could make him and Rutherford.

He exchanged glances with his wife, Noraline. She placed a hand over the top of his, and I didn’t miss the gesture as he swatted her away.

“As I was saying.” My eyes flicked between the two rulers of Silestone. “I want to have a marriage, not a contract.”

*Spoken like a true hypocrite.*

“You do not know the first thing about ruling, *boy*,” Ander spat, and he surprisingly turned more crimson than he had just moments ago. “Don’t try to lecture me on what you think a healthy marriage should look like. Do you think you’re going to find the perfect damsel to ride off into the setting suns with?”

“Maybe,” I shrugged, pretending to pick dirt from underneath my pristinely clean nails. Though I wasn’t submerging myself fully in water when I bathed, but I was still a stickler for hygiene. “I’ve had women bursting at the seams to have a dance with me. I will have no problem finding another if things with Lady Amaris go south.”

“It was no question who you would choose.” Priscilla’s chocolate eyes glittered. “It didn’t take an astrologist to notice your astrology was fated.” I fought to keep my features in check before they betrayed me altogether.

Titus, captain of the royal guard, burst through the doors of the council before my laughter could burst from my lips. “Your Majesty!” He stormed to my father and whispered in his ear, and Father’s eyes flicked to me in horror.

He rose quickly, moving down the table as he spoke. "Council is canceled until further notice. Ezra, come with me."

"Father, what's going on?" I stormed after him down the hall, and he only grimaced.

Titus led us to the entrance of the castle, and the smell of mildew and sweat grew stronger the farther we traveled down the stairs to the dungeons. Screams pierced my ears before we reached our target. Something repetitively struck metal, the sound echoing off the stone walls. When I rounded the steps, I saw the horrors of what caused it.

Izan. Except... it wasn't Izan, only the mere shell of him.

His eyes were hollowed, and his once brown irises were black pits. The clothes on his frail body had been almost completely stripped away, save for scraps of a pair of trousers. All his ribs were evident, his skin merely covering the skeleton he had become.

Over and over again, he bashed his head into the side of his cell. No blood pooled from his wounds as it should've, and I wondered if he felt pain or if whatever creature overcame him took that away, too.

Another prisoner lay on the ground, his frail limbs twisted in every direction. Instantly, my mind went to the first time I heard of the creatures in the Moaning Hills. Some would survive the transformation, while others would be devoured in the process until the demon could leave the lifeless body and try again.

"Where are the guards who were keeping watch over these men in the Hills?" I called out.

"They were sent home, Your Highness." Titus shifted in his armor. "They had seen enough for one day."

"Bring them back here immediately," I ordered, concealing the fear in my

voice. If this man had already died, one of the guards was likely to turn soon. They couldn't be around their families when it happened.

Titus bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

I pulled the dagger from my side, calling upon my wind to make deadly aim. Bending my arm, I waited, watching Izan as he tortured himself against the chamber wall. When he pulled away, I struck.

The dagger planted itself deep within his skull, death immediate.



Black crystalline waves rolled along the horizon of the sandy beach, and my muscles relaxed instantly at the comforting sound. The water was peaceful and serene, void of any threat that the Sapphire Sea held. For everything that the Sapphire Sea was, the Onyx Sea was not.

This was the first time I had been here since the shipwreck, and a small part of me felt sorrow for neglecting my mother's gift for so long. Thankfully, the wind still greeted me the same, raking through my dark curls as it had done countless times before.

I sank down into the sand and set my elbows on my knees. I didn't blink the tears away when they threatened to spill over. For the first time in months, I cried. For Fletcher. For Izan and Priscilla and the new life within her. The life that will never experience a father's love.

"I wish I could talk to you," I murmured to the black water. "I wish you could come back and tell me what to do, the way you'd manage Father." I smiled at the distant memory. "I miss you every day. I think of you and wish things were different, that I could have you instead of..." I clutched a handful of sand in my palm, grains slipping between the cracks of my fingers in streams of beige.

“Instead, all I have to remember you is *this*.” I chucked the remaining bits into the water, the waves retracting like a living thing. “What do I do, Mother?” I whispered. “Please, give me a sign—”

I would’ve missed the sound of the door clicking shut if I hadn’t been nearby. I turned to find Amaris’ green eyes wide with amazement. They darted from the sea to the door that led to the castle, then out to sea again.

No one had ever discovered this place. *My* place. Here, where I was safe. Here, where I didn’t find washed-up bodies on the shore. It was the only thing in my entire life that someone hadn’t tainted.

Until now.

“What are you doing here?”

“*How?*” she breathed, her full lips parting in surprise. Her unbridled hair whipped in the wind as she took in the expanse of the Onyx Sea.

I crossed my arms. “I asked you first. How did you get here?”

As if finally noticing I was there, she turned to me. My eyes must have been swollen, because she said, “Oh. I’m sorry. Were you—? I should go.”

“Not until you tell me how you found this place.”

“I was walking around the castle when I heard the crashing waves. I assumed it led outside to the Sapphire Sea. I’m sorry to bother you.”

I ground my teeth together. I couldn’t blame her for getting bored and wandering around the palace. Someone as curious as her would have found it eventually, anyways. “Don’t be sorry,” I sounded unconvincing as I dropped back down to the sandy beach, locking my eyes on the black waves ahead.

Next, Amaris did something unexpected: she sat down next to me in the sand. “I heard about Izan. I’m sorry for your loss.”

The muscles in my face were so sore from crying and gritting my teeth, I couldn’t find a way to relax any further. Amaris’s presence only served as a

reminder of why my mother had conjured this place for me to begin with.

I was always on guard with everyone; especially when I was with her. The last time I was near a body of water with Amaris, I was pulled to the bottom by a member of her cove. What was stopping her from willing herself into my mind, right now, when no one else was around? Perhaps she had come to finish what she started.

I was fairly certain that she wouldn't risk the marriage agreement with me just to drown me here, but one could never be too careful.

"How are you?" she asked.

It was an odd question to ask someone who had recently lost a trusted friend and member of the Court of Lords. I supposed it was the only sympathy a mermaid could offer, given she probably didn't have much of a standard to go off of.

"Fine." I pressed my lips together, forcing my expression into neutrality. It wasn't that I was insecure of someone seeing me cry; it was the idea that someone would know my weaknesses, chiefly the person I should be guarding myself from the most. My most sacred space was not only infiltrated, but my moment of vulnerability could be dangerous if I wasn't careful.

Sharing emotions almost always blurred the lines of intimacy and affection. I didn't need any more of those two things with Amaris; in fact, I needed less. Less was better. Less was *safer*.

She gave me an incredulous look to let me know she remained unconvinced. "We both know that's a lie, Ezra. You watched your friend return from the Moaning Hills. You saw him—"

"I know what I saw." My nostrils flared in anger at the thought of reliving it. "Besides, what do you care?"

*She doesn't care about you. She cares about her own safety.*

“You only care because you have to.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“It isn't about what I believe. It's about the truth. No one cares about the leaders of the kingdom, they only care about what affects them. The sooner you realize that, the better. That is, if you can find someone in the next two months who can, at the very least, stand your presence.”

My words were harsh, but I didn't have the energy to sugar-coat them for her. Or anyone, for that matter. If someone came here today expecting to find the prince in good spirits, they were utterly thick.

Except no one knew how to find me when I was here, before today.

“You're technically '*standing my presence*' right now, prince.”

“Barely.”

Amaris snorted in an unamused kind of way. “Would you care to, at least, tell me what this place is, or should I leave you alone?”

A decision. She wasn't forcing me to tell her, nor was she pressing me. There were very few things I had been given freedom over, and it was nice to finally be faced with a decision that didn't involve determining an entire dominion's livelihood.

I wanted to tell her many things, if not for any other reason than that I needed a friend, but that could never be an option with her. First, I needed to remember the reason behind our courtship, and why I was marrying her. Attraction and feelings aside—she was still the enemy. She didn't care if my kingdom would be saved through our marriage, she only cared for her safety that only I could provide for her. Whatever her reasoning was for needing refuge from her cove, it was not for the common good. It was for her own.

“It's called the Onyx Sea,” I answered.



“There is no such thing as the Onyx Sea.” She furrowed her brows in disbelief. It was impressive how easily she was able to flip from one conversation to the next. She must have had to do that frequently in her former life. “There is only the Opal, Sapphire, Quartz and Amethyst, Amber, and Emerald,” she recited while counting on her hands.

“Come now, Little Fish. Don’t tell me you have forgotten about the Onyx Sea.”

Amaris’s face darkened with disapproval. “I haven’t, because it doesn’t exist.”

“My mother made this for me.”

“Your mother *created* this?” she gaped.

I nodded. “She could cast illusions. I thought it would go away once she passed, but somehow, it didn’t.”

She was the reason I loved this place so much. A small part of her soul was here with me.

Amaris frowned. “It’s just an illusion?”

“I don’t mind,” I shrugged. “It’s better than the alternative.”

I didn’t need to explain myself further. Amaris must’ve understood I was referring to the Sapphire Sea, and the pack of monsters that infested it, because she shivered.

Her green eyes searched down the line of the shore and back up again. “How far down does it go?”

“For a while. I’ve found the end only a couple of times, but it takes at least a day and a half to get there.”

“Could you swim in it?”

“Of course. I used to every day.”

“Used to?”

“Until the shipwreck,” I murmured.

Only the waves filled the gaps of silence between us for several long moments. I was starting to become aware of how much my muscles had relaxed from when she first sat down beside me. I wasn't particularly comfortable; nothing about Amaris made me comfortable, but I wasn't on guard with her, either.

At last, she turned to me. “Do you mind if I come here to swim one night? I’ve really missed the sea. I—I didn’t know there was a place for me to do so where I felt safe again.”

My jaw ticked, but for some reason, I didn’t object. The vile, revengeful part of me wanted to refuse her request, if only to show her what it felt like to miss out on something so beautiful and precious.

“As long as you don’t bring anyone else here.”

I wasn't sure why I gave her permission to come here. Maybe I felt guilty for her. Maybe I was too tired to fight with her about it if I had said no.

"Thank you," she said, rising from the sand. I acted like I hardly was paying attention, but I saw the tear she wiped from her eye as she made her way back to the entrance of the Onyx Sea.



## CHAPTER 29

### AMARIS

The water greeted my skin like an old friend, the only difference now was that I didn't have fins to sweep behind me. Scales no longer covered me, but the sea didn't recognize the shift as it lured me away from the shore.

Sucking in a breath and holding it within my lungs, I dove as deep as my legs could allow. Instantly, the sensation of being under the surface calmed me, soothing me with the promise of quietness.

To me, the sea was quiet. Still. The sound of cresting waves was a foreign concept to me because I had spent eighteen years of my life underneath them. The quietness of the open sea is what I missed the most. Burning in my lungs caused me to retreat to the top once more, coming up for air.

After my skin was wrinkled, my eyes and throat burning from the salt, I finally pulled myself from the sea, and surveyed the moon and celestials above. Somehow, the Illusionist who designed this—Ezra's mother—had made the dome surrounding the Onyx Sea invisible from the inside, to make

the experience seem even more real. She was so gifted that she even fooled me, a mermaid. Every seashell, grain of sand, and coral reef had been created with perfect preciseness.

It occurred to me that I never asked Ezra of his childhood, or of his mother. Not that he would bother to tell me much. I'd learned that his mother passed, but I wasn't sure of when, or from what, exactly. The dynamic between his father seemed strained, but it was difficult to tell simply from mealtimes.

It made me wonder what Ezra was like as a child, having a somewhat uninvolved father, and a dead mother. Was that why he seemed so emotionally reserved, or had he developed that trait from the position as prince, requiring too much from him at such a young age?

“Amaris?”

Ezra sucked in a breath from behind me, and I whirled just in time to see his eyes shift away from my marred back, his face twisted in disgust. I immediately reached for my shirt, throwing it over my head to cover myself.

Ezra's hair was thrown in a messy topknot, his chest bare. Only the lines of solid black ink embellished his skin in places, but I tried to avert my attention away from the lean muscles on his arms and abdomen.

“Who—” he stuttered, taking a step closer to me, “—who did that to you?”

“No one, Ezra. It was a long time—”

“Don't deflect my question.” His voice was harsher than I'd ever heard before, as if gravel was stuck in his throat. He reached out, grabbing the hem of my shirt. My breath caught from our sudden closeness, the concern in his eyes. “Who gave you those scars, Amaris? Who did that to you?”

I swallowed, turning my gaze to look at the sea. For a moment, I contemplated telling him. There was nothing to hide from him, nothing that

could possibly change his mind about me. If anything, he probably thought it would be pathetic that I received the scars from saving him.

Besides, why did he seem to care so much? One moment, he decided to be concerned about me, and then the next, he reverted to hating me. I couldn't understand him.

Anger bound his features, and with us standing this close, I could see his jaw clenching and unclenching. He was waiting for me to tell him, and he wouldn't take anything other than the truth as an answer.

Drawing in a breath, I turned away from him once more, because I couldn't stand the intensity in his eyes. I found it easier to explain the events this way. I didn't want to see the look of silent judgment. When I exhaled, I finally answered. "My father."

From my peripherals, I saw Ezra flinch, but he didn't pull away from me.

"I came here because I had no other choice. The night of the shipwreck was the first time I had been considered eligible to hunt with my pack. They call it their Claiming Night. I had been so appalled by the thought of taking my first claim that night as I watched my sisters and friends—" I closed my eyes, shivering. The words were thick in my throat.

"I was ashamed to take a man for myself. I was afraid of what that would do to me, who it would make me. Then I saw you as you helped your men to safety. You put yourself on the line for those men, even though you knew you would die if you didn't get on that boat. As the prince of the fucking Western Dominion, you had every right to shove everyone else aside, but you didn't."

"It doesn't matter," his voice was clipped. "They still died."

"It *does* matter, Ezra." I turned now to face him, "You made me realize what it meant to be compassionate. Sacrificial. You showed me what it meant

to be human. What you did that night was something none of my family would ever do for me. You saw the results of what saving you got me.”

His eyes grew wide. “Is that why you—? For saving me that night?”

I nodded, sinking down on the beach, wiping away my tears. Ezra followed suit, and I began weaving the story together of how I came to Erison. Elecktra coming to the shore of the island to save me, bringing me to Nephtali’s cave to be healed, how I made a bargain just to have another chance to live. I shared everything: the terms and conditions about the bargain, how I would die after three months if my mortal enemy didn’t love me in return.

When I finished, guilt seemed to weigh heavy on his shoulders. “Have you ever killed a man?”

“Never.”

He started to run his hands through his dark curls, only to remember his hair was already out of his face. His eyes were genuine when he looked at me, like he was truly seeing me for the first time. “Gods, Amaris. I’m so sorry.”

My eyes grew wide, and despite this serious conversation, a smile tugged at my lips. “Did Ezra Anaforiene just apologize to me?”

“I’m serious. I thought you were some awful creature, when really, *I’m* the one who’s been awful to you. You said I showed you what true compassion and sacrifice looked like, and I haven’t extended that grace to you once. You’ve acted more human than I have. I’m incredibly sorry, but I understand if you can’t ever forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” I said.

He jumped back slightly as I grabbed his hand, but to my surprise, he let it remain there, underneath of mine. Moments or hours passed, and we both sat

in silence, looking at our hands.

Heat crawled up my arm, spreading into the rest of my body as he wrapped his thumb around mine, doing little circles along my skin. “I never got to thank you for saving me that night.”

“Holy shit,” I retorted. “I somehow managed to get an apology *and* a thank you, all in one day? Either I’ve been mercifully blessed by the gods, or I’m dreaming. I’m going to go with the latter.”

“I can be nice when I choose to be.”

“Exactly: when you choose to be. I just don’t want to be disappointed when I wake up.”

“You’re not dreaming. See?”

Ezra pinched my thigh and I yelped, swatting his hand away. “What the hells?”

“You’re still here, Little Fish.” He chuckled, drawing water from the sea and forming a tiny fish just above his palm. Its liquid scales glinted as it floated there before he sent it swimming through the air toward me.

“Very clever,” I giggled, popping the fish with my finger. “There,” I pinched his bicep, “We’re even.”

“Don’t start this war with me.”

I laughed heartily. “Oh, but I *do* wish to start this. You’re kind of fun when you’re not such an asshole.”

“That’s it.” Ezra jumped to his feet, grabbing my forearm and hoisting me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He playfully pinched me all over the backs of my thighs as he hauled me toward the water. I squirmed in his arms, yelling profanities between my giggles. My skin was on fire from the contact, how his hands rested on the backs of my thighs as he carried me, and I was

keenly aware of how close he was to touching my backside. A part of me shamefully relished the idea of him having his hands there.

Ezra reached the edge of the beach and the waves splashed against his toes, then ankles, and finally, calves. All the while, I pounded his back, screaming in-between laughs. “Put me down!”

“Put you down? Anything for you, Little Fish.” He peeled me off his shoulder and lowered me around his waist with ease. Now, each of my legs were straddling him, but I wasn’t given a moment to think about how this made me feel before he buckled his knees, dunking us both into the black water. Cries of protest and laughter broke from me, and the sound only served as a reminder that I was actually having fun with Ezra.

When he stood up, he still held me locked into place around his waist, his hands now gripping my butt for support. The only barrier between our skin was my soaked shirt and undergarments, the only sound was our ragged breathing and the gentle waves around us.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, the world stopped as he held me in this illusionary sea. My cheeks felt as hot as the growing heat within my center, and I searched his facial features for any sign of regret or apprehension for the way he was holding me. His eyes were intensely focused on me, and I half-heartedly thought—maybe hoped—he would kiss me.

I pondered whether to lean in and taste them myself. Would he want that? Would he throw me off of him, demand I never come near him? With Ezra, it depended on the day.

He smirked as he lifted one of his hands, and before I could turn to see what he was scheming, a huge wave barreled into my back, sending me crashing into the water along with Ezra. I tumbled through the waves,



accidentally gulping water in the process. When I surfaced, I noticed Ezra was frantically searching the water, his voice weary as he called out to me.

“Amaris?”

As he turned his back toward me, I leapt from the water and tackled him from behind with a plethora of pinches. “Gotcha!”

Then, he threw me off of him, guiding a cresting wave to splash into me once more. I fell back into the water, and he dove underneath, swimming to catch up to me to finish the pinching war once and for all.

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## CHAPTER 30

### EZRA

**L**ast night was the first time I had been fully submerged since the shipwreck.

Amaris had gotten those scars because of me, for saving me when she wasn't supposed to. I was wrong about her this entire time. I had been so afraid of her sinking her claws into me that I never gave her the benefit of the doubt that she may be telling the truth.

All this time, the world had been perfectly black and white for me. Then, Amaris came crashing in, painting everything in shades of gray.

She was good, even though she was born a mermaid.

She had saved me, and all I'd done was put a knife to her throat. The girl had not only lost everything she had ever known or cared about in life but was beaten by her own father and left to die. I had been worse than Titus when he kicked her in the throne room. I had been repeatedly kicking her every day since, with no idea how much pain I was causing her.

*“I came here because I had no other choice,”* she had said as she closed her eyes and shivered. Did that night haunt her, too?

Titus bowed to me from outside the council room, and I snarled at him as I entered. I couldn’t stop reliving the events in my mind: Titus kicking her within days of the fresh wounds, sending her head slamming to the floor on the throne room. All the while, she was trying to learn how to fucking breathe.

The guards were the ones who found her washed up, naked on the beach. Titus would’ve seen the stitches. He’d known of her injuries, and he still used cruelty as an attempt to gain information from her.

“Why am I here, Your Highness?” the guard asked, shutting the door behind him. Once inside, he assumed the At Ease position in front of the table. I sat on the other side of it for his sake—it was the only thing keeping me from destroying him on the spot.

“You saw Lady Amaris’ back the day she came to Erison, did you not?”

Titus nodded. “I did. However, I don’t understand—”

“And yet you still harmed her by kicking her?”

“We needed answers, Your Highness. I assumed that would be best for the kingdom, in the midst of such trials.”

“You assumed wrong. You harmed my future wife, your future queen. A week before she came here, she was whipped and left to die. What makes you think that I should allow you to live, after hearing how you purposely hurt her after you already knew she was injured?”

The captain of the royal guard hung his head in shame. “I admit now that I overstepped. Allow me to make it right with you.”

I stood from my seat, my fists flexing into tight knots by my sides. “You don’t have to make it right with me. It’s Amaris that needs to hear you

apologize. After you do so, you must pack your things. We have an apartment for you outside of the city that we will provide for you until you can find another source of income. You have until twelve on the line. After that, you will be escorted out of the palace.”

Titus opened his mouth to object, but I stopped him. “I’m merely letting you go on my behalf. I simply couldn’t stand the sight of you, knowing how you harmed my fiancée. It is a grace of mine to allow you to live, and even more gracious to allow you severance. Don’t push your luck.”

At that, Titus bowed one last time before he scurried out the door like a scared child, no doubt beginning his pursuit to find Amaris and make amends.

Amaris could hold her own in a fight—for that, I was certain—but a small part of me was filled with dread that she may find forgiveness too quickly. She obviously was a better person than I was, for the way she risked her life to make the right choice.

I wouldn’t put it past her, however, to make amends with Titus and plead with me to offer him the position again. If it were anyone else he’d harmed, anyone else that he’d tortured to get information from, I wouldn’t have blinked twice. Hells, I may have even handed him my dagger, in any other case.

But the scars on her back hinged on so much, changed the game. She could be trusted. Gods help me, too, that I genuinely enjoyed our time together, and felt comfortable enough to get into the water with her. I always genuinely enjoyed our time together, and, until now, I thought that had been the issue: that she’d killed men at sea before, yet I still enjoyed her company. I felt like I was condoning her past murders. I felt ashamed for wanting her, terrified of what she may do to me the second I let my guard down.

I wondered if now I should be more terrified, the fact that nothing was stopping me from enjoying her.

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## CHAPTER 31

### AMARIS

Countless petals bloomed on delicate vines as I ambled down one of the garden paths. I had seen this labyrinth of greenery from my tower window and have been itching to explore it ever since. Today, I finally got the chance.

Ezra and I had been getting along better this week. Between coordinating a wedding and council meetings, we were busier than ever. Nevertheless, Ezra insisted on taking time out of his days to see me. We saw each other almost every day, whether it be taking walks at night or reading next to each other in the courtyard. The main trajectory was to be seen with me, so that it was clear we were courting.

In less than two weeks, we would be married, giving me exactly one month to find someone to break the curse upon my soul. It was less time than I hoped for, but right now, our union is what mattered most. Gods forbid, if my father found me, there would be nothing stopping him from invading Erison, besides what little backing the Western Dominion had. Without alliances

from other Valian dominions, the West wasn't much of a threat, not when they were landlocked between bloodthirsty creatures on either side of the map. I shivered, turning the corner of the maze and pushing the thought from my mind.

At last, the massive sundial greeted me. Obsidian coated the very center of the garden, the black stone forming a large, rounded circle, a smaller one inside of it to monitor the second sun's orbit. The gnomon in the middle was a giant prism that converged the two beams of light into one, a single shadow appearing along the numbers of the sundial, which were carved in the rock, starting with the first hour of the morning and ascending until the last.

A bark sounded, and Ezra's dog sprinted down one of the pathways, her entire back side wagging violently when she spotted me.

"Nice to see you again, Lucy." I chuckled, grabbing her furry ears and scratching before looking to Ezra. "What are you doing out here?"

It was the beginning of the week. Normally, Ezra would have council meetings all day, not that I particularly cared about his whereabouts. Still, I was curious. It dawned on me that soon, I would be obligated to attend the council meetings, too. I winced. Maybe it could be arranged so that I didn't have to attend *all* of them. A healthy time away from politics was equally as important as being involved in them.

"I always walk Lucy around midday. What are you doing here?"

Holding my book up in answer, Ezra nodded. "Ah. Solana has sunk her claws deep, hasn't she? Don't tell me you're reading the same books she does."

I quirked up a brow. "And what if I do?"

"I guess someone would turn to them if they don't get enough fun. No one I've ever been with seems to take interest in them. In fact, I keep them

quite...entertained.” Ezra winked, a smirk settling across his full lips. Heat surged to my core at his insinuation.

“What are you reading?” he asked, and I silently said a prayer of thanks to whatever god was watching over me to diffuse this awkward moment.

“It’s called ‘*The Trove of the Lost Queen.*’ I haven’t started it yet, actually.”

I handed him the book, and he read the description on the back. “Reminds me of an old children’s story my mother would read to me. It used to spook the shit out of me.”

“I was told stories to purposely scare me. I think it was just to keep us from doing stupid things as children. I was told that if I went to the surface before my Claiming, I would be plucked to death by blood-thirsty seagulls, or that if I explored abandoned sunken ships, there were monsters who waited to eat my flesh. Turns out, that one wasn’t entirely a lie.” I laughed, remembering the time the baby hydra had greeted me with all five of his massive heads. Nephtali even remarked that was her favorite story of mine.

Darkness flickered in Ezra’s gaze. “Unfortunately for us, sea monsters aren’t just a work of fiction.” He handed the book back to me. “That book may be written for entertainment, but the lore is true. It’s the story of how mermaids and humans became mortal enemies.”

I shook my head, trying to unscramble my mind from what was fiction and what wasn’t. The story reminded me of the one Nephtali told me, and it made me wonder what actually happened the day mermaids and humans became adversaries.

Apparently, Ezra could tell by my expression that I was bewildered. “There’s a library on the palace grounds; I can show you more books tomorrow if you’re interested.”



My eyes widened. “You mean there’s an entire library? Right here?” For months, it had been so close by. Why am I just hearing of it now?

He chuckled. “Yes. I know how much you’ve been enjoying books lately. I figured you would want to know about the library two stories away from your room.”

“*Only two stories?*” My voice jumped an entire octave.

In a palace as large as this one, it was surprising it didn’t take days to travel from one end of the grounds to the other. Even for my easily tired legs, two stories were only a stone’s throw away.

“Take advantage of it while you can. It’ll be on the other side of the castle when you move into my quarters.”

He ran a hand through his hair as I watched the muscles in his arms flex, the lines of his tattoo peeking through the hem of his shirt. My thoughts drifted to a week ago when he stripped in front of me at the Onyx Sea, the way his muscles moved as he hoisted me over his lean body, the black lines of dates and symbols etched into his bronzed skin, the perfectly sculpted V that dipped low on his hips...

I rolled my eyes. “Your humor is so twisted sometimes.” When his hazel eyes locked on mine, my face grew pale, finding not an ounce of deceit. “You have to be joking.”

As if to confirm my worst nightmare, he shook his head. I didn’t know which was worse: sharing a bed with easily the most attractive man I knew and being forced to touch him—or *not* sharing a bed with this man, and never getting the opportunity.

“What—” I started, but every objection died on my tongue.

As if he knew where my mind was going, he raised his perfectly angled brow upwards. “What if you want a male other than me warming your bed?”

I swallowed, and something in my eyes must have given away what I was thinking. “You will still have a separate chamber for whatever you wish. We can hide that you have male suitors by keeping them in a separate area where you happen to also be from time to time. At night, though, you’re with me, at least for the first year. Then, once you’re out of the limelight as the queen, I’d be happy to have my bed back to myself.”

For some reason, I hoped I would live long enough to find out.



Endless corridors of elegant, ivory archways stretched in every direction I turned. In the very center of the domed atrium, golden vines wove their way through pillars, forming a monumental garden of blooming petals along their lengths.

My mouth dropped open as I observed the books neatly stacked into every nook and cranny of the Royal Library. Not a single page was out of place, not a single speck of dust coating the tops of crisp pages.

I hated all of it.

It was one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen, but I was wildly out of place here, unlike every one of the expensive treatises lining the walls.

The library that Solana had shown me in the city had been dark and old and quaint, the way a library should be, with leather chairs weathered with time, pages yellowing with age and creased in the corners. And the *smell*...There was nothing that could compare to the smell of parchment mixed with the burning firewood from the hearth of the Library of Erison.

Here, however, the air was stale and cold.

“What do you think?” Ezra asked, coming up to me with a book in hand.

I bit my lip. “It’s wonderful.”

“Just ‘wonderful?’” Ezra’s eyes narrowed at me, unconvinced by my statement. “Okay, now I *know* you’re lying.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked him, masking my face with bewilderment.

“Your eyes didn’t light up when you entered this room like they do when you talk about something you’re interested in.”

I didn’t know he paid attention to my interests. “Yeah, there was a whole damn sea in the palace, Ezra. Seeing anything after that is slightly less impressive in comparison.”

“How do you like the Library of Erison?” Ezra asked.

My eyes widened immediately. “It’s perfect in every way.”

Ezra gave me a pointed look. I read the unspoken words on his handsome features, “*That’s what I mean when I say your eyes light up.*”

“Well, nearly perfect.” I blinked, recalling my first few visits. “A librarian threatened to kick me and Lana out because I was talking too loud.”

Ezra snorted. “No kidding. You were talking louder than Lana?”

“Well, I had just found out some rather... interesting news.” My cheeks warmed, remembering the conversation I had with Solana that day, how she told me I was invited as one of the potential brides for Ezra. Was it only a month ago that I would have been completely nauseated by that thought?

“I swear, that woman went into the wrong profession. She should’ve been an actress or a novelist with how much she loves drama.” Ezra shook his head, and the smile on his lips widened to show off the dimples of his cheeks.

For a moment, my gaze was locked, taking in the way his upturned lips and perfect white teeth brought out his youth. It was nice to see him smiling again.

Suddenly, I remembered something I’d been meaning to ask. “What do

you know about Lord Rutherford?”

“I know practically everything there is to know about him. Why do you ask?”

“I—well, I saw something, and I wanted to be sure you’re safe.”

Ezra canted his head. “Safe? What do you mean? Why wouldn’t I be safe?”

I explained the mysterious creature in the alleyway of Past and Present, and how I saw him again a week later going into BellaDonna’s shop.

Ezra drew in a slow breath. “His past certainly isn’t the cleanest record, but he’s been serving our court for over a century now. As much as we oppose each other, he isn’t someone I’ve been suspicious of wanting to take the throne, but I’ll look into it. Thank you for telling me.”

I nodded, pointing at the navy book in his hand. “What book is this?”

As if noticing it for the first time, he held it up. “This is the children’s book I was telling you about yesterday.” A fiendish grin spread across Ezra’s lips. “You know, this is something that I’ve always wondered about...”

“Oh gods. What is it?” I braced myself for what new realm of hell he was about to make me endure.

“Can fish read?”

“Fish? I’m not sure. Mermaids? No. Our language is one not meant to be written, only spoken. There was no way to preserve any documents other than wood, stone, or writing on the sand. Each method has its own reason it would be too difficult to sustain. My sisters and I were taught, though. Our handmaiden would draw letters in the sand and make each of us sound out the letters. She told us that, because we were daughters of a very powerful king, we never knew when we may find use of it and that we needed to be well-educated.”

“Makes sense. I spent my whole life thinking I would love to be a merman, that way I could be in the sea without fear. The more I get to know you, though, the more I realize I wouldn’t enjoy being one much at all.”

I sauntered closer. “Well, the more I get to know *you*—,” I snatched the book from his hands, “The more I can’t stand being a moss maiden.”

As I flipped through the pages, scribed metallic artwork caught my attention. “What in the hells is a *moss maiden*?” asked Ezra.

Snapping the book shut, I burst out laughing. “It’s what we call human women. Sounds quite ridiculous saying it out loud, doesn’t it?”

“That’s the silliest name I’ve ever heard.”

“What? You don’t have slang for mermaids?”

Ezra grimaced. “None you’d want me repeating.”

I frowned, lowering my gaze back to the book. The illustrations woven throughout it were nothing less than spectacular. Rich tones of oranges and electric yellows depicted lanterns floating about a thick ethereal garden of green. Speckles of lilac clung to branches hanging low to the mossy floor, where a young woman with honey curls sat, a golden lyre in hand.

Ezra looked over my shoulder, and I was all too aware of how close he was to me. “That’s one of my favorites, actually.”

“What’s it about?” I asked.

I watched his face as he dove into the story. His face lit up at his favorite parts, and I found myself mirroring his own reactions.

