



MIDNIGHT

BY

THE

SEA

BOOK TWO OF THE GOLDEN ISLES TRILOGY

GISELE BRISEIA

Midnight By The Sea

THE GOLDEN ISLES TRILOGY

BOOK TWO

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Contents

Foreword

Prologue

1. Rose
2. Rose
3. Rose
4. Rose
5. Rose
6. Rose
7. Rose
8. Rose
9. Davis Brown
10. Rose
11. Rose
12. Rose
13. Rose
14. Rose
15. Rose
16. Perry Brown
17. Rose
18. Rose
19. Rose
20. Davis Brown
21. Rose
22. Rose
23. Rose
24. Rose
25. Rose
26. Rose
27. Rose
28. Davis Brown
29. Rose
30. Perry Brown

31. [Rose](#)
32. [Rose](#)
33. [Rose](#)
34. [Rose](#)
35. [Rose](#)
36. [Davis Brown](#)
37. [Rose](#)
38. [Rose](#)
39. [Rose](#)
40. [Rose](#)
41. [Rose](#)
42. [Rose](#)
43. [Davis Brown](#)
44. [Rose](#)
45. [Davis Brown](#)
46. [Rose](#)
47. [Rose](#)
48. [Joseph Kelley](#)

[Want Extra Spicy Scenes?](#)

[My Dearest Readers: Thank you!](#)

[Sunrise By The Sea](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also By](#)

[Glossary](#)

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The Golden Isles

For those who struggle with change...

SAME

Foreword

This story contains mention of certain sensitive topics such profanity, explicit sexual content, body horror, violence, threats of violence, animal death and maiming (minimal description), mentions of torture, torture (on page), drowning, death, and other topics that may be sensitive to some reader. For a full list of content warnings and tropes please visit my [website](#).

Prologue

ROSE



ONE YEAR AGO

Sand was rough against my cheek, the sun beating down on me. Despair unlike any I'd ever felt before clouded my mind. It seeped into every cell, every atom of my body. Will had left me, trapping me on the beach in a bubble of magic so I couldn't follow him, and with everything I'd lost... I couldn't cope.

I shattered.

Rather than let the wounded remains of me scatter, the roots from the island—the ephemeral tendrils I'd never seen, only felt—held the fragmented pieces of my heart and soul. Tender warmth filled the spaces between my broken parts and made sure none of me blew away in the wind.

It was constant, familiar, like an old friend. It whispered to me, telling me to stay as long as necessary. To take as much time as I needed.

Long after the magic bubble came down, I lay still on the beach, reaching for the numbness that'd served me for so long, but it was beyond my grasp. I was left to feel *everything* I'd bottled up, to relive every anguished moment. And all I could do was let it happen.

Time passed.

My phone buzzed, and with a sluggish hand, I reached into my pocket to pull it out. It was my Auntie Violet—Vi—the woman who'd taken me in and given me a job after the chaos

of my father passing. The one who still had no idea about the truth of the Golden Isles...

The one who I could never tell about what actually happened that night in the cave.

Rubbing the back of my hand across my eyes to clear away the tears, I opened the message.

VI

Sorry to bother you while you're out but could you bring back some sugar?

We're almost out

ME

Ofc

Anything else we need?

Nope

That should be it

Ok

I'll be back soon

Be safe

Ily

ily2

Locking my phone, I slipped it back into my pocket.

I'd lost so much, so many people. But Vi was still there. She still needed me, and I had to get back to her before she started worrying about me. After all, it'd been barely two weeks since I'd been pulled out of the ocean since the "accident"...

Since Eli died.

With the last dregs of energy I possessed, I pulled myself up. Each movement was excruciatingly slow, but I managed to get myself to my feet. The roots, still holding me together, whispered encouraging words even in the face of walking up the cliff face to return to my car. They pushed me to take the first step.

Then another.

And another.

CHAPTER 1

Rose



ONE YEAR LATER

My sheets tangled around my legs. I couldn't breathe, my lungs constricting as panic coursed through me.

With a shaking hand, I pushed my sweat-soaked hair out of my face to better see the room. I searched the shadows for the faces of the phantoms that haunted me. Yet there was no one. It was only a dream.

A dream... a nightmare... that was seared into my mind with perfect clarity.

The ocean before me was endless. The calm, dark waters stretched as far as the eye could see and softly lapped at my ankles. Though it was night, there was no moon here; only the light of a thousand stars shined as the Milky Way arched overhead in magnificent splendor.

A male voice whispered along my senses. "Rose... Rose. Help me... Save me..."

Something in my heart tugged, guiding my body forward into the water as if it knew who I sought lay within the inky black depths, and I was helpless to deny the urge. With every step forward, the water rose, first from my ankles, then to my calves, and next to my waist. When it reached my shoulders, I plunged myself fully beneath the surface and listened for the voice to call out again.

"Rose, please..."

The desperate plea propelled me forward. I swam further out to sea, keeping an ear out for the man's cries, but no matter how far I swam, no matter which direction I went, the voice never got any louder. I searched the shallows, the trenches, explored every reef and wreckage, and still no signs of the man could be found.

Where was he? Where could he be? Would I ever be able to find him?

As self-doubt crept in, his pleas took on a sharper edge.

"You promised to save me, Rose," the voice grated. "You swore to free me. You swore!"

His last words were screamed directly into my head, the volume like a knife to my mind. It knocked the breath out of my lungs, and I began sinking into the darkness below me, my hands pressing to my temples to soothe the pain. I sank until my feet hit solid ground, in a cavernous room with blue-green light and drawings alive on the walls.

"I'm sorry! I'm trying to find you," I whispered in return. "I swear I am!"

"You've forgotten your vow! You are a failure, Rose McKenzie!"

My mind zeroed in on one word, and it echoed in my head over and over and over again until I screamed.

Failure.

Failure...

FAILURE!

"No!" I shouted upon waking, only to realize there was no one there to refute. It was just a dream. A horrid, soul-wrenching dream. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I buried my face in my hands and cried.

Eight weeks. Eight weeks I'd been free from having nightmares. Yet in the span of only a few days, I'd suffered through six of them. All had the same ending but with

different voices screaming at me for failing them. And all of them felt so real. I'd awake still tasting the saltwater on my lips and feeling the exhaustion in my muscles.

As I calmed and my tears subsided, counting my breaths and naming things I could sense in reality, I could think more clearly about what the dream was.

A cry for help.

In another world, I wouldn't have put stock in my dreams. They usually were nothing more than the mind working through things or impressions from occurrences during the day. But in this world, in a world full of hidden magic and supernatural creatures called Otherkind... in a world where I'd bound my own soul to a magic no one understood... I knew it was more.

Once I was calm, I kicked my sheets off my legs and hopped out of bed. I wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep, not with the urgency vibrating through my body. If the souls living within me wanted me to go back to the sacred cave where all this started, I would.

Flicking on the light to the bathroom, my own reflection startled me, and I quickly looked away from it to head to the toilet. Ava joked I was attempting to join the sickly Victorian child's club with how I'd changed. I couldn't really refute it, not when the ghost of myself stared back at me in the mirror: dark, bruise-like circles marring the pale of my usually somewhat golden skin, eyes—one of ocean blue with a jagged golden line across it and the other of honey-brown—haunted by memories, and a tangled mess of long caramel-colored hair. Only recently had I gained enough weight back to not look so gaunt. Despite my recent improvement in mood, my appearance still matched the hurt I nursed inside.

Hair, teeth, face, bathing suit, and clothes were easy to achieve without waking my Aunt Violet downstairs; it was a miracle my screaming hadn't done so. Once I was ready, I jotted down a note and set it on the kitchen table before heading out, making sure to lock the door and reset the security system alarm when I was outside. Slipping between

the houses, I bypassed my car and walked across the street where my pride and joy was docked: *Poseidon's Beloved*.

After unmooring her, I stepped onto the deck of my boat, running my hand along the railing as I walked towards the helm. I bought her around Christmas from a friend of the Kings. He'd lived on the boat year-round until his children convinced him to move closer to them as he'd been getting up there in years. The moment I saw her, I fell in love, and in the interim five months, I'd spent a lot of time making her my own. Vi, however, hated her with a passion, which was one of the reasons I'd felt it necessary to slip out undetected.

Looking out through the window as I stepped up to the helm, I took a moment to center myself. To bring myself back to the present before I put my keys in the ignition and set off. My eyes traced over my surroundings as I took deep, measured breaths.

A fine mist clung to the surface of the water of the bay. The other islands were not much more than dark silhouettes in the fog that had descended upon the Golden Isles in the predawn light. There was a hush over the world, a stillness. Not even a bird or bug made a sound as the people of Nora slept peacefully in their beds. It was as if the whole world was still asleep, just waiting for the spell of night to break.

Taking one last deep breath, I turned on the engine and pulled away from the dock to head to my destination.

Piloting my ship came as naturally to me as breathing. The feel of the bow cutting through the water, the purr of the engine, the way she handled—my ship was an extension of me when I was at the helm. The waves were nonexistent, and the ride was smooth as I made my way out of the bay and into the caldera itself. My destination was about an hour southwest of the islands I called home, and that meant I had time to mentally prepare myself for what was to come.

What I'd avoided doing in the last year.

My life had been a roller coaster since the night Joseph Kelley abducted me from my bed and left me to die in the cave that still haunted my nightmares. The highs had been amazing.

The shop was more successful than ever. I'd started therapy and was making progress in healing from not only that night but from the shitshow that was my childhood. I had hobbies and hung out with my friends. I'd made myself a part of my community.

None of these things, however, could offset the lows.

For the longest time, my nights had been plagued by nightmares and my days haunted by flashbacks. The day Will left snapped the fragile tethers keeping me together, and devastation set in. It was enough to send me to therapy three times a week for several months, and I'd only recently tapered off to once a week. Part of it, my therapist thought, was that my guilt triggered me to relive everything over and over again. The other was the fact that my psyche was so fractured it needed a lot to be put back together.

Easing my way out of the caldera between Nora and Mariana, I went out of my way to pass by the Kings' cluster of houses on the south side of their island. As I cruised past, I honked my horn at Declan, who stood on the docks closest to his house. He had the signature King coloring with jade-green eyes, tanned golden skin, a mess of dark brown hair that was greying at the temples, and a muscled working man's physique. The man didn't look a day past his prime despite being well into his hundreds, which always shocked me. He waved at me, and I smiled, returning the gesture.

Declan—well, all the Kings—had been a source of strength throughout this past year, and I wasn't sure I could ever fully repay them for their kindness.

Now faced with the open sea and a long way before I arrived, my mind wandered. This plan of mine likely was going to be fruitless, mostly because I had no idea what exactly it was that I was going to be doing. Hell, I wasn't even sure I was going to be able to make myself step foot inside the place that was instrumental in breaking me so thoroughly. I hadn't even been able to tell Aeden, my therapist, about the dreams that echoed those that I'd had a year ago because it was too painful. Too terrifying.

I'd made a promise that day in the dark that I'd free the siren souls which had been bound to me. It'd been a desperate act, suggesting to be the new vessel for the talisman's power that was meant to make a merperson immortal and all-powerful.

All I'd been able to think of was finding a way to keep Eli from leaving and to keep the talisman away from Joseph Kelley...

And I'd lost him anyway.

Eli never finished the binding. However, he'd done enough that the power was still within me. With the increasing intensity and number of nightmares in the last week, what I once thought was going to be something I carried within me until I died now felt like a ticking time bomb in my chest.

Before the nightmares, I'd been content to ignore the fact that I was a glorified vessel for incomprehensible power. I'd not really spoken to anyone about it and had refused to let them try to undo it. In fact, I'd done my best to ignore it until I couldn't anymore. Which was why I came up with this stupid, half-baked plan to go back to where it had happened. I wanted to find out if I could communicate with the sirens to see how I could keep my promise while also cleaning up the mess that was the evidence of Eli's murder.

Filling my lungs with as much air as I could, I let it out in a long rush. *Now is not the time to ruminate on what happened. I should be mentally preparing myself for what I need to do. If I don't, I'm going to break down.*

The rest of my ride was spent attempting to meditate, to clear my mind so I could hear the souls when they were ready to speak, not that they'd ever spoken to me outside my dreams before. All too soon, however, my destination grew from a hazy dark outline in the distance to something large and looming, and all the meditation in the world couldn't stop my breath from catching in my throat.

Pulling up close to what looked like a large rock outcropping on the surface, I dropped my anchor and turned off my boat. My dream echoed in my mind once more as I

looked out at the one place I'd never wanted to return to. The place where my nightmares started.

The sacred cave.

After another deep breath, I pushed away the flashes of memory and tried to focus on the task at hand. I'd prepared for this trip weeks ago, stashing away all the materials I needed little by little as I found the nerve to look for them. After messaging my coordinates to Declan just in case, my feet guided me below deck to the living quarters. On the floor by the little kitchen table was a waterproof bag, and after pulling off my clothes so I was in my bathing suit, I hauled it up onto the deck by the ladder at the back.

Before I went into the water, I checked the contents of the bag to make sure everything was there and pulled on the headlamp. The cave had no natural source of light, so I had to pack several battery-powered ones to illuminate the space enough for me to clean it. In it was also a bucket for water, a scrub brush, as well as several bottles of rock- and ocean-safe cleaner, as the last thing I wanted was to damage either the cave or the water with chemicals. Luckily for me, the selkies had exactly what I needed and made a batch for me—no questions asked.

Once I was certain it was all there, I zipped the bag back up and pulled the strap across my body. Then I made sure my pearl necklace—the one that enabled me to breathe underwater, Will's gift to me—was secure around my neck before stepping off the end of my boat and into the water. The bag's weight helped me quickly sink to the floor, and when my feet were planted in the sand, I switched on my headlamp.

With the rising sun behind the island hiding the grotto, I was bathed in shadow, the light shining from lamp making the white sand glitter. However, it did little to dispel the murky depths of the cave entrance. The great stone that usually hid the tunnel to the cave had been pushed to the side, leaving the passageway open and vulnerable. There was something about the impenetrable curtain of black that made me want to turn back, to forget it ever existed, especially since memories crept back up.

It was impossible not to be transported right back into that moment as I peered into the gaping maw of darkness. The utter desolation at being left there to die echoed in my very soul as the memory overlapped reality.

Will standing over Eli and I with Eli's heart in his hand...

Eli's blood on my hands and the heat seeping from his lifeless body...

The tiny sliver of light from the space between the rock and the tunnel...

Shaking my head, I pushed the images away and forged ahead. I didn't have time to get caught in webs of memories. Not now.

Swimming through the tunnel to the cave with a light was an odd experience. Previously, I'd gone in blindly, as the sun's bright rays were unable to reach this place, so seeing drawings all along the walls was new to me. I could tell as I moved through the tunnel that it was an expanded version of how the Goldens came to the islands on one side, and on the other was the story of how and why they left. I promised myself that I'd pay more attention to the latter story when I was leaving.

The tugging in my chest propelled me forward, and before I was ready, the tunnel came to an end. Maneuvering the bag above my head, I put it on the ledge before hoisting myself onto it as well, expelling the saltwater from my lungs with a practiced cough. Instead of moving forward, however, I stopped when my eyes caught sight of something that brought me right back to that night.

There, between my feet, was a bloodied handprint.

It stood out in stark contrast against the pale grey stone. I tried to look away from it only to find another, then another, then another, all accompanied by long streaks of blood from me crawling, leading back into the heart of the cave itself. My

heart jumped into my throat, beating wildly in my chest, from both my own rising panic but also the souls that resided there.