“It’s multiple fairy tales in one book. That way, you can read a new story each night before bed,” he explained.

I giggled. “Does your maid tuck you in and read these to you?”

As if realizing his grave mistake, he ran his hands through his hair and chuckled. “Yeah. Right before she changes my nappy and puts me in my

nightgown, actually.”

I paused, trying to decipher his casual demeanor. “Wait, does she really?”

Ezra snorted. “Gods. No, Amaris. I don’t have a maid who tucks me in. Plus, I sleep naked, not in a frilly nightgown.”

“That’s a shame.” I clicked my tongue at him. “Nightgowns are quite sexy, if I do say so myself.”

“Right.” Ezra winked. “Because sleeping naked isn’t.”

My cheeks flushed. “Definitely not.”

“It’s good to know you’re not attracted to me like that, but you don’t have to sound so repulsed.”

I looked down at my hands, anxious to change the subject. In just a short, while we would be sleeping in the same bed together, and Ezra had just told me he slept *naked*.

My wicked thoughts brought me back, once again, to the moment at the Onyx Sea, when I saw his tattoos stretched across his bronzed skin. I wondered if he had any more in places I could only see once he wasn’t clothed.

Dear gods above and below, help me.

“This is the story I was telling you about.” Ezra turned the pages in my hands. “A sadistic mermaid tricked a human into marrying her. On the day of their wedding, she pretended to be locked in a cage. He came to free her, but the rest of her pack had already been waiting for him. They attacked him and she laughed as she watched him be devoured.”

My eyes flitted to the caged woman in the book, noticing that she also had the tail of a fish. This was the story Nephtali had told me.

Ezra sat down. “The moral of the story is to beware of creatures who mask themselves in light but actually wish to harm you.”

“Poetic,” I said, and for some reason, anger rose to the surface. “Although, I think the story may be skewed.”

“What do you mean?”

I sighed. “I heard the same story. The mermaid truly loved the human, but her pack didn’t approve, so they tricked her and her fiancé. They murdered him. As punishment, they caged her to make her watch.”

Ezra leaned back in the leather seat, crossing his arms. “It still doesn’t change the fact that mermaids are heartless beasts.”

“I’m not defending them, but all stories can be changed to fit others’ agendas.”

“I guess you could say that there’s a ‘*tail*’ to every story,” Ezra laughed, rising from the chair. He easily seemed to shrug off this children’s story, but I couldn’t. Although the moving pieces were told slightly differently, the overall story was still the same. This had to be the origin of how mermaids and humans became mortal enemies.

Though Ezra didn’t seem to care, the motivation of the mermaid meant everything. If that mermaid truly had the ability to love her enemy...that meant there was hope for me, too.

“Where did you get this book from?” I asked.

“Here. Hells, it’s probably as ancient as Erison itself. My mother and I would come here every week to pick a new story to read together. For some reason, I always went back to this one.” Ezra chuckled, “I think it’s because she would fall asleep with me if she knew I was scared. I didn’t see her or my father much. I liked the feeling of being watched over by her as I slept. It made me feel safe.”

“What happened to her?”

Shadows danced in Ezra’s eyes. “She had an illness that slowly killed her.

They could've saved her if she—" He ran a hand through his dark curls. "My father ignored the beginning signs of the illness. She would become forgetful or have uncontrollable tremors that we later found out were seizures from a lesion at the base of her skull. The healers gave her the most aggressive potions and daily tonics to kill the sickness, but by the time they caught it, it had been too late. She died when I was eight. She was pregnant with my sister."

"I'm sorry." I had never known my mother and had hardly any memories of her other than the occasional dream of her blonde hair and the way her voice sounded as she nursed me to bed. Something always told me those were just dreams of what she was like. I had never known my mother to truly mourn her death.

He smiled faintly, but the expression didn't reach his eyes. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't," I said. "I lost my mother, too. I still blame my father to this day."

He may not have said he blamed Verin for the loss of his mother, but he didn't have to. The pain in his voice told me all I needed to know. He blamed his father, just as I blamed mine.

"What happened?" he asked.

"She died in childbirth. I wasn't supposed to live, either. I think my father still blames me for her death." I shook my head. "He always wished I died that day instead of her." He laid his hand on mine. I looked down at them, focusing on the way his veins snaked up his muscular forearm. We sat in uncomfortable silence, so I changed the subject. "Do you know if there are any other books here about the history of Mermaid's Cove?"

"I don't know if we have specific books about that, but I do know there's a section about the history of mermaids that could maybe help."



I rolled my eyes. Of course, there was a whole section dedicated to just one topic. To think, I had spent eighteen years missing out on all of these books.

Ezra strode down the long corridor, scanning the rows of identical marble arches. I followed quickly before he could disappear from my line of sight. As I passed by a shelf, I dragged my finger along it. Noting my clean skin, I frowned. How in all the hells was there not even a hint of dust on anything in here? It must take the palace employees days alone just to dust the shelves and mop the crystalline floor.

He rounded a corridor to reveal yet *another* long white maze of dustless books and squeaky-clean marble.

“Is this palace filled with nothing but long hallways just to piss everyone off?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Such a little fish in a big pond.”

I stuck my tongue out at him, but he turned to face me at the same time.

“Very original comeback.” Folding his arms, he leaned against a pillar, looking so boyish and friendly, it made me forget we’d truly just started enjoying each other’s company a week ago.

“You’re welcome, by the way.” Ezra sauntered toward me, the scent of musk and citrus rendering me immobilized, like a honeybee sniffing its favorite flower. “For taking you exactly where you needed to go in this awful place. This is how you repay me?”

He towered over me, so I had to look up to meet his gaze. “How else, then, princeling, should I repay you?”

Ezra licked his lips, sending my eyes flitting to them. “I have a few ideas. Maybe on our wedding night, we can make a few come true.”

“Bastard.” I shoved him away, ducking my head to hide my blush. Ezra burst into laughter before he disappeared out of sight. I was thankful for that,

because my mouth was dry, my body hot all over. I shook away my courting desire by hunting the spines from top to bottom. For what, I wasn't sure, but I would know when it caught my eye, the same way lost treasure always spoke to me.

There: the third shelf down from the top, five books over. The brown ink read: *"The Origin of Mermaids and Their Infamous Name."*

Grabbing the wooden ladder, I rolled it over to where the book rested high above my head. I hoisted myself onto it and began my ascent. A couple more caught my eye, so I plucked them from their spaces. My feet hit the floor with a *thump*, and I pulled out the stiff chair nearest to my reading section. I flipped the book open.

*"There is plenty of speculation as to how mermaids and other horrid sea monsters came into existence. Though it may seem quite shocking to most, the realm of Vale did not begin with either mermaids or monsters. The earliest remains came around the Age of Desolation, 12,000."*

I kept skimming over the text until I found more important information.

*"They were not always evil. Mermaids, though it's difficult to prove whether they exist now, at one time lived off the coasts of The Opal, The Twin Seas: Quartz and Amethyst, and The Amber. Their cousins, and certainly the vilest of them, lived in the Sapphire Sea. Near the Age 14,340, the pack migrated to where they now reside, otherwise known as "Mermaid's Cove."*

*This pack terrorizes Erison to this day. By taking the form of an unwed goddess, she sings to lure men to their deaths, thus coining the name "mermaid." Because of their ruthlessness, it is said the crystal blue shores are permanently stained red from the blood of those who dare sail it.*

*Other mermaids, however, are rumored to still reside off the coasts of the Twin Seas. Though there is no evidence as to whether mermaids exist in any*

*of the other seas of Vale, there is archaeological evidence of their remains found in all six seas. It is debated among biologists whether the mermaids of Mermaid's Cove hunt and kill their cousins for sport. [For reference, see "Hunting Down the Former Family.] The last mermaid was spotted in The Quartz Sea A20,332."*

The mermaids in the other seas haven't been spotted in nearly twenty years. Yet, there are weekly occurrences of shipwrecks in the Sapphire. Not only were the mermaids of my cove guilty of the loss of countless human lives, they also were deemed responsible for the extinction of their former coves, too. The extinction of their own *family*.

I knew my cove was cold-blooded but this...

This was vile.

If this textbook was historically accurate, the mermaids would have been actively hunting their kin for the entirety of my life. I hadn't ever heard about an order for my pack to rid the other seas of merpeople.

All the kingdom's sin fell upon one alone: my father.

My head spun with confusion, rage, hatred, and sorrow. I didn't know what to believe, or who to trust. Everything I was told, everything I was born to be was a lie. Why would they hunt down the mermaids of the other seas? What was the reason for killing them off? Is this where Ava had been disappearing to? Is this why no one seemed to question her absences? If she had been sneaking off to go to the shore or anywhere else, our father would have known about it. He wouldn't have allowed her to vanish for days on end unless he was the one who ordered it to happen.

She left to hunt down the remaining lines so my father could monopolize the six seas.

Then it all pieced together: the hunts. My father's plan. My existence.

The six Strauhn daughters were born to rule our respective seas. We were to kill the other mermaids to ensure full control without any uprisings. We were made to kill our own flesh and blood if they didn't bow to the King of the Seas.

I hurled the textbook across the room. My blood boiled hot within my veins. If I were a dragon, I would breathe fire, and I would smile as I watched it all burn. I wanted nothing to do with any of my sisters again, but Ava?

Ava lied to me. She betrayed my trust. At least my other sisters had the bravery to be awful to me to my face. Ava had befriended me, given me hope that she was different.

Where was she when it was my Claiming Night, and I was forced into a morally evil task? Where was Ava, my only friend and sister, when I needed her protection from the rest of our terrible family? Where was she the day I was manacled in bronze and left to bleed to death like a mortal?

Ava's promise echoed within my mind. *"I'll always come back for you."*

How could she promise me such a thing when all she ever did was abandon me? Every inch of my skin ached with the desire to throw another book, to get my hands on something so I could destroy it. I wanted to destroy *her*. I wanted to hurt Ava the way she hurt me.

Worse. I wanted to hunt her down the way she hunted our family.

"Amaris?" Ezra's raspy voice echoed, as if reaching through a dark tunnel. It was hollow; he could've been calling out from miles away. I searched around for him, but all I could see was a white library filled with books, so many books. I was lost in them, just like the lies of my entire life.

My vision blurred and hot tears streamed down my cheeks. He called out again, but he was so far away. "Amaris, are you alright?"

I was taken back to the day I took the potion that transformed me into a

human. I couldn't breathe. I had no comprehension of how to. My lungs were leaden inside my chest, weighing me down and drowning me at the bottom of the sea. Except I wasn't drowning; I wasn't in water at all.

I was *suffocating*.

"Amaris, what happened?" His voice—Ezra's voice—was concerned. He placed a gentle hand on the small of my back, stabilizing me, grounding me to the realm. "Are you hurt?"

I tried coming up for air, but I couldn't. I was suffocating in a sea of lies and betrayal. I couldn't catch my breath quick enough, I couldn't think quick enough to save myself, I couldn't—

"Shit, Amaris. *Breathe.*" He cupped my wet face in his hands, wiping the tears away. "Listen to my words. In," Ezra took a couple of breaths to demonstrate, "Now breathe out. Try it again. Just like you learned before. In..."

As I heaved, I concentrated on his words, but all I felt was anger. Bitterness. *Pain.*

"Out. You have to breathe, Little Fish."

*You have to breathe.*

I put all my focus on that one goal: to swim up for air, to catch my breath on the tiniest bit of breeze that this stale library contained. Gods, I hated this place. If I survived this day, I would never come here ever again.

I needed more air.

In...

I followed Ezra's soothing voice. "That's it, darling. Now breathe out."

Out...

"Again," Ezra encouraged, his thumb brushing over my tears.

I clung to that thought, forcing my lungs to work, willing my racing heart

to calm itself. It was now beating for an entirely new reason, though. Ezra was here. He was holding me.

“You’re doing great. Keep doing that.” Ezra continued drawing little circles on my skin, leaving scolding waves of heat in his wake.

I wanted *him* to keep doing *that*. Never had I been comforted like this. I’d never had anyone to calm me, encourage me, or set my skin on fire all within moments of each other. I needed his touch like I needed air in my lungs.

I needed him.

Nephtali had been so right. To walk on Valian land would be the scariest thing I would ever have to endure, but not for the reason I had originally thought. This entire time, I thought being a human would mean I wasn’t at the top of the food chain any longer. That being a human would be scary because mermaids were the main issue, looming over the evil waters of Erison, the constant threat of being thrown into them because someone thought I was a spy from the Eastern Dominion.

However, this wasn’t what made my bones quake with the intensity of a thousand hurricanes.

This entire time, I had been living a lie. My worst nightmares turned out to not even be the worst. A whole new realm of hell was just unveiled. I was raised by a sinister king who ordered his subjects to kill his own family without mercy. Better yet—for *pleasure*. No wonder Ezra had been willing to compromise so much to make Mermaid’s Cove pay for their terrible deeds.

I wasn’t just willing to see the job done. I was set. If Father wanted to hunt down his own family, then it was time he tasted his own bitter medicine.

I would make him suffer.

PART THREE  
THE LOST QUEEN

*OceanofPDF.com*



## CHAPTER 32

### EZRA

**G**inger's hooves methodically struck the cobblestone, the smell of baked pastries and laughter hung thick in the air.

"Early morning, Prince." An old man took off his hat and lowered into a bow, revealing bald patches of his white hair. He flicked his hand and a poppy appeared. "A flower for your sweetheart this holiday?"

It was beautiful, and as the flower symbol of today's festival, it was nearly impossible to find a florist with other choices. I nodded but looked at the red flower in disapproval. "Would you happen to have lavender?"

The florist scoffed, as if it was an absurd question. "Do I have lavender? I have every kind!" With a simple twist, the poppy in his hand changed into a bundle of trailing purple flowers. "Lavender sprouts come from the Gardens of Elysia, but mine are always in season."

He hoisted the bouquet up to me, and I placed a gold sovereign into his palm.



Looking into his hand, his eyes widened. “Your Highness, your produce was only—”

“The extra was for the magic show. Happy Surpassing Day, sir.”

“Happy Surpassing Day, Your Highness.”

A little while later, I passed by a shop, the window displaying a fiery red festival dress. The fabric stopped at the mannequin’s mid-thigh, with pops of gold and orange woven throughout. The display turned by an invisible force to show the dress’ back, and the thought of Amaris made me smile.

What was she doing right now? My best guess was that she was curled up on her couch with a book in hand. With a quick glance at the sky, I thought better of it. It was early in the morning, so she was probably still in bed.

Inside the store, I purchased everything in the window display, including matching jewelry and gold goggles. Regardless of how stylish vendors attempted to make the last accessory, they always looked quite strange, even if they were necessary.

The goggles were needed to see the eclipse later this evening. Semiannually, the suns cross each other in the sky. For the two Valian holidays, people flood the streets, eager to celebrate the planets orbiting. It was just another reason for the dominion to celebrate. The summer eclipse, Surpassing Day, was a time of rebirth and spiritual newness. Conceding Day, the winter eclipse, was for self-reflection, with many peoples’ favorite aspect being gift giving.

Coppery hair flashed in my peripherals. I whirled, searching for the lovely face of emerald eyes and full, crimson lips. Amaris disappeared into the full streets of Erison. As quickly as I could, I leapt off Ginger, tying her up while keeping my eye on Amaris in the crowd.

“Excuse me,” I called out to those I barreled past, zigzagging through

congested streets.

“Amaris!” I said, passing by a group of giggling women. They each pointed at me, but I paid them no mind. I shouted again, trying to spot her auburn hair once more.

Once I was close enough, I noted how much shorter it was than usual. And now there were ribbons of blonde that the suns bleached in her hair. She must've gotten it done for the festival.

“Amaris, wait up.” I was in direct earshot of her now, but she didn't turn around. Instead, her purple cloak continued sweeping the cobblestone path, briskly moving away from the bustling streets.

I chuckled; it was so like Amaris to constantly have her head in the clouds, not engaging in many conversations. Her notorious scheming always seemed louder than the voices around her.

Doubling my steps, my heart quickened. I was eager to see her face when she saw the gifts I bought for her. Now, I was so close to her, I could practically smell lavender. Except when I leaned in, she even smelled different.

“Happy Surpassing Day, Little Fish.”

Amaris whirled to face me, elbowing me hard in the abdomen. Clutching my stomach, I dropped the bouquet of flowers. When I looked up at her, the breath was nearly knocked from me a second time.

It wasn't Amaris.

A few moments passed between the two of us, her emotions shifting from fear to confusion. When she saw my face, realizing who I was, her familiar face paled. Though her hair was lighter and much shorter than Amaris', it was eerie how much this stranger looked like her.

“I'm sorry,” I coughed, still clutching my stomach. “I thought you were...”

I trailed off. What was Amaris to me? My friend? My steady? My fiancée? “I thought you were someone else.”

The woman cut her amber eyes from my face to the stone path. She bent down to retrieve the stems from the cobblestone, handing them back to me. “I’m sorry for hitting you,” the woman smiled sheepishly. “I thought you were *someone else*.”

As I took the flowers back, she chanted a melody that I couldn’t quite make out, but when I blinked again, the stranger was pulling the hood of her purple robe over her face. And for some reason, I forgot the entire purpose of our conversation. Shaking off the odd encounter, I headed back in the direction I came, mounting Ginger and spurring her back toward the palace.



## CHAPTER 33

### AMARIS

“Happy Surpassing Day!” Priscilla said, enveloping me in a hug. Her belly seemed to have grown twice in size since the last time I had seen her. I frowned, feeling a tinge of guilt. The last time had been at Izan’s funeral three weeks ago.

“How are you?” I asked.

“I’m...doing better. It took me a while to process what this means for me and our baby. Azranth is being tended to while I’m away, but once the baby is born, we will journey back.”

She had arrived in Erison with her husband, and now she’d return as a single mother. Raising a child would be difficult as it is, but as the appointed Lady?

“You are so strong, Pris.”

Tears shone in her brown eyes. “I don’t feel like—” She winced, and her hands darted to her round belly. “Sorry. She just kicked.”

“May I feel?” I asked, my eyes wide with curiosity.

“Of course. Here, let us sit.”

We moved to the couch in the sitting area, and she lifted her tunic to show her perfectly round stomach, the dark skin pulled taut. Priscilla grabbed my hand, placing it over the spot where the baby had just moved.

“Ahh! She’s moving. I just felt it!” I shrieked in excitement. “Priscilla, this is amazing!”

When I turned to Priscilla, more tears were thick on her lashes. “I’m sorry.” Her lip quivered. “I just...I just was thinking of how I wished Izan would be here to have these moments with me. I’m sorry. I should go. I’m ruining your holiday.”

She stood, ironing out her tunic.

“No, Pris.” I grabbed her hand. “Please don’t go.”

Solana joined us, helping Priscilla to sit once more. “You’re not ruining anything. You are allowed to grieve. What kind of friends would we be if we left you to do that alone?”

“We wouldn’t have invited you if we didn’t want you here with us,” I said. “I couldn’t have survived without you and Solana to cheer me up when I first came here. You were so welcoming and thoughtful at all our dinners. You even laughed at my comments when I showed my ass to people.”

Priscilla let out a little giggle. “You’ve always been able to make me laugh. Being from another country can be very intimidating, and I wanted to welcome you. I wanted you to know that we are nothing like the Eastern Dominion.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Pris just trusted us with the most sensitive aspect of her life, yet now that I was in the limelight, I was faced with a decision: to tell the truth or to lie.

But I was not in the sea anymore. They were not like the people from my

past.

“I’m not from Paglon nor from the Eastern Dominion, but yes. I am talking about when I came here to Erison.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Solana rolled her eyes, turning to Priscilla. “Do you think she would be able to understand us if she was?”

“There are plenty of different languages and dialects,” Priscilla defended. “She may be bilingual.”

My eyes widened, looking at Solana. “Wait—you knew I wasn’t from the Eastern Dominion?”

Solana nodded. “From the first day I met you.”

My mouth nearly dropped open. “How?”

“Like I said—I came into your room with the coffee and medicine. I spoke in Palogian, and you looked at me like I had five heads. Then I spoke Erimaic, and you piped right up! With a funny little accent, but nevertheless, Erimaic.”

“Have you told anyone about this?”

“Do I need to? You were in danger and obviously in need of help. You looked as if you were on the brink of death until—” Solana stopped. Oh, gods. Until I miraculously healed myself. “Until I helped you, of course! Medicine is just the best, isn’t it? We have these new tonics you can take that make a blind person able to—”

I tuned out the rest of Solana’s story about medicine and her daily life as a healer. I had been around her long enough to know the best stories. It was interesting, but I didn’t have a medical bone in my body. My magic could heal, but I didn’t understand a single technicality, save for the bits I’ve picked up from Solana, who was thoroughly explaining the anatomy of the eye

practically for the hundredth time. Meanwhile, Priscilla's eyes were as round as the moon, seeming genuinely interested in what Solana had to say.

It occurred to me then that Solana had meant to bait Priscilla into this, to direct her attention away from me. Did Solana know my secret? She seemed to piece it together already, that I wasn't from Paglon, but she still hadn't mentioned it to anyone. She certainly wasn't an idiot.

A bell rang from outside my door, followed by heavy panting.

"Who else did you invite, Amaris?" Solana asked.

I shrugged, crossing the room. "Probably just a guard who was extremely unprepared for the journey up the stairs."

When I opened the door, something much more interesting sat on the mahogany rug. Lucy, Ezra's dog, wagged her tail at me. Around her furry neck was a silver bell. Between her massive paws was a box wrapped in flaxen, embellished with the two eclipsing suns of Vale.

"What'd you bring me, girl?" I bent down to ruffle one of her ears, sending the bells on her collar jingling.

"Amaris, is everything okay?" Solana called from the room.

"It's just fine! Lucy brought me a gift."

"Who?" Pris asked.

I opened the door for my friends to see, only for Lucy to run inside and jump onto the couch. My friends erupted in laughter.

Solana started jumping up and down in giddy excitement. "Amaris, *Ezra brought you a gift!*"

"No, Lucy brought me the gift." I sat down next to Lucy and scratched her head. "If Ezra wanted to bring it, he would have done it himself. Isn't that right, Lucy?" I leaned into her, and she gave me a big lick on the face.

"Forget about the dog, Amaris. Open it!" Priscilla demanded.

I looked down at the present in my hands. The gold metallic wrapping was so lovely, I didn't have it in me to destroy it. If the wrapping was this stunning, what could possibly be waiting inside? Tears surfaced, obscuring my vision.

Apart from Nephtali, I had never been given anything. In my former life, I was showered with dresses, jewelry, and makeup, but they were hardly personal. They had always materialized in my room by a servant.

Solana crossed her arms. "I guess we're waiting for the suns to cross before we find out what it is."

I flipped her off before tearing into the package. Still, I managed to preserve a tiny scrap. For what, I wasn't sure yet. It hurt me too much to waste something of such beauty. I would find a way to reuse it if I could.

My lips parted in surprise. A gown the color of deepest crimson with matching earrings, bracelets, and...goggles?

On top of them lay a single lavender sprig along with a note.



Don't hide the scars. Show them off  
like they were meant to be there.

Happy Surpassing Day.

Your friend,  
E.A.



## CHAPTER 34

### EZRA

“I apologize that we have to speak on a holiday.” Father smiled apologetically. His eyes were genuine, but I could tell how much the stress was weighing him.

Kings typically didn’t live as long as the average human, sometimes half the normal lifespan. The average never surpassed four hundred, either from the stressful matters of the position or from foul play. My father was five hundred and fifty, which was still young for a human with magic in their veins.

I smiled. “I don’t mind. I appreciate spending time with you, even if we are discussing politics.”

Verin chuckled. “I wish it just were politics, Ezra.”

“What do you mean?”

“People often debate the issues of our society, but never offer a solution for them. Rather, they look to their king or queen to make the decisions for

them. So, not only must we discuss the issues at hand, we must find a solution, too.”

“There’s a solution to most issues.”

Father shook his head. “Do remember, Ezra, that things aren’t often black and white. Good people are still sometimes evil, and evil sometimes good. It’s just about choosing the lesser of the evils, hoping that you make the right decision for millions.”

My heart quickened as I thought of Amaris. More than ever, I understood this because of her.

“Which one do you find Lord Rutherford is?” I asked, stopping to face him.

Verin plucked a flower from its vine, picking off the blue petals and tossing them behind us. “There isn’t anyone who loves his kingdom more than he does. The stress of council often drives him to sickness, even.”

“Have we investigated his illnesses? To see if he is bedridden as often as he claims?”

Father sighed. “He has been the Lord of Zhargen longer than I’ve been alive. If he was going to sell information to the East, he would have already done so.”

I grimaced. “How do you explain the Lady of Zhargen’s death?”

“Don’t assume that this was an assassination Rutherford orchestrated, Ezra. He loved Jirva. She was Marion’s closest friend.”

“I don’t care who he loves. However, I do care about our safety. We can’t have a spy in the center of our council.”

“Enough about Rutherford, Ezra. I don’t care to spend my holiday concerning all of my time about him.” Father claimed a seat on a wooden bench. “What about you? Do you truly love her?”

Amaris. He wanted to know more about her.

I ran a hand through my hair, looking right and left to ensure no one was in the garden. Typically, the garden was open to those authorized inside the palace. Today, the King specifically had this time forbidden to the public, save for the royal guard, of course.

“We’re okay, here,” my father assured me. “We are alone.”

I took a seat beside him. “I can’t give you all of the details on Miss Strauhn.” I looked to the guards, signifying to my father that the topic was far too sensitive for even the sworn-in soldiers to overhear.

Verin nodded. “Go on, then.”

“She’s royal, except she isn’t from Paglon. She’s from the cove along the Sapphire.” My voice was hushed, my heart quickening with each passing word.

“How is that possible?” Verin gawked, his voice barely audible over the stream of flowing water.

“Her family believes that she’s dead. Her father ordered the execution because she refused to abide by their traditions.” I spoke cryptically, in case of anyone happening to overhear. “And if she were to return, her family would kill her.”

Verin furrowed his brows. “How can we expect them to honor the marriage if her family counts her as dead?”

That was the one caveat. I could only have faith that they would. What if I was wrong? “That’s what I came to speak to you about. Would they be legally bound to honor the marriage?”

Father took a deep breath. “She is still an heir, whether they count her as one or not, but the question is whether they will honor the law.”

Mermaids were barbaric, after all. These were universal Valian standards:

when two royals from other kingdoms would marry, there was a treaty of peace between them. But countless standards and treaties have been broken before.

“She is of noble blood, but from the worst of them. There are others like her. Amaris and I read of her kind who lived in other places in Vale. They may be willing to hold their relatives accountable if they didn’t honor it.”

Verin swore. “There’s more of them?”

I explained everything Amaris found in the textbook concerning the mermaids in the other five seas. When I was finished, Father rose.

“This is all conditional on so much, Ezra. It’s a very risky plan.”

“I know, but we can’t write it off as impossible just because it seems hard. This is our best shot at winning the sea back. I’m afraid if we don’t, our kingdom will not be strong enough to sustain itself much longer.”

“My main concern isn’t with the plan, or the marriage treaty. It’s with you.”

“*Me?*” I clutched my hands into fists. “I’m the one who came to you with —”

Verin put his hand up, “It isn’t about that. It’s about how you feel about this girl, if you trust her. At the end of the day, you’re the one marrying her. I can’t make that decision for you, but it’s a decision you will have to make. I don’t want you to marry out of obligation, alliances, or even procreation. All those things have their place as king, but they are not of the highest priority. Is she who you see yourself marrying, Ezra?”

It was like someone physically took all the tension out of my spine. I slouched on the wooden bench. I had never known how my father felt about my marriage arrangement with Amaris, a mermaid. This entire time, I carried this burden alone. I should’ve gone to my father sooner. Of course, he

would've trusted my plans, no matter how ludicrous it sounded. He may not have been present most of my life, but he still didn't miss a single detail.

I dropped my head. "I have no other choice but to marry her."

"That's where you're wrong. No one is asking you to carry this weight. *You* are the one taking it upon yourself. You've always taken after me in that regard," he smiled.

"What would you do?" I asked. "If you were me?"

"I cannot make the decision for you because I am not you. Do you care for this girl, regardless of her heritage? Do you trust her? Do you want to marry her? She isn't an asset, Ezra. Don't treat her as such." Father chuckled. "Things between your mother and I weren't perfect, either. She said the seventh hell would freeze over before she married me."

I smirked. Amaris had definitely said something similar. "What happened?"

"Her parents were the baron and baroness of a village outside of Cammesian. When she was old enough to travel to Erison for court, she hated it. The lifestyle, the clothing, the title, and the privileges of being royal. The first night we had dinner together, she saw how much food I left on my plate as I gave it up to one of the maids and she hated me for it. She glared at me the entire time as she ate every morsel of food, and when it was time for the maid to come around, she got up herself and took it to the kitchen."

I had never heard so much about my parents before. I was eager to know more. "How did she come around to you?"

"We slowly became friends. We always liked each other but were too afraid to ruin a good thing. I dated others, and she did too. They never stuck around, though. When we were nineteen, a boy broke up with her, and so she came to my room to talk about it. We ended up talking for hours until finally,

with a little liquid encouragement that night, I kissed her. We married nine months later.”

I smiled, trying to picture the two of them so young and in love.

“Don’t be like me, Ezra. I let a lot of things get in the way of my relationship with my family. I sacrificed so much of my time away from you and Claudia. I thought what I was doing was for the sake of Erison. I told myself it was. When Claudia got sick...it was too late. Maybe, if I was present more, I would’ve seen the symptoms of her illness. I blame myself every day for how neglected she was. Your mother might still be standing here, governing by my side, if I would’ve paid more attention to her.”

My father blinked away a tear shining in his eyes.

“I blamed you for a lot growing up, for leaving me without a father. For leaving Mother without a husband. That’s why I’ve been fearful of marriage,” I confessed. I didn’t want it to end the way his did.

“I’ve made many mistakes in my time as king, but that is one I’ll never forgive myself for. I’m sorry, Ezra. Don’t be fearful. Don’t give too much of yourself for acceptance. Don’t be like me.”

He hoisted himself up from the bench. “I like Miss Strauhn. She reminds me of your mother. Don’t use her as a token of freedom. If you want to marry her, be intentional with her. Not because of *who* she is, but *who* she is to you.”



## CHAPTER 35

### EZRA

The whole city stopped to take in the beauty that put all else to shame. Amaris searched the sea of faces, stopping when she met mine. More than anything, I yearned to tear myself from the conversation with a duke from a far-away village to be with her instead.

Did I want her for the reasons my father had wanted my mother, though?

“Ezra Anaforiene,” Solana whistled, running a finger down the crimson inlay of my vest. “You clean up nicely.”

I gazed down at Solana’s tiny figure, her dark skin radiant against the yellow of her dress. “As do you, Solana.” I exchanged pleasantries with the girls, my eyes locking last on Amaris. “All of you ladies look incredibly stunning.”

“We’re pretty hot,” Pris affirmed, fanning herself with her hands. “I can’t wait for the dead of winter because it’s hotter than hells. Is Erison always this stuffy?”



“Mainly in the summer. But soon the suns will cross, and it’ll be nighttime,” I assured Priscilla, who was still waving herself down. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

Priscilla looked longingly at my glass. “A pitcher of wine would be nice, thanks.”

Playfully, I shielded it from her gaze. “A mocktail, then. Amaris, would you help me carry them?”

She looked to her friends for affirmation.

“Don’t worry about us!” Solana waved her hand. “I can get my own drinks, princeling.”

A blush settled on Amaris' cheeks, and she took my elbow. We walked in tandem, shuffling around the crowd of strangers. The streets were filled with live music, performances, and local vendors. Children played, their faces glittering in gold and silver. Dancers on a nearby stage swayed to the beat of the music, their arms and legs moving in perfect sync. Other, not-so-skilled couples in the audience were moving to the beat as well.

I turned my attention back to Amaris, the most captivating of all places to look.

“This dress looks beautiful on you,” I said with full sincerity. She looked down at her feet while her hands defaulted to twirling her necklace. “I knew it would,” I continued. “The moment I saw it, I thought of you.” She shivered at my touch as I brushed a loose strand of auburn hair behind her shoulder.