I had to close my eyes and count to ten... twenty... thirty... to calm myself enough to continue, even though I dreaded every single step as I followed the path of my handprints.

I stopped at the mouth of the cave, my headlamp the only source of illumination, and my eyes zeroed in on the spot where my life had been altered forever. It took a moment for my mind to make sense of what I was looking at, but when it did, my whole body went rigid. My breath seized in my lungs. There on the ground were two outlines: one bigger form lying prone in the center of the room and a smaller form right next to the wall.

How long had I spent in the dark, laying in his cooling blood to have made such an outline? Even now, those memories wiped any and all other thought from my mind as my eyes followed the bloody path of handprints from where I'd crawled away to find the exit to get out. They led straight to a wall and then a series of handprints dotted along the cold stone until they met the tunnel entrance. There they stopped, and splotches of crimson colored the wall where I'd rested. More handprints would lead to the water.

Bile rose in my throat when I turned back to the center of the room. I looked for evidence that the selkies had been here; I knew they had been to have gotten Eli's body, but there were no footprints or even flipper marks to be seen. It didn't really matter, I supposed.

I focused on setting up the lights that I'd packed. After so long—though, I knew it would likely be a stain—I wanted to try to remove the evidence of Eli's death, to cleanse the space of the tragedy that had occurred here.

There weren't enough lamps to light up the whole space, so I set them up around the spot where the evidence was the worst to start with. Then, taking out the things I'd need from my bag, I went to fill the bucket with water before returning to my chosen starting point. My eyes caught on the stains again,

and the pull of those memories sucked me under their spell despite trying to push them away. Getting on my knees, I started scrubbing.

I struggled internally as I painstakingly scoured the stone, fighting the memories I'd purposefully tucked away into a dark back closet in my mind in order to function. But there they were, bright and vivid and as real as the day they were made. Soon, sobs wracked my body, but I kept scrubbing, hoping against hope that maybe if I cleaned this physical space, I would scrub it from my mind as well.

I was not so lucky.

My tears mixed with the water and the cleaner I applied to the stains until there was nothing more to cry, and all I could do was keep going. I stopped only to fetch more water and to send a message to Vi that I was still alive and still out before I went back to it.

Over and over again the images of that night played before me, as if making up for the year I'd tried not to think about it at all.

In the end, I'd exhausted every single ounce of energy in me to ensure there was no more taint of death here. If anyone came to this place, they would not know anything tragic had happened at all. But the price was steep: my insides were wrung out of all emotion and only numbness was left behind.

Emptying the bucket one last time, I dragged my feet back to the cave, then sank to the ground to rest with my back against the wall, much like I'd done nearly a year ago. Though I wanted to leave, there were still two things I needed to do. Taking in a deep breath, I steadied myself.

"Hey, Eli," I started, my voice scarcely above a whisper. "I've missed you so much."

As if speaking to an old friend, as if we were just simply catching up after a long time, I told him about me and Vi, about therapy with a kelpie named Aeden. I told him about the islands and how things were beginning to recover. There was

nothing I left out. All this despite me talking to him nearly every day just to pretend he wasn't gone at all.

“Oh, and Jesse and Callie are growing up so fast! We get a call from them every few weeks or so.” I paused, then sighed. “Well, Jesse calls us. Callie's still too angry about what happened. I wish I could tell her, but with her being so young and the fact that I'm not even supposed to know about Otherkind... I couldn't. I just hope that, wherever you are, you have the chance to watch over them and see them grow.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. The guilt of surviving when he hadn't rose up inside me, overtaking the numbness and raking sharp claws against my heart. I shoved the image of his unseeing eyes away, then stood to make my way back to the center of the room.

“I'm sorry I wasn't the one to die that day. It should've been me. You had so much more to live for than I do,” I whispered. Try as I might, throughout the many therapy sessions I'd gone to, it was the one thing my coping skills couldn't help. At my words, I felt a pulsing warmth in my chest, and I sighed again. “I know, I know. I'm getting to it.”

I plonked myself down in the very center of the spiral on the cave floor and tried to meditate and center myself, but my mind refused to settle. So, I turned my thoughts inward, staring unseeingly at the darkened hallway while I addressed the sirens residing within me.

Okay, I'm here. I've done my task, and now I ask what you need me to do to free you. You have my undivided attention. Please tell me what you need. How can I release you from the prison that is my flesh without dying?

My query was met with only silence, as always when I was awake.

Alright, well, if you can't speak, that's fine, but please guide me. You obviously have the power to influence me and my reality. I'm just one measly human. How can I help?

Again, there was only silence. Not even the slightest stirring within my chest answered me. Were they even

listening? Were they even there?

Well, I guess if you aren't going to give me anything, I hope this proves to you I'm a woman of my word. If you must use my dreams as a medium to communicate with me, so be it, but I ask that you please speak plainly. I cannot divine an answer from riddles. I'm not that smart.

At this point, the lack of an answer was expected, and I accepted there was nothing more I could do. I stood and gathered my things, packing them away in my bag before readjusting the headlamp. After I slung the bag across my body, I took one last look at the cave, not knowing if I'd ever see it again... if I'd ever want to see it again.

“Atargatis,” I said, unsure of the proper address for a Goddess that was not my own, “I hope that my efforts to clean this space are to your standards, and I hope one day, it can be reclaimed by good memories and as a space for veneration of you, as I think it was meant to be. I'm sorry again for being part of its desecration.”

I opened my mouth to say more but decided against it. Turning away from the cave, I made my way back to my boat, unsure of whether I did the right thing or not.

CHAPTER 2

Rose



By the time I reached the surface, the sun was low in the sky. I'd been down there longer than I'd wanted to be, and as soon as my head was above water, my entire body grumbled at having skipped breakfast and lunch. Wrinkling my nose, I grabbed the ladder at the back of my boat and hauled myself up onto the deck.

I deposited my bag by the cabin door before ringing out my hair and grabbing the towels I'd prepped to wrap the dripping strands in to dry. Next, I descended into the cabin to change my clothes and grab food. I went back on deck and sat down to watch the sun set as I ate.

"You know, Eli," I said aloud between bites, a habit I'd picked up in the last year despite how stupid it was to talk to a dead man, "I bet you and the kids would've loved coming out to watch the sunset over the ocean with me on my boat. I bet Will would've, too."

At the mention of Will, my heart twinged. Since he left me on the beach that day, I'd not heard a word from him. No calls, no messages, nothing. Then again, it shouldn't have surprised me. He *had* put magic around me so I couldn't follow him into the sea, leaving me there without so much as a backward glance. That didn't stop him from contaminating my thoughts and breaking my heart all over again when I realized what we both lost that day.

One month had dragged out into two, then three, then four. After six months, my anxiety crept up. Nightmares about his

father taking his mind from him happened almost daily, adding to the already awful cacophony I had polluting my mind.

It took everything in me not to call him, not to see if he was okay, but I held off. He'd made it clear I wasn't wanted. I could respect that.

"Fuck, I miss him so damn much, Eli. I hate that I miss him," I whispered. "Like with you, there are so many moments I wanted to share with him. There's still so much he left unfinished. Like, would he have wanted to go to the autumn market on Casper? Would he have left his family so we could get our own house together?" I cleared my throat. "He'd shown me how he envisioned our future together, and I didn't realize until he was gone how much I'd wanted that, too.

"Maybe it's time to put that dream away... along with the dream of you, the kids, Vi, and I being one big happy family together. I guess I'm not meant to have happy endings." My laugh was bitter. "I suppose you don't get to have your dreams come true, either. It's only fair that I don't get a happily ever after since you won't."

A great weight settled on my shoulders, exhaustion seeping into my bones as I watched the sun sink below the horizon. Without asking, I knew it was the sirens trying to communicate with me by the way their energy grew as mine waned, but I asked anyway, just to be sure.

"You want me to go to sleep now?"

The energy I knew to be theirs thrummed in response, and I sighed, slumping. Aunty Vi was *not* going to be pleased. She hated that I bought a boat and often spent hours out on it. Not in a controlling way, but ever since being told Eli died from a "boat-related accident"—the lie Declan came up with to explain why they couldn't bring his body back, seeing as it had a giant, gaping hole where his heart should be—she'd feared something similar happening again. I couldn't blame her. I'd have lost my shit, too, were I her.

As I popped the last bit of sandwich into my mouth, I pulled my phone out again, took a picture of the gorgeous sunset, then messaged Vi my coordinates and that I was going

to be spending the night on the boat, citing that I didn't want to be piloting my ship after dark. Just as I suspected, Vi did not respond favorably.

VI

Sweetheart, are you sure you can't make it home before dark?

ME

I'm sorry, Aunty

I'm too far away to make it back safely

Alright, but I'd like you to be back in the morning.

Of course

I know cleanup is tomorrow

I don't care about that

I just don't want to worry you won't come home this time

Reading that had me cringing down to my very soul. My eyes pricked with tears.

ME

I promise you I'll never do that to you again

VI

I know, sweetie

I love you

Be safe

I will

I love you too <3

If I'd felt guilty before, it paled in comparison to what I felt now. I couldn't even imagine how she felt when I didn't show up for work and no one could find me for the several days I was missing. Then to find out I'd been hurt and her lover was dead? It was something I still grappled with, especially knowing I could never tell her that her source of anxiety regarding boats was a lie and that it was Joseph Kelley she needed to be wary of.

With the sun fully set, I gathered up my dinner bits as well as my bag from earlier and prepared myself for bed.

I loved this boat specifically because it was also made for full-time living with a kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom below deck, and it was exactly how I wanted it to be. Once I had my PJs on and my hair was brushed and braided, I climbed into bed, and almost as soon as my head hit the pillow, I slipped into a dream.

All around me was darkness, the cooling blood beneath me growing more viscous with every passing moment. I had no energy to move or to cry or to do anything but drag air in and out of my lungs as I gripped the cold flesh of Eli's arm. As I grieved the man I looked at as a father.

I drifted between consciousness and unconsciousness. I never released his arm, as if, should I let go, he'd disappear before my very eyes and cease to be forevermore.

It wasn't fair that I lived when he died. It wasn't right that I should live while his children and girlfriend and family were deprived of him.

I was no one.

It should've been me.

Time was nonexistent. There was no sun or clocks to indicate how long I'd laid there, and in my mourning, it didn't matter. I was going to lay here with him, so he wasn't alone. If I joined him in death, well, it was what I deserved.

When the blue-green lights began to glow once again, dim at first, then growing brighter and brighter, I didn't bother to move. It was my eyes playing tricks on me. But soon, their lights burned my eyes with their brilliance, and I shifted my head to block it out.

Had someone come back to save me?

Or had Joseph come back to finish the job?

Eli's arm jerked out from beneath my hand, and I opened my eyes to see him kneeling before me. His expression was inhuman, animosity obvious across his usually kind features.

He bared his sharp, needle-like teeth and growled.

"Eli, how—"

"What the hell are you doing, Rose?" he snarled. "Get the fuck up."

His hands yanked me up to my feet with a bruising grip, and it took a moment for my legs to gain enough strength to keep me upright. Before I could say another word to answer him, he continued, his words battering my already wounded heart.

"I sacrificed my life for you, and this is what you do with it? You're just going to lay down and die?" He shook his head in disgust. "If I'd known this was what you were going to do, I wouldn't have let Joseph kill me."

A second voice came from my right, and I turned to see it was my father, shaking his head with his arms crossed. Disappointment was emblazoned across his stern features. "Rose Annemarie McKenzie, how could you squander everything you've been given? I told you I wanted you to be nothing less than extraordinary and gave you the resources to do just that. Yet you're choosing to rot next to a corpse in a cave. You disappoint me."

A third voice, my mother, yelled from my left, and my heart stopped as she screamed at me. "What a worthless waste of flesh you are! How could you do this to your own mother? You left me homeless with my reputation in tatters, and now people are going to think I had something to do with your death! It's

like you want me to go to prison. I should've aborted you when I found out I was pregnant!"

I shrank away from them, trying to back away and get space, but they kept advancing no matter how far I moved. Their voices grew louder and louder until they were screeching all at once, the sound like knives in my ears.

"—My sacrifice was for nothing!—"

"—You deserve nothing I've given you!—"

"—You took everything from me!—"

I pressed my hands to my ears to try to drown them out, but one of them wrenched my hands away as they hurled more abuse at me.

I looked for an escape, my eyes filled with tears obscuring my vision, but a hand gripped my chin and forced me to look up. It was Eli, and his grip was a breath away from breaking my jaw with how hard he held me. His eyes bore into mine as they shifted from a tempestuous ocean-blue to pure black.

"Eli, please... I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Save your apologies. My children are fatherless because of my mistake in thinking I should lay down my life for you, a disgusting human." He brought his face close enough to mine that the heat from his breath against my skin made me shiver. He hissed, "You were right. It should've been you."

His words were a bullet to my heart, and I choked back a sob as I shoved him away from me, darting between him and my mother. I ran for the tunnel entrance, desperate to escape them.

But as I ran, my father's words chased me, "All you ever do is run, you coward! You shame me!"

The hallway leading out of the cave was pitch-black, and I couldn't see a thing, so when it ended, I plunged straight into the water, its freezing temperature shocking me to my core. Instead of hitting the tunnel floor, however, I kept sinking and sinking and sinking. Twisting around, I tried to regain my bearings, only to find that all around me was an ocean, the

cave nowhere to be found. Below me was only blackness, and above me were gradients of blue lit up by what appeared to be a full moon.

As I tried to find any sort of landmark to give me guidance, something in the distance caught my eye. At first it was just a glint, like a sparkle of the moonlight off something shiny, but as it came closer, it brightened everything around it. Its orb-like shape solidified and morphed into one I recognized: a siren.

She was undeniably female, her breasts bared for me to see, but they were not what caught my attention. Her form was unlike any I'd seen before. Her scales were white and opalescent, glinting rainbows in the moonlight, and her skin, claws, and fins were so pale they were nearly translucent in contrast with the long flowing dark hair floating in waves around her.

She was terrifying and beautiful, but it wasn't what she was that frightened me. It was who she was that had a scream building in my throat.

She was me.

When I looked into her eyes—both ocean-colored but the left with a golden line bisecting it—awareness of who and what she was passed between us. The not-me-but-me siren smiled, showing me a mouthful of sharp teeth made for tearing flesh from bone.

“So, we finally meet,” she said, her voice sounding nothing like mine at all. Hers was deeper, ethereal, and each word was threaded with pure magic that made me shiver.

I jerked my body around to try to get away from her when my fear overtook me, but something caught me, stopping me from escaping.

“Now that's just rude,” she mocked, swimming gracefully back into my field of view.

My body wouldn't move, as if invisible ropes held me in place. The not-me siren grinned maliciously, reaching forward as she closed the distance between us. Though I tried to get

away, my limbs wouldn't cooperate, and all the while, the bindings holding me in place tightened with every breath until I was choking.

That claw-tipped hand plunged into my chest and ripped out my heart. All I could do was watch as she held it in front of my face, its meaty flesh still beating wildly in her hand.

One squeeze had me coughing up blood as my ribs cracked, and she laughed at the agony written upon my face. Her other claw came up and speared my heart, then wrenched something free: my soul.

Beneath layers and layers of other colors—the sirens' souls and the raw power of the talisman—was my own light-blue soul, fractured and dimming under the immense power heaped upon it. The not-me siren tossed away my heart, letting it sink into the midnight depths below us, as her eyes took in the unnatural configuration in her hand. One tap of her claw against it, and the sirens began screaming all at once, pushing against the power binding them there.

“You want to free them?” she asked, that savage grin still on her face. “All you have to do—”

Her claw snapped one of the ties holding the power of the talisman around my soul.

“—is release—”

She snapped another.

“—these bindings—”

And another.

“—and let them—”

And another.

“—kill you.”

Her claws plucked and snapped more and more of the binding ties until only one was left. I struggled anew, not knowing what would happen if she released the talisman's power. I wanted to shout at her to stop, but nothing came out but bubbles.

My siren doppelgänger wagged a finger at me, and when she spoke, her tone was patronizing. “Ah, ah, ah. None of that. You promised. You do want to free them, don’t you?”

I nodded, words still impossible to form.

“Then you have to die, as no human can fulfill this promise.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to die. There had to be another way. Any other way.

The not-me siren laughed before popping the glowing orb into her mouth. I watched as the light glowed behind her teeth, then descended down her neck as she swallowed it and my soul settled into her chest. Her heart pulsed with its light until it was absorbed completely by her, and when it did, her eyes caught mine.

“Now it’s time to die.”

She swiped her claws across my throat, cutting off my silent screams as a pulse of power rippled out of me...

My body hit the floor of my ship as I screamed, unable to stop myself. I fought against the invisible bonds that had held me in place, my body thrashing. My eyes popped open, and with a gasp, the awareness I was no longer in my dream flooded me. I scrambled up from the floor, uncaring that I was in my pajamas, and went straight to the helm of my boat, my only desire being to put as much space between me and the cave as possible.

My fingers fumbled with the key, but when I turned it to start the engine, nothing happened. Not even a sputter. I tried it again—nothing. Panic cinched a vise grip around my chest as I tried every button and knob and light switch close to me, but not even the lights came on.

Nothing worked.

Stumbling away from the helm, I went back into the cabin, trying switches and lights there, only to come up empty as well. My mind screamed at me about being stuck, being left

there to die, and I couldn't stop it. I shoved at the feeling, trying to make room for rational thought on what to do next. As I was about to devolve into an utter meltdown, my head swimming from breathing too quickly, I forced myself to sit down.

Taking in one breath, I held it, then let it out in a slow and measured rush. *It was just a dream. Dreams from my own mind cannot hurt me*, I reminded myself as I took in another breath.

It took several long minutes to force my body out of its panicked flight mode, and once I could breathe without gasping, I turned towards the bedside table where my phone lay. Picking it up, I made a call to Declan, an apology on my lips for calling after midnight.

CHAPTER 3

Rose



Sitting on the deck of my boat once more, I sipped on a sports drink and nibbled on some grapes. Classical music played softly out of my Bluetooth speaker as I waited for Declan to come save me. After a panic attack like the one I'd just had, I usually needed to get some sugar and electrolytes into my body to help me balance out again. Aeden always said eating and drinking helped trick the mind into believing everything was okay. I wasn't so sure about that, given how nauseous I always felt right after a panic attack or a nightmare.

After the phone call with Declan, I changed into some clothes I kept in my boat and brushed and re-braided my hair before grabbing my snacks. Usually, I'd also take a shower, but with no electricity and in the depths of night in the middle of the ocean, that wasn't possible. I'd be home in a few hours, though, so it didn't bother me too much.

As I sat there, though, I turned over the dream again and again in my head, trying to figure out what was usual dream nonsense and what the message was. Logic told me the first half was likely my own mind being an asshole, and the second half was their message, but even that was tinged with my own fears. Survivor's guilt told me I should've been the one to die rather than Eli, but I didn't *really* want to be dead. My reason for living was the same as what it had been when I asked for help to get out of the cave: Aunty Vi would be alone. At least if Eli had lived, she'd have him and the kids.

But that clearly wasn't what happened, and I was left with a heaping pile of guilt regarding not only Eli, but also my

father and mother as well. *That's what the first part of the dream was. Nothing more than the manifestation of my upbringing making me feel bad for everything to do with me and my continued survival.*

With that in mind, the second half must have been the message. Was it true, though? Was it what the sirens wanted to tell me? It was going to have to be something I talked with Aeden about, because I couldn't figure it out on my own.

The rumble of another boat approaching had me perking up out of zen mode, and the tension in my body eased from the sound of it. I popped one last grape in my mouth and shut off my music before standing up to greet my rescuers. When the boat was in range, however, it wasn't Declan who was smiling at me, and I had to blink a few times to check to see if my eyes were seeing correctly.

"Milo?" I asked when the boat sidled up to mine and he jumped on deck.

"The very one," he replied, his huge grin never faltering. His rich jade eyes were fastened on me, as if he couldn't believe I was real, and I imagined my expression was much the same.

It'd been so long.

He strode right over to me and wrapped his arms around me in a hug. I melted into him when he rested his chin atop my head. His heady cinnamon and ocean scent filled my nose and seeped into my skin, relaxing places I hadn't known were still knotted up. How had I never noticed how warm he was? *Maybe because you never hugged him when you weren't near death, dingbat.*

The last time I'd seen him was when he'd saved me after being trapped in the cave almost a year ago. His parents told me soon after Joseph was confirmed to have left Nora, he and his crew had gone to check on the local fish and plant life, only to find Joseph had allowed overfishing which had damaged the local ecosystems in his territory. They'd spent very little time islandside since as they tried to heal the area.

“Your mom said you weren’t due back to the islands until early August,” I said, holding him just a little bit tighter. Having him in my arms unclenched something in my belly, a sense of rightness coming over me. *It’s probably just my anxiety easing. Nothing more.*

“The areas around the islands are recovering faster than we thought they would, so we’re going to give them some space and check on them later to see how they do on their own,” he replied. He squeezed me back before stepping away from me to look me over, his hands still on my shoulders. “You look really good, Rose.”

My face flamed in a blush. “Thank you. Aside from this—which, I’m so sorry you had to come out to save me again—I’ve been doing well. Therapy and all that.”

“Please don’t apologize. We want to help. And I’m happy to hear that.” We just looked at each other for a long time, not saying anything, until one of his crewmates cleared his throat behind us. “Oh, right. Can you show me the problem?”

I snorted, “Yes, Doc.”

I led him and two of his crewmates to the helm and explained what was going on, then I stepped back to let them fiddle with things while mentally adding basic ship mechanics to the list of things I ought to learn. It was fascinating to watch them work together, and I found myself smiling at their camaraderie.

My eyes kept going back to Milo, though. The lights from their ship illuminated the space around it, which made it easy for me to see him. It was like I was seeing him for the first time all over again.

His skin was tanned from his time in the sun, and his body was lean with muscle. The light smattering of freckles dusted across the tops of his cheeks and nose only added to his boyish charm, as did the messy tousle of his long, dark brown hair. Up close, I could see how dark lashes framed vibrant jade-green eyes. What got me, though, was the warmth of his smile and how his entire aura radiated the same. Knowing what I

knew about him, how caring, kind, and patient he was, made him all the more attractive in my eyes.

Not that that was hard. The man was gorgeous as sin and had been from the moment I'd laid eyes on him when he walked into Sutton's a year ago.

A not so small part of me scolded myself for thinking this way. Will and I had never officially broken up, but after a year of no contact, it might've been safe to assume there wasn't a relationship... *He trapped you in a bubble on the fucking beach. Do we need a banner to announce his intentions more clearly? There's nothing left of our one-day relationship, if you could even call what we had a relationship. Besides, he's not coming back.*

Milo caught me staring at him and gave me a salacious wink before going back to focusing on what he was doing, but it was enough that I averted my eyes from him after that, lest he catch me staring again. After a few minutes, the two crewmates went to check the engine, leaving Milo and I alone. It was Milo who broke the silence first, his grin back in full force.

"My parents have been giving me and the guys updates about you," he said casually. As if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Have they now?" I asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah, they even sent newspaper clippings and everything. You've become quite the town darling in my absence."

I wrinkled my nose to stave off the inward cringe, but I couldn't quite keep my cheeks from heating. After the town newspaper got ahold of my story, they'd started keeping casual tabs on me, most likely because there wasn't much by way of other local news stories. Well, aside from all the corruption and damage they uncovered from Joseph's time as mayor, that is.

Milo chuckled at my reaction. "You know, my favorite was the one of you laughing on the beach with one of the seals resting between your legs."

“I don’t know how they got that picture, especially because it was Ava trolling me and stealing fish from me.” I smiled at the memory until I looked at him, asking, “Why did you want to keep tabs on me?”

“The guys and I left so soon after you were rescued, and we wanted to know how you were doing, given everything that happened. My parents were happy to oblige.” He moved to sit next to me, giving me enough space to be comfortable despite how much bigger than me he was. “Of course, now you’re practically part of the family, so you get lumped in with the rest of the family updates.”

My heart warmed at that. “It’s been an incredible blessing to be welcomed into your family, especially after all I put you guys through.”

He reached over and placed his hand on my arm. “You didn’t put us through anything, Rose. We offered you our protection, meager as it was against siren magic. I know my parents and I wished we could’ve done more to help you.”

“I know. Aeden tells me the Otherkind community feels responsible for not dealing with this issue earlier and not stopping Joseph from, well, everything he did. He said the kelpies and the selkies knew of the problem but did nothing, so their help is their version of penance.” I chewed on my lip before continuing. “That doesn’t stop me from feeling guilty, of course. In fact, it makes me feel worse, if I’m being honest. I’ve no desire to be a charity case.”

“There’s nothing to feel guilty about, Rose. If we didn’t want to help, we wouldn’t, and no doubt if someone wanted to, you would’ve had your memory wiped to protect you from us. Of course, it was our fault you were exposed to us in the first place.” He had the decency to look a little sheepish.

“My knowledge of the supernatural world is the fault of Will and Joseph Kelley and no one else’s. The community as a whole shouldn’t have to clean up their messes, me included.” I stopped myself from rubbing my hand over my heart at the mention of Will’s name. *Damn him for making me ache so.*

Milo opened his mouth to reply, but his crewmates came back up and joined us. The shorter of the two of them, Cory, said, "Sorry to interrupt. We think we figured out the problem with your ship. It seems like some sort of electrical pulse overloaded the electronics and knocked a few fuses loose. We'll need to give your girl a charge and see if that helps."

"Thank you," I said, looking them in the eyes. "Do what you need to, and I'll pay you whatever you want."

The other crewmate, Jason, replied, "Ain't no need for any of that. We're happy to help. Besides, perhaps it will make him stop talkin' 'bout you."

That made me arch an eyebrow at Milo before looking back at his men. "I'm sure lack of female company means his standards are lower than usual. Being islandside should help with that." I paused, then looked back at Milo, my face wearing a faux-innocent look. "I mean, unless you're into one of the fine gentlemen you have in your crew."

Milo blinked at me a moment as if he were seeing a stranger, and his crewmates laughed. Seeing my smirk, he returned it, saying, "Unfortunately for the lads, they aren't pretty enough for me. I like my men as beautiful as my women."

"Well then. Lower standards it is." I smiled.

He chuckled. "That's most certainly not true." His eyes darkened for a split second, flickering to cinnamon then back to jade again so fast I nearly missed it. "In any case, we need to get you to shore, low opinion of yourself notwithstanding."

The men gave a mock salute but laughed as they walked away. They were back almost as soon as they left, with tools and things in hand, bypassing Milo and I to go down to the engine. Though I could've sworn they gave each other a *look* when they walked by us and snickered between themselves.

Clearly, there was some context I was missing, but I was fairly sure it had something to do with me and their captain. How much had Milo talked about me?

Did I mind that he had?

The man in question gave me a subtle sidelong glance, asking, “So. You were speaking of Will Kelley when we were interrupted. Have you spoken to him a lot since he left?”

I suppressed a shudder as my heart twinged. “No. He left to help keep his mother and sisters safe from Joseph. He hasn’t contacted me at all.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I know you two had a thing.”

“It is what it is.” I shrugged, glossing over the fact that I missed the bastard. That I still wondered about what we could’ve had... while in the same breath cursing how much it hurt.

“I’m sorry. Joseph ruined a lot for you, didn’t he?”

“That’s an understatement.” I let out a long breath. “It’s probably for the best, though. We’re both probably safer apart. Now I don’t have to wonder whether it was my fault Joseph took his mind from him or not.”

He cringed. “Still. I can only imagine how torn he must’ve been between you and his duty to his family. I don’t think it would’ve been an easy decision for him.”

Glancing over at him, Milo had the appearance of a man who knew keenly what it meant to have to choose to walk away from something he valued and desired. Reaching over, I grabbed his hand and squeezed it before looking away from him again. “I don’t think it was either, but all I can do now is wish him healing while I do the same.”

“That’s a good way to look at it.” He squeezed my hand back. I dared to turn back to him, his eyes catching mine as I did so. He opened his mouth to say something but was cut off when one of his crewmates called out from below deck.

“Alright, try turning her on!”

Milo chuckled, the double entendre not lost on him, even as it took me a moment to catch up. My cheeks blazed with a blush, making his smile wider, but he didn’t tease me for it. He reached forward and turned the key, and my beautiful ship came to life, a vibrating rumble coming from beneath our feet.

He turned back to me with a warm smile that spread from ear to ear. “Looks like we got your girl working again.”

“Thank you so much. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this.” His crew mates came up with their things in hand as I said this, so I repeated myself for them to hear. “I promise I’ll make a huge pan of Norasagna for you all to make it up to you.”

Jason grinned. “I think that would be a good enough way to make this up to us.”

Corey nodded. “Not that you need to, of course.”

“Still, thank you. I’ll message this hooligan to pick it up,” I replied.

They enthusiastically agreed to this, and after another round of thank-yous and hugs, they were shuffling off my ship and back onto their own. Watching them leave, the pit of anxiety in my stomach twisted. *What if my boat’s engine fails again? What if I crash in the dark like Vi always thinks I will? What if...*

My thought spiral was cut short when Milo put a hand on my elbow, asking, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, um, I was wondering if you could stay on my boat with me, just in case? I’d panic again if it died and you guys were too far ahead to help,” I replied, peeking up at him.

Milo’s expression was soft as he squeezed my elbow a little, his thumb rubbing the skin there. “Of course. Let me tell the boys, and I can have them follow you to Nora so they can take me back with them when you’re safely docked.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

While he went to talk with Jason and Cory, I busied myself with prepping my ship for the journey back. Well, mostly it was just fussing and resetting my controls back to what they were before I’d panic-flipped them, and by the time he returned, everything was back to how I liked it, and I was

ready to raise anchor and leave. He settled down onto a nearby bench.

“Are we ready to sail, captain?” he asked, a smile in his voice.

“We are indeed. Now, let’s hope you don’t give me performance anxiety in the meantime,” I joked. I raised the anchor and made sure everything was in order before I maneuvered my ship away from the island hiding the sacred cave and towards home.

“No judgement here. I always thought you’d be a natural at the helm,” he said, and I glanced over at him with a questioning expression. “You always looked the most at peace when you were on or near the sea, and when we went on that tour, you did really well when you were piloting my ship.”

“Even though I was close to throwing up when you decided *I* was going to dock?”

He laughed. “I didn’t see that at all. I thought you did wonderfully.”

Our conversation turned to lighter things as I followed his ship back to Nora, and he told me all about his time out at sea the past year. Something about the way his eyes lit up when he talked about the sea life and creatures he’d helped made my heart flip a little in my chest.

By the time we reached Nora, my anxiety was completely gone, and I was relaxed. Whatever it was he had in his aura, I wanted to bottle and keep for later when I was an anxious mess.