Her voice was low and playful. “You’re so romantic when you’re pretending.”

Slowly, I traced my fingers along the ridge of her spine where her dress revealed the scars. The skin on her back was softer than I had imagined.

Amaris swallowed nervously, looking towards the city streets. “People are

staring.”

“This is the first time they’ve seen the beautiful woman I’ve been courting. Can you blame them for their eagerness to see their future queen?”

“I suppose not.”

“Let them stare. Let them think whatever they want.”

“That’s easy for you to say. I’m with the *prince*.”

I put my hand to the small of her back, pressing our bodies firmly together. I leaned in, pressing my lips against the delicate skin of her neck. “And I’m with a *fish*. Can you believe that?”

In answer, she shivered, making me chuckle.

I glanced at the sky. Only a sliver of space remained between the two suns. “We have to hurry.” Taking her hand, I pulled her along in the thick crowd.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see, Little Fish.”

I led her down street after street before hooking a left and climbing the broken marble steps of the memorial. Every year, I was always surprised no one decided to throw a blanket down in the meadow of wildflowers near here.

“What is this place?” Amaris’ green eyes balked in amazement. The tall monument had once been intact, but after centuries of being left to its own devices, parts of the backside cut into the hill had crumbled. Which, I had learned, was the safest way onto the roof.

“It’s a memorial wall, dedicated to those killed at sea.” My feet pounded into the solid stone as I climbed. At certain points, when the cracks were too wide, I offered Amaris my hand. We reached the top, and I pulled my set of goggles from my pocket, donning them. “Got yours?”

She cupped her hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

I put my hand on my hips, the glasses still plastered to my face. “Sexy, am I right?”

“I am *not* wearing those,” she protested.

“You have to, or else you’ll go blind from looking at the suns for too long.”

She groaned but didn’t object any further.

We laid down on the memorial’s roof and looked up to the suns just in time. “Where is the smaller sun?” Amaris asked, taking my hand.

“Look at the larger one and you’ll see.” I grinned, not daring to tear my eyes away from the suns.

A small speck lay in the center of the larger circle of the sun. In minutes, one sun surpassed the other, taking the lead just at twilight. Cheers and shouts came from the city below. Music was started up again in a jovial tune, ringing in the promise of an evening full of celebration.

I lowered my goggles from my eyes, still beaming from the eclipse. Amaris still had her goggles plastered to her eyes as she was still looking upward at rare phenomenon, her mouth gaped open in awe. Even in the silliest attire, she eclipsed the suns. “Happy Surpassing Day, Little Fish.”



After both suns had set, Amaris and I headed back to the heart of the festival. We took off across the courtyard, her feet nimbly working underneath her to the beat of the drum. As she spun, the dress swayed on her hips, showing off more of her glorious legs.

“How the hells could you barely walk just two months ago, but now you can dance like an experienced ballerina?” I marveled at her in disbelief.

She smiled, leading me into uncharted territory of the courtyard. Globes of fire were strung in intricate streams across the area, casting a warm glow along her skin. I swore the lights dimmed a little in her presence. “Dancing with feet isn’t much different. You feel as if you’re floating the same as if you had a tail.”

Still, I had been amazed at how quickly Amaris took off across the grass lawn. She twirled and twisted, moving her hips to the beat, leading me to turn her in time to the music. Not only was she the best dancer tonight by a long shot, but she made it look easy, her steps light and graceful. “You’re a fantastic dancer.”

“The prince isn’t too heavy on his feet himself.”

Someone gently rubbed past two of us. A woman with short, mousy brown hair waved, her other hand firmly pressed into the small of Solana’s back. Amaris gave them both a wink before the two women turned away, getting lost in a collage of reds, yellows, and oranges.

One dance with Amaris turned into four, five, six. With each new turn of the song, the slowing of the tempo, or the quickness of the drum—we worked in tandem. It got better and better as we learned to predict one another’s steps. Amaris found every opportunity to spin, sending the hem of her dress flying out in all directions. She spotted something in the distance, and I was really only there to aid in giving her a hand to hold onto as she did most of the work. Breathless, she collapsed into me.

“I think that was the best one yet, Little Fish,” I said, brushing her hair away from her neck before I could stop myself.

“I think I need—” she gasped, “A break.”

I chuckled. “I know the perfect place.”

Grabbing her hand, I led her away from the festival. Along the way, I

stopped by a fountain of flowing alcohol, taking two drinks for both of us. Stars burned bright, and the rush of the waves in the distance grew louder the further we moved away from the festival on the city streets.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I’ll give you a hint.” I flashed her a devilish grin. “Despite the fact that it’s right outside of your window, you seem to never be able to make it on time anywhere.”

She swatted at my arm, but I saw the smile flirting with her lips. “I’d rather be late than a self-righteous ass.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite hear that. Can you repeat it a little louder for me?” I inclined my head towards hers, cupping my ear for emphasis.

She only clicked her tongue. “Case and point.”

“Do you always have a remark ready for me when I try to have a little fun with you?” I laughed, grabbing her free hand and placing it through my bent arm.

“‘A little fun’?” she repeated. “Is this what you call *fun*?”

“I’m hurt, Little Fish,” I clutched my chest. “Deeply hurt. Here I was, trying to be a good friend and lead you to the sundial so I can use this moment as a learning opportunity for you.”

“To learn what, exactly?”

“How to tell the time.”

“We’ve already been over this. I *can* read. I just choose to take it as a suggestion rather than a hard and fast rule.”

I smirked, taking a sip of my champagne. “So I’ve noticed. But you’ll want to see this.”

We walked in silence until we finally reached the entrance to the lovely garden. Tonight, it was lit by only a few lanterns along the way, so as to not

take away from the beauty of the night sky. She followed behind me, making her way under the trellis of vining greenery.

Gesturing to the timekeeping mechanisms, I explained, “This garden circles the tower that displays the dials. Along the four corners, there are statues to the gods of time, the suns, the moon, and the sea.”

Amaris whipped her head to look at me. “The sea?” I nodded. “I thought that the people of Erison hated the sea.”

“We don’t hate the sea itself, Amaris. We hate the evil that lives inside of it.”

“Right, but you wouldn’t think that they would dedicate a shrine to the god who made the sea if they were afraid of it.” Amaris giggled. “What if the statue was of my father?”

“Unless your father is a female, then that’s not possible.” I shook my head, though I laughed with her at the ridiculous notion. If her father was the god of the seas, then I certainly would not be a worshiper. In fact, I’d have the shrine destroyed immediately.

As we walked to the back of the garden, it became more evident that it was a less kept version of the front. This was a part of the garden that hadn’t been cleared for a reason. No one worshiped her anymore. There were no records of who she was.

“I know the way here like the back of my hand.” I smiled, tearing away the old vines that covered the pathway. “I would always take a book out here to read.” Though it was quite dark, I still knew by muscle memory that there was a bench ahead. Pointing to it, I said, “I used to come to this spot, pretending the bench was a ship and that I was a pirate. Sometimes, I would pretend I was getting attacked by mermaids or a kraken. Do those even exist?”

“Gods, no.” Amaris snorted. “If they did, I would’ve found a way here much, *much* earlier.”

We rounded the corner of the statue, the marble bust faintly illuminated in a blue haze from the moonlight. I grinned down at her. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

Beside me, Amaris sucked in a breath.

The statue's stone-cold features were familiar, the gills that rested along her high cheekbones and the full lips. Around her forearms and collarbones laid more anatomically correct gills. In her right hand, she held a trident, and upon her brow sat a crown with six peaks, for the six seas of Vale. Her long, flowy hair covered her bare chest, a sea serpent necklace around her neck. Her stone hand was pressed to her heart, and on her finger was a signet ring.

I looked at the engraving onto the bottom of the shrine, the words etched on the altar there: *Remembrance of her is not enough to lift the veil. Only by profession of the Lost Queen’s name.*

There was a rustle in the leaves nearby. Quicker than an asp, I shielded Amaris behind me, my dagger unsheathed. Another limb snapped, louder this time. Amaris shook in my arms, but I steadied her. Footsteps grew closer, heavier now. I waited for the attack, and slowly, a dark, tall figure rounded the corner of the garden.

“Lower your hood!” I ordered. For a moment, the tall figure stood idle, as if contemplating obeying the order. “I said, *lower your hood!*”

Long, slender hands reached toward the cloak and pulled the dark fabric away from his face. Sharp black eyes and a crooked nose greeted us.

I straightened. “Lord Rutherford. What are you doing here?”

“It’s nice to see you, too, Your Highness. Miss Strauhn.” He tipped his head. “I thought I would take a break from the party. I’m sorry to ruin your

moment of seclusion."

"The city is over a half mile away. You came all this way to have a break?" I asked incredulously.

"I could ask the same of you. Goodnight, the two of you." Marion tipped his head once more before righting his cloak and disappearing into the dimly lit garden.

Amaris swallowed. "I can go back to the party. Would you like to—?"

I shook my head, realizing that my hand was still on the small of Amaris' back. I wanted to follow Rutherford, to see why he was so far away from the festival and in the garden of all places. Had he been following us this entire time? If so, what was his purpose for doing so?

I didn't trust the thought of leaving Amaris to go back to the party while I trailed Rutherford. It may not be safe for her.

"No. I want to walk with you. We should head back, anyways."





## CHAPTER 36

### AMARIS

The festival seemed to have doubled in size from when Ezra and I had left. I spotted the golden hem of Solana's dress among the mosaic of warm tones.

This time, Solana was dancing with a handsome man with light brown hair and crystal blue eyes. He easily towered over me, but next to Solana, he made her look like a child. Solana giggled at something her dance partner whispered in her ear before she made eye contact with me across the courtyard. She excused herself, and I crossed my arms in disapproval as she approached.

"He's so cute, right?" she squealed, her eyes flitting back to her handsome dance partner.

"*He* is also not the *she* I saw you with earlier." I rolled my eyes. "But yes, he is gorgeous. Where's Priscilla?"

"She was tired, so she left early." Solana giggled again, stumbling a little as she did so. I righted her.

“Woah. How much have you had to drink tonight, Lana?”

“At least seven.” I swore. “But no more than twelve,” she slurred.

“Lana, you need to go back to my room if you’re this drunk. Remember, we were going to meet up there later?”

Solana pouted. “I was going to go back with—” She pointed to where her gorgeous male was, except she pointed in the opposite direction. “With Brazlyn, I think is his name. Or maybe Basil.”

“That is an herb and certainly not a name,” I corrected, pushing a stray braid away from her face.

“Could be a name,” Solana shrugged. “Kind of attractive, actually.”

“What isn’t attractive is how drunk you are right now. You need to go back up to my room, or I can take you to yours, but I’m not letting you go home with this stranger in your condition.”

Even drunk, Solana must have understood because she didn’t challenge me. I wasn’t letting her leave so that someone could take advantage of her like I almost had been the night at Beer-in-Tin.

“Fine. But don’t worry about me tonight. Go have a sleepover with Ezra instead.”

“What? No.”

“Chicken.”

“Why do you always insult me by calling me animal names? You’re drunk, Lana. We need to—”

“*Chicken!*” she howled.

People snapped their heads toward us. They had to recognize me as the prince’s promised. Something told me it wouldn’t put me off to a very good start if I was seen with my wasted friend who was shouting animal vulgarities.

I flashed them an apologetic smile before fixing my attention on my friend.

“Lana, come on. We need to get you back.”

“I’m not leaving until you promise me.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“Promise me you’ll have sex with Ezra.”

“*What?*” I blushed, my eyes darting around to make sure no one overheard.

“Why are you talking about this?”

“Because *Amaris*.” She leaned in close and whispered, although it was the loudest damn whisper I had ever heard. The liquor was thick on her breath.

“Don’t pretend it isn’t obvious how much he wants you. He practically eye-fucks you every time you’re in his presence.”

I blushed a deeper crimson than the color of my dress. Had his attraction for me been that obvious? Or had he simply been playing the role well enough to fool everyone? “You’re talking about this in public, mind you.”

“I don’t give a shit. If you can’t promise me, then I’m leaving here with Basil.”

“His name is *not* Basil,” I snapped. Solana twisted from my grip, stumbling back to Brazlyn. Except she went the wrong way. She looked right and then left before falling into a bush nearby, and I darted over to help her up.

“Fine!” I groaned.

“*Fine*, what?” Solana asked.

“If I have sex with Ezra, will you please hook up with Brazlyn another time?”

“One: the terms and conditions were that you must sleep with him *tonight*.” Solana counted off on her fingers. “And two: his name is definitely Basil. Like the herb.”

“You are so fucking ridiculous,” I mumbled, rubbing at my temples.

“Tonight, or we don’t have a deal. Either it’s you getting laid, or me.”

“Enough!” I yelled. “I will do it. Just please shut up and go back to my room.”

Solana flashed a wicked grin. “Go sleep with the prince, baby!” She slapped me hard on the butt before stalking back in the direction of Brazlyn—the right way this time. Solana whispered in his ear and kissed him on the cheek before making her way toward the castle.

I trailed behind her to ensure that she, at least, was going in the right direction. She seemed to be walking clearly enough, but I followed a bit further for extra precaution.

Without looking over her shoulder, Solana yelled, “Get your ass back to the festival, Amaris! I know how to get back to the castle just fine.”

It was true. We’d done it a hundred times by now. Still, I had never seen Lana quite this belligerent before.

I spotted a guard and pointed to Solana. “My friend in the yellow dress is to go back to my quarters. Please send someone to stand guard outside of my room until I return.” The guard nodded, taking off up the hill after her.

*What the hells just happened?*

Solana would never remember that I made that silly promise tonight. She probably thought, in her best-intended drunken state, that she was truly doing me a favor by putting pressure on me to sleep with him. For all she knew, we were actually courting each other, and normal couples did *that* when they courted.

Still, Ezra was completely off-limits.

I spotted him from across the courtyard. My cheeks heated when I saw that his gaze was already fixed on me.

“What took you so long?” Ezra handed me a drink.

I shook my head. “Lana being Lana.”

He chuckled. “What was it this time?”

“She was drunk off of her ass and said that if I did...*something*, she would go back up to my room instead of going home with a boy.”

“What was so important that she wanted you to do?”

I blushed, draining the remains of the champagne. “It’s nothing.”

“That girl doesn’t make sense.”

“You’re telling me.”

Did I want to hold to that promise? Would I be a bad friend if I didn’t fulfill my end of the deal? Or was I trying to justify following through because I really wanted to?

“She wanted me to have sex with you,” I blurted.

Ezra choked on his drink. “*What?*”

I raised a brow. “That’s exactly what I said. She couldn’t even remember the name of the boy she had been dancing with. His name was Brazlyn. She called him Basil, Ezra. *Basil.*”

He snorted. “Like the herb?” I nodded. “Do we think she was playing a prank on you?”

“I don’t think she knew her head from her ass, honestly. She was stumbling so badly, there’s no way she could think coherently enough to prank me.”

Ezra was silent for a long moment, continuing to sip from his flute. He leaned casually against the bar on one elbow, his legs crossed at the ankle. “So would you do it?” he asked, bumping my shoulder playfully.

“Do what?”

Shadows danced in his eyes, his voice a low growl. “Me.”

Shivers ran down my spine, a blush surfacing to my cheeks. What kind of power did this man have over me to make me blush every ten seconds?

I thought about his question. If I was truthful, I would risk that he didn't feel the same way. If I *wasn't* truthful, I was guaranteed never to get that with him. But Solana had mentioned that even she could tell he wanted me. So did he? Or was it all merely an act?

My response was nearly a whisper. "Get a couple more drinks in me. Ask me, then."

There. That got me off the hook.

He gave me a mischievous grin. "Alright, but just so you know, Little Fish, you're not off the hook. We will revisit this question once we get a couple more drinks in us."

*Dammit.*

"But until then." Ezra walked me back so I practically toppled into one of the barstools, which I was thankful for. It steadied my knees. Then he settled himself right between them.

He lowered his lips to the shell of my ear. "Until then, I want to be right here."

My stomach tightened into knots at his words. Citrus and musk filled my head, driving me nearly mad with temptation. I was all too aware of how intimate we must have looked to others. This was certainly *not* in the contract. It was a damn shame it wasn't. I liked seeing him between my legs.

One hand gripped his glass while the other snaked its way up the hem of my skirt. Waves of heat came crashing into me, rushing all the way to my core. I instinctively spread my legs wider. I wanted him closer, desperate to feel him hard against me.

"A toast." He raised his flute of champagne. "To the most beautiful fish I

know.” He clinked my glass before washing the rest of his down.

Maybe it was the alcohol flowing in me, but I grabbed his collar and pulled him closer. “How many have you had tonight, *Lana*?”

Ezra licked his lips. “I’m not that drunk. Unlike your friend, I still have my faculties.” He squeezed my upper leg, sending flutters of pleasure through my core. Ever since the day at the Onyx Sea, we’d started pinching each other during playful moments. Every time he touched me, I imagined his hands in other places instead.

“Oh, no you don’t. We’re not starting this mess again.” I clicked my tongue at him in disapproval before pinching him square on the nose.

“Oh, but we *are*, Little Fish. You started it the first day I met you.” His hands brushed the lace of my underwear, and his breath sent tendrils of pleasure racing down my spine as he took in my neck. “You never asked me,” he kissed my collarbone, “What *I* would do to *you*.”

When I raised my head to look at him, I found nothing but intensity etched in his hazel eyes. His gaze wasn’t fixed on the bartenders serving us, or the drunken commoners surrounding us. His attention was fully fixed on me.

Maybe I was hoping for too much, but I believed that, in this moment, he truly wanted me. “What would you do, then?” I pleaded breathily.

As if the torture couldn’t get any worse, he began tracing little circles with his thumb over my delicate center. He must’ve heard my breath hitch because he chuckled. “You’ll have to get more drinks in me to find out.”

Abruptly, he pulled away.

“You are such an ass!” I blushed, swatting him away.

He threw his head back in laughter before grabbing another full glass of champagne. A familiar pungent scent assaulted me as he moved the stem of alcohol past my nose. Ezra flashed me an award-winning grin as his cruel,

calloused fingers caressed the glass. It was silly being jealous of a flute of champagne, yet here I was. His eyes darkened as they followed my gaze, understanding just where my thoughts were leading me to.

“Round number five, Little Fish. Keep up.”

He tipped back the foul-smelling champagne, draining the liquid with ease. I blinked, and the glass slipped from his hand, shattering on the cobblestone.

Ezra fell to the ground, convulsing.

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## CHAPTER 37

### AMARIS

“**H**ealer!” I screamed, but my voice was drowned out by the loudness of the festival. Right and left I searched, frantic to find someone, *anyone*, to help. People turned their heads, gasping. Foam spilled from Ezra’s purpling lips, and I rolled his head to the side so he wouldn’t choke.

“Stay with me, Ezra.” I pleaded.

Helpless. I was so helpless. I couldn’t leave him to find a healer. I couldn’t stay to watch him die. Somewhere in the distance the music screeched to a halt. The sound was a symbol of Ezra’s life, if the healers didn’t get here in time.

I wouldn’t allow it. Ezra *would* rise from this spot.

By the second, his lips deepened in color, his breaths growing weaker, shallower. It didn’t take a healer to know he only had moments left. “Stay with me! They’re almost here.”

“Out of the way!” A woman barreled through the crowd, her round body racing past the drunken bystanders. The healer's steps pounded across the yard, her cream robe swishing violently behind her.

She tore open her leather satchel, rummaging through the vials. “Did you see any discoloration of the alcohol? Was it a powder substance or a liquid?” Her hands were steady as she went to work on Ezra.

“I don’t know, I just—it all happened so fast. One moment, we were drinking together and the next...he was like this.”

The healer cut her eyes to me, her tone accusatory. “He’s been poisoned.” Uneven, strained gasps broke from his lips. The healer checked his pulse and grimaced.

“What does that mean?” I pleaded, “Is he going to die?”

“He will if we don’t act quickly.”

Several more healers crowded around us, and a middle-aged woman with black hair forced me to my feet. “Step aside. We’re unable to work if you’re over top of him.”

“Stop!” I shouted, pulling against her. Ezra’s body was obscured from view as more healers crowded around him. “Stop! Please! I’m trying to help.” I fought with every strained muscle in my body to break away from the healer’s grasp. “Please! He’s my fiancé.”

The woman stepped around to face me, sizing me up and down in silent condemnation. “Miss Strauhn, you're getting in the way. Now—”

Before the healer could finish barking orders, I swung my elbows right and left until I felt her grip loosen. A *crunch* reverberated through my bones, and the healer wailed. She clutched her face in agony, falling to the ground.

Several guards scrambled to cease me, but I broke into a sprint across the courtyard back to Ezra’s near-lifeless form. I didn’t have time to think. The

healer's face would heal from my accidental attack. Ezra wouldn't, if I didn't take control.

Now.

I smashed through the front lines of the healers gathered around him, open vials of antidote held at the ready. Each of the healer's faces were slack as if they were...waiting. For what? For Ezra to die?

Not on my watch.

Forfeiting the vials altogether, I opened my mouth, and tendrils of smoldering heat rose deep within. Waves of magic riled to the surface, pushing forward in my soul like a storm on the sea. Ezra's skin was cold to the touch as I planted my palm to the center of his chest. I willingly transferred every ounce of magic flowing through my veins to him, echoing the melody that coursed inside me like a sinking ship. If either one of us drowned, the other would go down with it, but I wasn't chained to it the way I convinced myself that I was ever since I came to Erison.

All this time, I had counted my strength as a weakness.

I realized, then, that mermaids themselves were not innately evil. No, we'd just been led to believe we were. Mercilessly, they bled thousands of innocent men while they suppressed the fear of what may happen if they challenged the mindset of their king. They made their choice. I was created to *give* life, not take it, and I would sacrifice every last breath to ensure Ezra would live.

People were now gasping and pointing, but I ignored them. They were drunk. They would soon forget, continuing their lives as normal. But me? I would never forget tonight as long as I lived. Ezra was dying in my arms, and this small attempt was my only hope of bringing him back.

Taking my fingers in with his, I coaxed the poison to neutralize. My hand

was his anchor, a lifeline that brought him back to me. This is not how I was going to lose him. I wouldn't lose him. This kingdom needed him. Maybe I even needed him, too.

*Come back to me. Come back, come back.*

A single breath escaped from his blue lips, sending my heart into my throat. My voice was raw from the moment of hope, but I continued, my weary breath faltering with every note. It wasn't about the beauty of the words or the pitch that made a mermaid's power successful, but the intent behind them.

I didn't stop singing. Another gasp broke from him.

The eyes of every person, sober or drunk, bulged from their heads. Was it amazement? Fear? Still, they didn't dare peel me from my fiancé's side. Even if they didn't want to admit it, I was the single-most reason Ezra was breathing again.

He coughed, and healers rushed to sit him up. He winced. "Ow."

"What hurts, Ezra?" I asked, breaking off the song mid-chorus. For comfort, I traced little circles in his palm, the way he always did to me.

"Is he alive?" someone whispered from behind.

"My hand—" he whispered, his large fingers flexed around mine slightly. "It hurts—" He licked his dry lips. "Squeeze...too tight."

I looked down at our intertwined fingers, and noticed I had been clinging to him so tightly, my knuckles were as white as a bone.

"Oops." I blushed, dropping his hand. My shaking fingers traveled to his face. "You almost died, Ezra."

"You saved me. Again," Ezra murmured softly. His voice was raspier than usual, the strain of the poison taking all his energy.

A single tear fell from my face and landed on his chest. I couldn't help the

chuckle that escaped my lips. “At least you still have your sense of humor.”

Hazel. His eyes were hazel. I never thought I would see them again. When I broke my gaze from Ezra’s, I realized the crowd had miraculously cleared. Other than the royal guards and healers, we were alone.

He raised his hand to my face, slowly running his thumb over my wet cheeks to catch the tears. “I said my hand hurt, Little Fish, not that I wanted you to stop holding it.”

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## CHAPTER 38

### EZRA

I was in a bed, though I was fairly certain it wasn't my own. When I opened my eyes, my vision doubled before finally settling on Amaris.

At some point, she had changed into a simple tunic and leggings, her hair thrown into a disheveled top knot. Despite the bundle of sheets and pillows on the sofa, the purple tint beneath her eyes suggested she hadn't slept.

She brushed my arm. "They brought up breakfast. Would you like some?"

Nausea rose within me. There was no way I would be eating anytime soon. "I'm okay, but please, help yourself."

"Don't worry. I already did." She smiled apologetically. Her brows furrowed when she noticed I was staring at her. "What? They brought up bacon, and I couldn't help myself. Is that not okay?"

"No, Amaris. It isn't that," I whispered, continuing to hold her gaze. The morning light of the suns cast a glow on her skin, illuminating the highest points of her features. "You are absolutely stunning."

Her eyes lit up in surprise as they darted around the room. Their usual deep green was now the lightest shade of jade. “Ezra, it’s just you and me. You can drop the act.”

“I don’t want to. You’re stunning. You look beautiful this morning.”

She looked at me like I had lost my mind. “I’m stunning? I’m dressed like a slob, my hair is a mess, and I’ve hardly slept a wink, but *I’m* stunning. Not last night?”

I laughed, but an acute ache in my abdomen stopped me. My body felt like someone had lit torches inside of it. “You were stunning last night, too.” If last night had ended any other way, I would’ve had more time to tell her just how I felt.

The door abruptly swung open. Solana, Lord Rutherford, and several familiar members of the royal guard entered. The new captain of the royal guard, Landon, straightened in his armor. I’d terminated Titus the moment I returned from the evening at the Onyx Sea.

“Lady Amaris, you’ve been released from your duty for the morning,” Marion Rutherford announced. The symbol of the Western Dominion shone brightly on the badge he wore above his heart.

“*What?*” Amaris shrieked. “No, I’d like to stay with Ezra today. I’m okay, really. I’ve slept plenty.”

Marion held out a hand. “There is someone who wishes to see you downstairs in one of the cabinet rooms. Once you are through, you can proceed to Ezra’s quarters, where he will be moved.”

“There’s no way in hells I’m leaving Ezra alone. We just had an assassination attempt on him last night.”

“I can assure you, Lady Amaris,” Landon cleared his throat, “Our prince is in good hands. He will not be alone while you are away. You’re leaving him

with the Lord of Zhargen, along with me, who will be standing guard in front of his chambers.”

Amaris’ face paled as white as a sheet. “Absolutely not.”

“That’s too bad,” Marion tsked, his crooked nose more apparent from this angle. “The King has requested someone to take your place, to give you time to properly rest. You will be taking shifts with me and Landon, to ensure someone is constantly by Ezra’s side, awake and on guard.”

“Why can’t someone else watch him while I’m away?” She stood, looking fierce as she protested.

Why was she being so protective right now? I wasn’t particularly fond of the idea of being alone with Lord Rutherford, but I had been alone with the man plenty before last night. If he wanted me dead, he could’ve easily found a way before.

Rutherford raised a bushy brow. “That ‘*someone else*’ you speak of, Amaris, would be me.”

Her nostrils flared. “How can anyone trust you, given the circumstances?”

“Little girl, I was here long before you ever washed up on the scene like a piece of eastern trash. Besides,” Rutherford looked at her from head to toe, “I wasn’t nearest to him when he was drugged.”

One moment, the dagger was strapped to my hip, and the next, it was stuck in the door frame just inches from the man’s head. “Do *not* speak to her like that,” I snarled, growing suddenly defensive.

Solana looked between me, Amaris, and Rutherford, then grabbed Amaris’ arm in an attempt to pull her away. “You will be with Ezra shortly. He obviously can handle—”

Amaris broke from her friend’s grasp. “I’m not leaving here until I know Landon is also going to be in the room. We need as many eyes on the prince



as possible, especially when his attempted murderer is still free.”

“It’s okay,” I reassured Amaris. “I keep more than one dagger on me at all times.”

Rutherford scoffed. “I think I’d rather be thrown one of your daggers than another look from Miss Strauhn.”

She threw Marion one of her looks that could kill. “This isn’t funny!” Amaris snapped. “Your prince was damn near assassinated, and you joke in his presence?”

“No, my lady.” He dipped his head. “Apologies.” Marion Rutherford cowered under her glare.

My council would have a lot on their hands when she became queen.



## CHAPTER 39

### AMARIS

**L**ord Rutherford was the one to poison Ezra. The moment he walked into the room, a strong, pungent scent assaulted my nose, the same scent I had smelled just moments before Ezra drank from his poisoned cup.

I had never known the man to smell particularly nice, in my opinion, but *poison*? He had been carrying it on his person this entire time, waiting for the moment to drop it. He must not have realized I could smell it as a mermaid.

I needed to tell someone. I *needed* to get back to Ezra.

“Solana,” I whispered, contorting my face in pain.

“What is it?” she asked.

Leaning in close to her ear, I whispered, “I need to find the nearest washroom right now or else I’m going to shit myself.”

A guard behind us snorted.

“We’re almost to—”

“No,” I said loudly, ensuring to draw attention to myself. “You don’t understand. If I don’t get somewhere right now, I’ll—I’ll have to go change

my dress.”

The guard in front of me shook his head but averted our original path. A proud smirk flirted with my lips, but I held it in check. Once the guards cleared the way to a washroom, Solana dragged me inside. For good measure, I grabbed my ass, and a couple of guards stifled laughter at the sight.

One of the men trailed behind us and I turned on him, looking him up and down. “You might not want to follow us inside.”

His cheeks warmed. “Uh, right. Yes. I’ll just—wait here for you to finish up, then, my lady.”

Solana shut the door to the washroom, and I promptly grabbed both of her arms. “It was Rutherford. He’s the one who poisoned Ezra last night.”

“*What?* How do you know that?”

I explained the scent I’d smelled after he left BellaDonna’s shop, just moments after making the dangerous exchange. It was the same strong scent I smelled in Ezra’s cup. He had even followed us last night into the garden to kill Ezra.

“He makes me nervous, too, Amaris, but you can’t make assumptions like this unless you absolutely know it to be true. I saw Rutherford last night, and I never smelled what you claimed to smell on him. He smells quite nice, actually.”

“You saw him last night, too?”

Solana nodded. “As I was walking back to your room, I saw him disappear into a shop along the main street with a woman. I couldn’t see who it was, but I figured I shouldn’t pry. I thought it was a mistress or something, by the way she was whispering something in his ears.”

“Maybe he got back to the main party in time to slip it into Ezra’s drink?”

Solana rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. No one is *that good* in bed to

make someone last only thirty seconds. It's physically impossible for him to be done in time to be back to the festival."

"Unless he didn't actually sleep with her," I suggested.

Solana blinked slowly, clearly irritated by my accusations.

"He insinuated I was the one responsible for poisoning Ezra. He was trying to avert the blame—"

"Because *you* insinuated it first about *him*. If you're suspicious of someone, you need to do it more discreetly next time. He is innocent until proven guilty, not the other way around. Until then, you need to square your shoulders like the future queen and get down there to talk to whoever is needing to meet with you. I will go back up to Ezra's room and try to stall him while you sneak into Rutherford's room to search for the evidence.

Okay?"

I nodded.

Twenty minutes later, the guards led me into a large sitting room. An ivory mantle sat straight ahead, and a small fire kindled inside it. Hanging over the fireplace was a large tea kettle, the palace guest already seated on the duvet facing the wall. A purple cloak hid her features.

With a nod, Solana exited the room. A handful of the guards following suit. I was alone with the unrecognizable woman, save for a few more guards stationed around the edges of the room.

The woman stood, turning herself around to face me. I blinked, doubtful of who I saw. Her amber eyes landed on mine as she lowered her cloak, allowing her coppery blonde hair to spill from her shoulders. It was shorter since I had last seen her.

"Ava?"

My sister was standing before me. *Standing*. Without a hint of gills, fins, or

scales. Still, she had the same sharp jawline, full lips, and warm hair that mirrored my own.

Without warning, she raced forward and hugged me. But I just stood there, my arms slack at my sides. I still couldn't believe my eyes. What was she doing here? *Why* was she here?

"It really is you." Her eyes sparkled with tears as she stepped back, taking me in from head to toe. "I never expected to see you here."