Oh well.

I docked in my spot across the way from the house, and he helped me make sure she was moored securely. Before I could thank him again, he turned to me, his expression unreadable.

“I was wondering if you’d like to come to dinner with me...” He paused, looking at his watch. “Well, I suppose tonight. I know you have the day off today.” His eyes searched my face.

“Like a date?” I asked, then cringed at my stupidity. *Of course it’s a date, ding-dong!*

“Exactly like a date. Unless you’re completely soured on Otherkind.” Mischief lit up his eyes as he spoke.

I thought about this for a moment. This was a big step. This would be... moving on from Will. Was I ready for that? *You’ll never know unless you try. Besides, it’s just one date. It’s not like I’m cheating on Will by doing this.*

“So long as you don’t take me to Okinohime, I’d love to.” Going there several times a month to hang out with Ava and Aira had kinda ruined it as a date spot. Not to mention the last time I’d tried to have a date there, Will stood me up.

He gave me an enormous grin. “The restaurant I had in mind is on Charlotte. I’ll make a reservation for tonight and pick you up.”

“I’d like that. Thank you.”

He pulled me in for another hug, saying, “I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Your company alone is that,” I said, my cheeks heating a little at my obvious flirting as he pulled away.

“You flatter me, Rose. Can I get your number? I mean, unless you’d rather I pester my sister for it for your amusement.”

“Oh, hell no. She’d never let me live it down.” He got his phone out, and I recited my number. “Message me when you know what time you’re going to pick me up?”

“Of course. Take care of yourself in the meantime, okay?” His expression was so soft, so genuine, I was taken aback for a moment.

I gave him a mock salute. “Yes, sir.”

The warmth in his expression turned a little darker. “I like the sound of that.”

My insides flip-flopped inside me when I realized his meaning, my breath catching a little. “I’ll keep that in mind for

later.”

“Until next time, Rose,” he said before turning to board his own ship, and all I could do was stare dumbly at him and wave when he left.

CHAPTER 4

Rose



“**R**ose, honey, are you okay? You keep messing with your eye,” said Vi as she brought her dishes to me where I was washing up from breakfast.

Despite being fifteen years my senior—not that she looked it, the lucky duck—was nearly my twin in appearance with her dark brown hair, honey-brown eyes, and thin figure. Today, though, she wasn’t in her usual witchy get up and Victorian hairstyle. Rather, she wore her pajamas still, a nightgown that resembled a chemise I’d bought for her birthday last fall. Her honey-brown eyes were soft with concern when I turned to her.

I paused rubbing my left eye with the back of my wrist to avoid getting soap bubbles in it, but the burning and itching continued. It’d bothered me since I woke up. Not both of them, though. Just my left one—the one injured the night Eli died—and nothing made it better. Not washing it with water, not eye drops. Nothing. It was getting to the point where my vision on that side was starting to blur.

When I looked over at her, she added, waggling her eyebrows at me saucily, “We wouldn’t want you to have to cancel your date tonight over your eye, of all things.”

“Oh jeez,” I snorted. “You act like I’m a teenager going on my first date, Aunty.”

When she replied, there was such elation in her voice, her smile reaching her eyes for the first time in such a long time. I could tell she was five seconds from dancing around the

kitchen praising the Gods for our fortune. “I’m just happy you’re going on a date, period. And the fact you’re going on a date with Milo? I’m over the moon!”

Which was the exact sentiment I’d heard all morning. I’d managed to get home early enough to get some sleep before needing to be awake for the monthly Nora clean-up, but when I’d told her about my date when we met up for breakfast, well, Vi had been positively giddy. The way her face had lit up... It was the happiest I’d seen her since before Eli’s death.

Making her smile like that filled me with equal parts joy and guilt, especially knowing I was partially responsible for her sadness in the first place.

“I’m really excited, too, Aunty. Well, nervous and excited.” I turned back to continue washing the dishes.

“Why nervous?” she asked, starting to rinse what I’d washed.

“Well, he’s my best friend’s brother. If this goes south, what happens to my friendship? Also, you know there are no secrets on these islands. I’m not looking forward to adding to Miss Winnie’s gossip. Then there’s all the stuff that happened with Will...” I huffed a pained sigh.

She shrugged. “All of those are valid concerns, I agree. But really, it’s just one dinner date, not arranging to get married. It can’t hurt to give it a chance. Life is so short not to try.”

Her smile slipped, and she began to stare off into the distance. The instant pang of guilt that rose up was a knife to the gut, and it was hard not to flinch seeing it. So, I decided to try to add levity back into the conversation.

“I mean, keep talking like that, and I’ll start thinking you have some sort of secret pact with Iris about us dating,” I replied, not even attempting to hide my smile. “Don’t think I didn’t hear the phone call you just got off with her about this. Are you trying to arrange a marriage between the two of us?” I waved my soapy sponge at her.

“It’s part of an ancient pact. Every fifth generation, a Sutton daughter must be sacrificed to the King Clan to keep the peace,” she deadpanned.

I burst out laughing. “And here I thought you were going to sell me for some cows.”

“Oh, cows will be exchanged. At least three, by our last negotiations.”

“Pfft. I’m worth at least five, maybe five and a half cows.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind the next time I speak with his parents. We wouldn’t want to sell you for less than you’re worth, after all.”

Vi and I kept chatting and joking around as I finished up the dishes before going our separate ways to get dressed for the monthly clean-up, which I didn’t want to go to at all. It took the place of my usual therapy time, which meant I had to move therapy to Monday in the evening after work, since Vi and I alternated who worked Monday through Friday and Tuesday through Saturday these days.

At least this week I can talk about what happened at the cave AND my date, should it go bad. Silver linings and all that.



As Vi and I walked up to Bryony Beach, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I groaned. I’d already had to field a call from Ava, who wanted to know if it was true that I was going on a date with her brother, and despite her giving me her blessing in the end, I wasn’t sure I was up for another round of feeding the gossipmongers. Much to my surprise—and abject delight—it was Milo, his name popping up in my notifications.

MILO

Are you still up for dinner tonight?

If you are, can I pick you up around 5:30?

I got us a reservation at 6

ME

I'm soooooo up for dinner

5:30 sounds perfect

I can't wait!

I nearly unsent that last message, feeling like it might come off a little too desperate, but seconds later I received his reply.

MILO

I can't wait to see you too

It's been too long

And sorry about Ava. I don't know how she found out.

That had me laughing. Ava did always have a knack for finding information that she wasn't necessarily supposed to have. She called it her superpower. I called it being nosy.

ME

It was probably your mom

She and Vi have been talking about this all morning

Something about an ancient pact and exchanging cows

All very sinister

MILO

I can't say I'm surprised

They're thick as thieves, those two, and always up to some mischief

Anyway, have fun at clean-up

I'll see you at 5:30 😊

See you XD

Vi waggled her eyebrows at me when I put my phone back in my pocket, which made my cheeks blaze with embarrassment. *She is taking too much delight in this... But at least she's smiling again.*

The rest of our neighborhood was congregated on the beach for the monthly clean-up of our area of Nora when we walked up, Vi chuckling to herself as I poked her in the ribs.

On the surface, the whole thing was very inspiring and was touted in our guidebooks as proof of our love of the islands. How many other places could boast that every month for the last century everyone on all five islands came together to ensure the Golden Isles were as beautiful and clean as they could be? There was a sort of magic, a sense of deepening our connections as a community that was borne of all of us performing this act of service. This was what kept me going even on the worst of days.

The reality of it, however, was that clean-up days were exhausting and ate up what little free time I had. Any fun I used to have was sapped when the new leadership made changes to the way things were done. Now, I went out of obligation rather than a genuine desire to help.

The new leadership, namely Sandra Craig, modified how our labor was organized in anticipation of newcomers moving to the island. She'd decided to pair islanders with newcomers in the hopes that they could teach the newest of us how things were done, as well as break up any "cliques" that may make

anyone new feel unwelcome. This meant Vi and I were separated, as we were both classified as “islanders” under this plan, which did not help me want to be there. It also ensured the day would drag on and on with endless rounds of small talk, if my group talked at all.

I took solace in the fact no one was happy with these decisions, as it now meant that instead of having a family day of being together and doing something meaningful for our community, everyone was separated. Turnout was lower and lower every month, and if I was really honest with myself, I considered not going. Given my status as one of the island’s founders—my ancestors Markus and Bryony Sutton had come with Thomas Golden and settled the islands with him and his family—it would be an act of open opposition.

Just as I was about to give in to the impulse to just turn around and go home, I took a step back and reminded myself it was just a few hours once a month.

It didn’t help.

When everyone was gathered, Sandra in her bright pink ‘Nora is the Greatest!’ t-shirt and khaki cargo shorts gave her usual impassioned speech about the importance of clean-up day. There was an air of self-importance in her tone as she gesticulated wildly, but it was undercut by her occasionally hitting the bill of her visor. I was almost willing to give her some grace about all this; it wasn’t her fault I was in a foul mood. However, when she gave us our assignments, that dissipated, and I groaned before I could stop myself.

For the third month in a row, I was assigned to clean up the trails on the mountain behind Golden Castle, which meant trekking all the way up from the beach—as walking up there rather than driving to the bottom apparently promoted communication, according to Sandra—then all the way back down to the beach with our trash. There were rumors she assigned those she didn’t like to the trails because it was much more strenuous a process than cleaning the beach was. This prompted many families to start making jokes about being exiled to the mountain at every small inconvenience.

Stubbed your toe? To the mountain!

Package was late because the waves were too high and the ferries couldn't run? To the mountain!

Martha brought the wrong dish to the potluck? To the mountain!

All this was said outside of her company, of course. But the joke had spread throughout our area. It was only a matter of time before Sandra caught wind of it.

"Looks like you're on exile mountain again," whispered Vi as we walked toward where they were handing out trash bags.

"Can I be you today?" I whispered back.

"Does that mean I can go on that hot date of yours tonight?"

"If it gets me out of this, yes. A thousand times yes."

Sandra looked over at us and wrinkled her nose in our direction, the telltale sign of her displeasure, and I slumped a bit. Vi just patted me on the back. "Looking like you're outta luck, Rosie. Sorry."

"Our previous system was better. You know, the one we've had in place for a literal century," I grumbled, then stopped myself. "Great, I'm starting to sound like Miss Winnie and her friends."

Vi chuckled. "It happens to all of us in time, I promise."

Sandra now full-on scowled in our direction, and it took everything in me not to stick my tongue out at her like the child I felt like. "I'd better get going. Speaking to you for this long has surely exiled me for another six months."

"See you at lunch, sweetie, and don't let this get to you. It'll change back soon enough."

"I certainly hope so."

I walked away from her after grabbing my trash bag and joined the other exiles, ahem, volunteers before heading up towards the trails.

No one talked much as we walked, which I was eternally grateful for. My mood was already sour, given my dream and my eye being on the fritz, and I knew I was doing a poor job of keeping that off my face. The others left me alone for the most part, aside from the few times my eye blurring caught me off guard and sent me stumbling which prompted them to ask if I was alright. *Looks like I need to call Corvin when I get home.*

Once we reached the bottom of the mountain where the trails started, we split up for the most part, one or two of us going up each one. My chosen path was the one that led most directly up to the summit. It was a steeper climb than the others, but it wasn't frequented as heavily, meaning less litter in general and less time doing much more than walking.

Since I was determined to enjoy myself *damnit*, the least I could do was have more time to focus on nature rather than actually picking up trash.

Despite my irritation at the situation, the day was beautiful. A slight breeze offset the rising oncoming-summer temperatures, and it rustled through the branches covering the mountain in shade above me periodically. The forest had a presence during the warmer months, which made it feel like a living, breathing entity, and today, it was more apparent than before.

Looking over at my companions, they, too, seemed to notice the feeling as they shivered before walking up the trail ahead of me to get to where the paths split off.

I said a silent prayer to whatever spirits or creatures may be living on the mountain that I came in peace and to clean, nothing more. It felt a little like overkill after having done this so many times in the last year, but it made me feel better about stepping onto the trail.

I bent down to pick up my first plastic bottle laying when a sudden scurrying near my hand caught my eye. Whatever it was, was small and too fast for me to really see, especially with my left eye being blurry, so I disregarded it. What I couldn't disregard was the itching in my eye and this odd

awareness of something in my periphery just out of sight that I couldn't see but could sense. It skittered along my skin, making goosebumps break out all over my body.

I immediately pushed the idea away; to even entertain the thought was courting fear given what I remembered of stories about the islands before Thomas Golden came here.

In one of his journals, Thomas wrote about hordes of, in his words, "lesser" supernatural creatures which had come to call the islands home, little fairies, brownies, and the like. His journals detailed the care he took in negotiating with them and the offerings he gave them, and while most of the local (human) historians chalked it up to either an allegory for taming the land or rampant superstition, I knew now that all those stories were true.

What spooked me, though, was how all those little creatures absolutely hated humans and took great delight in tormenting them, despite my own experience with them being quite benign.

When I was around six or seven, I could've sworn I saw one of the little folk walking up to Golden Castle one summer. It'd been hanging on one of the lower branches of the sea bell trees, swinging back and forth on a day when there'd been no wind. I'd pointed at it frantically to Vi, and she'd only smiled indulgently, telling me, "You're very lucky they showed themselves to you! It means they trust you, but you have to promise to not tell anyone you saw them, to keep them safe." I'd nodded all too eagerly, and when she continued telling me stories about them, I'd been enamored.

I still was, if I was completely honest with myself.

Being a small person, I'd wanted so badly to be special and to mean something to these islands, and the idea that I'd been chosen to see one of the special creatures that lived here? I was over the moon. The rest of that summer—and every one after that, as well—was spent imagining myself as a fairy princess or a warrior born to protect these islands from bad people. Of course, I'd also imagined we had a houseful of

them as well, and I'd left little offerings of food and sweets, like my grandmother used to do.

The stories, however, shifted into darker things as I got older. Vi told me about how hikers had gone to the trails and went missing for hours and were found near death, with no memory as to what happened to them. There were older accounts of attacks in the woods. Even my great-great-to-the-somethingth-grandmother, Bryony, was said to have had a terrifying encounter with the little folk. Vi always said this was to show that the little folk were to be respected and not messed with, but it instilled a deep sense of fear in me I'd forgotten until stepping into the woods that first time for the monthly clean-up.

This day was no different, though it felt even more looming than usual.

I walked a little ways away to the next piece of trash, which was further off the trail, and there was more scurrying after I picked it up. My left eye blurred as I stood, and I closed both tightly to see if that would change things. But when I opened them again, the blurring was still there.

Continuing my trek forward, I bent to pick up garbage that was starting to look suspiciously placed. Almost every few feet in the same direction up the mountain was some sort of trash, and I had to wonder what hooligan had placed them there. My ire grew the more I had to pick up, and by the time I shoved the sixth into my bag, I was completely irritated with whoever had done this. But nonetheless, I continued, moving further and further away from the trail to do so.

The more I walked, however, the slower my pace was, as that instinctual feeling of something being in the woods floated just beyond my field of view.

There were scurries and creatures seeking to escape, and the more it happened, the more my heart rattled against my ribcage. I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right, and the moment I stuffed the last piece of trash into my bag, I was ready to turn around and run back to my group. But as I did so, I stopped, my ears perking up.

Though it shouldn't be there, the faintest hint of a song rode the wind towards me. At first, I thought I was imagining it, but a gust of wind made it grow in volume until I knew it was real.