*That's the understatement of the age.*

"Why wouldn't it be?" I asked.

Ava cast a sidelong glance at the guards around the room, her eyebrow raised. Even after two months without seeing her, I still was able to translate the look she gave me. *"Are you really going to ask that with them standing right here?"*

"Everyone outside," I ordered. "If you have a problem with it, take it up with Ezra."

"Your Grace," a guard protested. "It's the King's orders to not—"

"I am courting his son, yes? Please leave. I will not ask again."

Ava's face paled, but she steeled her expression before I could decipher what it meant.

One by one, the guards filed out of the room. At last, I turned my full attention to my sister. "How did you get here? Speak plainly. I don't have much time."

She sucked in a breath, as if trying to search for where in her narrative to begin. Or was she trying to come up with another lie to avoid the truth?

"McCollum isn't from the Amber Sea. He's a human from the Eastern Dominion. I've been going back and forth between the two dominions ever

since we began courting. Once we get married, he will change me into a human permanently.”

“That’s a shame,” I said with a shrug. “Seems you’ve already missed out on so much while you’ve been away hunting those in the Amber Sea.”

“I don’t know what you’ve been told about that,” Ava shook her head, “but you don’t know what you’re talking about. If that’s what you think I’m doing —”

“I *know* it’s what you’re doing. It’s what the textbook said. That’s why you were away, wasn’t it? You went to murder our relatives while I almost died on the island.”

“I didn’t know something like that would ever happen.” My sister’s eyes pleaded with me to believe her. “If I had only known how lonely you felt, I would’ve stayed. I *should’ve* stayed that night. Gods, there are so many things I should’ve done differently.”

“It’s a little late for that. If you were sorry, you would have searched for me. You would have come sooner. You wouldn’t have been off fucking McCollum and wedding planning, instead.”

She wouldn’t have left at all.

Ava flinched at my words, her body shaking with rage. “I had no other choice but to leave,” she hissed. “I went to warn the mermaids of the Amber Sea, not to hunt them. By the time I returned, I thought you were dead, Amaris. I had no reason to search for you after I went back to Mermaid’s Cove. Everyone still thinks that you’re dead, including Father.”

“Good. They’re dead to me, too.”

She blinked. “Why would you say that?”

I resisted the urge to throw the tea kettle at her. “*Why would I say that?* Maybe because they tortured me, tying me off to a post made of bronze and

whipping me to a bloody pulp. They left me to die on that island. No wonder they think I'm dead—*they* tried to kill me!" I seethed. Little white stars blurred my vision. "Oh, but that's right, I forgot. You wouldn't know because you weren't there."

Ava was silent for a very, very long time. Her knees buckled and she practically fell onto the sofa, clutching her face. "They didn't tell me that," my sister breathed. "They said—they said you had run away...that Azaliah found your body days later. Gods, I should've known better than to trust them."

"Are you shocked they'd paint themselves the victims?"

The fire snapped in front of her, sending her jumping from the suddenness. It was the only sound in the room save for her quiet sobs.

"How did you even find me?" I asked.

Her voice was raw as she spoke. "I ran into Ezra yesterday in the square. He thought I was you. He said your name—I *knew* you had to be alive somehow. I didn't know how, but I hoped it was you. I saw you at the festival last night, what happened to Ezra. I watched you sing to heal him. You need to be careful, Amaris. If word gets out that—"

She reached for my hand and I snatched it away. "I don't need your advice."

A scream broke to a crescendo, my own voice echoing in my mind from last night. Or was it just the tea kettle? I jerked my head over to the fireplace to see the flames licking up the sides and burning the pot. Rushing over to the mantle, I grabbed the pitcher and howled.

*Fuck.*

I had forgotten gloves before reaching into the fire to retrieve it. After I donned the leather gloves, I attempted grabbing the small handle once more

before successfully setting it down on a nearby table. Pitching off the gloves, I turned my attention back on my sister.

“You may want to summon a healer for your burn,” Ava suggested. “Or perhaps you could heal it yourself—”

“*Enough*,” I spat. She was no longer my caretaker. I didn’t need my sister to protect me anymore. “You’re in *my* home. You do not get to order me around.”

Ava stood. “You think this is your home? You should’ve seen the hatred on people’s faces last night when the townspeople saw you singing to Ezra. They will kill you the moment they find out what you are.”

“I said *enough*,” I seethed. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No, Amaris. *You* don’t. How do you think you got away last night so easily?”

I shook my head. “Everyone was drunk. Others have gifts of healing. It isn’t just mermaids who—”

“Yes, but you *sang* to heal. No one else heals that way. It’s because of me you aren’t dead right now.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, the way she used to do when she was about to reprimand me. “I hypnotized the people who saw to make them believe you healed him without using your voice.”

My eyes widened. Why would she have done that? Why was she even there last night? Could she have been behind Ezra's attempted assassination?

No. She couldn't have planned such a thing. I immediately felt guilty for even speculating. She clearly had protected me last night. If she had other motives, she wouldn't have hypnotized anyone to help me. It still didn't make sense why Ava was here in the Western Dominion, but that didn't mean her intentions had to be malicious.

And if Ava was at the festival, then maybe...



“What else did you see last night? Were you there to see who poisoned Ezra?”

I couldn't believe I was asking my sister for this information, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

“You don't have any leads, then?” Ava leaned forward in anticipation of the news. "I suppose you don't, given you're asking me for help."

“I'm the one asking you questions, not the other way around.” I crossed my arms.

She leaned back on the sofa, taking a deep breath. “I was there, but I didn't see much.”

My shoulders slumped. A part of me was relieved she hadn't mentioned Rutherford, because if it were him, we may have an insurgency within the council. Another part of me was more worried than ever. If it wasn't Rutherford, anyone could have poisoned him.

Ava furrowed her brows. “There was one man I noticed. He's a lord from one of the other kingdoms in the Western Dominion, I believe. I've seen him around a few times. Tall, crooked nose...”

I shot from my chair and headed for the exit.

“Where are you going?” my sister called, but I ignored her. The only thought I had was to get to Ezra. I had to get Rutherford away from him. I should've trusted my gut, I should've—

“Amaris, stop. Please, talk to me.” She followed me to the door. “Amaris, there's something I came here to tell you,” she pleaded.

"Save it," I called over my shoulder. The cold metal of the door handle met my skin, my pulse heavy in my palm.

"I came to warn you!" she shouted.

At those words, I stopped and turned. We held each other's gaze for a long

moment, a steady stream of tears barreling down her cheeks. In all of my life, I'd never seen this much emotion in her eyes. She'd never allowed me to see this far into the depths of her soul, but now... she looked petrified.

I didn't have time for this. My fiancé was almost murdered last night, and the man responsible for it was in his room right now.

Ava's lips trembled, and she swallowed hard, as if contemplating what to say next. Her voice cracked when she finally spoke. "It isn't safe here."

"And when have you cared for my safety, Ava?"

Her shoulders slumped, as if all of her hope drained from her body. This time, she tried again. And when she grabbed my hand in hers, I allowed her. I had no idea how much I had missed her, and despite how much betrayal I felt, I was still glad to see her alive. "Leave Erison," she whispered. "Come with me."

I stared down at our clasped hands before laughing coldly, dismissing the notion immediately. Ava may be someone that I would always care deeply about, but I wasn't going to submit to her commands so easily. Not anymore.

"What are you going to do if I don't? Hypnotize me?" Then, I clicked the door shut behind me.



After spending several precious moments convincing the guards I didn't need an escort, they finally gave up. They hardly asked questions about why I needed directions to Marion's quarters, though, which was a blessing. If only I had Ava's gift of hypnosis, life would be so much easier.

I followed a set of stairs that led down a familiar hallway, and I realized I'd been here before. This was the hallway where Ezra had pinned me in the corner and kissed my neck.

*“Would it be impossible if I told you I was worried about you, Little Fish?”*

My cheeks warmed at the memory. Ezra was worried about me that night. If he was worried...Did that mean that he cared? If only a little bit?

The handle to Marion’s door was cold against my skin. To my surprise, the knob swiveled open. I rolled my eyes. What kind of pompous assassin must you be to keep your door unlocked *and* unguarded? Then again, maybe it was pride that led to Rutherford’s sloppiness. He was quite bold to offer to watch over Ezra. Marion Rutherford understood the meaning of “keep your enemies closer.”

Once I was inside, I locked the door behind me before lighting a candle to aid in my search. His room was tidy, a four-poster bed on one of the walls, a simple dresser, living area, and vanity. A potent smell instantly grabbed my attention, and I sniffed out the drug like a dog on a mission. First, I checked Rutherford’s nightstand only to find a letter. I didn’t read the entire thing, but skipped down to the bottom where it was signed by a woman named Jirva.

I rummaged around a little deeper, finding a ring and more memorabilia from his old lover. Giving up, I moved to his bed, around the room, in his wardrobe, the pockets of each piece of clothing he owned. I searched and searched and searched, still to no avail. But the strong scent of poison in the air remained. It had to be in here.

Footsteps pounded from down the hallway, sending my heart leaping. Had Solana not been able to stall him? Had he suspected our plan?

Pivoting on my heels, I rushed into the washroom and the smell became infinitely stronger. I pulled the drawers and rummaged around without regard to how close the steps were from the door. I *had* to find the poison. If I didn’t, Rutherford would immediately discard it. To my misfortune, the

drawers held nothing but cologne, bathing supplies, and toiletries. Dammit. Everywhere I checked, I came up short.

Until I noticed something.

The ornate mirror above the sink hung on the wall, although slightly off-center. A knock came on the door, voices echoing throughout the chamber. My mind scrambled, my fingers trembling with fear.

Quickly, I removed the mirror from its hanger before setting it to the floor. When I looked back again, my eyes grew wide. Glass bottles of every kind littered the hidden crevice. Examining each of them, the labels read “hemlock,” “coriander,” “wormwood and mint,” and...

Before I even grabbed the bottle, I knew this was it, but I read aloud the label printed on it all the same. “Hexsenic.” The bottle of poison from BellaDonna’s shop.

“Hey!” an angry voice yelled. “Unlock my door this instant!”

The door handle jiggled, and I hurriedly pocketed the evidence, turning to find the nearest window outside. Rutherford pounded on the door, rattling the wood. “Open the door and show yourself right now, thief!” he shouted.

The noise in the hallway stilled, and I didn’t wait long enough to find out why. Scrambling to the nearest window, I unlatched it and hoisted myself over the ledge. A gust of wind assaulted me, knocking my shaking knees into further panic. A shriek escaped my lips as I peered down at what waited for me below.

Nothing but jagged rocks could be seen. Even though I was on the second level, I would still splatter on the cliff and tumble to the crashing waves below. And then the evidence of Ezra’s attempted killer would be lost with my death if Solana didn’t push for an investigation.

I took a fortifying breath, willing my chin to look up from the angry

precipice. With hardly nimble feet, I shimmied myself against the castle's stone ridge and began shuffling to the nearest parapet. Once more, shouting came from inside Marion's room. Suddenly, Rutherford's hands were digging into mine, the force practically sending me falling to my death.

“Get back in here, you thief!” he yelled. “Explain yourself!”

I didn't think there was much need for an explanation. His claws dug into my skin, leaving red marks along their way. Remembering the dagger strapped to my thigh, I quickly unsheathed it and sliced deeply into his hand.

Rutherford screamed, releasing his iron grip. Then, I turned and fled, placing my hands on the ledge above me as I slowly side-stepped my way across. I dared not to look down once more, but heard the waves all the same as they angrily pounded into the mountainside. Beads of sweat pooled along my back, my muscles spasming with every careful step that led me to freedom.

A gust of wind knocked into me, and I gripped the edge of the castle tighter. My grip was so firm around the bottle of poison that my knuckles were aching, and I was certain I was going to crush the glass.

Once I was fully to the edge of the castle's embankment, I jumped below to a balcony, my knees slamming into my chest as I landed. With the poison still clenched in my fist, I sprinted as fast as I could to the King's throne room.



“Your Majesty.” I dropped into a brief curtsy. My trembling muscles couldn't afford much else. “Forgive me for entering in such an unruly manner. I am here about Ezra's attempted murder. I have strong evidence against the betrayer.”

“Betrayer?” Verin echoed, standing to attention. “Miss Strauhn, do not waste any more time. Please explain.”

I did as I was told, quickly yet precisely explaining my case. With a jittering hand, I held up the bottle of Hexsenic. A guard was hastily summoned to retrieve the poison from me.

“Do you believe Marion was working with anyone else?”

I thought of BellaDonna from Past and Present. If I gave her away for being the one to sell the contents to Rutherford, what if she gave away my secret to the public? Still, I couldn’t lie to the King, my future father-in-law. I had to take that risk.

“Madam BellaDonna, owner of Past and Present. I saw him enter the shop a month before Ezra was poisoned. Beyond them, I am unsure.”

Verin nodded. “We will investigate with haste. Thank you for your bravery, Ms. Strauhn, but from now on, please mind your curiosity. As the future of the Western Dominion, Ezra and I need you in one piece.”

He winked at me before immediately barking orders at the guards. “Landon, take your men to Rutherford’s quarters. Mayson and Norjar, station guards across the palace grounds to ensure he cannot escape—”

Before the King could finish his sequence of commands, the doors swung open. Marion Rutherford’s black eyes landed on me, his features permeated with hatred. He cradled his hand to his heaving chest, blood dripping down the front of his tunic.

“Marion. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Your Majesty, Lady Amaris is a thief! She—”

“Lady Amaris,” Verin interrupted, “is the single-most reason we have to thank for catching the one who attempted to murder my son. Guards, seize him.”

“What?” Marion shrieked. “My lord! You must believe me. She framed me! This is a mistake!” Silver armored men encased Marion on all sides. “I’ve been framed! Please—”

“Marion Rutherford, you will be tried on the fourth week of the season. Do not speak any longer unless you wish to be beheaded on the spot.” Verin’s eyes flashed, their hard surface as cold as the betrayal he clearly felt. “Escort him to the dungeons.”

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## CHAPTER 40

### AMARIS

**W**hen I swung the door open, I was surprised by what I saw. Books lined one of the walls with trinkets and memorabilia filling the shelves. The room was lived-in, though it wasn't messy, the way Ezra often commented mine was. Of course it was lived-in. These were Ezra's personal quarters.

As soon as Ezra saw me, he sat up straighter in the bed. "What's wrong?" Setting down his broth, he gathered both my shaking hands in his. "It's okay," he whispered. "Solana told me. You caught him. *You* did this, Little Fish. You're the reason I'm still here."

He traced little circles with his thumb, and I was reminded again of just how selfless this man was. He had been recovering from almost dying, yet he was the one comforting me.

"He was just in your room, acting like none of it even happened. How can you say it's okay?" I hiccupped, tears flowing down my cheeks in ribbons.



“Because you’re here, now. Not him. He’s going to be tried for murder and sentenced to a life of imprisonment. We’ll never have to see him again. He isn’t a threat anymore.”

“Still. He *watched over* you. What if he tried to do it again while I was away? I allowed him to keep you company while I—”

“While you, what?”

I swallowed. “I saw my sister. She was the one who came to visit.”

Ezra’s brow raised. “A human sister, hopefully?”

I shook my head. “Mermaid. Her fiancé somehow can shift her between human and mermaid.”

His features contorted into doubt. “There isn’t any kind of sorcerer who can wield that kind of magic in Erison. Are you sure?”

I thought about the potion Nephtali had concocted to make it possible for me to become a human. Surely she wasn’t the only one with that kind of power.

“Perhaps some kind of potion?”

“Maybe. Did she tell you where she was staying?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t ask. We had a lot to discuss.”

“Gods,” Ezra sighed, running a hand through his dark curls. “Before we know it, Erison will be filled with mermaids.”

“Ezra, you’re shaking. You need to sit back down.” I led us back over to his bed before returning to the conversation at hand. “I don’t think so. I think she’s here for something else.”

“Like what?” Ezra’s spine straightened. “If this is a threat to Erison, we must inform my father immediately.”

I remembered her parting words to me, right before I walked out of the room. At first, I had brushed it off, eager to catch Rutherford before he tried

something again...

*Come with me.*

“I don’t think it’s that. She seemed scared, but she didn't say why. Only that she wished that I would come with her. I'm assuming back to the Eastern Dominion, where her fiancé lives. She mentioned that she's supposed to be hunting mermaids in the Amber Sea, but was away the night of my Claiming to warn them. Or maybe she runs away just to spend time with McCollum instead.”

“McCollum?” Ezra echoed.

“That’s her fiancé.”

“Did she ever mention McCollum’s surname? Any details about the man at all?”

I shook my head. “None. She just says his first name and leaves it at that.”

Ezra ran both of his hands through his messy curls in frustration.

“*Dammit.*”

“What’s wrong?”

“There was a McCollum on the ship that night—” He began, but I cut him off.

“I don’t think it’s the same one. They met long before the night of the shipwreck. Plus, she wasn't even there. She told me the day after my Claiming about their engagement. They’ve been seeing each other for a while.”

He held up a finger. “Yes, but there was a stolen rowboat that night that we never found the remains of.”

I furrowed my brows at him. “I don’t understand.”

“Someone stole that boat to save himself, and no one ever found the remains of McCollum’s body. What if that was the same McCollum? What if

he took it, and now he's back here with Ava?"

I thought for a moment. "Even if that were true, I still don't understand why that should matter."

"*He took a boat from us, Amaris. He sabotaged half of his crew, resulting in their deaths, almost in my death, if it weren't for you.*" Then, his eyes shot wide in realization, his face pale. "Shit. What if that was part of the plan? To leave me on that ship with no way of escaping?"

Ezra shot to his feet, his bare chest flexing as he sprung out of bed. Throwing on a shirt, he said, "We need to inform my father right now."

He stumbled, and I rushed from the bed to stabilize him. "Ezra, you need to rest."

"I'll be fine. We need to go right now."

"Your face is green. You're going to get sick if you don't—"

Before I could finish, Ezra hurled bile onto the floor. Wiping his face, he said, "I will get that when I come back. We need to leave right now."

"It's the middle of the night. Can this wait until morning, please?"

He stumbled again as he turned to face me. "Amaris, someone may have tried to kill me the night of that shipwreck. When they didn't succeed, Rutherford resorted to poisoning me. This isn't just about me anymore. If there is some sort of insurgency, they may be targeting Father as well."

"You're right, but your father is being looked after while he rests, which is what *you* need as well. He won't call a council meeting until the morning anyways. We can find him first thing to tell him."

Ezra hung his head, knowing I was right. He collapsed onto the bed. "First thing tomorrow, then."

After I helped him in, I spotted a bundle of towels, cleaning supplies, and a burlap sack by his desk. Apparently, this hasn't been the first time he'd

gotten sick from the aftermath of the poison. I grabbed the supplies and bent down to clean up the mess.

“I can do that,” Ezra said faintly. Lucy just looked between us with concern.

“Even the dog knows that’s bullshit,” I said, wiping up the remains. Standing to my feet, I knocked out the wrinkles of my tunic. After discarding the towels, I lit a few scented candles. “I think I would like a bath now, but I don’t want to leave your side.”

Ezra silently pointed to a set of double doors where the washroom was. “You—you don’t care if I use yours?”

“Of course, not,” he rasped. “They’ll be yours soon enough.”

My breath caught in my throat. One week. How had it approached so quickly? I had been so excited with life, distracted with finding Ezra’s attempted murderer, that I completely forgot about the wedding, or the bargain.

I was happy. Regardless if a man professed their love to me or not, I had been happy.

I didn’t care about the future, because I was completely content in my friendships with Priscilla, Solana, and even Ezra. The idea of leaving them was agony, so much so that I had pushed away the thought for so long. I wanted to pretend everything was going to be okay, but now, this close to my deadline, I was reminded of my fate. I needed next week to come.

I plucked a towel from the cupboard before twisting the ivory nozzles on the tub. Hot water rushed from the pipes. “I thought the whole point of being my caretaker is that you can’t leave my side,” Ezra called out from the other room.

I rounded the door and cast him an irritated look. His eyes were shining

with mischief, a smile playing with his lips. I rolled my eyes but didn't object.

"Give me a minute to undress." The door clicked shut behind me, and I tossed my clothes to the floor. As the water filled to the porcelain edges, I poured a substantial amount of soap into the mix to create bubbles. He had already seen every part of me, minus the important bits, but something about this made it feel less...revealing.

To pass the time, I surveyed the stained-glass windows above me. The colors ricocheted from the ceiling, casting every shade of the rainbow on the walls. Soon, the entire space was rippling in iridescence. This place was beautiful, and it would be mine in a week, too.

Moments later, Ezra stalked inside with Lucy beside him. I giggled. Anywhere Ezra was, that dog had to follow. He brushed his teeth, gargling some mouthwash before taking a seat on the floor. He placed his elbow on the lip of the tub. "Thank you." His hazel eyes twinkled. "You never cease to amaze me."

I shrugged. "It's how I would hope someone would take care of me."

"Not everyone *is* you, though. You are so thoughtful and compassionate."

"You expect so little from people, Ezra. I serve you because I want to, not because I have to."

He reached out, caressing my cheek with the back of his palm, sending fire spreading throughout my body. "I know."

I stilled, closing my eyes. I concentrated on every light stroke of his hand as it outlined my cheeks, my lips, my jaw. I didn't want him to stop; to stop complimenting me, to stop gazing at me, to stop *touching* me...

When I opened my eyes, his gaze was still on me. Nervously, I played with the bubbles in the water. "There's still room in here, you know. The water

may help you feel better.”

Ezra searched my face for any hint of apprehension, and when he found none, he smirked. “Right. Well, since I had to wait for you to get in, you have to look away while I undress, too.”

“I can’t say that’s what I’ll do. I’m your caretaker for the night, remember? What if you fall and hit your head?”

Ezra chuckled. “Of course. Precautions.”

Leaning back, I rested my head on the tub as Ezra stood. His eyes never left mine as he slowly stripped out of his shirt. The hard lines of his abs flexed as he tossed it over his head. Mesmerized, I watched the veins in his hands go to work as he reached for his belt.

He stopped, giving me a devilish grin. “Are you sure you’d like to ruin all the fun before next week?”

I looked away to hide the blush on my cheeks.

“Close your eyes,” he growled.

I closed them, but it did little to tame my nerves as I heard the jingle of his belt, imagining his strong arms pulling it through the loops. With a thud, Ezra dropped it to the floor.

My laugh echoed throughout the chamber. “Such a tease, Ezra Anaforiene.”

His dark laugh reached my ears, sending chills through me. The water rippled around me as he dipped inside, and his legs brushed up against mine. “You can open your eyes, now,” he said.

He was sitting opposite me, his hands resting on either side of the tub. The muscle of his arms, the tattoos across them, and his chest were on full display. I couldn’t stop myself from drinking in the lines of toned flesh under black ink. On his right arm was the sigil of Erison, the two suns with a ship

sailing below them. On his chest, two dates were inscribed, the bottom one only seventeen years ago, A. 20,334, in memory of his mother, Claudia.

“Don’t stop staring on my account, sweetheart,” he said playfully, and my mouth dried with embarrassment. I didn’t want to quit staring at him, but I had just been caught.

Ezra sighed, resting his head back. Above us, small fragments of moonlight poured in through the windows, setting his skin alive with blues, purples, and pinks. “This does feel nice.”

“Are you feeling better?” I asked.

“I am. I didn’t expect to take this long to recover. I still have bouts of nausea and some dizziness, but I don’t feel like death anymore.”

I brushed my leg against his. “I’d come to your rescue again if you needed it.”

“Do you remember last night much?” Ezra asked, cutting his eyes at me.

“Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t be able to forget that moment for the rest of my life.”

“I mean before I tried to die on you.”

“Oh,” I blushed. “Right. It was...a blur at the end, but yes, I do remember.”

Ezra’s hazel eyes glowed in the firelight, the intensity of his eyes on me made my stomach do tiny flips. “Did you mean it?”

Another one of his trick questions. He said that night that he wasn’t that drunk, but what if he truly regretted it, and what if that’s why he was bringing it up? My head swam with questions. I couldn’t keep up with what was real with him and what wasn’t, what was he saying for the sake of our fake marriage and what he truly felt? What if he didn’t feel the same way anymore?

I bit my lip. “About us?”

He nodded. A long pause stretched between us, the only sound the shift of the water as it rippled. I really didn’t know what to say. If I admitted how much I wanted him, it would take us down a path we could never come back from.

His raspy tone broke through the silence, breaking the barrier of everything I had been waiting so long to hear. “I meant what I said that night. I want you. I’ve wanted you from the day I met you.”

“Even as a mermaid? I thought I was a monster to you.”

He sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “This is going to seem silly, but I thought it was some sort of mind game. I believed you were tricking me into being attracted to you because that was part of your...*power* over me. I had no idea that it’s because I just wanted you.”

I smiled, brushing my foot against his bare chest, wiggling my toes. “You hated the ground I attempted to walk on.”

Ezra threw his head back and laughed. Hard. “Gods, it was so damn cute, the way you watched the ground so intently. You had bruises all over your arms and legs from the times you would fall.”

“You noticed that?” I blushed.

“Of course, Amaris. I noticed you. From the day that I laid eyes on you, I couldn’t help but notice. I still do.”

“I notice you, too.”

He reached out, resting his hand on my shin. I twirled my necklace between my fingers, and for the first time tonight, he looked down past my neckline, following the trail of my hands.

His brow ticked upward. “Nervous, are we?”

I nodded, my cheeks heating deeper from his gaze.



A smile formed on his lips, revealing the faintest dimples. “Good. That makes two of us,” he confessed, but the casual way he rested himself in the tub made me think otherwise.

Ezra dipped his head under the warm water, his arms reaching up to force the unruliest dark strands of hair under. When he emerged, he shifted his naked body next to mine, placing his arm around my shoulders.

*How large was this tub?*

I was embarrassingly aware of how close his lips were to mine, and even now, I smelled the citrus on his skin. When I looked up, his eyes were directly on me, those flecks of rust burning from the heat of his stare. I reached out my hand to his wet curls. “This is one of my favorite things about you, you know.”

“My *hair*?” The way Ezra said it made me giggle. “Really? Not my handsomely bronzed skin, heart-stopping good looks, or my amazing rock-hard muscles? My hair?”

Taking hold of a strand, I pulled it straight before letting it go. Abruptly, the dark tendril sprung up into a curl. “It’s adorable.”

He rolled his eyes. “You are so ridiculous, Little Fish.”

“I’ve never really seen curly hair. Everyone’s hair in the water just kind of looks straight. It just goes out in all directions like this,” I demonstrated by dunking my head into the water, allowing my long hair to flow wildly in the basin. Once I raised myself up in the water, my sopping hair came down over my body.

“See?”

His gaze dropped to mine, his eyes holding me there for several long seconds. At last, he breathed, “You are so beautiful.”

I bit my lip. I wanted so badly to close the space between us. I wanted to

feel every inch of his lips on mine, his naked body pressed against me. Still, I was determined that it would be *him* who crossed that line.

The moment passed too soon, and Ezra grabbed for our towels on the edge of the tub. “We better get to bed.”

With a sigh, I took one and stood, simultaneously wrapping myself in it. I made my hands busy with wringing out my hair as Ezra climbed out of the tub behind me. I stepped down onto the tile, tucking my towel in the crux of my arm.

He touched my shoulder lightly, spinning me around to face him. His dark hair was still dripping with water, a towel hanging dangerously low on his hips. Ezra peered at me from beneath his coal lashes as he brushed my wet coppery hair over my shoulder.

Slowly, he ran his thumb over my lips, his eyes following his movements. “I want to kiss you, Amaris. Can I?”

There was only one answer, but I didn’t just want to be kissed by Ezra. I wanted his mouth to claim mine. I wanted him to claim all of me, yearned for his hands to remove the towels that separated our burning flesh. I wanted him—all of him. He bent low and his full lips brushed against mine, sending my heart hammering in my chest. My knees weakened with desire as citrus flooded my senses, already leaving me dizzy. I reveled in the scent. Reveled in *him*, his velvet lips, how they gently pressed into mine.

His touch was slow and deliberate, his hand came up to caress my jaw, forcing my head to tilt upwards into him more. But somehow, the precious moment didn't last long enough. He pulled back, resting his forehead on mine.

“I’ve waited so long for this, Little Fish,” Ezra breathed, his words warm against my skin.

And when his lips found mine again, we collided together like the violent waves of a storm. Everything the first kiss had been was everything this kiss was not. Before, it was soft and sweet and slow. Now, it was hard and fast and pleading, as if something inside of us had snapped. The rope between us, coiling with tension, unwound itself in mere seconds. Now, we were both plummeting into our own chasm of desire with nothing left to hold us.

My lips parted for him, and he deepened the kiss, wrapping his hands into my hair, and pulling me tight against him. Then, his hands were on the backs of my legs, hoisting me around his waist. My towel began slipping away at the movement, but he caught it, wrapping the fabric around my frame again. I groaned in protest, and I felt his lips part into a smile on mine.

Cold marble assaulted my back and thighs, and I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him closer to every facet of me. He was hard beneath the towel, and he let out a moan as I swept my tongue against his. I raked my hands over the muscles of his bare shoulders and back, scraping as I went.

Everything between us had led to this moment, and there was no going back. I didn't want to go back—I only wanted to go forward with him. I cared about Ezra deeply, and I wanted him in the most intimate ways.

Ezra lowered a trail of kisses from my neck and down my chest, and a moan escaped my lips as he took my breast in his mouth. Calloused fingers held my thighs spread firmly against him, and I was all too aware of how dangerously close he was to the spot I wanted him so badly. Desperate for his touch, I took his hand in mine to guide him there.

Instead, he stopped.

Several seconds passed as we tried to steady our heavy breathing. On instinct, I reached for my necklace. Had I somehow overstepped?

Ezra looked between my eyes and fingers, shaking his head. “Don't be

anxious. You didn't do anything wrong.”

“Then why—”

“I want to take my time with you,” he said, brushing a stray hair behind my ear. “Things are complicated enough right now. Trust me, if I were any other man, there would be nothing stopping me from taking you right here, but I’m not any other man, and you’re not any other woman. You deserve to be treated better than this.”

I placed a hand on his bare chest. “Ezra—I *want* to be treated like this.”

“I know, and you will. But for now, I want to take it slow. If we’re going to do this…” He ran a hand through his hair. “If we do this, I want to properly court you, not the bullshit we’ve been doing up to this point. I want it to be real.”

“The wedding is only a week from now.”

Ezra nodded. “I know. And until then, I want to spend every moment with you. I want even that to be real, when the time comes.”

My heart quickened at his proposal. Somehow, this one was so much better than when he asked me to marry him. This one was sweeter, more genuine.

Real.

Ezra smiled before helping me down from the counter. He opened his wardrobe, retrieving clean clothes. After donning a pair of trousers, he handed me a shirt. I shrugged it on, his scent immediately enveloping me. Ezra chuckled when he saw how the hem of his shirt brushed my knees. “You are so little.”

“I’m not little,” I crossed my arms. “Maybe *you’re* just insanely huge.”

He tossed me a wicked grin. “You aren’t wrong, Little Fish. I’m definitely huge.”

I rolled my eyes at the insinuation. “Gods, if you aren’t going to bed me

tonight, you could at least not tempt me.” I let out a huff and made my way over to the small couch opposite the bed. It would be too small for me to stretch out on fully, but—

“Where are you going?” Ezra asked, his hands on his hips.

I gestured to the sofa. “I figured you’d want to take some time before letting me sleep with you.”

He growled in disapproval. “Get your ass over here.” Ezra opened the covers for me, letting me drop down on the bed. Then he came behind me, wrapping himself around my backside. The effect of what I did to him earlier was still entirely too evident.

I could confirm: I wasn’t wrong. He was definitely huge, and it was an act of the gods to resist the desire to turn over and feel every hard inch.

“Is this okay?” he whispered in my ear.

I closed my eyes as his fingers traced over my skin, down the line of my exposed back from where my shirt had ridden up.

Of course, this was okay. This would never not be okay. In fact, it should be illegal for us to do anything different while we were together.