Softer, gentler than a siren's song but no less bespelling, the music permeating the air wormed its way into my mind and guided me forward, my bag of trash slipping from my hand forgotten. I was compelled to keep moving forward.

A distant, disturbed part of my mind thought, *Well, at least there are no cliffs nearby for me to jump off of.* If I'd had more presence of mind, I'd have realized how fucked up that thought really was, but I was ensnared, hopelessly walking where the music wanted me to go. Not that I wanted to resist. The eager little girl inside me squealed at the excitement of this, of seeing new magical things.

My feet led me to a clearing towards the summit of the mountain, and there, the sun shined through the trees, illuminating the area and bathing it in warmth. There were many pine needles and leaves on the ground encircled in a ring of mushrooms. The tree stump to the right of where I stood was the only thing of note I could see, aside from the motes glinting in the sunlight. The blurring in my eye turned worse for a moment, then shifted into sharp focus, and the scene before me changed from one of an ordinary forest with trees and moss and leaves and dirt to something... more.

Something not as natural.

What I thought were wisps of pollen in the air were actually dozens of little forest fairies, each one unique in their own way, congregating near what appeared to be a meeting place.

Their skin tones varied from green to brown and even grey, and the wings on their backs were just as diverse. There were butterfly, moth, beetle, and dragonfly wings; one even looked like they had hummingbird wings! Their dress was a motley assortment of leaves and flower petals. The one that caught my eye, though, was one which looked *exactly* like the one I'd seen as a child, and I couldn't help but gape.

They didn't seem to notice me standing there at first, staring at them like a great idiot, but when they did, the music stopped, and the shrieks started. There was a flurry of movement as they darted in all directions to go into hiding, and I was unable to move for fear of hurting one.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, staying still. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just heard the music and couldn't help but follow."

There was a breath of silence before tiny, chirpy whispers erupted around me. Slowly, little heads poked out from their hiding places, and I smiled, trying to be as friendly and non-threatening as possible.

As I waited for them to make a decision, there was a tugging on the sleeve of my shirt, and I looked down to see two forest fairies. I followed them to where they were leading me, stepping into the mushroom circle, then sat when they indicated for me to do so. They flitted off, meeting a third mid-flight, as the others stepped out to look at me.

The three of them spoke furiously to each other in a speech I couldn't understand, with the others joining in occasionally. I focused very hard on trying to hear anything, especially as they flew closer to me and looked and spoke directly at me. The twittering slowly turned into words as I focused on them, wanting to understand what was being said to me.

"You're a Sutton, are you not?" the middle fairy asked, his dragonfly-esque wings buzzing as they kept him at my eye level.

I nodded. "I am. My name is Rose, and my aunt's name is Violet."

There was a flurry of twitters after I said my name, and I wasn't sure if they were for a good reason or a bad one. Their de facto leader gestured at his brethren to quiet down before saying, "It's very nice to meet you, Rose. It's been a long time since a Sutton graced us with their presence."

"I'm happy you have invited me to be among you. Though, I admit your methods are subtle and unexpected," I replied.

“We sensed a new presence in the woods, and we wanted to see the new creature who was trespassing without permission,” said another fairy, a female with butterfly wings.

“Others of us have been watching you for many moons now,” the leader added. “We are pleased to see the Suttons are upholding their end of the agreement.”

I blinked in confusion, but I didn’t get a chance to ask for clarification as another one chimed in, “The Suttons have never been creatures before! You’re special!”

“But I’m—I’m not...” My eyebrows furrowed. *What is happening?* “I’m human?”

The leader tilted his head, looking at me intensely for a moment as his aura pulsed around him. “Are you?”

“I should be. Maybe my necklace is throwing things off?” I asked, pulling it out of my shirt for them to see.

He shook his head, then flew closer to my face, his two companions coming with him. They twittered and chirped between themselves, buzzing around me, and I did my best to sit still and let them do what they needed.

Dragonfly Wings flew around in front of my face, his words going from unintelligible to me to understandable mid-sentence. “—in any case, you’re safe.”

“Oh, good.” I wasn’t sure how much I should believe that. After all, didn’t all the lore say to keep away from the fae folk? Really, this should’ve been my first thought, but with my natural inclination towards curiosity and the music ensnaring me, I couldn’t beat myself up too much. *Honestly, Rose. This is what got us into trouble in the first place.*

“Come, dance with us, and we can enjoy each other’s company and celebrate your coming, just as your ancestors did before you,” he said.

My response was automatic, throwing away what little caution I’d mustered up. “I’d love to.”

The music that’d lured me there rose again, a sweet twinkling at first which then grew into a swell of infectious

melodies and harmonies catching me in its spell once more. I stood and let the music guide my movements as it threaded into my very soul and entranced me. All else faded away but the music and the forest fairies. I danced and danced and danced until I couldn't anymore, my whole body exhausted. Then I sank to the ground to lay in a patch of moss, watching as the fairies kept going.

For just a moment, I closed my eyes, and I heard a whisper, saying, "Thank you for upholding your promise to keep our forest clean, Rose Sutton. You honor our pact."

I smiled, replying, "Of course. I love these islands."

There was no answer. I opened my eyes again and found the forest was brighter than when I'd closed them, and the fairies had vanished. I sat up, looking around me for where they could've gone, but saw nothing.

I got up off the ground, which was much more difficult than it should've been, and made my way back down the mountain in a daze. Along the way, I found my discarded bag of trash and picked it up. The further away from where I'd been, the more my mind cleared, and by the time I hit the trail and exited the forest, I was fully back to myself but more confused than ever.

Pulling out my phone, I checked the time and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that it wasn't noon yet. *At least now I won't have to worry about explaining myself to Vi... Not that I really even know what happened.*

I quickly made my way back to the beach with my trash, making a mental note to figure this out later.

CHAPTER 5

Rose



The rest of the day passed with minimal hiccups. Vi and I had lunch with the rest of the neighborhood, but after that was finished, I was left to try not to get anxious about my date. All afternoon, I'd fielded messages from Ava and Aira in our group chat, asking me what I was going to wear, how I was feeling, if I was going to—as Aira put it—“get down and dirty on the first date”... Ava gagging saved me from answering that question.

When I got out of the shower, I went straight into my room with just my towels around my hair and body and sat down at my desk to do my skincare and makeup while listening to the “angry 90’s lesbian rock” playlist Ava had made for me.

I'd rediscovered a love for doing makeup in the last year, a hobby I'd dropped when I left Boston to help with my father's last days due to my mother's witchery; one could only listen to being called a “painted harlot” so many times before cracking, even though I knew now that it had more to do with her need to extinguish any hint of self-esteem I had. So making myself look pretty for myself was really nice after so long, and having heterochromia now, was an exciting experiment to see what would look good for both my brown eye and my blue one.

There was something about sitting down and concentrating on small tasks like eyeliner and foundation that helped ease my anxiety. It meant mental quiet even for that short while. Well, usually meant that. Now, I was stewing in nerves.

I was going on a date. A real, Aunty Vi approved date I didn't have to sneak around to go to or have her give not-so-

subtle disapproving looks at the mere mention of. And the man in question was, without a doubt, devastatingly handsome and kind and... I had to stop myself.

Unfortunately, makeup was proving difficult with how intensely my eye kept burning and itching. Not to mention the fact it kept blurring, as well. All this plus the rubbing made it nearly impossible to put on eyeshadow and eyeliner.

There was a knock at my door, which was open despite me being in only a towel, and Vi called to me, “How’re things going?”

I glanced at her, mid-rub, and replied, “Going as well as it could be, I think.”

“I can tell you’ve been anxious all day.” She gave me a soft look. “You know you don’t have to hide things from me, right? No matter how weird or unnatural you may think it is, I’m not going to judge you.”

I smiled at her. *I love this woman so much. If only she knew...* “I know. Thank you. I promise there’s nothing going on that you don’t already know.”

“Okay. I just want to remind you. I know you, much like me, have a problem with bottling things up.” She came over and squeezed my shoulder. “Now, I know you need to be getting ready for your date. Do you have an outfit picked out?”

“Not yet.” I smiled sheepishly. “Do you think you could help me choose?”

“I’d love to.”

Vi and I spent a good twenty minutes looking through my closet and choosing what I’d wear later. It was what I always imagined a night like this would be like between a mother and daughter—albeit between a *teenage* daughter and her mother, but I wasn’t going to let that sully my perception of the experience. In the end, we chose a dark blue silk top, an A-line black skirt, and black flats. I had to stop her as she suggested I wear my nicest underwear set “just in case”—the woman fucking winked at me when she said this, *oh my god*—before embarrassment had me wanting to throw myself into the bay

and never come out again. Thankfully, she relented when she saw me blushing down to my toes.

When my outfit was picked out and laying on my bed, Vi went downstairs after a few more embarrassing quips about how “you never know what could happen” and “he’s such a charming man”. Then I was left to finish my makeup and put my clothes on.

As I placed the finishing touches on my appearance, namely fussing with everything that could be fussed with because I was a nervous wreck, the doorbell rang.

My heart jumped into my throat. I went to grab my cell phone to check the time and found it was five-twenty; the man was early! I’d never had a date come pick me up *and* be early. Then again, I’d only ever been with a total of two guys in my life before this, so my experience was limited, to say the least.

Vi squealed in excitement loud enough to be heard upstairs as I grabbed my phone and purse, and with one last check, I turned off my lights and headed downstairs.

“Good evening, Milo. You’re looking very handsome tonight,” said Vi when I reached the upstairs landing and before going down.

“Thank you, Violet. I do try to shine up every once in a while,” he replied. He looked like he was about to say something else, but when he turned to see me, his face lit up in a smile.

Milo did indeed look very handsome, enough so that I paused on the stairs as I took him in. He wore a white button-down that was rolled up at the sleeves and unbuttoned at the neck with dark grey trousers. His clothes did very little to hide his muscled physique; in fact, they accentuated it in a way that had my knees going a little weak.

His dark brown hair was pulled back rather than tucked behind his ears, and in his hands were a dozen red roses. If I’d thought him perfect before... I’d been wrong.

This was perfection.

A chuckle from Vi broke my trance, and I walked the rest of the way to him, my eyes catching his.

“Hi,” I said stupidly, then cringed.

“Hi,” he replied, his grin widening. “You look beautiful.”

My cheeks warmed. “Thank you. You look great, too. You dress up nicely.”

I couldn’t help but give him another once-over he most certainly didn’t miss, by the sound of his chuckle. When I looked back up, he held the roses out to me with a mischievous glint in his eye. “A bit on the nose perhaps, but I couldn’t think of any other flowers that would suit you. Roses for a Rose. And I didn’t even pick them out of your garden this time, Vi.”

“Oh, small favors!” she laughed.

He handed the bouquet out to me to take, and when they were in my hands, I smelled the bloom closest to me. I turned my eyes back up to his, smiling. “Thank you. I love roses.”

“I’ll remember for next time,” he said, parroting my comment to him with another cheeky smirk.

A hand on my elbow had me looking at Vi, who said, “Let me get those into a vase for you, Rosie.”

“Thank you, Aunty.”

I handed the bouquet to her, and she stepped into the kitchen with them. As she walked away, Milo said, “I promise I’ll have her back before curfew, Violet, and if I don’t, you can ground us both.”

“Hey now!” I said in mock outrage. “You’re the one driving. If we’re late, *you* should get all the punishment.”

“Not if *you* make us late coming back.” He had the absolute *audacity* to wink at me, and my cheeks burned hot.

“Well then. I promise *I* won’t make us late on the way back, so it’ll all be on you, furball.”

He quirked his eyebrow up at the moniker but said, “Then we’d best get going.”

Vi rejoined us, the now-vased roses in hand. “I’ll put these on your desk in your room, okay? And you two be safe. No shenanigans on that boat of yours, Milo Finnegan King.”

I leaned over and whispered conspiratorially, “Oh no, she used your full name. You’re on thin ice.”

“The same goes for you, Rose Annemarie Sutton McKenzie. Come back in one piece,” she added just as intensely, her eyes on me.

“Looks like we both are,” Milo whispered back.

She pulled each of us in for a hug, then shooed us out the door with one last “be safe.” Once the door was firmly closed behind us, I gestured for him to take the lead to where he’d moored his boat. He looked behind him once to see if I was following, then walked on the pathway towards the docks. After getting on his boat, he gestured for me to take the seat near the helm while he pulled the ropes off the dock. When he came back, he gave me another smile, then stepped behind the helm.

“Have you been to The Noodle Baron in Charlotte before?” he asked as he pulled away from the docks. “It’s run by one of my crew’s family.”

“I haven’t, no. Is it another secret Otherkind place?”

He nodded. “It is.”

“Are you allowed to tell me what they are? It’s okay if you can’t.”

Milo considered this for a moment, then asked instead, “Do you know of all the types of Otherkind there are on the islands?”

I shook my head sheepishly. “I wasn’t sure I was allowed to ask, since I’m not supposed to know you all exist.”

“Well then,” he started, then glanced over at me before looking back at the water in front of him, “each island has a different species of Otherkind. Not on purpose, mind you, but happenstance. On Alexander, there are the kelpies. On

Charlotte, krakens; on Nora, mermaids and sirens; and on Mariana, there are the selkies.”

“What about Casper?”

“I’ll let them decide whether they want to show themselves to you. Mr. Shioji has made it very clear he doesn’t want you to know, sorry.”

I nodded, remembering the outrage he’d had when he learned the Kelleys had exposed what they were to me. Thankfully, I only heard it secondhand from Aira, but based on the full-body shudder she’d had, it’d been a blow-up of epic proportions.

My eyes widened. “Then, from what you’ve told me, krakens own the restaurant you’re taking us to? And one of your crew mates is a kraken as well? I thought all your crew members were selkies.”

“Well, you’re mostly right. There’s only one member who isn’t a selkie. And yes, the restaurant is owned by the krakens. Don’t worry, though. They usually keep the tentacles away from the normies. You’ll have to fend off advances from the cook named Davey, though. He’s fond of human women.”

If he’d have been closer, I’d have whacked him on the shoulder for the salacious grin and accompanying wink he gave me. “And here I thought you taking me on a date meant you would defend me from such things. For shame. What will your mother say when I tell her?”

It was his turn to wrinkle his nose. “I’ve never taken a girl out on a date who knew my mother better than she knew me. I’ll have to make sure you have nothing to tattle about.”

“I think between my aunt, Ava, and your mother and father, you’d have a very difficult time if you were anything less than a perfect gentleman.”

“Well, unfortunately for me then, I’m not a perfect gentleman.”

The absolutely wicked grin he gave me was enough to make my heart skip a little in my chest, and it took everything in me not to openly stare at him after his eyes returned to the

water ahead of him. There was just something about him that enticed me in a way I'd never been before. Part of me wondered if it was a selkie thing; I'd learned they always had a sort of mood-stabilizing aura around them to keep things calm, but this didn't feel like those other instances I'd felt that.

No, this was all him.

We chatted the rest of the way to Charlotte, and when we arrived at Charlotte Port, I helped him moor the boat to the dock, despite his protests, and then he helped me off. He jokingly offered me his arm as if I were a Regency lady needing an escort, his eyes glittering with playfulness.

"I have no wish to incur the wrath of my family. I was instructed to treat you like a lady, so I shall endeavor to do so," he said, a laugh in his voice as he put on a frankly ridiculous English accent.

"We wouldn't want that, now, would we?" I smirked, slipping my hand into the crook of his arm.

"I'd rather not be skinned alive, no."

I couldn't hold back my laugh that time.

The walk from the port to the restaurant was a little longer than I expected, but the evening weather was cool and clear, affording me the opportunity to take in the sights. From where we were walking, there was a beautiful view of both Casper and Nora bathed in the beautiful golden glow of the setting sun. There was even the tiniest bit of music in the air, a lovely baritone singing a song which felt familiar but I couldn't place, adding to the ambiance.

If I'd been alone, I would've watched the sun fade from the sky and the lights from the buildings surrounding the bay glitter like artificial stars on the water. Since I wasn't, however, I promised myself I'd come back sometime to do just that.

Before long, we arrived at The Noodle Baron, an odd but fitting name for what looked like a former fisherman's shack. As soon as we stepped inside, the scent of spices flooded my nose, making my stomach rumble in anticipation. The interior

was as rustic as the exterior suggested it would be. The whitewashed walls stood in stark contrast to the dark beams that stood out like rib bones on the angles of the ceiling and crossbeams. A large stone fireplace dominated the far right side of the building, which made me imagine how lovely the fire would be in the wintertime. The lights were set low, each table illuminated with little flameless candles, giving the space a cozy, romantic feel... or maybe that was just me projecting.

Milo was recognized immediately by the host, who gave him a big smile when we walked in. Despite being early to our reservation, the host guided us to our table, winding our way towards the fireplace. Once we were sitting, he handed us our menus and promised a waiter would be over to take our orders soon.

Almost as soon as we sat down, however, a big, burly man came out from the kitchen. He pulled Milo out of his seat and into a tight hug that had Milo gasping for air while I sat in my chair.

The man had an easy four inches on Milo—a feat in its own right as Milo was easily six and a half feet tall—and was even more broad. He was a huge bear of a man, so when he hugged him, he managed to make Milo look small in comparison.

My eye began to burn again watching them interact, but after a few blinks, the vision on that side cleared. All around both of them, there was a halo of color, with Milo's being a deep purple and the salt-and-pepper-haired man's being a seafoam green, and where they touched, the colors mingled, blending into one.

“You son of a gun,” said the man with an accent I couldn't place. He was still gripping Milo tightly and pounding on his back hard enough for the possibilities of bruises. “You thought you could make a reservation at my restaurant and not speak to me first?”

“Last I heard, you were on an extended siesta at sea,” replied Milo with a grin when he finally escaped the other man's grasp.

“I came back when I heard my boy was going to be islandside.”

The longer I looked at the stranger next to Milo, the deeper it felt like I was looking *into* him. There were impressions of the depths of the ocean, of long, lithe tentacles, and an age beyond my comprehension. The body in front of me barely contained what this man was, as if his already great human size was too small for his true form.

The man’s eyes swung to me, and the weight of his gaze left me breathless. “You must be the infamous Rose McKenzie. I’ve heard much about you.”

I blinked a few times to reorient myself, then said, “All good things, I hope?”

“Enough to know your experiences with our ilk have not been the best, and I’m sincerely sorry for that.”

“Thank you for that. I don’t like to paint the whole of your... people with the same brush as those who wronged me, I assure you.”

“As eloquent as she is gorgeous. You’ve got yourself quite a catch, Milo.” The man smiled, slapping Milo on the back again. “Now, where are my manners? My name is Tomas Marin. I’m clan leader and representative of my people.”

He reached out to take my hand in his and brushed his lips across my knuckles. The touch sent goosebumps up my arm as my body reacted to the smallest hint of magic.

My cheeks heated as I said, “It’s very nice to meet you, Mr. Marin.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” He beamed as he straightened. “I’ll let the two of you enjoy your dinner. Please stay as long as you’d like and let me know if there’s anything you need.”

Milo and Tomas shared a look before the older man walked back to the kitchen and my date took his seat again. A waiter whose energy matched Tomas’s came over to give us our menus and glasses of water, then told us he’d be back to take our orders. I was eager to get food in me, and all the options I saw sounded delicious. True to the namesake of the

restaurant, there were so many pasta options, not only of the Italian variety, but from other cultures as well. Satay, udon, pad thai, chow mein... The selections seemed endless, and I wanted one of each. I was definitely going to have to come back.

My perusal and drooling over the menu were cut short when Milo spoke.

“My sister tells me you’ve been trying out a lot of new hobbies in the last year,” he said to me between looking at his menu and taking a sip of water.

I blushed; I couldn’t help it. This was one of those things I didn’t like to discuss or admit, as most people thought it weird that I was never allowed to be my own person for the first twenty-five years of my life. It was only in the last year I’d been comfortable enough to spread my wings and start to figure out who I was.

“It seems like Ava’s a snitch,” I replied, hiding my heated cheeks behind the menu as I pretended to read it, my focus thoroughly shattered.

“Oh, she didn’t tell me of her own volition, I promise.” I stopped to peer over the top of my menu at him. “I pestered her until she answered the questions I had. I wanted to make sure I didn’t propose doing anything you wouldn’t enjoy.”

“I suppose I can forgive her this once. She’s told me on many occasions how persistent and obnoxious you were as an older brother.”

Milo laughed. “I can’t deny that. We were as close as we could be when she was growing up, given our almost two-hundred-year age gap, and we gave each other hell all the time.”

‘Almost two-hundred-year age gap’? He’s like three hundred years old? That’s something I’ll have to tackle later. I cleared my throat. “From what it sounds like, having siblings must have been both a blessing and a curse.”

“It was, yeah, but I love all of them, even when they do things like show me up by getting engaged before me.”

I snorted at the mock outrage on his face. “Is that the real reason you’re on this date with me? You’ve gotta save face with your family?”

“Not at all. I asked you on a date because I wanted to, and because I wanted to a year ago, but...” He paused, choosing his next words carefully. “But you were dealing with a lot then, so I decided to give you time.”

While I’d usually have gone for the joke, his answer was sincere in a way I hadn’t planned for, and all I could do was blink at him until I collected my thoughts again. “I—thank you for that. I don’t know why you would want to go on a date with a ‘normie’ like me, but I’m happy you do.”

“If I’m perfectly honest, I wanted to ask you on a date after the boat tour, and I was about to ask that day on the beach when you found out what I am, but we were interrupted.”

Ah, yes. The day I’d sat on the beach with Milo when Will came up out of the sea, partially transformed into his merman form to confront me about leaving Nora... before he outed the selkies to me. What a disaster that day had been.

It’d been all downhill from there... Let’s not think about that right now.

“You did? I mean, it’s been a year since then. I can’t believe you’d still want that date with me after all this time,” I said, my skepticism slipping through.

Milo was about to speak when our waiter came back to the table for our orders. He ordered crab linguini in red sauce with garlic bread to share, and I ordered the mushroom and cheese ravioli with a side salad. We handed our menus back to the waiter, and as I was taking a drink, he caught my eyes with his.

“That day on the beach when you stood between me and Will, you defended me and mine against someone who was scaring you,” he said, his expression so genuine that my heart fluttered in my chest again. “That action had a deep impact on my inner beast in a way that’s stayed with me this past year. We are pack creatures, my family and I, and we defend each

other. The fact you did that, as human as you are... It pleased me and my other half.”

His eyes held mine, their color fluctuating between jade-green and cinnamon-brown, and I knew he was telling me something of significance, but I lacked the context to understand what he was really saying, so I said, “I couldn’t not defend you. You were brought into the situation because of me.”

“You put yourself between me and one of my natural predators and held your ground even when you were frightened. Not only that, but you have kept our secret this whole time. I know that to humans that may not be *as* significant, but it wasn’t to me or my seal.”

I mentally made a note to ask Ava what he was talking about later, as I didn’t want to risk being heard by those around us.

“And I would do it again in a heartbeat,” I said, putting as much sincerity into my words as I possibly could.

The jade of his eyes fully transformed into warm cinnamon as the air around him thickened and sparkled. Before I knew it, however, he blinked and shook his head, and when his eyes looked into mine once more, they were his usual green, though it looked like he had to fight to get them to be that way. A moment of self-doubt wavered my confidence.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked, my voice even.

“Not at all. My seal... He likes you very much.” A tinge of pink colored his cheeks as he smiled sheepishly. “He wants to get to know you too, but this is definitely not the place for that, so I had to push him back.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I’d be interested in getting to know him as well.”

A deep, rolling rumble vibrated along my senses, raising goosebumps along my skin. Looking back into Milo’s eyes, I saw them flick to brown then back to green for a split second. He took a breath, then said, “Well, now you’ve pleased him even more.”

“I’ll be sure to give him pats on the noggin if he’s a good boy,” I teased, making Milo burst into laughter.

“That’ll take the wind out of his sails, for sure,” he said between laughs.

The waiter soon returned to our table with our orders in hand, then placed our dishes in front of us. To our surprise, however, wineglasses were placed on the table before having a deep red wine poured into them. He smiled at us. “Compliments from the owner.”

He left the bottle at the table with us after we said our thanks. Milo explained to me that it was a very rare vintage, but given my lack of knowledge about expensive wine, I could only give a contemplative hum as I took my first sip.

“So, what ever happened with your mother?” Milo asked as we started digging in. “My mum was a bit vague on details.”

I sighed. “To be honest, it went better than I thought it would. The judge threw the book at her. She was ordered to pay me back for all the things she’d stolen from the house. Not only that, but she also got some jail time for breaking and entering to steal the deeds to the house and the shop, as well as for intending to fraudulently sell them. And because she technically assaulted and stalked me, I got a restraining order against her.”

“Wait, she what?” His eyes went wide, flickering to cinnamon for just a moment.

The anger in his tone almost made me minimize it, but I took a breath and answered honestly, if not a little sheepishly. “Oh, yeah. The way it went down the night she broke into the house, the police defined her yanking me by the arm and bruising me as assault. Though, I think that was because it was your brother and Levi handling everything, and they were eager to see her pay for what she’d done.” *Bless the two of them for being on me and my aunt’s side.* “When she got out of jail, she started calling me and leaving threatening voicemails, so my lawyer made sure the court was aware of that and her

history of tracking and sabotaging me, so I was granted a restraining order.”

“I’m so sorry she did that, Rose. That’s awful.”

I offered a sad smile. “I’m very happy it’s done with. I’ll never have to deal with her again, and if she does try anything, my therapist offered to have another kelpie make her leave me alone permanently.”

“Ruthless. I like it.” His eyes shined with ferocity, almost as if *he* were contemplating doing that himself.

The rest of our dinner went by so fast, it felt like it was gone in a blink. Our conversation was as easy as breathing, and being around him was effortless. There was a safety, a comfort with him I relished. More than that, though, I was helplessly attracted to him. His wicked smile when he cracked jokes, his quick wit, everything. He ensnared my attention by being nothing more than himself.

The red wine complemented our dishes perfectly. We’d traded bites from each other’s plates, and after the food was gone, we’d ordered dessert as well. The conversation didn’t end there, though. We talked for so long that the other patrons had left by the time we realized the shop had closed, and when we went up to pay, the host told us our meals had been paid for by none other than Tomas.

During the walk back to his boat and the subsequent ride back to Nora, whether it was due to increased comfort with each other or the bottle of wine we shared, we stood closer together. The heightened electricity between us had me wondering what was going to happen next in the best possible way.

I was... giddy. I was incredibly, unabashedly giddy, and I was loving every minute of it, even when his seal poked his head up to join the conversation every once in a while, which only piqued my curiosity about his other half.

After docking in Nora, Milo walked me up to my front door, and my heart pounded as I turned to him, only to find him much closer than I thought he’d be. My breath hitched

when he stepped further into my space, close enough to feel the heat of his body radiating off him. When I didn't step back, that wicked grin returned to his face.

"You're really warm," I said stupidly, my brain malfunctioning in the face of all his attention on me.

"Selkies run much hotter than humans so we can survive the frigid seas," he replied. His hand came up to pet my cheek, and I couldn't help but lean my face into it, nearly missing his next comment. "I had a great time tonight, Rose."

"I did, too. It was really fun," I whispered once his words registered in my mind.

"Would you be amenable to going out with me again sometime? You don't have to tell me now, but would you think about it?"

"The answer is already yes, but I can't this coming Sunday. We have Ava and Aira's engagement party to go to, after all."

"Oh, yes. My mother asked if you'd like to come early to go swimming with us. I can text you the time later."

"I'd love to. I'll make sure to pack my swimsuit."

"You'll be woefully overdressed, but I suppose we can make allowances for your human need for modesty."

I laughed. "I'm sure it will be a big disappointment for you."

I thought he'd laugh back and make a sarcastic reply, but when I looked up at his face again, his expression had gone dark.

"It will give me something to look forward to later and to keep all to myself, should you choose to share yourself with me like that." A shiver went through me, but it was him leaning closer that had my breath stopped. "May I kiss you, Rose?"

Without thinking, without even a beat of pause, my answer tumbled from me. "Please?"

That wicked grin returned a breath before his lips were on mine. He was gentle at first, tender even. His lips were a soft brush against mine, but even that slight touch ignited my entire body. I leaned into him, my hands going to his chest to grip his shirt to steady myself as I let myself get lost in him.

His arms wrapped around me just as his kiss turned from tender to hot, his mouth coaxing mine open so he could sweep his tongue inside. Tiny noises spilled from my throat, and it prompted his hands to grip at me to ensure no space separated us. I could've kissed him forever, letting him stoke the fire within me until it was an inferno.

As it was, my whole body was too aware, too sensitive not to react, and heat began to pool between my legs, readying my body for him.

I wanted him. I wanted him more than I could've accounted for, and it'd been so very long since I'd had the pleasure of a man. But just as I was about to wrap my own arms around his neck and beg him to take me upstairs to explore this further, he pulled away, resting his forehead against mine. Confusion had me blinking up at him, thinking perhaps I'd done something wrong or that he wasn't as affected as I was, but he, too, was panting, his pupils dilated wide.

His hands moved to cup my cheeks, and his smile this time was soft before he kissed me on the forehead, then stepped away from me entirely.

“Thank you again, Rose. Have a lovely night,” he murmured before turning and walking away.

I watched him leave, already craving his warmth again, and once he was out of sight, a tiny keening noise escaped me. Just one kiss had me more turned on than I thought possible.

If that was what only a kiss was like, what would sex be like with him?

I pushed the thought away and went into the house, but not before images of just that popped into my head, feeding my already denied desire.

CHAPTER 6

Rose



My morning began perfectly. Utterly and completely perfect.

MILO

Good morning, beautiful. Did you sleep well?

I smiled stupidly at my too-bright-for-my-barely-awake-eyes screen, my whole being vibrating with happiness as I typed my response.

ME

The best sleep I've had in ages. You?

MILO

Like a baby

I wanted to thank you again for a wonderful evening

I hope you had as great a time as I did

My idiot face hurt from smiling so much.

ME

It was amazing

MILO

Good!

If I may be so bold

I can't wait to see you again

I squealed and hugged my phone.

ME

The feeling is mutual

Very mutual

MILO

Keep talking like that and I'll have to kidnap you from therapy for another date

You say that like I would mind...

Though, Aeden might

Say, how would a selkie match up against a kelpie?

Poorly, but don't tell my seal that lol

I promise I will keep that to myself XD

Rolling out of bed, I went straight to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face so I could get ready for work and then therapy with Aeden afterwards. I was so in my head in the best way that I barely registered I'd completed both tasks and had to go back into the bathroom to check I'd done both. The rest of getting ready was much the same, in a dreamy daze. Somehow, though, I managed to get myself put together and my therapy bag packed without being completely present.