Maybe I had dreamed it, but I swore he whispered in my ear, “I care for you, Little Fish. I want to be intentional with you. I want to get to know you more than I already do. I want to grow to love you. If the gods allow, I will make you my wife. Not just a queen, not just a mother, but a wife. *My wife.*”



## CHAPTER 41

### EZRA

**A**maris stirred next to me. She was still wearing my shirt that looked two sizes too big on her. I took a piece of her copper hair and twirled it around in my fingers. Her eyes fluttered at my touch, and I kissed her cheek before getting up out of bed. A soft moan escaped her lips, sending my heart quickening. Damn, if I could just stay here all day with her, I'd show her exactly what I meant last night by *taking my time with her*. Under different circumstances, I would cancel the meeting today with the Court of Lords, but with the information we pieced together last night, I couldn't take that risk.

A swift knock came at the door before it swung open. In Solana's hands, she carried in a tray of breakfast. The sweet smell of coffee filled the air, making my mouth water.

"Well, it seems you didn't last a full night without taking advantage of your alone time with Amaris," she smirked. "I brought toast, eggs, and bacon."

Amaris shifted under the covers. "Did someone say bacon?"

Solana and I laughed in unison. “Yes, now get your ass up so you can get some before we eat it all.” Solana set the tray of food down and poured the two of us a cup of coffee. She added three cubes of sugar, and a hefty amount of creamer to one. She left mine black.

“That’s an interesting way to make coffee.” I gestured to the other cup. I took a sip of my own and felt the warm liquid travel through me. Not a hint of nausea came over me.

“Amaris doesn’t enjoy torturing herself with that bitter shit. She much prefers it the way I prepare it.”

“Noted,” I said, taking another sip. “Thank you for bringing us breakfast this morning, Lana.”

“I’m paid to do this,” she reminded me, placing multiple potions in my palm.

“I know,” I smiled. “I’m still thankful for you.” *And that lovely bet you made with Amaris.*

Solana waved her hand. “I’m sure you’re *very* thankful for me now.” She leaned in close, her voice a low hum. “I haven’t even told Amaris yet, but I wasn’t drunk at all the night of the festival. I was totally screwing with her.”

“You haven’t told Amaris what?” Amaris called out, her voice barely audible over a large pile of pillows she had wedged around herself.

“We ate all the bacon already,” Solana said, without hesitation. She gave me a grin, schooling her tone to perfect composure. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“*What?*” Amaris shrieked, jumping out of bed as swiftly as a fish out of water. She took one step toward us, but her feet got tangled in her blanket as it dragged underneath her, sending her tumbling to the floor. I jumped from

my seat to help her, but she was already back on her feet and pushing past me to look at the breakfast tray. "How could you do this to me?"

"You should know by now, Little—" I stopped myself. I couldn't call her Little Fish in front of Solana. If Amaris wanted to tell her friend, that was a secret for Amaris to tell. It wasn't my place.

I cleared my throat. "*Amaris*, that your friend is just being an ass. There's plenty left." Solana stuck her tongue out at me for not going along with the prank.

Seeming completely satisfied with that response, Amaris took the bacon before crawling back in bed. She wasted no time as she devoured the crispy strips, chewing around the fatty edges. I set her mug of creamer and sugar, with a slight bit of coffee, on the bedside table for her.

"Gods. You're like a little bacon troll, Amaris." Solana shook her head, crossing her arms simultaneously as she turned her attention to me. "Allow me to check your vitals and then you can get back to...whatever you were doing."

I chuckled. "I think the little bacon troll has better things to do other than what your smutty books would suggest."

She placed her hand on my stomach, chest, and various places along my back. I took a deep breath each time, saving her from having to bark the order. "How are you feeling today?"

"Great."

She nodded, looking to her notebook and jotting down my progress.

I dared not mention that I hurled my guts up again last night, knowing she would order me to rest for one more day. I partially blamed my nausea on the information Amaris and I had pieced together anyway.

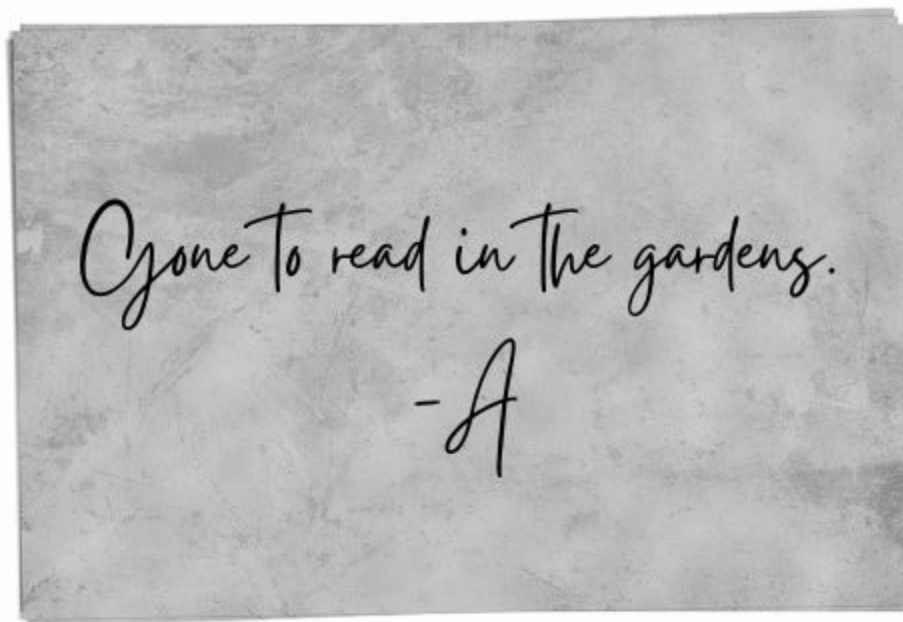
Though, the thought of staying in bed with Amaris today seemed like an



excellent idea. And once I spoke with my father this morning, maybe that's exactly what we would do.



After the meeting, I half-expected Amaris to still be curled up in my bed. Instead, I found the sheets and blanket made with the silver and navy pillows neatly piled high. The only hint of her being there was the remaining scent of lavender and a note on my desk.



Looking out my window, a long, narrow shadow was cast along the number eight in a perfect silhouette. And there among the flowers was Amaris who was scribbling something in a notebook. I grabbed a couple of

books, a quill, and paper before making my way down to the kitchen to pick up a basket of fruits and vegetables. Ivory tile met terra-cotta stone as I took the path to the heart of the garden.

“I brought us plenty of snacks today, along with extra bacon, cheese, and wine,” I said, placing the basket at her feet.

She didn’t bother with pleasantries. Her expression was gravely serious. “Ezra. What do you know about the Lost Queen?” She held a book in her hand, and although I couldn’t read the title, I knew it was more information on the history of the Kingdom of the Seas.

“I know that we have our statue dedicated to her. Other than that, I don’t know anything. Why?”

Amaris placed the hefty book in my hand, her dainty finger pointing to the text halfway down the page. She read aloud,

“Four treasures, forged by the gods themselves, have been given unique power. The heir to the throne, the Strauhns, have been given these to wield: the triton, the crown, the signet ring, and the necklace.

“The triton, power over bronze, a mermaid’s one weakness. The crown, power to rule over the seas and everything in them. The signet ring, power over waves and wind. The necklace, the power to grant any wish through a blood-binding agreement.

“However, a curse was placed upon the six Kingdom of the Seas, almost as old as the Dominions themselves. The true heir to the throne has been lost to time and the depths of the waters. Now, the one who rules obscures the powers of the four treasures.”

Amaris stopped reading, explaining to me how her father had the three items.

“I have so many questions,” I breathed.

“Join the club.”

“So is your father not the rightful heir to the throne?”

Amaris shook her head. “It means he stole the artifacts and cursed the true queen so he could rule instead.”

“Who do you think it could be then?”

“It must be Nephtali. She was the mermaid who changed me. She has the last artifact.”

“Why don’t you think your father has it instead, like the rest of the artifacts?”

Amaris shrugged. “He probably doesn’t know where to find it.”

“Or maybe Nephtali stole it from him,” I suggested, doing little circles along her thumb. She thought for a long moment, playing with her necklace in the hand that wasn’t holding mine.

“Do you remember the dagger you lost the night of the shipwreck?” she asked.

Though I was unsure of how this correlated, I nodded. “The one you carry around with you.”

“After I saved you, I went back to the shipwreck and found it. I buried it outside of the tower of my room, and that was how my sisters found the evidence of your dagger and concluded that I had saved you. Then, it turned up in my room here.” She pulled up her skirts dangerously high on her legs.

The legs I felt last night. The legs that were on full display for me to touch and...A metallic whine broke through the air, jolting my thoughts back.

Amaris unsheathed the blade from her garter, holding it out for me to inspect. Right now, I preferred to inspect *other things*, but I took the dagger anyways.

“Nephtali sent it back to me with a note. Frankly, it didn't make much sense, but I believe she sent Elektra to breach the palace walls and steal it

from my father. So, what if she did it before, when she stole the artifact from his tower?”

“It still doesn’t explain why she would do it.”

Amaris shrugged. “Because she can. She’s a sea serpent. Their nature is to sneak in and out of places just to cause mischief. That’s why Nephtali said she liked me, because we’re kindred spirits. Plus if the artifact was hers, she may have strongly felt like it belonged with her, and that she should take back what was once hers.” Abruptly, she shut the book and popped to her feet from the bench. “Would you mind going with me to the statue? I’m not sure if I’ll find anything, but I didn’t really get to examine it much in detail the night of the festival. Maybe it’ll help me find more information on this Lost Queen, whether it’s Nephtali or not.”

I nodded, offering her my hand. Amaris excitedly led the way, and I chuckled to myself. She always did that. Even if she had no idea where in hells she was going, she took off like she owned the place. The world truly was her oyster, and she loved exploring it.

For a while, I allowed her to lead the way, only to end up going in a full loop, but she rounded corner after corner confidently with a new sort of anticipation. I didn’t have the heart to tell her we were going the wrong direction.

“You know, you could’ve asked me how to get there. You’ve been taking us a much longer route,” I finally said, hoping she’d take the suggestion. Even though I felt much better now, sometimes I felt too faint to stand. If I was out here much longer, I may collapse from exhaustion.

Amaris slowed her steps, turning to face me. Reaching on her tiptoes, she planted a slow kiss on my lips. “Perhaps I wanted to take the longer path. I get to spend more time with the prince that way.”

Caressing her neck, I reached down, savoring the moment a bit longer. She pressed her body against mine, and I was overwhelmed by the warmth of her, the intoxicating feel of her hands as they pulled me closer. It took me back to last night, when she was laid out before me with nothing but a towel separating our naked bodies.

Soon, I would recite my vows to her, and nothing would hold me back from shredding any cloth between us. It was damn near impossible now as she touched me, but I wanted her to know that this was real to me. She wasn't just an object for me to use to secure my kingdom's safety or to entertain me in the bedroom. To me, Amaris was so much more than that. She had always been.

I pulled back, resting my forehead against hers. "In that case, I'll stop complaining."

"Good." She flashed me a wild grin before continuing down the floral path.

When we rounded another bush, the statue of the Lost Queen finally came into view. She was as before, her body poised in marble, her glimmering scales in all the right places. The four treasures—the crown, the ring, the necklace, and the triton—adorned her. I searched around for any hidden clues that we may have missed the night of the Surpassing Day Festival, but to no avail.

Now that it was daylight, however, I examined the sculptured woman in further detail. For the first time, I noticed something new. Running my hands over the angular cheekbones, full lips, and dainty, sculpted nose, I was reminded of...

"Amaris," I called out. When she came around to where I was standing, I pointed to the stone statue's face. "She kind of looks like you."

It didn't just look like her. It looked like the sculpture was made *for* her, or a near relative. Beside me, Amaris gulped, her eyes widening.

"This isn't me, Ezra. It's not any of my sisters. This..." She swallowed once more. "Ezra, I think I know why my father doesn't allow anyone in his tower. I think I know the secret he's been hiding."

"What is it, then?" I asked, looking at her.

"Not *what*—but *who*." Amaris's breathing grew ragged and heaving.

"Shh. In and out, Little Fish." I ran over to help stabilize her. "Remember what I taught you. Take a deep breath—" Mimicking a sharp intake of breath, I guided her through the breathing exercises. "Good. That's great. Now, take a deep breath out. Slowly." I continued demonstrating for her as she followed my breathing. "Good. Now again," I coached, and finally, she peeled her eyes open.

Panic surged through her body once more as she tried to break from our position on the floor of the garden. I pulled her back to me. "Not so fast," I said, my fingers weaving through her hair.

"Ezra, I don't have much time—"

"Shh. You had another panic attack. You need to breathe. Seriously."

"I know—but, please. I need to—"

"You don't need to do anything. You're going to have another if you don't calm yourself."

"The statue—" she said. "I know who it is."

"Really?"

She nodded. "It's my mother. My father—" She closed her eyes. "I think he has her. In his tower." She righted herself into a sitting position, turning to meet my gaze.

I caressed her face. "Amaris..."

“I know it sounds insane.” She blinked back another tear. “But he never has let anyone go inside. Ever. I thought it was to keep people from killing him while he slept, but what if he has my mother there, so no one knows where to find the Lost Queen and doesn’t know how to look for her?”

“What do you think will break the curse, if she is there?”

“She *is* there, Ezra. I know it.”

Still, I wasn’t convinced. “Don't you think someone would have found her imprisoned there by now?”

"I know it sounds crazy. And I’ll admit, I don’t have all the answers sorted out properly, but it makes sense. From the time I was born, no one was allowed inside of his tower." She explained, her breathing still uneven from her near panic attack. "If he doesn't honor our marriage and stop the attacks on the Sapphire, we must kill him."

Letting out a slow breath, I raked my hands through my hair. Even if he did honor the marriage between me and Amaris, he was still inadequately ruling the seas. That in and of itself was enough cause for immediate action to be taken. "Do you think you’re prepared to face him? To restore your mother to the throne by killing him?"

“I—I don’t know. Bronze is a mermaid’s only weakness. If we form an army of bronze, we can attack. Every weapon, every ship, every piece of armor, all in bronze.”

We couldn’t afford to start a war, but if Amaris’ father truly didn’t have the birthright and her mother was imprisoned, that meant as soon as King Strauhn was killed, all his allies and war-plans died with him. It all hinged on so much. One way or another, we would be facing a war soon. Perhaps we could stop it before suffering any real casualties if we broke this curse and put the rightful heir on the throne instead.

“Are you sure that’ll lure the mermaids out? Wouldn't they be able to notice the bronze if it stripped them of their power?” I asked.

“It won't matter if I’m there to distract them.”

“No way.” I shook my head. I couldn’t stand the thought of it. Sooner would I hand over the crown than watch her sacrifice herself. “No way in hells am I sending you back there.”

“You have to. Once they realize I’m alive, they’ll come after the ships. They’ll want vengeance. They’ll send word to my father, and he will personally see the job done. He’ll be infuriated I bested him, and his anger will lead him to the surface. We have to get the signet ring. That’s what keeps him immune to the bronze. Then, we must kill him.”

I nodded. “I will inform Verin of this today. Until then, you need to rest. It will be easier and quicker to use the fleets we already have and attach bronze to them. Do you think that will be enough to weaken them?”

"Yes," she affirmed.

"It'll take two weeks minimum to forge the material onto the ships, and it'll a damn miracle if we have those resources. We only have a few days until the wedding, so let's hope your father doesn't attack until then. After that, he will be bound by Valian law to uphold our union. If not, we'll have no choice but to go to war."





## CHAPTER 42

### AMARIS

There were only two more days until the wedding. Solana and I had planned one of our weekly slumber parties, which I hoped wouldn't change once Ezra and I married. Normally we would be due for another run for drinks in the city, but we wouldn't be going anywhere tonight, as per my request.

As I waited for her to arrive at my quarters, I anxiously twirled Nephtali's note around in my fingers and prepared for the conversation I was planning to have with her. In the coming weeks, I couldn't ensure my own safety. With everything Ezra and I had recently learned, we needed to prepare. And even if Solana hated me, I needed her to know the truth about me.

The card slipped through my shaky fingers, the frilly words landing face-up on the rug.

*Amaris,*

*I do apologize for not explaining the side effects of the potion sooner. Elektra was so eager to give this back to you. Don't even ask how she*

*managed to travel such mischievous waters! Remember: each passing hour counts. Look to the sundial if you get lost.*

*N*

*P.S. Don't forget to breathe, darling.*

I stretched my knees, kicking out the gelatinous feeling in them. Outside, the second sun was melting past the horizon. Little white stars began to twinkle above the waves of the sea that overlooked my balcony. One wave crested along the beach and I synced my breathing to the push and pull of its rhythm to steady my mind.

*Each passing hour... Look to the sundial...* What could Nephtali mean? Was it simply a warning, to constantly be aware of my time here? Or had she meant something else? And if she had meant something else, what exactly was she meaning to say?

The door swung open before I could think on it any further. Solana stalked in, carrying a small stack of books along with a bag full of liquor.

“You certainly brought the essentials, Lana.” I grinned, greeting her with an embrace. I hoped it wouldn’t be my last. Still, I held her tight against my chest longer than usual, taking in her perfume that smelled of dandelions and vintage books. She always smelled like books.

“I brought extra alcohol because we must celebrate!” She pulled away, not sensing my dread.

Good. Soon, if she hated me, I wanted to remember this moment with her. I wanted to forever be trapped with her like this, in the version of reality where the two of us were best friends. Where we would do anything for the other. Where we knew everything about each other.

Almost everything.

“What must we celebrate?” I giggled as she made a scene of lifting the

bottle over her head and dancing.

“Well, your wedding, for starters. And Priscilla had her baby!”

“*What?*” I squealed. “That’s amazing! Wait, how far along was she?”

“Eight months. Hope was slightly premature. Or perhaps right on time. There's a chance Priscilla had been wrong about the point of conception. She was already five months along when she found out, and a little after that when she announced. I think she was waiting for Izan to return to tell everyone. She knew that if she had told him before they left, he never would've gone. But when Ezra asked her about why she was drinking at dinner, and also the size her belly was growing, she couldn't keep it a secret any longer.”

Something lodged in my throat at the mention of Izan's name. I couldn't imagine what it must have been like for Priscilla, finding out shortly before her husband left to go trek a path through the Moaning Hills, the place where sentient creatures hunted anything alive. Then to wait anxiously for his return only to find out that he never would. Because when he had come back, he had been possessed. He was no longer himself, but had slowly become like one of the creatures in the Hills.

I stifled a shiver. “Aren't you her midwife?”

“I was off tonight. Plus, I have healers in training who did just fine. They’ve learned from the best.” She cracked her knuckles comically, and I laughed.

“Are you sure we can trust the other healers? They moved as slow as snails the night Rutherford tried to kill Ezra. They seemed to not have the faintest clue what to do.”

“In Ezra's case, poison was a little trickier than labor. It was a damn miracle that you healed him. Even I still marvel at how you managed to do it.

Plus, I had plans with you tonight. I wouldn't miss those for the world.” Solana shrugged casually, as if choosing to be with me was unquestionably the better option. My heart swelled as I blinked back the tears that formed in my eyes.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Of course. You're my best friend. Plus, do you honestly think I'd rather work a night I was scheduled to be off?”

I chuckled. “Well, yeah, actually, for Priscilla. She's our friend.”

“Which is exactly why I didn't want to help deliver. I love her, but damn. I don't think I could've listened to her whine another minute. I went in to check in on her, and she was begging me to give her a sip of wine. Just moments before labor! Can you imagine?” Solana shook her head. “Please promise me that when you and Ezra have children, you won't be a pain in my ass.”

My heart raced at the thought. Ezra and I having children. Solana delivering them. I bit my lip, crossing the room to sit on the loveseat.

“Actually, Lana, that's sort of what I need to talk to you about.”

“Dear gods, please don't tell me you're pregnant.”

“I'm not.” I shook my head. “I—would you mind coming to sit down next to me?”

Solana raised a brow, skepticism written all over her face. She didn't object as she took a seat next to me on the couch. My heart sank lower, but I turned to her, taking in a deep breath.

“You said you knew I wasn't from the Eastern Dominion because when I came here, you found out that I couldn't speak Palogian, and you didn't tell anyone. Why?”

She shrugged. “You clearly risked your life enough to come here through the Sapphire. I knew you weren't a spy, or else you *would* have only known

how to speak Palogian, to trick everyone into thinking you couldn't speak Erimaic. Your story just didn't add up."

"And it still doesn't. But I want to tell you, if you're willing to listen."

Solana sucked in a small breath, grabbing my hand. She seemed to be bracing herself for what she would say next, as if it was hard for her to put what she was feeling into words. That was odd for Solana. She always knew what to say next.

"I know, Amaris. I know that you're a mermaid, but I wanted to hear it from you."

"What? How could you have guessed?"

She bit her lip. "Your blood. I was the one who stitched your wounds after Titus kicked you. Ezra specifically appointed me as your healer, to ensure you would be safe."

Safe. Ezra had assigned Solana to me because he had been protecting me. Even as my enemy, he was doing all that he could to keep people from knowing the truth about me. Was this why he had tried keeping me from singing at dinner as well? Until now, I had thought it was because he was making fun of me, truly believed I wasn't that good. But now I understood that he had been trying to warn me not to sing, to keep people from guessing what I was. Just like the time he came to rescue me from the club where Banks had drugged me, and just like when he concealed my hands and wrapped them for me later that evening.

Solana continued, "The day after your spine healed practically overnight, I did some research. Mermaid's blood is deep jade with healing qualities."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"It wasn't my place. I figured you would tell me when you were ready, and now, you're ready." Solana smiled, beckoning me to continue.

Taking a deep breath, I started with the night of the shipwreck and told her everything. I even told her about my mother, how I had suspicions of her being the Lost Queen of the Kingdom of the Seas. When I was done, she grabbed me in a hug.

“Amaris, I’m so sorry. For everything,” she said, her neck firmly resting on my shoulder. A trail of her tears snaked onto my skin. “I didn’t realize—*gods*. Your family is so, so wicked.”

At her words, something deep within me broke. I began crying, too. “You’re not mad at me?”

She pulled away to look me in the eyes. “How could I be mad at you, Amaris? You didn’t have any desire to murder. You did the right thing.”

“I lied to you,” I sniffed. “I haven’t been a good friend, and I’m so incredibly sorry.”

“You *are* a good friend. You’re brave and strong and funny and smart. You lied to me to keep yourself safe. You didn’t know you could trust me yet. You had to do what was best for you. I can understand that.”

“You can?”

Slowly, Solana nodded. “I’m from Paglon. I know what it’s like to escape such a horrible place. That’s something about me not many people know, either.”

Suddenly, everything began to click into place. The reason she spoke Palogian. The reason she knew I was lying. The reason she *understood*.

She was just like me.

How could I have ever thought we were so different? How could I have thought I was so distant, so unlike everyone else, just because I didn’t read the same books, enjoy the same food, and know the same bits of information?

I had been so worried to tell Solana for so long, when all along, she had been here, feeling the same as me.

“How?” I asked, and though it didn’t quite make sense, she understood what I was asking.

“My family and I escaped to have a better life. My parents came over first, leaving me to be raised by my distant relatives. Once they earned their citizenship, they eventually sent for me, when they knew it was safe. I met my parents for the first time when I was three. I was blessed to have parents who loved me and sacrificed so much of their lives for me, but they still abandoned me. At just a few months old, I was ripped from my mother’s arms. Now, I understand why, but it still doesn’t negate the pain. It was hard for me to view my parents as people who could truly love me. I didn’t trust them.”

“Didn’t? As in, past tense?”

Solana’s eyes deepened to almost black. “They were officials for the King. You don’t escape from the King without consequence.” She looked down to the floor.

I grabbed her hand, whispering, “I’m sorry. No one should have had to live through that. It’s truly heartbreaking.”

She nodded, wiping the tears from her dark skin. “Thank you for trusting me with this part of your story, Amaris. For the record, it doesn’t change anything. You are my best friend. I love you. Whether you’re from Paglon, the Sapphire Sea, or the seventh realm of hell, I would still love you. Not because of where you’re from, or the sins of your fathers or mothers, but because of who you are, and who you have chosen to be. You have proven your worth through your character, and I am so, so fucking proud to call you my friend. My sister.” She squeezed my hand with her dainty one. Wet tears

gleamed on her skin as she leaned forward and whispered, “Plus, you laugh at all of my stupid jokes.”

My chest tightened, and warmth spread throughout my entire body, taking up residence like a living thing. Solana had known every deepest, darkest facet of me, and she still loved me. Solana jumped back suddenly, her face filled with panic.

“What?” I asked, looking around the room, “What is it?”

Viridescent light flickered in her eyes, a green glow trapped like sap in Solana’s light shade of honey. Panic gave way to curiosity as she tilted her head, her attention fixed on the center of my chest.

“Your necklace,” Solana said, inching towards it. “It’s... *glowing.*”



*“Amaris,” a voice called out to me. I wasn’t alone. Solana and I weren’t alone. I rose, scanning every inch of my room, the light of the moon illuminating everything in a pale blue haze.*

*“Amaris,” the voice hissed once more, sending prickles of fear into my blood. Looking over to Solana, I was relieved to see her still asleep next to me. In the mirror, something caught my eye: an aura of light spilling from my necklace, casting shades of green in every direction.*

*I felt inclined to leave, to follow wherever it was trying to take me. My feet hit the cold marble as I slowly made my way downstairs. I didn’t see any guards outside to stop me, but for some reason, I knew Solana would be safe while I was gone. It wouldn’t take long.*

*The light swelled brighter and brighter, before diminishing, then growing brighter once more.*



*“Amaris,” the voice—the gem—hissed, its pulsing light coaxing me down, down, down the stairs. I didn’t even have to look at my feet. I knew the way. I knew where the stone was leading me.*

*My reflection caught in the fountains lining the garden. The light led the way deep into the labyrinth of twisting vines and blooms. Tonight, they weren’t colorful, like they had been in the daylight. Tonight, the only color was the light of the gem in my hands, carving the path forward.*

*“The Dimensions of Vale written perfectly to scale,” the gem whispered, and I felt the wind of someone’s breath near the shell of my ear. We passed by the Lost Queen, the statue erected for my mother, but the gem led me deeper into the palace grounds.*

*It hadn’t been this overgrown when I first arrived. The branches hung low around me, the roots of the large trees knotted into the stone grounds, completely severing the walkway in areas.*

*The sundial came into view and bursts of jade shone brighter than ever before inside the crystal. Suddenly, the color shifted to blinding white, burning hot in my hand as two spheres emerged from it. It was warm, but it didn’t burn my hands. The two orbs floated to the sky, shining above like the suns of Vale.*

*“Each passing hour,” the gem demonstrated, showing shadows of the sundial moving to fit the exact hour on each of the obsidian platforms. Letters lit up from around the ring as each line from the shadow landed on a singular letter, spelling out a word I couldn’t recognize. I squinted, trying to read them, but the letters lit up too swiftly for me to process. The vision was too quick.*

*The crystal fell back into my hand, weighing as heavy as a brick. The light sputtered before completely vanishing, the stars and moon with it.*

*Once more, I was left in the dark.*

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## CHAPTER 43

### AMARIS

I woke in a cold sweat, heat pouring from the crystal around my neck. Shifting my gaze to the window, I saw the suns had just begun to rise. Someone—Solana—stirred next to me, and I let out a sigh of relief. We had fallen asleep late into the evening, but I had such a vivid dream, I truly felt as if I left Solana alone while I roamed around the palace.

Pulling the covers back, I threw on a sundress and sandals. I didn't bother to check my reflection as I grabbed my satchel and creaked the doors of my room open.

"Lady Amaris?" my guard asked in disbelief. "Up so soon?" He had jokes this morning.

I smiled, which he knew was a hard task for me in the early hours of the day. "Good morning, Norjar. Solana is still inside, so please keep watch over her while I'm gone. When she wakes, please tell her I had some work to do in the gardens today."

Norjar gave me a solid bow, but I didn't bother staying to watch him rise before beginning my descent to the gardens. The emerald gem hummed in affirmation the closer I got. My feet pounded the cobblestone, anticipation building inside me with each step.

I reached it just in time. Cast in the shadow of the gnomon was the time: eight on the line. I looked at the motto, "*The Dimensions of Vale written perfectly to scale.*" My heart lurched, remembering the words of Nephtali's letter. The words on the motto were exactly as my dream had said. Could the letter, the glowing crystal, the vivid dream, all be a sign somehow? On instinct, I grabbed at my necklace and felt the radiating heat of the prism. It was *guiding* me.

I turned, ripping open my satchel. Upon retrieving my quill, ink, and parchment, I sat down on the floor of the garden and marked my first clue.

The letter H.



I had become so engrossed with the book in my hand, I hardly remembered my task when the bells of the tower chimed nine times. Rising to my feet, I climbed the stony steps of the raised platform. When I scribbled down the letter accented in the shadows, my necklace hummed. I was one step closer to finding out the secret message written in Nephtali's note, one hour closer to revealing the Lost Queen's identity.

*"The seas have been cursed for a long time,"* she had said.

What if this was the path to free it, somehow? What if, when she changed me into a human, she had left me with this note and this crystal for a greater purpose? What if they were weapons to fight, to break a curse? What if

Nephtali was leading me to the key to unlock my father's doing, to save the seas?

My faith may be sightless, but I felt this more than I had anything in my entire life. Maybe this is how Ava felt. Before now, there were very few things in life I felt a definitive draw to, one of the first times being the night I saved Ezra.

Movement to my left caught my attention, knocking me from my thoughts. A large flock of carriages pulled by a steady stream of expensive horses halted at the castle's entrance. I had forgotten that today was Rutherford's trial. Ezra would be there to testify, along with the others. I hadn't been asked to be present, thank the gods. There were plenty of bystanders the night of the Surpassing Day Festival, and the incriminating evidence was damning enough.

My necklace hummed to life once more, and I felt the warm rays of its magic on my skin, but when I looked at the sundial, I frowned. It wasn't the next hour yet, nor were the bells ringing to signify the time change. Voices broke my train of thought. Turning to the left and right, I didn't see anyone coming down a random path in the garden, but the voices remained.

"The prosecution may call its first witness," a male boomed, and subsequently, I heard the high soprano of Solana's words.

"Solana Fetterman."

More voices echoed, and I realized it was coming from my crystal. Sure enough, when I gazed inside it, I was looking at Solana as if she were standing in front of me. Instead, she was standing at the podium in a courtroom. The crystal around my neck was exactly like the ones in Nephtali's cave that showed events in real time. Right now, I was witnessing Rutherford's trial.

But how? How was Nephtali's magic able to do this?

I had never seen others in the crystal before. Was it a coincidence she had fulfilled the bargain I had made with Nephtali by telling me she loved me?

She was giving her testimony on what she saw the night of the festival. Since she was a healer, she doubled as an expert, because she knew every facet of the poison.

Ezra held up the evidence. “Does this look familiar, Rutherford?”

His black eyes popped open, as if remembering the poison he kept locked away in his mirror. “I’ve never seen that in my life. I don’t know where it came from. Please! You have to believe me.”

Ezra rolled it around in his fingers, inspecting the colorless liquid. “You don’t believe it’s a coincidence this is the same poison used to murder the lady of Zhargen?”

“No! I loved her like a sister. I never would have—”

Again, the bell chimed, and I scrambled to my feet. On a piece of parchment, I scribbled down the letter and returned to my designated bench below the dials. So far, I had two letters: H and I. Considering that the sea witch’s letter purposefully said *each passing hour*, I had a long way to go, but since the crystal’s power hadn’t given out yet, it at least gave me information on Rutherford’s case while I waited.



Two more hours passed and not only had I come two letters closer to discovering the hidden message, but the crystal winked out as soon as Solana had been dismissed from the courtroom. So now, as I waited, I had nothing better to do but to open the book I had checked out more than a week ago

from the library. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy it, but it wasn't particularly my favorite, either.

I made a game out of it, timing myself with the sundial to see how many pages I could speed through before the next hour rang out. The first round, I flipped through seventy-one pages, and the next, I improved by ten.