Heading downstairs with my bag, purse, and cell phone in hand, the scent of bacon beckoned me into the kitchen, and I walked right in and gave Vi a side hug as well as a kiss on the

cheek before heading over to the cabinet to grab the plates to set the table.

“So,” she said, drawing out the word, “how was your date?”

I let out a dreamy sigh. “It was amazing. I didn’t want it to end.”

“Good! I’m happy for you, Rose!” She turned around and captured me in another hug, then returned to the eggs and bacon on the stove.

I continued moving around the kitchen, getting everything we’d need for breakfast. I tossed down some potholders for when she’d need to set down the pans, as well as plates and forks in our spots. Both of us preferred tea in the morning, so I pulled out our respective cups and a teabag for each of us. Then I grabbed the grapes from the fridge as she brought the eggs and bacon over. She’d already put the kettle on, so it was the last thing I grabbed before sitting down.

“It’s a good thing it went well,” said Vi as she plated our food. “I asked Milo to help you at the shop tomorrow with putting together those shelves we ordered for upstairs.”

I couldn’t help but smile knowing I’d be seeing him again so soon. “Oh, good! I was worried about that.”

We were doing a reorganization and renovations at the shop now that the upstairs was vacant. Mrs. Gordon and the other vendor who’d leased the space for their own shop had moved to the port after the new mayor had Nora Port renovated as well. It was just one of many projects the town was throwing money at in an attempt to bring people back after Joseph had used his magic and influence to run them off. The new mayor—Miss Winnie’s son, Julian Forester, the deviled egg thief—had even allotted money for our shop to hire some part-timers and to make improvements as well, which we were making full use of.

“He said he’d be at the shop around ten, so remember to dress extra pretty tomorrow,” she said with a saucy wink in my direction.

“If he likes me, he’d like me in a potato sack,” I retorted, waving my fork at her. “And since I’m doing all the heavy lifting in the redesign of the upstairs, maybe it’s best if I didn’t wear my nice silk.”

“Hmm, that’s true. Then tight leggings and a sports bra should do the trick, I think.” She couldn’t even take herself seriously long enough to finish her sentence without laughing.

“You are incorrigible, Aunty!” I laughed, “But if it makes you feel better, I’ll be in my bathing suit on Sunday with him before Ava and Aira’s engagement party. That way, he can see all the goods then.”

“Good! I’ll keep clear of the upstairs just in case.”

Groaning, I ignored her eyebrow waggles to finally get some breakfast in me.



The day went by quickly, much quicker than I’d thought with Milo messaging me throughout the day. Vi couldn’t keep the smile off her face every single time she caught me looking at my phone instead of doing the work I needed to do upstairs. Despite her playfulness, it was nice to have someone messaging me throughout the day. It made four-thirty arrive much faster than usual.

MILO

Have fun at therapy, Rose

ME

I’ll have as much fun as possible ^_^

I promise I won’t talk about you... too much

I can't even blame you lol

You gotta make sure Aeden has all the hot gos

I couldn't help but laugh as I grabbed my purse and bag, and as I headed towards the door, I told Vi, "Going to therapy. I'll see you for dinner."

"Okay," she replied with a smile. "Be safe. Don't be texting and driving."

"I will!" I paused when I realized what I'd said, then snorted. "I mean, I *will* be safe, and I *won't* text and drive."

"Good! I'd have to throttle you otherwise. Love you."

I rolled my eyes with a laugh. "Love you, too."

After she shooed me out the door, I gave her another smile, then stepped out of the shop. As I walked to my car, my whole heart was singing as my mind went over our kiss for the umpteenth time. Was it presumptuous of me to want another? Would *he* want another?

I mean, I was five seconds from asking him up to my room as it was if he hadn't pulled away. Of course, I didn't want to pressure him to do anything he didn't want to...

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts I didn't realize that, instead of walking down the street towards my car, I'd crossed the street and was about to walk into the bay. My foot was literally over the water when a car went by, its horn honking at me, which was enough to startle me out of my thoughts. I absentmindedly waved and smiled at the driver—I'd missed who it was—as they drove past, but I had to stop for a moment to gather my wits about me again. How had I gotten so lost in my thoughts that I nearly walked into the water?

I shrugged. *My body was probably going off muscle memory and thought I was going to my boat instead of my car.*

Correcting my direction, this time, I made it safely to where my car was parked behind our house and got in. My little interlude cost me, though, as I was the last in line to get on the ferry to Casper, just barely making it in time before

they pulled up the gangway. Parking my car, I cut the engine after rolling down all the windows so I could get some breeze in as the ferry attendant put the little yellow stoppers behind my front two tires. He then came to stand by my window to get my fare from me, which I handed him after digging around in my wallet for my three dollars.

When he walked away, I pulled my phone out to check my messages, and though I didn't see a new one from him, I decided to be a little brave and send him one anyway, even though the little voice in the back of my mind warned me I was being annoying.

ME

Vi told me you'll be helping us out at the port shop tomorrow

While I waited for his response, I leaned my head against the headrest, looking outside my car. From where I was parked, I could see directly into the passenger area of the ferry, and because my eye had started to burn, I tried not to strain it by looking hard at anything in particular. My eyes unfocused a little as my mind wandered, but when they did, I noticed something about the people inside the ferry.

All around them was an aura of colored light, just like Milo and Tomas had. There were so many different colors and shades and opacities; some even had shapes or sparkles in them. Each person was unique. Some of them, like the ones for Mr. and Mrs. Harper and their grandchildren, had little tendrils connecting them and blending their colors together where they touched, or even reaching out into the air around them as if seeking something to connect to.

The more I looked at them, the more I wanted to study them, to see how many shapes, patterns, and colors there were and what the little wisps meant. They were just so beautiful and fascinating.

My phone vibrated in my lap, and my ability to see the halo of light around people shattered.

MILO

Yeah. I'm heading over around 10

You don't mind, do you?

ME

Not at all. Your help is very appreciated :-)

I'm always willing to help pretty ladies

I'll tell Vi you think she's pretty lol

Bahaha

I'll see you tomorrow morning then

I'm very much looking forward to it

The announcement about arriving at Casper Port came on before I could respond again, so I tucked my phone away and prepared for leaving the ferry, all while smiling like a loon.

The drive to my therapist's house went by in a blur as I turned up my new playlist and let the wind blow through my hair as I drove. The cabin my therapist, Aeden Byrne, lived in was deep in Casper Forest next to Bonnie Lake, the source for the river which ended in Titan Falls.

Over the last year, I'd come to love the drive up to his house, as it was both scenic and beautiful. The road there from Casper Port was narrow, winding, and mostly hidden from view, unless you knew where to look, but that was done purposefully to keep unsuspecting humans away from the lake and from his home. Even *I* had to be brought there the first time so I wouldn't get lost. Now, though, I knew the route like the back of my hand.

When I reached the cabin, I parked my car and got out, leaving my bag full of extra clothes and towels in the front seat for when I would need them. The air up there was fresh, free of the scent of the ocean my area of Nora smelled like,

and I took a deep breath into my lungs as I listened and looked at the sights before me like I hadn't seen them so many times before.

All around me was a forest whose trees seemed to touch the sky and provided shade for the ground below. To my right was Aeden's cabin, a two-story structure made of red-colored wood with a chimney, and directly in front of me was Bonnie Lake, whose shores were shaded but whose center was open directly to the sky. At night, it offered an unimpeded view of the stars. It was peaceful and blessedly quiet, which was perfect for therapy sessions.

Heading towards the lake and bypassing the cabin, I stopped about ten feet from the edge and waited. There was no need to announce myself; Aeden would know I was here.

The water was calm with only the occasional ripple from the wind or a fish splashing in the distance, and as I took in the forest ambiance, a rush of power prickling at my skin preceded a disturbance in the water. Not even a moment later, a large black horse head breached the surface, exhaling the water from his lungs as his glowing green eyes took me in. He rose from the lake, water cascading down off his massive black body, and walked right up to me. Reaching out, I petted him between the eyes, pushing his seaweed hair out of the way to do so.

"You know, after a year of doing this, you'd think we were past the dramatic entrances," I said to him, poking at the soft flesh of his nose. The horse chuffed, nudging me with his head. "I also thought we discussed having my sessions with a horse was a little weird for me."

His laughter slid across my mind as another rush of power tickled my skin. The horse before me shifted, his shape changing into a large, very nude, red-headed man with pale, freckled skin.

A man who was busy laughing at me.

"And I thought after a year, you'd have gotten used to your therapist being a kelpie," he replied, his Irish brogue thick with laughter.

“Fair, fair. I’ll give you that, but...” I paused, tried to think of a reason... and came up blank. “Alright, I’ve got nothing. You’re right.”

In truth, I was used to strange supernatural things happening around me. Ever since I’d accidentally discovered creatures from myths and fairytales were real, I saw evidence of them everywhere. The Golden Isles had a large, diverse population of them living right under the unsuspecting noses of humans, and though my introduction to their world was, well, traumatic, I felt honored I was one of the trusted humans to keep their secret. I mean, they didn’t really have a choice in that, but it was an honor, nonetheless.

My experience with Otherkind was what led me to start therapy in the first place. After everything that happened the year before, after everything I’d witnessed and was subjected to... my mind couldn’t function anymore under the weight of it all.

Being mind-controlled, harassed, threatened, watching the murder of my friend, and then being trapped in a cave and left to die all at the hands of one man, a merman, proved to be too much. This didn’t even include all of the traumatic nonsense from my childhood I’d already been dealing with. So, my doctor, Dr. Corvin Kemmer, called Aeden in specifically for me, and I’d been seeing him weekly ever since.

He was my lifesaver as much as he was my friend.

“What has you in such a good mood today, Rose?” he asked as I settled onto the sand. “Your whole aura is vibrating with happiness.”

“I went on a date last night, and it went really, really well,” I replied.

“Is that so?” he asked, moving to sit next to me.

“Yeah. It was completely different than my previous dating experiences.”

“What makes this different?”

“Well, I had one boyfriend when I lived in Boston, and well...” I paused to sigh. “You know what happened with

Will. But I don't know. I guess I can't believe I'm getting another chance to feel this way, while the other part of me is worried it's going to blow up in my face."

"Why's that?"

I slowly blew out a breath of air. "Well, with my boyfriend in Boston, things were very cordial, like we were both going through the motions. Danny was a great guy. Driven, ambitious, but in the end, he was transferred to another office in London around the time I found out my father was sick, so we ended things. And then there was Will." I hugged myself around my middle. Would it ever get easier to talk about him and what happened?

"This must be frightening for you to think about moving on with how unfinished things feel in regard to him."

Looking out across the water, his words resonated inside me. He was right. Things were unfinished with Will. We'd only barely gotten started when... when his father ruined it. And with how he left me on the beach?

Oof.

"There's a tiny voice in the back of my head whispering, 'What if he comes back? You should wait for him. How would he feel knowing you moved on?' While rationally, I know it isn't healthy to stay rooted in the past like that. Besides, he made it quite clear he doesn't want anything to do with me after trapping me in a freaking bubble."

Which still hurt. Regardless of how much I tried to keep my mind off Will and what he'd done, he crept back into my thoughts when I least expected it. Thoughts like, *Was he safe?* and *Did he escape his father?* or *Is he under Joseph's influence even now?* I knew I shouldn't care about him anymore, yet I did.

Aeden shifted beside me, and I turned to look at him. "And you feel guilty for comparing Will and Milo."

"Well, yeah. They're two different people. And it's not fair to Will if I move on, but it's not fair to Milo to be compared to the ghost of a possibility, and that's really all there ever was

between us.” I sighed. “But it really is different with Milo. It’s easy. He already knows who I am; he knows my history. We have a lot in common. That, and there’s no sneaking around or possibility of either of us being hurt for being seen together. Vi loves him.”

And he excites me.

He makes me feel so alive.

Aeden chuckled at the thoughts I’d been too shy to say aloud. “I imagine he feels safe for you, being a family friend and all.”

“Yeah, but that’s the part that gives me anxiety. He’s my best friend’s brother. My aunt is friends with his mom, which adds more pressure for us to get along and couple up.” I paused, chewing on my bottom lip to give myself time to collect my thoughts. “If things go badly with him, I worry I might lose my friends or lose my connection with his family. Not even just for me but for Vi as well.”

“I’m fairly certain that wouldn’t happen, barring very extenuating circumstances.”

“I mean, I hope not.” Centering myself, I pushed the catastrophizing thoughts out of my head. “If I’m going to try to move on, I need to not shy away from this. I need to give it a real chance.”

Saying it helped me feel more resolute. *I will give this a fair shot. Will’s not coming back, so I can’t just wait around and be alone forever.*

Aeden smiled at me. “Good. I’m happy to see you continuing to branch out and doing things a person your age should be doing.”

“You think it’s going to be okay?” Vulnerability made my voice waver.

“I do. Even if it ends, I think at the very least it will have been fun while it lasted, and that’s important, too.” Aeden’s head perked up, and he patted me on the shoulder. “The phone’s ringing in my house. Why don’t you get in the water while I take that and get comfortable?”

“You got it, boss.”

He chuckled and sped away faster than my eyes could comprehend. I lingered on the beach towel he'd laid out for me longer than I needed to before I forced myself to get up and shimmy out of my clothes.

One of the great things I loved about Aeden was his approach, though I supposed it was because he wasn't human or subject to the confines of human professional ethics. Our sessions were, weather and temperature permitting, held with me in the lake while he sat with his notebook on dry land and listened to me work through my issues.

Though awkward at first, I'd learned to trust the process and to trust him enough to let him use his telepathic powers to peer into my mind to help him better understand me.

Once my clothes were off, my hand flew up to feel for my necklace to check if it was still in place, a moment of panic pulsing through me until I realized it was exactly where it should be. I never took it off, not when the magic within it ensured I could breathe underwater and was instrumental in ensuring my survival last year. There were other perks as well, like being impervious to the cold of the water and whatnot, but it keeping me alive was enough for me to be cautious about ensuring it was on me at all times.

With the heat of the day making sweat drip down my spine, padding into the cool water was like stepping into a little slice of heaven. As soon as I was deep enough in, I dove to the bottom to wet myself completely before coming back up to situate myself close to where he usually set up his chair on the side of the lake. I lay on my back, floating peacefully. This feeling, this excitement, I wanted to revel in and stay in forever. I wanted to stay happy.

You know what? It's time. I'm going to throw myself into this and see where it goes. What I had with Will is over.

The thought made me sad, knowing I was going to try to lay to rest the possibility of what we could've had together, but in the end, I needed to move on, with or without closure. Besides, it felt right.

An odd feeling between my fingers pulled me out of my introspection, and I tried to swish my hands through the water to unstuck whatever had gotten caught there. It tickled between my fingers like strands of hair. However, the feeling didn't go away, so I did it again. And again. Frustrated because it wasn't getting off me like I wanted, I opened my eyes and lifted my hands above me to see what was stuck there, only for my heart to stop completely.

Between my fingers was pale, thin webbing... just like I'd seen in my dream with the not-me siren.

I screamed.

CHAPTER 7

Rose



“Get them off me! Get them off!” I screeched, pushing my hands as far away from me as I could.

I couldn't get in enough air, and my whole chest constricted as panic seized me. Before I even realized Aeden was there, he pulled me out of the water and sat me on my towel. He spoke to me, but I couldn't hear anything outside the pounding of my heart and the high-pitched, wordless shrieks spilling from my throat. The inhuman webbing between my fingers was all I could see.

Aeden gripped my face and moved my head so I'd look at him and not my hands. When my eyes met his, his power washed over me, strengthened by the eye contact. Somehow, his words penetrated the block that was my panic.