Granted, I had to go back and reread full sections. I figured it was okay because it wasn't a book I would ever consider reading again, but the romance was fascinating. Apparently, the main character and the love interest were said to be "crossed," meaning that their fates were bound to one another by the suns. I hadn't ever been the romantic type to dwell on such minor details of a relationship, but now, the thought of being so intimately woven into someone else's essence made me blush.

If I had been fated by the suns to anyone, I hoped it was Ezra. Before him, there hadn't been anyone worthy of marriage, let alone crossing my soul.

Again, the bells informed me of the next hour, which made me push my thoughts aside to inspect the letter. After scribbling it down, I checked what I had so far. H, I, N, A, T.

Already I knew it didn't spell anything outright, but the letters were an anagram. With the switch of a few letters...

Thina. The letters pointed to Thina Strauhn. My mother was the Lost Queen.

It all came together. The way the statue resembled me, why Nephtali would send me to unveil this mystery, the reason my father was so secretive about his tower.

Nazaro Strauhn wasn't afraid of being murdered in cold blood. He was afraid of someone finding out he wasn't the one who bore the royal

bloodline. It was my mother. My mother, whom he cursed and locked away to keep the world from remembering.

Footsteps sounded behind me, but I didn't turn around as I heaved into a nearby bush. Warm, calloused hands suddenly caressed me, holding my hair back.

Ezra. Ezra was here. Had the trial already adjourned?

He looked between my face and the piece of parchment I held. "Are you okay?"

I scoffed. That was a loaded question. Not only were we planning a war against my father, but I just found out he locked away my mother just to take the throne for himself.

I opened my mouth to explain, but nothing came out right away. What had become of my life that my mother was cursed by him, I was almost whipped to death by him, and now I had to kill him to save the seas from a tyrant?

After I was done explaining to him Nephtali's encrypted letter and the dials pointing to my mother's name, every bit of incredulity Ezra had yesterday was wiped from his face today. Gone was the speculation from his tone, the only thing remaining acceptance.

"What are we going to do about this, Ezra?"

He shrugged. "Same as our plan before. Only now, we know what we're after. And we know who the Lost Queen is. Now, we need to find out how to break the curse to bring your mother back to the throne."

The rest of the day was filled with hope—hope that we would succeed in breaking another curse. I had already broken one in record timing, considering the impossible stipulations of Nephtali's bargain. I didn't have to worry about turning into sea foam or salt, or ever having to part with my human body that I've grown to love so much.



One question lurked in the back of my mind, no matter how many times I tried to force it out. What if this curse was somehow different?

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## CHAPTER 44

### AMARIS

**A** gust of cool wind wafted through the open window and hit my back like a sheet of ice. I shivered, biting back both my nerves and the bitter air. It was certainly not ideal weather for a wedding.

“Don’t mind the storms. I’m sure they’ll go away in time for the wedding.” Solana smiled at my reflection, pinning a curl in place before shutting the window. The pitter-patter of rain hitting the glass soothed my nerves, so I didn’t mind it. Thunder rippled through the palace, and I closed my eyes as I remembered Ezra’s words. Deep breaths. In and out.

In an hour, I would be walking down the aisle surrounded by the entire kingdom. In an hour, I would be repeating my vows to Ezra. In an hour, we would be married.

Another rumble shook the foundations of the palace and Solana groaned, a bobby pin between her lips. “Damn, if ‘his doesn’ ge’ bedder, we’re going ‘o have ‘o move i’ inside.”

I giggled. “It’ll be okay. It’ll make for good memories. Right?”

“Righ’.” She smiled, grabbing the pin and forcing it open with her tongue.

She made the finishing touches to my hair before spinning me around in the chair to begin my makeup. Within fifteen minutes, she had contoured my face and sculpted my eyes. With tears in her eyes, she stepped away to admire her work.

“Look at you,” she beamed, beckoning me to stand to gaze at myself in the floor length mirror. My mouth fell open in surprise. “You look...” Solana started, her hands cupping her full lips.

I didn’t look beautiful. I looked like a queen. I was radiant and fierce and...me.

Half of my hair had been swept back into elegant braids, the rest falling around my waist in soft waves. Satin and lace embellished my dress, and I turned to see that it had been fully open across my back to reveal my scars, just as Ezra had said the night of the Surpassing Day festival.

“Oh! I almost forgot,” said Solana. She darted over to the couch where her belongings were. From a satchel, she pulled out a tiny box before crossing the room and placing it in my hands. “For you.” For a moment, I looked between her and the box. Gifts were still such a foreign concept to me. “Don’t wait for the suns to cross, Amaris! Open it!”

Inside was a golden necklace shaped into a book. I burst out laughing, and Solana joined in.

“It’s for all the books we love to read!” Solana explained, “Although very...different books. I wanted you to have something to wear for your wedding day other than the crystal. It’s pretty, but not as elegant or dainty for —”

I raced to her and wrapped my arms around her. “Thank you.”

The bell tolled and Solana grumbled. “I swear, if it weren’t for me, you’d

be late to your own wedding.”

"It's your fault this time!" I accused, giggling.

"Yeah, yeah." Solana waved her hand, motioning for me to turn around. Grabbing the chain of the crystal, she unclasped it before helping me don the new one. Then, she secured the emerald to my bouquet before we hastened down the stairs for the processional.



The clouds parted in perfect timing. Rainbows arched, lining the path with every color imaginable, the soil still damp from the downpour. A sweet ballad echoed throughout the garden.

I caught Solana's eye when she reached the front, and she nodded. The guests rose from their seats, and every pair of eyes turned to me. I clutched the floral arrangement between my fingers, fumbling with the crystal tied to it.

The weight of everyone's attention shifted from my face to my mangled back as I glided past. Whispers threatened to cloud my line of sight, but I didn't feel ashamed, not anymore. I lifted my chin high, squaring my shoulders a little, searching through the crowd until I only saw one.

Ezra.

Suddenly, all else faded away. He was standing at the front of the altar, dressed in the ceremonial navy and silver of Erison. He was already looking at me, the russet in his eyes glimmering. I blinked, feeling a warm wetness stream down my cheek.

A month ago, I had been looking forward to this moment, not because I truly loved or cherished Ezra, but because I needed refuge. I wanted to live

free of my father's corrupt governing. I wanted to taste freedom and the kiss of a lover, but I had never known it could be like this.

From the moment our eyes locked the night we met to this moment, where they're meeting for an entirely different reason, I couldn't deny our connection.

Now, there wasn't an ounce of regret in my steps, not a moment's thought that weighed down my shoulders as I inched nearer to the prince of Erison. My future husband. Ezra was my refuge, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. I didn't want to fall in love with anyone else if it wasn't Ezra. But of course it was Ezra—it always had been.

*I loved him.*

That alone was something I never even thought I was capable of until now: love. My entire life, I had been shown that love was an afterthought, a burden, something more self-serving than sacrificial. In the little time I'd known Ezra, he'd showed me what it really was, making up for a lifetime full of hatred and cruelty. I was eager to exchange vows with him.

When I reached the front, he tangled my hands in his, giving them a little squeeze of assurance. Verin urged everyone to take their seats, his voice booming over the large crowd by an amplifying spell.

“Men and women of Erison, the Western Dominion, we greet you in the strong name of the gods. We thank you for traveling near and far, dedicating your time to celebrate with us. Today, we gain a beloved member into our family, Amaris Strauhn, who I knew would give a run for Ezra's money the moment I met her.” Pops of laughter resounded from the guests.

Verin winked at me, breaking from his speech to whisper just for Ezra and me. “Well...maybe not the first moment I met you.”

We laughed. He was speaking of the moment I showed my ass to

Rutherford at the dinner table. He resumed his speech, but the noise was drowned out by Ezra's gaze, his hazel eyes roaming up and down, drinking in my curves.

"I, Ezra Anaforiene, vow the rest of my life to you, Amaris Strauhn. I promise to cherish you and to love you as long as I live. I promise to be faithful to you when you give me a run for my money—because I know you will." His lip twitched upside to reveal his perfect teeth. "I promise to give you an endless supply of bacon and patience when you're running late. I love you, and nothing, not even death, can separate that."

His words sent my heart fluttering as the gem between my fingers hummed to life. No one had known this was the first time he was saying these words to me. No one thought we'd only been together for a week.

"I love you, too," I breathed, only for him to hear.

He brushed a hair from my face. "Now promise me forever."

There were whispers and shifting in the audience, but I continued, making my promises to the man standing before me, the man I had felt drawn to from the moment I saw him on the ship, the selfless man who denied himself for the sake of others again and again and again.

The man I loved.

A rushing noise filled my ears. Ezra was speaking, his mouth moving, but for some reason, I couldn't hear any of his precious words. Someone gripped my arm. I whirled to see Solana yelling something, her eyes wide in panic. The noise drowned out all that she said, too, even though she was screaming.

The roaring grew louder. People in the crowd scrambled in every direction, their terrorized screams coming over the wind. A tidal wave came crashing over the walls of Erison and surging straight toward us.

I watched in horror as it swallowed several at once within its massive

wake.

“Grab the women and children!” Verin yelled, his voice carrying the farthest due to the amplifying spell. Guards rushed at him and other members of the royal court, immediately dragging them away to safety. He clutched Ezra’s arm, shouting orders to him.

Ezra grabbed my hand. “Follow me!”

I nodded, reaching for Solana, but she wasn’t there. *What?* Frantically, I searched for her dark skin and hair. She was in the masses, healing a small girl with a head wound.

“I’m not leaving without Solana!” I screamed, my voice raw with panic.

Solana looked at me, and although I couldn’t hear the words, I read her lips as she yelled, “Go!”

Ezra grabbed me and I had no choice as we sped away together. My heart leapt as I remembered the crystal around my bouquet. Quickly, I unbound it from the flowers before tying it off at my neck. Wind whipped through my hair, sending it in every direction, soaking it with forceful, pelting water from the Sapphire Sea. Our feet assaulted the street as we ran, but we both knew there was no escaping this. For a hurricane, the city should’ve been evacuated weeks ago in preparation. There wasn’t any safety here.

My ribs burned. If I didn’t drown soon, I was going to suffocate from my own pain. Every muscle in my body screamed—no, *pleaded*, for me to stop. To turn around. To accept our fate.

“Come on, Amaris!” Ezra yelled. “Just a little bit farther!”

We crested a hill, turning left down a familiar set of cobblestone buildings, marble steps in the distance.

Our feet scrambled up the massive stairs, and up to the huge doors of Erison's public library. Instead of going inside, he led us around the circular

building, grabbing onto a ladder, but he didn't start climbing.

“Amaris. I need you to climb. Get as far to the top of the building as you can.”

“Whe—Where are you going?” My voice cracked from over-exertion.

“I'm going with you, but first I need to—”

“No, Ezra.” I grabbed his arms. “You can't leave. You need to climb with me. You need to get to safety, too.”

“I will. People need you here. Get them to safety. Help them up the ladder. Heal them. Please, Amaris. Promise me you won't come after me. Promise. I can't lose you.”

“Don't leave me and I won't come after you,” I begged.

Ezra groaned before enveloping me into a kiss. His strong arms gripped me around my waist, in my hair, my neck, my face. My lips parted for him as he momentarily pinned me against the brick wall. He kissed me like it would be the last one we would ever share.

“I love you, Amaris. If I don't get to tell you that again, if... if I don't come back, please know that. I will fight every second I have to get back to you. I vowed to always protect you, to always cherish you and love you, and I meant every godsdamned word.”

“Please come back to me.” I wiped the stray, damp curls from his eyes. He wrapped me around him and kissed me. I dove into the kiss, memorizing the way he felt pressed against my body, memorizing his scent that, even now, clung to his clothes and hair. The dimples in his cheeks. His hazel eyes. His selfless heart.

He let go, his eyes locking on mine once more, his rough hands caressing my face. Then, he was gone, speeding down the steps to the raging storm below. Dark clouds loomed overhead, their ominous presence sending sheets



of rain down upon the city. I wasted no time as I climbed, reaching the first story and running around to the front to search for Ezra in the mayhem.

I spotted his black mass of curls just moments before a wave rushed through the street, straight towards him and a family of three. A little boy gripped his teddy bear as his parents huddled around him, preparing themselves to do anything to protect their child.

A strong gust of wind erupted from Ezra's hands, and he yelled something inaudible at the family. They each straightened, the father hoisting the boy over his head. Now that they had a head-start, the family dashed through the streets, dodging debris and flying objects. The mother reached the ladder first and she began climbing. Her feet slipped on the wet rungs, but I was there, catching her arm and hoisting her to the roof, the little boy and the father following suit.

"There's a second ladder just around the bend," I shouted. "Get higher up on the roof!"

The mother thanked me, and the three of them scrambled in the direction I pointed.

Jogging over to the railing once more, I scanned the drowning streets for Ezra. My heart skittered when I found him. He was battling the *entire tsunami*, forcing it back on a strong wind.

His power couldn't hold it forever.

More people ascended to safety as I directed them to higher grounds. To some, I even sang to heal their injuries. They couldn't hear over the rain anyways, and even if they could, I didn't care. I was saving them. I was done hiding my gifts like they were an inherent evil.

Suddenly, fire was scorching me—scorching my chest, right in the center of it. I cried out in pain, gripping the crystal. I tore it from my neck, throwing

it across the roof to put as much distance between me and the rock that burned my flesh.

Light poured from the crystal, bright and pulsing. I closed in on it, not daring to pluck it from its spot on the ground. Movement twinkled inside it, and I narrowed my eyes to see more clearly.

Ezra.

Frantic, I crouched down and realized it was showing him to me, in present time. My mouth dried. Blood poured down the length of his arm as he pulled a large piece of metal from his arm. More dirt and debris soared past his head as he clutched his wound, applying pressure to stop the bleeding.

His screams were deafening, even through the crystal. Ripping a piece of fabric from his shirt, he tied it off around the cut. To my surprise, it didn't stop him as he sprinted toward the coast.

On a rooftop, someone cried out in desperation. "Please, someone! The King is dying!"

Ezra sprinted up the stairs of the building. The moment he rounded the last corner, his face paled. He stopped dead in his tracks. I bit my lip in anticipation at what the crystal was about to show me.

Dozens of soldiers clad in silver lay still on the rooftop, each of their bodies mangled, blood pooling on the ground before them. In the very center of the fallen bodies, one man was left standing. His gentle, cerulean eyes held unwavering bravery even in his last moments.

Ezra's father.

A dark figure loomed over the top of the king of the Western Dominion, the creature's long claws snatching him up by his ceremonial robes. Ezra didn't have time to react as the monster sliced open Verin's neck. Ezra screamed, dropping to his knees. A metallic whine broke from its hilt, and I

screamed to warn Ezra, but it was useless. He couldn't hear me. Silver iron pressed to the base of his neck.

A cloaked woman approached from behind, her dark purple robe whipping in every direction. Copper blonde hair spilled from her shoulders, her amber eyes heavy with sorrow.

To my horror, my sister's voice echoed above the rain. "Happy Wedding Day, prince."

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## CHAPTER 45

### AMARIS

I sprinted through the city streets, dodging around...well, everyone. They were all running away from the coast, and I was running toward it.

My hair whipped in the wind, wet strands sticking to my face, getting in my eyes as I tried to bat them away. Rain pelted my skin, but I pushed through the storm to get to Ezra. Gripped in my hands, the gem still revealed him to me.

He was still on his knees, staring ahead. “Why?” he asked, “Why would you do this?”

The dark figure stalked next to Ava and shifted back into his human form. “Commander, are you going to—”

Ava held out her hand. “Hold on, Brazlyn.”

Brazlyn. Where had I heard that name before?

My gut wrenched. The gorgeous man Solana danced with the night of the Surpassing festival. Basil. *This* was Basil. The one I saw the very first time in

the alleyway of Past and Present. The one who killed Ezra's father. My sister was commanding him?

Ava came around to meet Ezra's gaze, never taking the rapier from across his neck. "The question isn't why, Ezra Anaforiene. I think you already know the answer to that. There are some in your midst who have waited a very long time for this day, to end the Anaforienes. We've been right under your nose this entire time, using members of your very court to get information to use against you, to strike when the time was right."

"Rutherford. He's imprisoned now. Your plans failed the moment he—"

Ava shook her head, her feline eyes narrowing. "Is that what happened? Or were you led to believe that?"

What was Ava even saying right now? Marion Rutherford was charged for the attempt on Ezra's life. It was a grace of Verin to have not severed his head on the spot.

"Explain." Ezra ground his teeth.

"You are royalty no longer." She backhanded him sharply across the cheek. "You don't get to make demands."

"*Don't fucking touch him,*" I seethed, squeezing the crystal tighter. Anger flooded my veins, making me pump my limbs harder. Of course, she didn't hear me. She would once I got my hands around her throat, though.

"You don't remember me, do you?" Ava crouched, using her knuckle to turn his head upward. Ezra looked her up and down, snarling. "I can tell you're Amaris's sister. It doesn't take a scholar to figure that out, although the much... *blander* version, obviously. How's McCollum these days? Thought he died the night of the shipwreck."

Her nostrils flared, ignoring him completely. "You ran into me on the day of the festival. I was afraid that you would put my relation to Amaris

together, so I hypnotized you, just as I did to Rutherford to poison you. When setting the Temptress on fire and fleeing in one of the rowboats didn't work, I was ordered us to wait until the festival."

I rounded the corner of the building, water sloshing around my ankles as I began my ascent to the rooftop. Rain was still beating down, my wedding dress completely drenched with water and mud from the streets. I heard the mention of my name over the crystal, returning my attention to it.

"We made sure you were on that ship with no way off. What were the odds that Amaris, of all people, would risk her life to save you?"

Something hard settled in the bottom of my lungs. We had suspected this. *I* was the one who assured Ezra she could be trusted. For Ava to admit those words made everything so, so much worse. My sister had planned Ezra's death, and if it weren't for me, she and her fiancé would have succeeded.

"It's all a bit ironic, don't you think?" she continued. "She saves the one person who formed an army to kill the likes of her. She took pity upon you, and all you've been doing is using her."

"No, I haven't," Ezra seethed. "I *love* her. Don't act like you do. You weren't there for her when she needed you most."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she snapped.

"I know enough about you to know you're no better than your father. Worse, even. You claimed to be her friend, and then you betrayed her. Just like you are right now."

"*Lies.*" She bent down next to him. "You don't know the first thing about me or my motives. Stop pretending to know what I do to protect my family."

Ezra laughed coldly, shaking his head. "How noble of you."

"You would do anything to keep Amaris safe, to keep those you love safe, would you not?" she challenged him. "What if you had to do terrible, ignoble

things to keep her safe? Would you do them?” Ezra ground his teeth. “You don’t have to respond. I already know the answer. You’re not the only one who cares for her. Everything I have done—*everything*—has been for us.”

“She will never forgive you for this.”

The gem in my hand burned again, nearly scorching my palm. “*Fuck!* Nephtali, what? What are you trying to tell me?”

“I know,” Ava smiled darkly. “That’s why she’ll never know. She may have the power to heal, but I have the power to make people forget. Those two gifts can be one and the same.”

A blade moved across Ezra’s throat, Ava’s hands pressing the knife deeply in position. My heart lurched. All she would have to do is slice, and Ezra would bleed out in seconds. I would be helpless in my attempt to heal him. My fingers scrambled to the blade attached to my garter and I pressed it against my wrist. “Stop!”

They whirled, both Ava and Ezra’s faces going slack. Ava held her hand up, motioning Brazlyn to cease the attack momentarily.

“If you kill him, you will kill me, too.”

“*Amaris!*” Ezra shouted, his eyes shining with fresh tears. I knew if we lived through this, I would never hear the end of it. I’d rather hear him bitch about it for the rest of my life than watch him die. I had saved him too many godsdamned times. We had been through so much. We had come so far. We had the rest of our lives together. I wouldn’t allow for any other option.

“Put down the dagger,” Ava commanded.

“Not until you do. A life for a life. Isn’t that part of mermaid customs? It’s ironic that it’s not a problem for you until it is. Then, you fight it tooth and fucking tail to get out of it.”

“*Amaris*. Please. Allow me to—”

“Put. Down. The. Fucking. Blade.” I emphasized each word.

Ava’s hands shook, every bone in her human body begging her to disobey. Her palm opened, the rapier clattering to the stone road. Ezra forced it to him on an invisible wind. Ava strode over to me slowly. Her eyes were pleading. “Put down the dagger, Amaris. You and I both know you won’t do it.”

“Don’t come near me,” I warned, the blade still pressed to my veins.

Sweat poured down my back as I looked between the blade and her, then to Ezra and Brazlyn, now in the midst of combat. I needed to form a plan, and fast. I turned the knife on her. “If you take one more step, I’ll kill you.”

Ava chuckled. “You’d have to have bronze for that. Even in this form, we cannot be easily killed.”

“Good to know. It won’t matter if I slice deep enough.”

“Please, Amaris. Don’t.”

How could she have done this? My own sister was going to assassinate my husband. Had she been planning to kill me, too?

“Shut up,” I demanded. I’d already heard enough.

Ava tilted her head to the side, assessing me. “Amaris, you’re hurting because of me. I am so sorry.”

I threw my head back in maniacal laughter. “You really don’t listen, do you?”

“Maybe I don’t,” Ava’s nostrils flared. “But you will. Brazlyn, kill the prince.”

“No!” I screamed.

Brazlyn didn’t listen to me. My words couldn’t hypnotize. Before I could react, she opened her mouth, and the spell shattered my thoughts and desires. Only one word forced its way into my mind. *Listen.*

Ava pushed a piece of wet hair from my face, and I nearly leaned into her



touch, the touch that I missed so much—no matter how much I convinced myself I didn't. I still fought Ava's call with all of my might, yet I wasn't powerful enough because I eventually gave in.

“Two years ago, Father ordered me to track the merpeople native to the Amber Sea. When I brought back word of their colony, Father ordered me to send a pack to infiltrate them. He didn't want us to just kill them. He said he needed their blood. Disgusted, I fled. Seven moons later, I met McCollum, and I told him everything. He advised me to play the part, to spy on Father until one day, we could find a way to—”

“You've been killing them,” I seethed. “Haven't you?”

Shouts roared behind me, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't turn to see the fight. I fought my sister's grasp on my mind with every fiber of my being. I strained against the thread so hard, my vision blurred. White stars winked in and out of sight.

“Don't fight it, Amaris. Just *listen*.” Her song lulled me back into compliance. “McCollum promised that once we married, he would find a way to change us both. I had to complete a task first—” She looked past my eyes to where Ezra fought for his life. I closed my eyes, praying to the far-off gods that he was still alive. If anything happened to him, I would tear her limb from limb.

“I didn't know you'd fall in love with him. You have to understand, Amaris. The King wants him dead. The Eastern Dominion is going to attack the West, and when they do... Gods, Amaris. You can't be here. If you come with me, you'll be happy. We won't have to worry about death or fear or even sickness. The god of the east has promised us so much. You only have to come with me to experience it. Please.”

I furrowed my brows, fighting as hard as possible to keep from hearing,

and believing, any more of Ava's bullshit. Looking into her eyes, I only saw hope, which broke my heart even deeper. What lies had McCollum been feeding her to believe this nonsense?

"No, Ava." I shook my head. "I won't. You did all of this, but it wasn't for me. It was for you. You chose to become an assassin for the Palogian king. Not me."

"He is not just a king. He's the keeper of darkness. *The Valiant King*," she breathed, her words full of pleading and promise and hope.

I shook my head. "No. My home is here, in Erison."

With Ezra.

Ava's smile fell, tears swimming in her eyes. I'd never seen her so desperate, so demoralized and full of dread. "I can *make* you believe, you know. I don't want to, but I've pledged my whole life to this task, if it meant your safety. Please don't make me force you, Amaris."

"You're being lied to, Ava." I took a step toward her, palming my blade. "Help me stop Father. Live with us in Erison."

"That can't happen. That can *never* happen." She shook her head, her eyes growing wide. "Trust me, you do not want to find yourself on the wrong side of the war when it comes. I would *never* let that happen to you."

"But to the millions who live in the Western Dominion, you wouldn't give a second thought," I muttered.

"They are not my responsibility. Ever since Mother died, I promised—"

"What?" I blinked, "What did you just say?"

I must have misunderstood. Mother was alive. She was the Lost Queen of the Seas. We were going to attack to break the curse my father placed on her and held her captive.

"When Mother died, I promised to watch over you, to raise you."

“She isn’t dead. I know she isn’t.”

My sister hesitated, as if unsure what to say next. “Amaris...” She grabbed my hand, but I pulled away from her touch. “I saw her pass, Amaris. I know how hard it’s always been for you to accept that. She’s gone.”

Then how did that explain the sundial? The sculpture of the Lost Queen? It all pointed to my mother, Thina Strauhn. Nephtali even pointed me to her name in the obsidian shadows of each passing hour—

Only it wasn’t each passing hour. I had stopped at one on the line after I pieced together my mother’s name. There were eight hours of total daylight before the first sun began its descent beyond the horizon, which meant that there were still three letters left to discover. My feet swayed beneath me, the rushing water nearly sweeping me to my knees.

“Amaris!”

I turned to see Ezra was clutching his naked side, a black burn singed on his skin. With his other hand, he held a gust of wind, warding off the fire that threatened to engulf him. Both of their strong muscles flexed, the veins in Ezra’s face and neck humming to life as the magic consumed the air around him, protecting him from the killing blow.

My eyes widened with terror—I had been hypnotized this entire time. Now, Ezra was going to die because I couldn’t fight the connection hard enough.

“Fight it, Ezra!”

Ava’s words echoed from behind me. “No. Don’t fight it.”

She turned to me. True sorrow flickered in her eyes, but she still didn’t order Brazlyn to stop the attack. To my horror, she said, “I’m so sorry for what you’re about to witness, Amaris. Soon, you will understand.”

Ezra’s shield slowly lowered.

“Fight it, Ezra! With everything you have!” I screamed. Begged. *Prayed*.

The dagger in my hand practically whispered to me. I looked to Ezra, who had collapsed into the water, both his arms shaking to fight back the damning command. For a moment, his eyes flicked to mine, and he nodded. “Throw it, Amaris!”

I reared back the dagger and threw it. The roaring in my ears stopped. The rain even beat down a little slower. End over end, the dagger turned as Ezra’s magic gave out and he fell back into the water.

Brazlyn laughed as the fire engulfed the spot around Ezra. Then, water splashed to life at Brazlyn’s feet, and I waited for my cue as a heap of black curls jumped up. Ezra didn’t look at Brazlyn, but instead, turned to me, catching the knife with his wind and guiding it through the air.

The aim was nothing short of forceful precision guided by the very winds of Ezra’s hands. He threw every ounce of strength into the blow, his mouth open, the veins in his neck bulging as he screamed out over the howling wind and rain.

Before I could blink again, blood gushed from Brazlyn’s chest, his eyes wide with shock at the turn of events. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ava dive off the rooftop into the murky water, shifting into a mermaid on the way down.

Ezra stalked forward, plucking the dagger from Brazlyn’s heart, black blood dripping from the blade. “That’s for my father, you fucking bastard.”

Brazlyn dropped, falling on his terrifyingly gorgeous face in the gray water. Shadows danced through the air, escaping from his body like a cloud of smoke. As if the fires of his own magic burned up the man, his body evaporated in a dark mist. Brazlyn was dead.

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## CHAPTER 46

### EZRA

I collapsed next. Then, Amaris was there, singing to heal me. “Don’t worry about me,” I whispered. “Go get your sister.”

She looked up and frowned. “She’s gone. She dove into the water.”

“Help me get Father’s body,” I choked, unable to say more. I couldn’t save him from dying a noble death, but I could give him a proper burial.

I held onto Father’s limp body, crumbling into him, my hands pressed to his bloodied chest. The storm continued to rage around us, but not even its strength could compare to the devastation welling in my chest. Like a dam breaking behind the pressure, everything rushed at me at once. His unbeating heart, his closed eyes, his cold skin...

My father was truly gone.

I hadn’t been given the proper time to fully comprehend what this meant, given the attack. Now, pain coated my lungs and throat as tears poured from my eyes. If I had lived even a slightly normal life, I would have time to grieve my father’s passing. Instead, everyone in the kingdom now looked to

me for answers. Answers I didn't have. Answers I shouldn't be expected to have. Not yet.

I looked up towards the stormy sky, blinking back tears and rain. If I had only been a moment sooner, he may still be alive.

Amaris crouched beside me, grabbing my face in her hands. "There was nothing you could have done, Ezra."

The water below was swirling as it poured from the sky. "We need to get inside until this passes. It isn't safe to be out in the open."

"Where are we going to go, then?"

Looking below, make-shift boats and rescue teams were taking advantage of the dying wind and flooding. The water on the streets was still up to our knees, but we could manage.

"To the palace," I said. "The court must be informed of my father's passing. We need a plan."



The beds in the infirmary were filled with commoners, their wounds tended to by the healers on duty. By nightfall, the Court of Lords would hold council, but first, we needed to find Solana.

Amaris and I spotted her in the corner, her hands pressed on the patient before her. She straightened when she heard who had entered the room and quickly finished healing the woman's arm before rushing over to us and falling into Amaris' embrace.

Pushing away from her friend, Solana looked over us, searching for any injuries. "How are you both?" she asked frantically. "When you and the King didn't return to the palace, we..."

"We're okay, Lana. I healed Ezra after—"

Her eyes grew large with fear. “After what?”

Amaris looked between me and Solana, her eyes pleading with me to help her explain. Whispers fluttered around the infirmary. Several patients healthy enough to hear turned our way. “Let’s step outside,” I suggested, opening the door.

Down the hall, we found a common room and closed the door. “We came upon a group of assassins from Paglon, Amaris’ sister and her accomplice. They—we...” I stuttered, unwilling to talk about the details yet. “We brought my father’s body back with us. He’s currently being prepared for the funeral.”

“Ezra.” Lana’s eyes swam with tears. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I reassured her. I needed to reassure myself more than anyone.

“The tsunami. Could it have been a direct attack from your father, Amaris?” asked Solana.

“We aren’t sure yet,” Amaris answered. “It’s a possibility my father knew of our marriage and wanted to stop it.”

Solana’s face paled and she shook her head in confusion. “So what if daddy isn’t happy? He still has to honor the union. If he attacked Erison, he’s declaring war.”

“Which is why we need you,” Amaris whispered, grabbing her friend’s hand.

Solana’s eyes widened.

“For a month now, Amaris and I have suspected that the King of the Seas may not honor the union. We found some evidence to argue that he, Amaris’ father, is not the adequate heir to the throne.”

Solana interjected. “Amaris’ mother is. She told me about it a couple of weeks ago.”



Amaris cringed, looking at her feet. Solana and I waited for her to explain, but when she looked back up again, tears were in her eyes.

“Darling, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“It isn’t my mother. Ava told me so when you were fighting Brazlyn.”

“Brazlyn?” Solana echoed. “As in...Basil? *That* Brazlyn?”

If it weren’t the shittiest day possible, I would’ve cracked a smile, but I couldn’t bring myself to it.

“Apparently, he was working with Ava and a group of spies from the Eastern Dominion. Including McCollum, her fiancé,” Amaris answered.

I turned the conversation back to Amaris’ mother. “Do you think Ava was lying to you? To keep you from knowing the truth?”

Amaris let out a huff, “I don’t. Not this time. She had no idea what she said had anything to do with the information we have. I jumped to conclusions about the sundial. I only had five letters, when there are specifically eight hours when both suns are above the horizon.”

“But how—”

“My mother is dead, Ezra. Ava watched her die. Tomorrow, I’ll have to go outside to check for the last three letters. I pray there will be enough sunlight to see, because if not, I’ll be fucked.” She wiped the tears from her eyes, steering the subject away from her pain. “We ordered ships and weapons to be forged with bronze, which is a mermaid’s only weakness. When we attack, we need as many healers willing to go as we can to pull injured soldiers from the fight.”

“How many ships?”

“Fifty-six,” I said, nearly wincing. We would’ve modified more, but considering the circumstances, we were out of time.

She crossed her arms, leaning on a table in contemplation. After moments

of silence, she finally spoke. “I’ll see what I can do, but until then, you two need rest. Amaris, if you stand here one moment longer, you’re going to shiver out of your wedding dress.”

In unison, we opened our mouths to object, but Solana cut us off. “Go! We can handle it until the meeting tonight. There is nothing you can do until then.”



We were silent the entire way to my quarters, which, I guessed, were also Amaris’ now. I shut the door, and behind me, Amaris shivered. She was standing in the middle of the room, her wedding dress hanging limply on her perfect form. I frowned. The fabric was completely ruined by the tenacious weather, and blotches of red coated the lace. Another reminder of how I failed today.

Turning to the hearth, I prepared a fire inside. Amaris let out a whimper as she fell before the heat. “Thank you.”

“You may want to take off your dress. It’s making you colder.”

She swallowed, looking to her feet. Somehow, she smiled.

“What is it?”

“It’s just—we lived. I never expected to be here with you, shivering my ass off in my ruined wedding dress.”

I couldn’t meet her gaze as I said my next words. “I’m so sorry for this. I should’ve—”

“This isn’t your fault.” She rose to her feet, coming over to me and caressing my face. “You protected me. You saved our lives. You would have until death’s end. Now, please, can you help me take off my dress so I can feel my toes again?”

I searched her eyes for any falsity in her words. She truly believed I hadn't failed today, but I did. I put myself and Amaris in danger. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be standing here. When I ran toward the hurricane, I put my kingdom in front of my wife. For that, I was a hypocrite.

Slowly, she turned, and I pulled her hair over to one side. She shivered beneath my touch as I went to work on the sodden dress, unlacing the corset around her waist. Once I tugged the ribbon out of the last eyelet, I peeled the ivory fabric from her body. My fingers trailed over her naked collarbone and down the length of her arms.

It was selfish of me, but I kissed the delicate skin of her neck. Her pulse quickened against my lips as I pressed myself into her.

"I wonder," I said, following up with another kiss, "just how many times in my life I'll get to rip one of these from you..." My lips trailed lower. "And I wonder how many times I'll just fuck you without removing it."

Amaris let out a soft moan, sending every inch of my body rigid with desire. No matter how shitty today was, I still wanted this. I wanted *her*. Right now, I needed her to take my pain away. Only she had the power to do that.

Amaris turned to face me and threw her hands up into my hair, bringing my lips down to her full ones. I let my own hands roam her body, completely enraptured in her taste, her touch, her...*gods, everything.*

My knee pressed into her leg as I slowly walked us back onto the bed, never breaking my lips from hers. She didn't miss a beat as she followed, stepping backwards inch by inch.

My shirt fell in a pile before I lowered us both, my hand behind her neck to guide her softly down. Her nimble hands worked on the buttons of my pants, forcing them from my body.

“Patience, Little Fish,” I chuckled. “I said I would take my time with you.”

She feigned a pout. “Ugh, you can’t make comments like that and expect for me to *want* your clothes to be anywhere but the floor.”

I burst out in laughter, immediately feeling guilty for doing so. No matter how much I needed the release, I shouldn’t be smiling today. Hells, I shouldn’t even want this right now, not after what I saw.

“Imagine the agony I’ve felt about you since day one,” I said.

The bells near the sundial rang out in a familiar tune, its dreadful noise sending me lurching from the bed. I sprinted to the balcony in a panic, looking to the streets below. The downpour had significantly lessened, but the wind still howled angrily, whipping my hair in every direction. Cracks of lightning strobed across the sky. Screams erupted below, and the bells chimed the warning again. In the distance, black flags thrashed wildly by the castle gates.

I knew the sound of the bells. It rang out every time there was an attack on the beach. And with the water rising above the flood walls... the mermaids had a perfect entrance into the city.

Amaris was now next to me. “What does that mean?”

“It means the mermaids are here.”

I paced back and forth, thinking through every solution under the suns, but I couldn’t think of a single one. Hopefully, the people of Erison had escaped by moving to higher ground. Still, if Amaris’ father was behind this, I knew he wouldn’t let up on the weather until the streets were completely drowned. Until the mermaids’ feasting was satisfied. Until the entire capital of Erison was under water. An iridescent fin popped from the water to reveal a mermaid with dark auburn hair and sharp, cunning eyes.

Amaris gasped. “That’s my sister, Azaliah.”

The brutal one I regretfully didn't kill on the night of the shipwreck. Her predatory gaze swept along the city streets as she propped herself onto the side of a building, as if it were instead a throne made of priceless pearls.

Azaliah's menacing voice echoed throughout the valley. "You have until the suns set tomorrow to capture Amaris Strauhn and bring her home. If she is not found," Azaliah flashed an evil grin, "the mermaids will ensure she is."

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## CHAPTER 47

### AMARIS

“I have to go to them.”

Ezra cupped my face in his large hands, wiping the tears that fell. “You’re not going anywhere. We’re going to find a way around this, together. I’m not sending you back there.”

“You have to. You’ll subject thousands to die in my place.”

“I don’t care!” he said through gritted teeth.

“Don’t say that. Of course, you do, Ezra.”

He looked out to the streets, where the mermaids prowled just moments ago. After the ultimatum, they slithered back into the Sapphire. It didn’t matter; they would be back tomorrow. When they came back, what would they do to me? What would they do to Erison, my kingdom, if I didn’t comply? Every scar on my back came alive in horror at the thought. Would they rip open those wounds again? Or would they do much worse?

Ezra sat on the edge of the bed, running his hands through his curls. It was a motion I would never tire of seeing, but I knew the adorable act was only

when he was frustrated. It was always a bittersweet moment to witness, one I would miss seeing.

“Don’t look at me like that.” His eyes bore into mine.

“Like what?”

“Like you’ll never see me again.”

My knees buckled on the bed next to him. “We’re trapped, Ezra. I see no way out of this.”

“We’ll find a way.” He turned to me, grabbing my face between his rough hands. “We *will*.”

I looked down at my feet because I was unable to look anywhere else, especially in Ezra’s eyes. It was too much. All of it.

“Amaris, darling, what do you feel?”

As I blinked, warm wetness slithered down my cheek. I should’ve never come here. I should’ve never made that bargain with Nephtali. I may have fulfilled it when Solana told me she loved me, but for what? Now, I was going to have to return to my father—willingly or unwillingly. I should’ve known he would find me. I should’ve known he wouldn’t honor the marriage. My life was nothing but a mistake, a tidal wave of failures and disruptions, and I was pulling everyone down in the hurricane with me. I was drowning everyone along with me. I was no better than a mermaid.

“It was a mistake to come here.” I wept into my hands. “It’s my fault Rutherford was tried for your assassination. Your father...he *died* because of me. My sister and McCollum. The mermaids. It’s all because of me, because of what I’ve done. I should’ve just died the day my father whipped me. Maybe I should’ve died sooner than that, even. My mother would still be alive if it weren’t for me.” I had killed her. My father had reminded me of that plenty of times.

I didn't have to look up at Ezra to know he had agreed. Of course, he did. It was all my fault. I may not have killed Verin Anaforiene, but I might as well have. My own sister did it *because* of me. She had said so herself. Calloused fingers met my chin and lifted it. Our eyes met, and I looked away.

"Amaris."

My eyes blurred over, and the room became equally as empty and obscure as I felt.

"Amaris," he whispered again. "Nothing, *nothing* is your fault. Rutherford *did* poison my drink. We didn't know that he was under the influence of your sister's power. My father was killed by her, too. Ava has been fed lies and chose to become an assassin for the Palogian king. Her reasoning may have been to protect herself and you from your father, but she still chose evil. Ava is the one to blame. Your father is clearly not going to honor the Valian law, and I will hold him accountable for that. He will not get away with it. The evil acts of your family and the forces of power around you are not your fault."

Seconds or hours may have passed as I continued staring ahead, avoiding the look of bitterness I knew I would see if I turned to Ezra. He may have said those words, but I knew both of us felt differently. He resented me. If he truly didn't now, he would one day. I couldn't stay here. I needed to leave.

"Look at me, Little Fish."

He used his fingers to delicately turn my face toward his. He wasn't forceful, but a small part of me wanted to lean into his touch, to drink in his hazel eyes and find love and acceptance there. I wanted to be understood, even if I didn't deserve to be.

"You have done nothing wrong. I know you won't believe me, but that's why I want to remind you every minute of every hour, if that's what it takes



to get you to believe me, to believe in yourself. You told me that you saved me from the night of the shipwreck because you saw compassion and mercy in me. When I told you that it was my fault for not doing enough, you reminded me I made a difference, even though every single other man lost his life. I hated myself for what I thought I'd done. I turned that hatred around on you, thinking it was your fault for allowing me to survive. I thought you were torturing me, and in a way, you were."

Ezra smiled. "You tortured me every damn day I had to look at your bare legs and your beautifully freckled nose. I dreamt about you wrapped around my body and writhing against me until the suns rose behind us. Others, you were singing over me as I drowned in your arms."

"I know now that it's because I was attracted to you, but I hated myself for it. Before you, I lived in a world where everything was black or white. You showed me what I least expected. In every single dream, I knew one thing clearly: my helpless desire for you. At first, I thought it was because of what you were, but now... I know the real reason.

"The day my father made me take you around town... I wanted to go with you. I secretly loved every excuse to go to your room, to be tortured by your beautiful legs all over again. Ever since you left me that day, I felt a shift. The longing. The ache when I was away from you. The need to touch you and be near you. It's like a string that constantly tugs me toward you..."

My heart quickened. The way he had described this sounded too familiar. Too good to be true. My head snapped to Ezra's. "Are we crossed?"

"I—you—you know what it means?"

"Are we crossed?" I asked again.

Ezra nodded.

The room gave way like sand beneath me. It explained so much. The

reason I held out for him when I could've summoned any man in the Western Dominion. The reason my mind always drifted back to him...

*Crossed.*

He pushed a stray bundle of hair behind my ear. "I could have rejected the bond, if I wanted to. I could have denied the temptation. I could have distanced myself if I wanted to, but I didn't. I still don't. That's why I'm here, Little Fish. I choose you. I'm not walking away. I'm fighting for you. I'd rather go to my grave fighting for you than see that bastard take you back. I'd sooner have him flood the whole godsdamned city. I'll personally migrate everyone away from here overnight if that's what it takes. Amaris, you don't understand how much I love you. I will sacrifice anything to show you that."

My throat tightened at his words, threatening a fresh wave of tears to surface. I swallowed, trying to contain them, but they spilled from my eyes anyways. There Ezra was, sweeping them away again and again, like countless times before. I should be holding him. I should be comforting *him*.

"I'm sorry," I hiccuped.

"You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I do. The first thing you'll have to do when the water goes down is bury your father's body."

Ezra's face fell. "I'm trying not to think of that. Helping you has been helpful for me, too. It's taken my mind away from things."

I studied Ezra, the furrowed lines between his brows and the dark circles under his eyes. He was exhausted. "You need to be held sometimes, too, Ezra. You can't be the one who holds everyone else up when you're the one drowning."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I know. It doesn't feel real, yet. It's like I'll wake from this nightmare, and he'll still be here."

I placed my hand on his arm, rubbing little circles over his bronze skin. “You should’ve never had to endure what you did today.”

He smirked. “We both should've gotten a normal wedding night.”

“What all does that entail for you?” I asked.

He raised a dark eyebrow. “I was especially looking forward to the part where I ripped your wedding dress from your body. Although, in different circumstances.”

I frowned, looking at the ruined fabric laying on the chair to dry. My thoughts brought me back to when he stood behind me, pressing himself into my backside as he kissed my neck...

“This may not be my wedding dress...” I gestured to Ezra's shirt I wore instead, “but it’s basically a dress on me.”

Ezra’s eyes darkened. “Don’t tempt me, Little Fish.”

I leaned forward, slowly brushing my lips across the scruff of his neck. He shivered, and his hand cupped the back of my neck as I continued, trailing up to meet his lips. “We don’t have to.” I pulled away, meeting his eyes. “It’s your choice. I understand if you need time to talk about the loss of your father, but I understand if you need a distraction, too. When the day comes—whenever it may be—I’m here to listen.”

I was all too familiar with needing a distraction to numb the pain, if only for a little while. I’d be content with any remaining time I had with Ezra, and I would consider it an honor to hold him as he fell apart, the way he was there for me whenever I did.

As if in answer, Ezra’s lips found mine in the dark room, his movements equally delicate as they were dominant. His breaths were heavy, pleading. “No,” he groaned, “I want this.”

His tongue slid into mine as he pulled me onto his lap to straddle him, his

erection firm against my softness. A low, raspy growl escaped the back of his throat, and I let my hands explore every inch of bronzed skin and black ink. He trailed a line of kisses down my lips to the base of my neck, his own hands traveling to my ass, gripping and kneading me.

"Gods," he groaned against my neck. "You're so perfect."

He began to suck on the delicate skin along my throat, grinding his hips into mine. Both actions sent waves of pleasure rolling through me that I couldn't explain, something I had never felt before. I let out a small whimper, which was Ezra's undoing. In one solid swipe, he spun me around on the bed, laying me on my back. He ripped the rest of the clothes from his beautiful body, and I drank in every bit of him, his powerful legs, the individual muscles of his abdomen, the line of hair traveling lower to his long, full length.

His eyes darkened as he took in my naked form on the bed, drinking in my curves like they were something to be worshiped. And to tempt me further, he stroked his hardness, the heat of his gaze igniting every fiber of my being.

"Are you sure about this?" Ezra's voice was raw and needy, though it was still a question. An option. There always was with him, but there didn't have to be. I always wanted him. I would never stop wanting him.

I must've said those words aloud, because he chuckled. "You know me. Always a gentleman." He lowered himself over the top of me, taking my wrists and pinning them above me, kissing and biting my lips like he needed me more than he needed air in his lungs. "But tonight I won't be, Little Fish," he breathed into the shell of my ear.

Then, he brushed one of his hands down, traveling to the apex of my body where every bit of warmth pooled between my legs. He inserted a finger, stretching me wide before slowly pumping in and out. My back bowed into

him, needing to feel his warm body pressed against mine, needing him to fill me more.

He abruptly pulled away, releasing my hands from above me, allowing me to finally caress his body the way he's touched and caressed mine. Spreading my hips wide, Ezra took in the full sight of my naked form, and another low, raspy growl escaped him. Next, he buried his mouth between my legs, his lips meeting the pulsing bundle of nerves. My breath hitched, and I fisted his curls in my fingers as his hands gripped either side of my thighs, firmly pinning me to the spot on the bed.

He continued his assault, and I writhed against him. The tension growing inside of me forced my hips to roll against him, desperate for release. Slowly, he slid his tongue over my center, locking eyes with me as he tasted. Then, when he pushed his fingers into my parted flesh again, the world shattered around me. Only when I was screaming his name did he rise from the floor and crawl over the top of me, his length pressed against my opening.

"Amaris," he breathed, his eyes meeting mine in the candlelight. "I love you, Amaris. I always will."

The moon cast a pale haze over his body, illuminating every crest and trough of his muscles, and I was overcome with sadness, the feeling of death in my heart.

We would never be granted another moment like this. Tomorrow, I would be handed over to my father once more, and I would go willingly for Ezra's people. For my people. Tonight was all we had together, and nothing could take this from us.

Perhaps in another life we would find each other again and start over. Maybe in the next life where we're crossed, our species wouldn't be destined to kill the other.

“I love you, Ezra.” In my entire life, I never was so sure of anything else.

He kissed me again, as he gently thrust himself into me before allowing me time to adjust. Ezra must’ve been contemplating the events of tomorrow as well because his touch grew softer than before, sweeter and less demanding. Once he filled my body with his own, he began rocking hard against me, and I wrapped my legs around him, willing him to stay. Warmth and pleasure seeped through every inch of my body, building in my core again. My muscles tightened around Ezra, release finding me in the dark. We both cried out in unison just as something deep inside my chest... *snapped*.

That was the only way to describe it. Overwhelming, visceral joy sprung to life inside of me, tears pricking at my vision. Ezra collapsed on the bed next to me, wrapping his naked body around mine, softly brushing a line over the warped scars along my flesh.

“Did you feel it, too?” he whispered.

“Mhmm.”

“It means we both accepted the bond.” He continued lightly tracing each healed wound with his fingers, pleasure flowing through me in the wake of his touch.

Once, I had believed I should’ve died when these scars were given to me. Now, Ezra was here, demonstrating that there can be goodness brought from pain, comfort in place of fear. He was reminding me how much those scars on my back weren’t my fault, that I still deserved to be loved and cherished, even if I was going to die tomorrow.

That was the last thought I had before I drifted into a deep sleep in his arms.



## CHAPTER 48

### EZRA

**T**he chains forged with magical bindings fell from Lord Rutherford's frail limbs, setting him free from his holding cell. After only a week in the dungeons, his long, slender face was even more gaunt from the last time I had seen him. His cheeks were hollower, his eyes bruised from lack of slumber.

For a moment, Marion stared at his hands in disbelief. The questions forming in his mind were nearly visible. Saving him the extra breath, I quickly explained.

“There was an assassination attempt by a crew member on the night I sailed the Sapphire. To save himself, he sabotaged a rowboat. We've since found that he and his fiancée are working with the Eastern Dominion who have been wanting to put an end to the Anaforienes. So they targeted a member of the court, hypnotizing you buy the poison from BellaDonna the day Amaris saw you in the alley. Then she hypnotized you again to drop the poison into my cup on the night of the Surpassing Day festival.”

Running a hand through my dark curls, I huffed, regretting what I had to inform him of next. “Father was assassinated last night. I killed the man responsible, but the woman involved escaped before we could capture her.”

When I was done, Rutherford’s eyes were wide in horror, surprise, and a little bit of regret. “I’m very sorry for your loss, Ezra. Verin will be greatly missed.”

Maybe it was the stakes of the coming hours or the terrible smell of mold, but my throat burned. My father’s death still didn’t feel real. Others verbalizing my loss only solidified it further. When we returned, perhaps I would have more time to process it all, and I was scared for when that day came—because it would come. We would return. I would not allow any other way.

“Why are you telling me all of this?” asked Rutherford.

“You were innocent, and because I need you.”

Lord Rutherford’s eyes shot even wider than before. Never had he imagined that I, Ezra Anaforiene, would utter those words to him.

“I want to welcome you back into the Court of Lords, as the Lord of Zhargen once more. If you are willing, that is.”

He raised a brow in skepticism. It was good to see that old habits die hard. “You need me? You used every opportunity you could to disrespect me in council. Why would I subject myself to that again?”

“Because I want things to be different. I didn’t trust you last time, but that doesn’t mean I don’t trust my father. If he trusted you, then I can, too. We polarize each other. Even though we drove each other mad, you tempered me. Convicted me. Challenged me. I’m sorry for how much I distrusted you.”

There was one thing I still needed to know about him. “I need you to tell me what happened to Jirva.”



Rutherford's black eyes darted to the cell floor. With a bony finger, he played with a loose strand on his burlap tunic. "I was in love with a commoner woman before I became the Lord of Zhargen. I didn't want the role, because I knew I would have to marry into nobility. So, naturally, when my father died, handing the title over to me, I had to break things off with Beatrice, the woman I loved. I tried to, anyway. A year into the position, we were still seeing each other secretly. Meanwhile, my father paid for Jirva's dowry. If Jirva and I didn't marry, then she would've been seen as unwanted, deeming her unworthy as a wife.

"So, I married Jirva, to give her security, but Jirva wasn't even interested in men. We became best friends, and I grew to love her like a sister. Beatrice, however, saw us together one evening and was so heartbroken over what seemed like betrayal, and she thought to poison me. She snuck into my home, dropping the poison into a drink meant for me, but Jirva drank it instead. After investigating the case for two weeks, I was informed Beatrice had hung herself. In her note, she explained what she had done, that the guilt drove her to end her life. I dropped the investigation. Her family had already lost so much—they couldn't afford to lose her reputation, too."

"So you sacrificed your own for the woman you loved."

Rutherford nodded in agreement.

"Why were you at Past and Present that day when Amaris followed you?" I asked.

"I have a disease that affects my metabolism. I've had it since I was a child. While I'm away from my usual healer in Zhargen, BellaDonna brews my medicine for me."

I nodded, helping Rutherford from the dungeon floor. "We will haste to free her today as well. Every quarter you are here, I will personally see to it

that her medicine finds its way to your chambers.”

The bells chimed three times. One more hour until the first sun sets. “Ah, just in time for the council meeting. I already have your quarters prepared for your stay, and dinner should be brought to your rooms any moment. Please feel free to—”

Rutherford shook his head. “If it’s okay with you, Your Highness, I would be honored to attend the council meeting tonight. On the brink of war, I believe my appetite can wait.”

Smiling, I pulled the tall man into my chest. “Welcome back to the Court of Lords, Rutherford.”



## CHAPTER 49

### AMARIS

**I**t was perhaps the first time in my life I had ever been punctual. With quill and parchment in my hand, the second to last letter popped out from the sundial. Now, all I had to do was wait for the last one.

The first sun had already begun its descent, sending my heart racing. So many things hinged on this. What if we were once again tricked by the letters? What if, once we got out to sea, we were utterly wrong?

One more hour.

One more hour, and our kingdom would be that much closer to war. We would be that much closer to death, if we didn't succeed. What if the bronze ships didn't lure the mermaids because they somehow knew that it was a trap?

No. They would come. I'd sooner make another bargain for my soul than allow my enemies to destroy anyone else. Still, I couldn't help but ask myself: if we failed tonight, how many more would have to die? Would it be Solana next? Priscilla? Ezra?

Gods, Ezra... If my father killed him... If *anything* happened to him, I would tear the sea apart.

Twirling my gem in circles, I walked the path around the obsidian dials, searching for answers, praying all the moving parts would align tonight.

Seconds felt like hours and minutes, an eternity. As soon as the shadow passed over the last and final letter, Ezra would adjourn the council meeting and come straight here. Now, the hand was nearing the eighth hour—the last before both suns began their descent into the depths of the horizon.

So, so little time.

I assumed my position at the top of the bell tower. The hand clicked into place, as if on a moment's notice, the bells ringing out their tune.

Now that I had scribbled down all eight letters, I read them off to myself, trying to unscramble them.

H, I, N, A, T, P, E, L.

By some godly force, whether below or above, it hardly took me a full minute and I had worked the letters into position.

N E P H T A L I



“Are you sure?” asked Ezra, his eyes roaming over the parchment like there was something I would've missed.

“Did you want to restart the day and have a look for yourself? What are the odds that this,” I snatched the parchment from him, holding it up to make a point, “spelled the name of the one person who sent me here? She’s been trying to hint to me all along that it was her, Ez.”

Yes, but how? If Nephtali were using clues from the kingdom to lead me to the truth, then...

Nephtali was the Lost Queen of the Seas. She was the rightful heir to the throne. And she had been hinting at it this entire time.

*“Remembrance of her is not enough to lift the veil. Only by profession of the Lost Queen’s name.”*

I stopped, whirled to face him. “Ezra. I know what we need to do. We speak her name into existence.”

The crystal in my hand was burning as I twirled it around in my hand. Clearing my voice, I spoke loudly into the garden, holding my crystal for Nephtali to hear. “Nephtali is the Lost Queen of the Seas. She is the rightful heir to the throne, and we know Nazaro Strauhn took it from her.”

Nothing happened.

I repeated myself, rephrasing a little to ensure that I had done it right. Why wasn't anything happening?

What if I was wrong again, somehow? What if I read too far into her note, and all of this was only a mere coincidence?

“Wait—” Ezra held up his finger. “What if it isn’t you who has to profess it, but the one who cursed her in the first place? What if *he* needs to be the one to admit that he cursed her?”

“Ezra, yes! We trick Strauhn into saying her name, speaking her back into existence and thus, reversing the curse!”

Maybe it was because we both were running on hardly any sleep, but this discovery deserved a medal. So, I reached up on my tip toes, planting a huge kiss on his lips. To my disappointment, he was the first to pull away.

“Amaris, did she tell you how long the seas have been cursed?”

I thought for a moment. “She mentioned that the seas have been cursed for a very long time. She told me about that story in the children’s book—about how humans and mermaids became—”

“And in the story, the mermaid’s brother was the one to have tricked her and her fiancé, right?”

Recalling the story, I recited it to myself. A mermaid who fell in love with a human had a brother who was jealous of his older sister. Around the time their parents died, the mermaid had decided to marry the human man, but on their wedding day, her brother tricked the human into believing his bride was in danger to lure him out to sea and devour him, forcing her to watch. Later, the mermaid was so grieved by her loss that she died, along with the baby inside her womb.

“Ezra, I think that children’s story was about her. My father killed her fiancé, broke her spirit, and cursed the sea to not remember her name.”

Of course. Her father only cared about power, about self-preservation. Pride. He didn’t kill Nephtali—he just made it so no one else could remember who she was. She became lost to the seas. No one even knew she existed to begin with. For centuries, all she had been given was a sadistic trove of crystals to constantly remind her of the thousands of lives she was missing. The crystals were her only form of companionship, her only form of escape from the cave she was forced to call home.

Getting an idea, I reached around my neck, and unclasped the golden chain holding the crystal.

“Here.” I handed it to Ezra. “You’ll need this for tonight. I’ll explain on my way to the coast. Let’s go fuck up my father’s plans.”

Ezra smiled, grabbing my hand and taking off to the forged ships.

Together, we sprinted into the jaws of the beast, and we wouldn’t stop fighting until it was slain.



## CHAPTER 50

### AMARIS

The bronze ship slashed through the Sapphire Sea, waves hitting the bow and drenching my body with salt and mist. My hands were manacled on either side of me by iron, mimicking the shade of bronze that parts of the ship had been forged of.

I felt heavier, though it had nothing to do with the faux restraints or the bronze surrounding me. It was as if a mass of bricks had settled in my chest, weighing down every breath the closer we came to Mermaid's Cove, the place I had once called home. The place I was now traveling back to, bringing vengeance with me.

My chest was hopelessly bare of Nephtali's crystal, and even though I knew it was in good hands, I was still weary because it wasn't in mine.

I found myself longing for its soothing presence, my constant reminder of hope. But what brought me more hope tonight than anything was that the mermaids would finally be stopped. We couldn't afford for the plan to fail.

Lightning cracked and rippled across the sky in deep purple veins. Ominous clouds the shade of smoke lingered so thick that it was nearly impossible to make out any of the ships surrounding the one I was tied to.

The captain shouted something indiscernible from the quarterdeck, but I felt the shift in the air almost immediately. The chill of death settled onto my skin, clawing along my body and lingering there.

One moment, the sea was full of life, waves, and wind. Next, the ship rocked back and forth in an eerie rhythm, the only sound the creaking of the wooden deck as it groaned in protest. "There!" someone screamed, and I whipped my head in every direction to find the source of their panic.

It began somewhere from behind. Then another voice to my left. Then another.

Together, the mermaids sang, their insidious, precious melody filling my ears. Like stars in the night, their eyes glowed silver-green over the water, their predatory fins slithering toward us.

Let them come. They wouldn't be able to sense the bronze until they were near. Then, it would be too late. The bronze weapons would pierce their hearts next.

My screams were muffled by the gag in my mouth as I pretended to put up a fight against my restraints. Once they spotted me on the bow, hesitation marked many of their expressions. Vocal cords faltered. Some pointed and gawked.

They had believed the act.

"Now!" the captain yelled, fisting his arm into the air.

Archers released their arrows. Blood sprayed on the side of the ship, onto my face. Screams from the mermaids came and went—dying with no way for their blood to heal them.



Another line of mermaids clawed their way up the ship, turning to their immediate threat and leaving me bound. Round after round, the archers fired. Each time, they didn't miss. Some of the men on the front lines fell, but the tide was with us. The mermaids hadn't come prepared for this. Before now, they believed they had the upper hand.

Bloodshed came from below me, the raised platform of where I was given the advantage of witnessing everything. Archers strung their bows, and trained soldiers readied their swords. Wave after wave, the mermaids persisted, climbing the ships vigorously. Countless were shot and fell back in the water. Others managed to pull themselves aboard to begin their savage attacks.

The whole sea shook with violent rage, a tidal wave coming straight towards the ships. A golden trident cut through a dozen men on the front lines, shredding them like pages in a book. A swirling, dark storm emerged underneath a blue-black tail. The pearl crown of six points on top of striking onyx hair could've only belonged to my father.

Teeth, tail, and bronze flashed as he took down dozens in a single stride. His movements weren't inconvenienced by the bronze. As long as he wielded the ring, he was able to withstand it.

Blood filled the ship, running down the slippery deck, and into the water. My bonds were cut like dainty string, and I fell, slamming into the lower deck.

"Save the girl," Strauhn's domineering voice boomed. "She's mine."

"Like hells I am." I snarled. Quickly, I plucked the dagger hidden on my side and charged. I may not have been a trained warrior like many men and women on this ship, but I knew the mermaids' tactics better than anyone. I wasn't completely useless.

A deafening scream came from my right. I didn't have time to react before a tail swung out, knocking me to the floor. Pain exploded in my head, and I instinctively reached up to hold it, coming away with blood.

“Where's lover boy? I want to make you watch as I gut him.”

Serena's eyes were sharp, cutting me to the bone with hatred. She crouched like a python ready to strike, her claws retracted from her webbed hands. “Or maybe I'll gut you now, while I have you here.”

Then, the mermaid dove, sending my heart leaping in my chest as I braced myself for impact. I rolled to my back, holding my blade upward. Before I knew it, she was over the top of me, teeth diving for my throat.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw Serena's life dissolve from hers in less than seconds, warm wetness gushing into my hands from where she had impaled herself on my blade. Pushing her from me, I pulled myself upright.

To my left, another familiar voice erupted into a scream, and I whirled, my insides turning leaden from the sight. Solana. Adrienne, my sister, held her by her neck, chanting her sensual song into her ear. Crimson coated my friend's hands, hair, and face. Her eyes were full of terror that slowly shifted to compliance the more Adrienne's voice coaxed her to abandon the fight.

Scales slithered into view, heading straight toward me, and my heart lurched. As I pivoted, readying myself for another ambush, I lifted my dagger only to come up short.

The oldest Strauhn daughter, Azaliah, bared her teeth. Blood dripped from them and down her neck like droplets of rain. “Father may have said to *save you*, but he didn't specify to keep you alive.”

“Azaliah, stop.” I raised my dagger above my head in surrender. “I don't want to hurt you.” Turning, I stole a glance of Solana. Adrienne was trailing

her claws over Solana's skin as if in contemplation of where she'd decide the first cut to be. I needed to get away from Azaliah to save my friend.

"But *I* want to hurt *you*, traitor," my sister screeched, her voice raw and guttural. Then, faster than any creature I'd ever seen, she lunged at me with full force.

"Stop!" I yelled, but it was too late. I was left with no choice but to lower my weapon from above my head and point it straight toward my sister.

She came down on me with a vengeance so unrelenting and powerful that I barely had time to react. Pain tore through me. Azaliah's claws slashed across my shoulder, deep absinthe cascading down my forearms.

She smiled. "You still bleed green, apparently."

"Unfortunately," I said, gripping my dagger in preparation. I wasn't the first to attack my own flesh and blood, but I also wasn't going to spare her life.

"Like I said before, you can't change it any more than you can change the tides. You don't have that kind of power." She lunged again, and I swiped hard and fast. My dagger found purchase, the bronze blade swiping into one of her gills. The equivalent for a human would be to puncture a lung, and Azaliah cried out in pain from the landing blow.

"You *bitch!*" she snarled, green blood gurgling from her wound.

Abandoning the fight, I broke into a sprint to make my way to Solana. Behind me, my sister yelled as she fought to get to me. I watched in horror as Adrienne slammed Solana to the deck, her forearm snapping at a gruesome angle.

"I'll fucking kill you!" Azaliah tackled me, this time full of murderous intention. My dagger fell somewhere next to me. Even with her neck profusely bleeding and the bronze equipment, her force was intense. She dug

her long nails into whatever flesh she could find, attempting to shred me to bits. Fire cut into me with every swipe, pain rendering me completely useless.

“You may still bleed like us, but you can no longer breathe the same way we do.” Azaliah gripped my neck, choking the breath from my lungs. I gasped for air, frantically fumbling for my dagger. With a flick of Azaliah’s tail, she sent it flying into the black water.

My vision clouded with white at the corners. I had to think of something, had to think, had to—*the crystal*. I couldn’t call out to Ezra, not yet. I had to find my own way out of this. No one was supposed to know yet.

As soon as I thought of him, the iron grip around my neck loosened. I could breathe again. There was no objection, no scream, or last words as Azaliah’s head rolled from her body.

I looked up to the hand that offered me leverage after the attack. I took it, and Solana pulled me up, breathless from her escape from Adrienne. We exchanged long glances at each other, taking in the damage our enemies caused. Solana held her broken arm, the bone protruding from her dark skin, yet her eyes were filled with concern as she observed my injuries.

Even in the midst of battle, we embraced, and as I held her for that brief moment, I prayed to the far-off gods that it wouldn't be my last.

I should thank her for saving me. She didn’t know she had just beheaded my sister.

“What have you done?” The thundering voice of my father rumbled. I couldn’t look away from the lifeless body, the bundle of auburn hair that lay across the deck.

Father’s eyes were ice cold, as frozen as the heart inside of his chest. Before I could run, he raised his trident, and water engulfed me. “*Ezra*,” I tried calling out to him through the crystal.

“First, it was Ava, and now it’s Ezra.” He clicked his tongue, plucking a blade from a corpse’s throat and twirling it in his hands. “Always needing someone to come and save you. Is this the poor human you saved the night of your Claiming? It’s a shame he isn’t anywhere when you need him most.”

“You don’t know anything about him,” I growled.

“I know he’s a *coward*, or else he’d be here with you right now.”

I spat. “What makes you think that he isn’t?”

“He’s the prince of Erison, Amaris. Do you think he actually cared for you? A *mermaid*?”

My face burned. “He cares for me more than you ever did.”

“You always lived in a delusional fairytale. If he cared for you, then why isn’t he here?” Strauhn challenged. I feigned a look of horror as my heart beat wildly in my chest. My father believed the lie. “How else do you think he would ever defeat us, without marrying a princess of one of the seas? He knew he didn’t stand a chance against us. That is, until he met you. He’s using you, becoming your friend, then warming your bed. Now where is he when it truly counts?”

“You know only what you would do if you were him. You are not a human —”

“Neither are you. You’ve forgotten where your loyalties lie.”

I sneered. “My loyalties lie with the king who doesn’t torture their daughters and leave them to be eaten by sharks.”

He canted his head, studying me. “Do you think I thought you wouldn’t survive? Even if I had, do you think I didn’t know where you were? It didn’t amount to anything. I still found you. Ava still found you.”

My father spun me to face the sea, showing me who floated in the water. Ava’s face was purple and swollen, bruises tainting her scales and flesh.

“I’m so sorry, Amaris.” My sister sobbed, her face an ocean of tears. “I didn't have a choice. Please—”

Anger burned inside of me at the sight of her. I pinned her in my glare, pure, unadulterated loathing radiating from me hotter than the suns of Erison. I almost felt sorry for her, that Ava had been tortured. But once again, she had betrayed me.

I didn't know which was worse: my family tortured her to get information from her, or that Ava gave away my secret. She was the reason we didn't have the element of surprise, that I was alive. *She* was the reason my father attacked Erison with the tsunami.

She didn't finish her pleading before my father plunged the knife into my chest.



## CHAPTER 51

### EZRA

**U**nder the raging storm and the starless night, I tore through scales and claws and gills. I only kept my gaze on the whirlwind of onyx ahead of me—Nazaro Strauhn.

If hatred were a dagger, it would be mine. I flung it with every ounce of malice within my heart, aiming it straight at his. Strauhn flicked his trident and sent it clattering to the deck on an invisible gust of wind, and I reached for another dagger.

If that failed, I would reach for another.

I tried again, but it fell away once more.

Did the bastard just laugh at me?

This time, I shot two, guiding them with a strong wind, hurling it straight at his poison eyes. I hoped to penetrate clean through them. There wouldn't be enough blood of his to spill, enough pain for him to feel. I would always want Amaris' father to suffer more. Longer. Deeper. I wanted him gone from the maps of Vale—wiped clean from the history books and blotted from time

itself. I would avenge what he did to Amaris, and I would not stop until I did so.

“Just in time to watch your bride die.”

I saw stars, my hands quaking with rage. “*Where is she?*”

A chuckle. “I never thought you would actually fall for it. Do you think I would truly have my daughter killed so quickly?” Strauhn tilted his head, the crown resting upon it tilting also. The first thing I would do is rip the crown from his head and give it back to its rightful owner.

“I don’t put much faith in mermaids.”

“You don’t put your faith in mermaids?” Strauhn echoed, his voice taunting as he flicked his gold trident. “What would you call this, then?”

In a swipe, he moved the facade of waves swirling above the ship. My knees almost buckled at what I saw. Amaris, a knife deep in her chest, just as the crystal showed me.

“Don’t worry,” Strauhn taunted. “She wasn’t stabbed with bronze, so her blood is replenishing itself. For now.” Another swipe from Strauhn’s trident, and she was gone. The water wrapped around her, vanishing into the darkness below.

“You are nothing without that,” I nodded, gesturing to the trident, his only source of power and might. “You hide behind it in fear and use it at every turn. Do you think it gives you power? Do you think you’re entitled to it just because your sister loved a human instead?” Strauhn’s face fell, and I swore, I saw fear flicker in his blue eyes. “What happens if it gets taken away?” I asked. “What if it doesn’t wield to you anymore? Is that the only object *your* faith is in, Strauhn? It certainly isn’t in your people, since they don’t know the truth.”

Strauhn’s voice echoed over the thunder. “*My sister is dead.*”



“If she died, then why did you curse her? Why can’t we speak her name, and why is she erased from all history books and fables?”

The look on Strauhn’s features was priceless. Surprise. Shock. Horror. Anger. Brooding, cold, fearful anger. “You ignorant piece of mortal filth. You have no idea what you’re saying. Nephtali is dead. She will never be the queen of the seas. She died the moment I cursed her.”

“There was one stipulation to that curse. Maybe your pride blinded you the day you made it. Please, allow the ignorant mortal to explain it to you, oh wise, Almighty King of the Seas.” I dipped into a brief bow in mockery.

Murder flicked in Strauhn’s eyes, but I knew he wouldn’t kill me—yet. He was too fearful of what I had to say. I intended to take full advantage of his pride—I needed to buy more time to lower his guard, to get that trident...

I took a tiny step forward. “The curse you created was years ago, so it’s only fitting that some important variables would, as they say, *‘slip through the cracks.’* Although, I don’t understand why they would, Almighty Strauhn, considering you do everything in your inadequate power to prevent such a thing. Still, you missed one tiny detail.”

Strauhn seethed, his knuckles were serpents, constricting the hilt of his trident. “What is that?”

“You said your sister...what was her name again? You said she was dead, but you and I both know that isn’t true. You may have killed her by wiping her from Valian memory, but you seemed to forget the one way to break it.”

I smirked, but I only thought of Amaris. I needed to be quick, unfaltering. “*Remembrance of her is not enough to lift the veil. Only by profession of the Lost Queen’s name.* You brought her back to life by saying her name.”

Horror deepened on his face for only a second before a mermaid’s voice shattered the noise of the fight. Beside me, a mermaid came into my

peripherals. I readied myself for the attack, but when I saw her face, I immediately remembered her. She was the one I ran into the day of the festival. This was—

“Ava,” he breathed. Every bit of malice coated his vocal cords. “Ava, if you do this, you’ll be—”

“I know what I’ll be, Father. I’d rather be a traitor than a heartless coward.”

Strauhn howled in pain, the steel trident dropping from his hands as he clawed at his mind. Beside me, Ava’s chanting turned violent as she continued torturing him, plastering him to the spot. I didn’t hesitate. I threw my dagger straight toward the male. The blade flew through the air as she paralyzed his body with a single note.

Mermaids recognized Ava and rushed to Strauhn’s aid. Scales and teeth met, and Ava screamed. Deep jade sprayed as she swung her rapier, fighting as many as she could until her last breath. I caught a glimpse of her purple scales as she leapt into the sea and dozens of her opponents followed.

As the dagger severed the finger with the ring attached, I surged through the air, leaping for the trident. Shifting the weapon in my hands, I pivoted my body on the blood-smeared deck. Then, I urged the wind to my will, hurling the bronze directly at my target.

This time, I wasn’t aiming for Strauhn’s hand.

Three separate streams of absinthe burst from his chest. Strauhn looked down, stricken with panic and dread. I carefully stalked forward, my eyes boring into his.

I hated Amaris’ eyes so much on this male. He didn’t deserve to have such beauty given to him.

The streams of green now gushed like rivers, his immortal heart slowing. I

pushed the trident deeper into his chest and stared down the brutal king as he died.

“Your daughter deserved better.”

A sea serpent rose from the water and climbed onto the ship. With its tail, it scooped the crown from Strauhn's head. A toad riding on its back croaked. “Thanksss,” the snake breathed. I blinked, assuming my eyes were betraying me.

The mermaids retreated as soon as they heard the bugle proclaiming triumph. Amaris' body fell like a shooting star to the deck, and I caught her with my wind before she landed.

I was over the top of her, breathing into her. I would not stop, would not let her go until she opened her emerald eyes again.

Solana was there, bending down to feel her pulse.

“The knife wasn't bronze,” I explained. “She's just lost a lot of blood. She will heal herself. We can get her back. We can—”

Solana grabbed my arm. Her eyes were swimming with tears. “Ezra.”

“Listen to me! We can help her! Help me save her.”

“*Ezra*,” she sobbed.

“*Help me!*” I screamed. “I'll call on Nephtali. I have her crystal, it can— what if—”

Solana only shook her head. “There's nothing more we can do.” No. *No*. “She's dying. Talk to her. Soothe her as her soul goes on.”

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. We had won. We had lifted the curse. Nephtali was set free. Amaris had been able to keep her life, her soul. Why wasn't she waking?

Dropping to my knees, I took her hand in mine. Her eyes were closed, as if she could only be sleeping, the only indicator of her death the wound on her

stomach, where the dagger still jutted from her.

“I broke my promise to you—I promised to always love and protect you. I failed. Come back to me, Little Fish. Come back so I can cherish you, spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

I sobbed into her chest, her neck, her hair. I wanted to wrap myself around her body and die with her. I wanted to trade all my days to take this away from her, to carry it instead.

I pulled the crystal from my pocket and held it tight. This was my last hope.

One last time, I stared into her lovely face, trying to memorize the freckles along the bridge of her nose, the way her green eyes would fix onto me in a crowd. My palm rested on her chest, praying to feel her heart quicken, but it only slowed.

Eventually, it quit beating altogether.



## CHAPTER 52

### AMARIS

**H**eat poured into my chest in tidal waves. A symphony of voices—no, one voice alone—called out to me. It sounded so familiar, though I was certain I didn't know the owner. The low alto's melody sank into my skin, warming me from the inside.

It was *mending* me.

I'd never known such comfort. Only moments ago, I was bleeding out. Now, it felt like life itself mended my bones, my unbeating heart.

When I finally had the strength to open my eyes, I saw the face of my savior. Crimson red eyes and stark black hair greeted me. A crown, my father's crown, rested on her brow. She ran a hand through my hair. "Good evening, niece," Nephtali smiled.

Then Ezra was there, or perhaps, I had only now realized his presence. His head rested on my chest, and when he looked up at me, his eyes were raw and bloodshot. Solana was next to me, too, holding my hand.

“You gave us quite the scare, Little Fish.” Ezra’s lips quivered, more tears streaming down his face.

I brushed a tear from his eyes. “I’m always here for the dramatics.”

“We did it, Amaris,” Solana sniffed. “We won. Your sister helped us. She came back. Ava helped Ezra defeat Strauhn.”

My eyes looked between Solana, and Ezra, certain that my mind was deceiving me.

Ezra confirmed with a nod. “She was attacked shortly after hypnotizing your father, but she helped me get the ring off. She came back for you.”

Tears soaked my cheeks. She kept her promise, even though she sacrificed her life to save me, and so many more. “*I’ll always come back for you.*”

The seas were restored. The Western Dominion could sail the Sapphire Sea once more. Nephtali was the Queen of the Six Seas. She would never be subjected to spending an eternity locked away in a trove of crystals, forced always on the outside. Now, she had the power to rule and reign, just as it always should have been.

Solana and Ezra helped me sit upright, though they were gentler than necessary. Truly, I didn’t feel much pain anymore. I looked down at the restored flesh of my chest, right where the wound from the dagger should have been.

“How?” I asked the Queen of the Six Seas.

Nephtali gave us all a mischievous wink. “I suppose you’re not the only Strauhn with a healing affinity.”



## CHAPTER 53

### EZRA

**I**n the distance, the first sun rose over the horizon, disarming all of last night's horrors. At least, most of them.

Beside me, Amaris leaned against the railing and watched the coast of Erison come into view. Auburn hair danced in the gentle breeze, and I tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "You're too beautiful to be real," I whispered.

She leaned into my touch, closing her eyes. "That's what you said—"

"I know. I meant it the day you saved me, and I mean it today. The only thing that's changed is how much you mean to me. Even then, I think I knew I would love you, but never, Amaris, did I think I could love someone the way I love you."

When our lips met, I pressed her body against mine, savoring her touch. "There is one thing we never got to do on our wedding night..."

Amaris raised a sensuous eyebrow. "Do you care to show me, soon?"

"Not soon enough," I winked.

As if on cue, Solana approached. Her arm had been bandaged tightly to her petite body. “Are you sure you’ll still be able to do the Eclipsing?” I asked her, looking at the cast.

With a smile, she nodded.

“Eclipsing?” Amaris echoed, “What in the seven hells does that mean?”

“Come on, Little Fish,” I smirked, “Tell me none of your books explained this to you.”

Solana rolled her eyes playfully. “The Eclipsing is the final act of the two crossed mates. You need a healer to bind you together.”

I clasped my hand around her forearm, instructing Amaris to do the same to mine. Once our arms were joined, Solana laid hers on either of ours, one on Amaris and the other on me. A stinging sensation gave way to pleasure as it wrapped around my arm. A shimmering golden light appeared like a tattoo across my skin. One sun appeared on my forearm, a tinier one inscribed across Amaris’. Together, our arms joined, it appeared as one sun was eclipsing the other.

When Solana finished, she said, “There. Now, you are joined in body, soul, and spirit.”

Amaris reached on her tiptoes and caressed either side of my face. I leaned in, and gently kissed her lips. The brisk, autumn wind blew across my skin, making me feel more alive than I had in years.

Three months ago, I had sailed these waters, ready to die. Today, we came back victorious. I met the love of my life, and together, we would rule the Western Dominion for as long as we both lived.

I looked to the sandy horizon, and the domed castle came into view just as the night fully turned to morning.

Home. We were going home.



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## CHAPTER 54

### AMARIS

**F**or the first time in hundreds of years, the sea wasn't deserted. Outside of the throne room, a thread of cerulean waves crested along the shore of Erison as people bobbed up and down in the water. Others played in the sand, building castles that stood tall against the wind. A smile crept across my lips. Seeing the children crafting sandcastles reminded me of how Ezra said he and his childhood friend used to do that together.

Now, Fletcher's children no longer had to be afraid. Neither would our children, either.

A jade statue rested along the edge of the water, her scales gleaming under the suns. Carved into the stone was the face of my sister, Ava, who smiled back at the ships who sailed into Erison.

Six months ago, nothing but death and destruction came from this sea. Now, it was the beginning of life and abundance and healing for so many. We were free of fear.

Ezra squeezed my hand, pulling my attention to him. His beautiful, kind eyes cut like gems of russet and peridot. He leaned into me, the wonderful scent of citrus and musk clinging to his skin. “Go show them their queen, Little Fish.”

I pushed my shoulders back as I strode to the podium to give my oath as the next queen. Today, at my coronation, my steps were sure and unfaltering, unlike they were before. A sea of faces looked up at me expectantly. Lord Rutherford was the first in the crowd, his face less gaunt than when I had last seen him.

A cry broke through the tall, chambered room, an unhappy baby desperate for its mother’s affection. Priscilla gave me an apologetic wince, scooping up her daughter and bouncing her on her knee.

Slowly, she had been getting better. She was laughing more at dinners, and even allowed Ezra to watch Hope while Solana, Priscilla, and I had a picnic at the beach. Next week, she and Hope would travel back to Azranth to attend to matters in their own region. But she promised that they would travel back soon for the Conceding Day festival.

Solana’s dress rippled behind her as she strutted to the dais. She cast a wink my way, causing me to bite back a giggle. In her dainty hands, she held the crown on a velvet pillow. My crown.

Vibrant sapphires glimmered bright, trapping the warm luminance of the suns inside like a hall of mirrors. The braided gold had been gilded to resemble waves, almost a perfect replica to the one that currently rested on Ezra’s brow. The two pieces complimented each other perfectly, one not overpowering the other. We were equals: King and Queen. Husband and wife. Crossed mates.

After reciting my oath, Solana beckoned for me to bend so she could reach

my head. She whispered to me, “I may or may not have requested breakfast for our celebration dinner after this. You can thank me later, bacon troll.”

I turned to hug my friend. Her honey eyes shone with tears, her grin wide across her beautiful face.

As soon as the crown rested atop my brow, the city of Erison roared in triumph. Even Lord Rutherford, along with the Lord and Lady of Silestone, joined in on the ovation. Soon, the entire throne room stood to their feet, accepting me as their queen. Then, Ezra was next to me, grabbing my hand and lifting it toward the suns.

Not every day of ruling one of Vale’s most powerful Dominions would be this sweet and poignant, but right now, it was, and that’s what mattered. Most days would be filled with politics, hard-decisions, and threats of potential war and strife. But I wasn’t making those decisions alone. I had Ezra and Ezra had me. Together, we would figure out this rare and beautiful life, and we would be with each other every step of the way. I would never forget the one who gave me those steps: Nephtali, my aunt. The Queen of the Six Seas. She was a Lost Queen no longer.

This life wouldn’t be easy, but with Ezra, it would be worthwhile.

I was peacefully content with that.



# EPILOGUE

## AMARIS

**A**s I woke to the smell of fresh evergreen and caramel, I already knew that Conceding Day would be my favorite Valian holiday. The eclipse of the suns would happen later in the afternoon, but until then, Solana, Ezra, Lucy, Priscilla, Hope, and I gathered together in a large sitting room to exchange gifts.

We all laughed as we watched Lucy, who laid near the fire. A huge bow sat on the top of her head, one that Ezra tied around her for the special occasion. She didn't seem to mind, but instead, she looked relieved to see Hope had stopped pulling her ears long enough for her to get some rest.

Hope had crawled onto bigger and better things, finding comfort in her mother's arms. Hope reached toward Priscilla's face just as she took a sip of her wine, which sent the red liquid spilling down the front of her dress and onto the floor.

Ezra rushed over to help, but Priscilla waved him away. "Don't worry about a little spilled wine. Gods know I do it often enough. However, I will let you pour me another glass, if you'd be so kind."

“Of course.” Ezra chuckled, filling her cup and bringing it over to her. He exchanged Priscilla the glass of wine for Hope, whose little hands reached for Ezra. He scooped her up, and came over to sit beside me as he began bouncing the baby on his knee. The act was so attractive and equally comical since Ezra was easily twenty times the baby’s size. Holding her, he looked even larger than he did regularly.

Solana popped from her chair, setting a present both in my lap, and in Priscilla’s. The package was wrapped so poorly, and judging by the weight and size, I already could guess what she had gotten us. Priscilla cast me a sideways glance, her expression telling me she was thinking the same thing.

We tore our gifts open simultaneously, and I was thankful I wasn’t in public for anyone else but my friends to see the title of the book, or the indecent man painted on the cover. My cheeks flooded with color as Hope snatched the book from my hands, sending the entire room to burst out in laughter.

Solana reached into her satchel and pulled her own copy of the book out. “I got us each the same one, that way we could start a book club! Wouldn’t that be so much fun?”

“Can I join?” Ezra asked.

My friends and I gave him a disapproving stare.

“What should we call it?” Priscilla asked.

Solana thought for a moment, tapping her foot.

Her eyes lit up. “What about “*Between the Sheets*”? Get it? Between the sheets of paper and...”

“We got it, Solana.” Ezra choked, a smile creeping on his lips.

“I love it,” I affirmed, reaching down to retrieve Solana’s gift from my feet. I rose from the sofa, handing her the small box.

As she opened the gift, I nervously bit my thumb. I was still new to the world of presents; I was fairly certain I was not a very skillful gifter. It had nearly taken me two days to shop for Priscilla and Solana's.

Solana held up the piece of fabric in her hand, the fabric pathetically slumping between her fingers. Her eyebrows were furrowed, contemplating what exactly it was.

"It's a book cover," I giggled nervously. "That way you can read a scandalous book anywhere you want."

Slowly, a grin crept onto her face. And before I knew it, she was beaming from ear to ear. Her smile as radiant and lovely as she was. "It'll come in handy, that's for sure. Looks like you'll need one, yourself," she winked, "now that we're starting this book club."

Now, it was Priscilla's turn to open hers. It was quite heavy and leaning on the back wall behind the evergreen, so Ezra handed Hope to me and went to retrieve it, setting it on the floor in front of Priscilla. Eyes eager, she tore it open, and after the first swipe across it, she realized what was hidden inside. Priscilla began to sob as she hugged the gift tight against her chest, holding her face against the frame.

Izan's face—or at least what others described to me what he looked like—was staring back at her. His mouth was tilted into a permanent smile, his brown eyes shining with hope. I was amazed to see the baby in my arms looked exactly like the man whose face had been painted there.

"It's perfect," she croaked, her face soaked with tears. "He's just as I remembered."

We all crowded around the painting to look at the man who Priscilla loved. She had said Izan once loved her fiercely, too. He had fought for the Western Dominion with the same ideology until the very end. And though I didn't



know him nor had I ever met him, I knew, judging by my friend, that he had been a great husband. He would've made a great father, if he had been given the chance. But Priscilla wasn't alone—she had us to count on. Azranth needed her strength, and she governed the region well.

Hope reached out her pudgy fingers toward the canvas, murmuring her first syllables. “Da... Da... Da”

Realization sparked in Priscilla's eyes as she took Hope from me, hugging her daughter tight. “That's right. It's Daddy.” Priscilla kissed her tiny forehead. “Now we'll have him forever. And we'll have each other for that long, too.”



“Okay. Now, open your eyes.” Ezra whispered into my ear, his warm body pressed into my back. He removed his fingers from my face, using them to keep me from stealing a premature glance at my Conceding Day gift. He had made it his top priority to ensure my ignorance regarding the contents of the gift until just the right moment. And in this moment, all I wanted to do was stay here a little longer, our bodies close enough to feel the heat radiating from us, the comforting feeling of his hands roaming down my body and resting on my hips.

When I was finally able to open my eyes, only white clouded my vision. The sparkling white marble arches and endless corridors were nearly blinding. I had been here before, with Ezra. This was the palace's library.

Why had he brought me here?

I turned into him, my shoulder brushing his chest. He must've seen the confusion in my eyes because his lip curled into a playful smirk. Still, he didn't say anything.

“What am I looking at?” I asked him, looking between him and the walls of books. Clearly, I had missed something. Was there anything different about this place since the last we had been here?

As I scoped out the area once more, searching for any signs of what could possibly be different, I noted the large evergreen tree in the center of the atrium where Ezra had brought me. Garlands filled with oranges and cinnamon sticks decorated the circular space at the center of the library; some were even woven throughout the tree itself.

But the greenery and ornamentation was nothing out of the ordinary during this season. Ezra seemed to be faithful to the tradition, because the palace had been filled with decorations for the upcoming ball, which was to be held at the castle later tonight.

Solana mentioned that the palace was more elaborate than in years past, and she had the feeling it was because this was my first time celebrating the holiday.

He silently gave me his hand, gesturing for me to follow him deeper into one of the halls, stopping only when we entered a small reading room. To my right was an entryway table, a mirror, and other portraits lining the wall. To my left, a fire glowed brightly in the hearth, another evergreen sitting in the corner with gifts underneath it.

At last, Ezra finally spoke. “It’s yours, Little Fish. All of it.”

I looked at the presents under the tree, each wrapped in navy and gold paper and topped with an oversized bow. My eyes filled with tears, looking between each package that Ezra had picked specifically for me.

“Ez...” My voice cracked.

“Not just those, darling.” Ezra chuckled, running his hand down my hair before cupping my cheek. The tattoo on his forearm, the one that matched

mine, sparkled in the candlelight. “This place, the library. It’s yours to do with it as you want. I’ll admit that this place has been lacking a bit of... personal touch. I want you to redesign it. In fact, I think that the entire palace could use your beautiful eye, but I want you to start here—where it needs you the most.”

My heart swelled at the implication of his words. He had once told me that this was where he and his mother would go to find a new book for her to read to him every night. And he was giving it to me?

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat. “Why—why would you do that?”

His eyes searched mine for several long seconds, his face so close to mine that I could see the freckle on his lip and the details of his eyes. He was truly beautiful, something to be marveled at.

“You’re mine, Amaris. Everything that is yours is better because of you. *I’m* better because of it. Because I’m yours. So, take it, please, and make it better.”

My tears tasted like the salt from the sea as they reached my lips, the weight of his words nearly causing my knees to buckle. I had known that as the Queen of Erison and Western Dominion, I could do with the palace as I pleased. But I never thought to completely make it how I saw fit, especially a place that held so much sentimental value for Ezra. It was another reason to love him deeper, his thoughtfulness for me.

“What would you have me do with it?” I asked.

Ezra shrugged. “Change it, decorate it, paint it whatever color you envision. Whatever you’d like to do. Or tear it all down, burn every godsdamn book, and fill it with all the smutty books you and your friends read in your book club.” He pulled me close, pressing his hard body into

mine. “As long as only I receive the benefits of those dirty little books of yours.”

I giggled, looking at the two of us in the mirror. “I read mostly textbooks. But that doesn’t keep me from imagining things any less.”

“Hmmm,” Ezra murmured. “What exactly do you imagine about me, alone with you in your library?”

I looked into the mirror hanging above the console table. My reflection stared back, Ezra towering over my figure, looking at me like I had hung the suns and moon myself. He turned my chin to face him once more. “Am I allowed to tell you mine?”

Before I could respond, he continued, trailing his hands from my face, down my collarbone. “I imagine you, Little Fish, underneath me, your legs wrapped around me as I fuck you on that table.” His knuckle grazed lightly over the swell of my breast, and I shivered.

My throat dried, unable to speak.

“I don’t even think we’d have time to remove your corset or your dress before I have my way with you.”

When he brushed his lips against mine, the realm collapsed around us, leaving only us two in this library. *My library.* I still couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

Ezra’s hand came around to grab my backside, kneading the flesh in his palms and spreading me slightly, causing a whimper to escape me. Then, my legs were around his waist as he lifted me with ease, his hard shaft thick against my center.

I was weak by his touch, needy for him to fulfill his promises as he kissed me and tasted me. When my ass landed on the dresser, Ezra was below, on his knees, and hoisting up my skirts.

Before I had time to catch my breath, his mouth landed on my center, right where my nerves were throbbing with desire and need. Waves of ecstasy rushed through me as I fisted his topknot, rolling into him to deepen the pleasure. And when the world broke around me, he moaned in approval, straightening to stand over me. Even with me perched on top of the table, he had to bend to meet my lips.

Then, he pulled me from the table, my feet hitting the solid ground once more. He whirled me around to face the mirror, my skirt thrown above my knees. "Hold on tight, Little Fish." He breathed, and something hard and slick met the parted flesh between my legs. Ezra pushed my neck down, bending me over. "It'll be a rough ride."

When he slid himself inside me, I gripped the table, holding his gaze in the mirror. I couldn't help the cry that broke from my lips as he thrust himself into me over and over, causing the table to strike the wall in a fast-paced rhythm.

As Ezra finished inside of me, his body folded into mine and he slowed his movements. His breath caressed the side of my neck, and he kissed along my collarbone, sending little seeds of pleasure sprouting underneath my skin.

"The library wasn't as bad as I originally thought," I said, and Ezra burst out laughing.

"In that case, we'll have to give every room in our home a try. For some reason, I find the rest of the palace to be extremely distasteful. Don't you agree?"

# PRONUNCIATION GUIDE AND GLOSSARY

## **Characters:**

(In sister birthing order from oldest to youngest)

**Azaliah** (A-zale-leah)

Princess of the Opal Sea

**Adrienne** (Aid-re-enne)

Princess of the Sapphire Sea

**Alota** (Ah-lot-ah)

Princess of the Quartz Sea

**Alto** (Al-to)

Princess of the Amethyst Sea

**Ava** (Ave-ah)

Princess of the Amber Sea

**Amaris** (A-mare-is)

Princess of the Emerald Sea

(In order of mention in the book)

**Erza Anaforiene** (Ez-ra On-a-for-ee-in)

Prince of Erison, Heir Apparent to the Western Dominion

**McCollum** (Mc-Call-luhm)

Ava's fiancé, from Eastern Dominion

**Nazaro Strauhn** (Naz-ar-o St-ron)

King of the Six Seas of Vale

**Nephtali** (Nef-tall-ee)

The sea witch who grants Amaris the ability to become a human

**Elecktra** (Ee-leck-trah)

A sea serpent, Nephtali's companion

**Zakheus** (Za-key-us)

King of the Eastern Dominion

**Verin Anaforiene** (Vare-inn On-a-for-ee-in)

King of the Western Dominion, Ezra's father

**Solana** (So-law-nah)

Amaris's healer and friend

**Priscilla Mayawell** (Pris-cil-la Miya-well)

High Lady of Azranth

**Izan Mayawell** (Eye-zon Miya-well)

Lord of Azranth

**Brazlyn** (Br-az-lin)

Assasin of Eastern Dominion, 2nd in command to Ava. Shape-shifter and fire Sorcerer

**Places:**

**Vale** (Vay-le)

The name of the realm that the four dominions reside

**Erison** (Air-ah-son)

City nearest to Mermaid's Cove, capital of the Western Dominion

**Zhargen** (Zar-gon)

City located in the Western Dominion

**Azranth** (Az-ran-th)

City located in the Western Dominion

**Cammesian** (Cam-ah-see-an)

City located in the Western Dominion

**Silestone** (Sy-el-stone)

City located in the Western Dominion

**Other:**



### **Claiming Night**

The night celebrated among the mermaids in Mermaid's Cove where they can surface from the Sapphire Sea to take their first male or female as prey.

### **Conceding Day**

A Valian holiday celebrating the two suns of Vale eclipsing. The time of year when the suns are highest, usually in mid to late winter. The larger sun takes the lead in the sky

### **The Eclipsing**

The ritual used to bind two crossed mates to one another for life, binding a permanent golden cord on their forearms.

### **Erimaic** (Air-ah-may-ic)

The language native to the region or region(s) surrounding Erison.

### **Hexsenic** (Hex-zin-ic)

A type of poison

### **Lux D'Solois** (Lu-xd-sol-ee)

Goddess of Light. Often worshipped in the Eastern Dominion.

### **Surpassing Day**

A Valian holiday celebrating the two suns of Vale eclipsing. The time of year when the suns are at their lowest, usually in mid to late summer. The smaller sun takes the lead in the sky.

### **Palogian** (Pal-oh-gee-en)

The language native to the region or region(s) surrounding Paglon. Also used synonymously for the people group of Paglon.

**Valian** (Val-ee-an)

Referring to the people of Vale in all four dominions

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Lastly, to my future readers. If just by captivating one of you, I will have done my job well. I hope that this book means something to you as much as it means to me.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Florence's devotion to story-telling began at a young age through journaling, creative writing classes, and lots (and lots) of books. Her debut novel, *A Sea of Blood and Sapphire*, has been a life-long dream to publish. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama with her husband and two dogs. When she isn't spending quality time with her family, she is most likely daydreaming about her next novel and listening to a Spotify playlist with a cup of coffee in hand.

Interested in keeping in touch? Follow Florence on Instagram  
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