“Rose, sweetheart, I need you to breathe with me. Breathe in through your nose for one, two, three, and four,” he said, his voice a bastion of calm as I did as I was asked. “Now, hold it for one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and now let it out through your mouth. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.”

He counted me through several cycles of this until my panic was more manageable. The tears didn't stop, though, and I kept babbling at him about making them go away, begging him to make the hands attached to me not be mine. Aeden just petted my hair and murmured about calling my doctor to help.

I wasn't sure when Dr. Kemmer, Corvin, arrived. It was like one minute, Aeden was shushing me, calming me down, and the next, Corvin was rushing towards where Aeden and I sat next to the lake. He was a tall man with a swimmer's build when I was standing, but sitting, I felt like an ant compared to him. His whole aura was of someone of great age, though he looked no more than thirty-five with his dark, wavy hair and golden skin. His eyes were a deep blue like a storming sea, and his usual gentle expression was etched with worry.

He kneeled in front of me, then pulled my hands away from my body to inspect them without preamble or greeting, studying them meticulously.

Looking back down at the offending appendages, I sobbed anew seeing not only webbing there, but also long, sharp claws extending out from my nail beds. Aeden ran his hand over my hair, quieting me again even as tears still streamed down my face.

"Rose, dear," said Corvin, "I need you to tell me what happened."

"The souls are angry. They don't like to be trapped. They want out," I whispered, my eyes fixed on my monstrous hands.

"How did you find out about this?" he asked.

He turned my hands over in his, continuing to inspect them and touching them gently. When his fingers brushed the nearly translucent webbing, a shiver ran through me. My mind knew I shouldn't feel that. It knew these things weren't supposed to be there, and yet they were.

Everything in me screamed this was *wrong*.

"The dreams. They've been talking to me in dreams. They..." The images from my dream rushed up and overtook my vision for a moment. "They told me I needed to die, that no human could free them. They showed me as a siren, and she tore my heart out. She pulled out my soul and started breaking the bindings which bound the talisman's power to me. She left only one before she swallowed it. Then, she killed

me.” The words rushed out of me like I’d be spared their impact if I said them quickly and got it over with.

It didn’t work.

Thankfully, Aeden spoke next, translating my dream into words which made sense and were devoid of panic. “From what I can see, she was shown herself as a siren and told she wouldn’t be able to fulfill her promise as a human.”

“Well, let me take a look at her soul so we can determine if it was simply a dream or a portend of her future.” His gaze caught mine, the ocean blue roiling. “May I?”

I nodded despite my fear of what he’d find. My whole heart prayed to whatever deity may be listening that it was just a dream, even as I knew it couldn’t be. My hands were proof of that.

Just like when Eli had done it before, there was a little tugging in my chest. Gently, Corvin pulled my soul from me and let it hover between us, shining bright and pulsing with energy, and my heart broke and tears blurred my vision when I saw what I’d hoped wasn’t true.

Just like in my dream, only one dimming string kept the power bound.

He turned my soul over without touching it with a gesture of his hands, his eyes fixed on it. My own soul was small and waning. Its light blue color lacked luster, and darker blue was seeping into the deep furrows left from the failed binding in the cave. Even to my untrained eye, the holes in my aura were concerning.

“Have you had any other symptoms? Anything else that’s out of the ordinary?” he asked without looking up at me.

My distraught mind was sluggish to think of anything at first, but then I remembered my eye and the time in the forest. “My left eye has been itching and blurry since having the dream... I think I’m seeing things I shouldn’t.”

This time, Aeden looked at me and asked, “Like what?”

“I saw some forest fairies yesterday. I lost time when I was with them,” I said, avoiding his eyes. I hadn’t had the chance to tell him about that yet. “And on the way here, when I was on the ferry, I saw something which looked like halos around people. Then yesterday, I felt like I could see into Tomas when we were at the Noodle Baron.”

“And do you see the auras now?” asked Corvin.

Pulling my eyes up from my lap and my monstrous hands, I looked at each of them. Sure enough, around both of them was the same aura of light. Corvin’s was a beautiful shade of sunset orange, while Aeden’s was a deep forest green, just like his eyes.

All I could do was nod and whisper, “I can see them very clearly.”

The doctor let out a troubled *hmmm*, then returned to inspecting my soul. A long moment of silence stretched between the three of us, and with each passing minute, fear took deeper root within me, which only worsened when the trapped souls pushed against the bond in an attempt to free themselves.

“I’m afraid to tell you there’s nothing I can really do to fix this,” said Corvin, “I’ve never been able to figure out how all of this worked, and to be completely honest, alive or otherwise, my power pales in comparison to the dozen or so sirens tied to you.”

What does that mean for me?

My words died in my throat, but Aeden spoke them for me. “What does that mean for Rose? What do you think is going to happen to her?”

“I can’t be a hundred percent sure, but it looks like there are two possibilities for what could happen. The first is she—you—might become one of the merfolk, though I can’t be certain whether you’d be a mermaid or a siren at this point,” Corvin said, but if he said anything else, I didn’t hear it.

My mind filled with static. My vision narrowed until my whole world was just a spot on Corvin’s shirt as everything

else ceased to exist except those words and the sound of my heartbeat in my ears.

How could this possibly be?

No one had ever told me a person could be *made* into an Otherkind, with one exception: sirens. But with them, they had to die at sea and have a strong enough will to live to move a Goddess to bring them back to life. Did this mean I was going to die? Was this going to kill me? Was that what this meant?

At some point, they noticed I wasn't listening and pulled my attention back to them.

"Rose? Rose? Come back to us, sweetheart," said Aeden, his power pushing his words through the static once more.

"How?" I whispered.

"Well," he started, then paused as he looked closer at my soul. "From what I can tell, their power is bleeding into your aura, but I can't tell whether it's changing your aura or destroying it."

"And what does that mean?"

"As I said, there are two possibilities: either you change into one of the merfolk, or it kills you."

"What do you mean, 'kills' me?" Panic rose up again.

"No living creature can live without their soul. If you don't have a soul, your body is simply an empty husk." Finally, he looked up and into my eyes. "Your soul was already severely damaged when Eli couldn't finish the transfer, and the human soul is already so fragile compared to an Otherkind's. It's only logical your soul is collapsing beneath the weight of a dozen sirens'."

That was not what I wanted to hear. Not. At. All.

"Is there anything you can do? Anything at all?" I pressed.

"I can't undo what's been done, nor can I stop the process. I simply do not have the power to. The best I can do is to slow the process for a time."

I shook my head. My voice when I spoke had a desperate edge to it, and his eyes softened in pity. “I-I can’t become a siren... mermaid... whatever. I can’t.”

“I’ll do what I can to slow it, but I don’t see another outcome that means you live. I can only speak for myself, of course, but you being alive yet changed is better than you dead. And I can’t emphasize this enough, Rose: It’s going to be change or die.”

A million different reasons as to why being Otherkind, a mermaid or siren, wasn’t appropriate for me buzzed between my ears, but one resounding reason stood out above all else: I’d lose Vi. It was bad enough that I had to hide the fact I knew about Otherkind and that they lived among us. But to hide that I’d changed, with as close as we were? It’d be impossible. I’d have to leave her and my home behind.

Unacceptable.

No.

I would *not* allow that to happen, not now. Not ever.

So, I shook my head, saying, “No. No. I can’t... You can’t let me...”

He took my hands in his as Aeden put another hand on my back, but I knew what they were going to do. Rightly or wrongly, I knew they were going to mess with my mind to calm me down and make me agreeable, which I didn’t want. I stood abruptly, their hands falling away from me and their eyes wide as I glared down at them.

“I said no.” My voice had a hard edge to it that was uncharacteristic for me, and they both backed off immediately. “I’m tired of my life being dictated by others. If I change, I’ll have to give up my home and leave my aunt alone. I won’t have it. *No.*”

“Rose, let’s look at this logically,” said Aeden, trying to calm me still. “We’ve looked for an entire year to find out how the talisman was made so we could understand how it worked and have found nothing. Not one page, reference, or whisper of such a creation ever being made before. We’ve searched the

world over and exhausted every resource. Whatever Molly Young did to make the talisman went to the grave with her. There's nothing we can do to recreate the bonds that bound them in the first place, which means we can't stop whatever is happening."

"Then how did Eli bind it to my soul? Can you recreate that?" I asked.

"I can approximate what he did, yes, but as you have seen, those bonds were not as permanent as he thought they'd be, especially not when the binding ritual wasn't finished," replied Corvin.

"Then what would happen if we just set them free? Like, you have my soul right there. Could you just snap the last band while it's outside of me?"

The look Dr. Kemmer offered me didn't inspire hope. "The talisman's purpose is to bind itself to a siren or a mermaid. If we simply snap the last bond, the power will likely bind itself to me, as I'm the nearest Otherkind who fits what it seeks, and I have no desire for that, nor would I trust any mermaid or siren with such power. Without a proper vessel, and without knowing how to construct another artificial one, there's nowhere else to keep the power but within you.

"If I were to even entertain the idea of trying to find another to take on this power, that doesn't minimize the risk to you. Come look at your soul. Let me show you why I think you'd be risking death to just snap the last bond."

Cautiously, I sat back down, and Corvin manipulated my soul and made it bigger for us to see more clearly.

He gestured to a spot. "Look here. Do you see how the white light is sticking to your soul and how those parts are changing the color of your soul? Do you see the holes?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I worry unleashing the talisman's power, at the very least, will rip those parts away and permanently damage you. At worst, it takes your soul with it completely, leaving you nothing more than a husk or even outright dead. I know

changing isn't something you want to do, but I can promise you I wouldn't allow this to happen if there was a way for us to avoid it. This is just the best of many bad options, Rose."

I didn't know what to say. What he said made sense, but *everything* in me rejected it. The terrified part of me wanted nothing more than to put my hands to my ears and scream, *La la la! I can't hear you! You're lying!*

Aeden looked at my soul, his brows furrowed, and his eyes narrowed as he studied it. "Corvin, do you think it's possible the talisman is trying to fulfill its purpose by changing her into an appropriate vessel?"

Corvin sat back and crossed his arms. "I think it's very possible and more likely than any of our other theories. If it can't find a mermaid or siren, it will make one. Either way, I'd like to keep the bindings in place to help encourage the change."

"How long do you think it will take for her to make a full change?" Aeden asked.

Looking back at my soul, Corvin replied, "If she's already showing physical signs after only a day, I surmise it'd be only a few weeks until she's fully transitioned into a merperson. After that, she'll have to leave until she can gain control of her powers so she's not a danger to herself or to others."

The urge to scream, to rail against what he was saying, surged within me. To stomp my feet and throw a childish fit. Only propriety held me back from screaming out loud. Propriety and the knowledge that it wouldn't do a damn bit of good to yell at the man who'd been helping me for the last year.

I don't want to change! I don't want to leave! No!

Aeden must have heard this, however, as he put his hand on my back again, which I allowed this time.

"We don't have to talk about this right now, Rose," said Aeden, his voice trying to be soothing but failing. "Let's come back to this topic when you've had more time to process this. Then we can come up with a plan you feel good about."

“What plan would ever feel good, Aeden? You know better than anyone that all I’ve ever wanted is to have a home and a purpose. I finally have it! I’m finally content!” My words came out as a yell despite myself.

“Rose, do you want to die? Do you want this to kill you?” he asked frankly. “Because this could kill you. Then any and all chances of you getting to come back to Violet are gone.”

His words hit that still sore wound on my soul, and I flinched. If there truly was no other option... *Fuck, I hate everything about all of this!* “Fine. Do whatever you need to band-aid it,” I said, seething and despairing in equal parts.

Aeden and Corvin visibly relaxed, which only served to further piss me off.

“I must warn you, if the souls are angry like you say they are, they might retaliate,” he said. “I don’t know how, but they might, and if they do, I’m not sure what we’ll be able to do.”

“I understand.” My words were forced through clenched teeth.

Crossing my arms to hug myself, I braced myself for what he was about to do. Corvin shrunk my soul back down to its usual size. After cracking his neck, he began to work, the air sparkling and crackling around him as he used his magic. I couldn’t remember feeling much the first time this happened, but the moment the first new binding was put in place, the breath was knocked out of me and each subsequent one added to the cinching of my ribs. Breathing was possible, yes. However, the more bindings he put on the amalgamation that was my soul, the sirens’ souls, and the talisman, the harder it was to get a full breath in.

Sweat dripped down my forehead, and my world tilted. I barely caught myself before falling over by sticking an arm out, while the other clutched at my chest. Panting, black spots started to dot my vision when Aeden spoke to Corvin.

“I think you need to stop,” he warned the other man. “She’s not taking it well.”

Corvin looked up at me as I struggled for breath, his own brow slicked with sweat. He nodded, then put my soul back where it should be in my chest. It didn't feel any better.

Reaching forward, he took my face in his hands and checked my eyes, then pressed his fingers to my neck to check my pulse as he said, "I know it doesn't feel good. I'm sorry. I had to compensate for my lack of personal power with extra tight bindings. But that should tide you over for a time. I'm going to want at least weekly check-ins. Perhaps I could come here after your therapy sessions to do that."

Aeden answered for me, saying, "I think that would be good. She's already here, so it won't be an inconvenience."

Corvin picked up my hands and looked at them. When I followed suit, I found they were normal, human hands. Tears pricked my eyes as partial relief found me.

"Rose, I know this is a lot to take in, but I need you to pay attention, okay?" urged Corvin, his voice strained. After I nodded, he continued. "This is *not* a permanent solution. I couldn't put as many bindings on as I would've liked, and I don't know how long they will hold now that the souls know they can break them. Do you understand?"

I wanted to say something more, to thank him, but I couldn't. So, I nodded again.

"Okay, good," he replied. "We're going to get through this together, Rose, I promise. You don't need to be afraid of the change that's going to happen. Between Aeden, the selkies, and I, you have a strong support system." Turning to Aeden, he huffed, "I need to get to the ocean. That wiped me out. But I'll be back on Sunday, and we can talk again then."

They spoke for a little bit longer, but I retreated into myself, emotionally and physically wrung out. When Corvin left, I waved at him and hid my flinch at seeing the sadness in his face. This left Aeden and I alone again, and before Aeden could say anything or try to ask how I felt, I said, "I'd like to go home now."

"Of course. We'll talk again on Sunday."

I stood up, my legs shaky and unstable. “Yeah, sure. Sunday.”

“Call me if anything else happens, okay? Even if it’s small or you think it might be nothing.”

“Of course.” I pulled on my dress, then grabbed my towel. At some point, one of them must have dried me, as there wasn’t even a drop of water on me. “I’ll see you then.”

He might have said something else, but I didn’t hear him. My focus was on getting as far away from him and the lake and everything as fast as I could. I climbed into my car, and without so much as a wave goodbye, I was off.

CHAPTER 8

Rose



Pulling my car into the parking lot across from where the Ferry Theo—the inter-island ferry capable of transporting vehicles as well as passengers—would be docking, I cut the ignition and got out. I don't know what possessed me to make an appearance in public with my psyche in shambles as it was, but here I was at one of my favorite places on the islands: Mawadaira's Sweet Treats, Casper Island's top place for all things, well, sweet.

It stood across the street from Okinohime, almost a mirror image of the exterior of the Shioji's restaurant with its wood exterior but with newer and more modern signage. Vi and I usually brought home their cakes and ice creams, but they also had a lovely selection of candies and sweets that were popular as well.

The only bad thing about the place was that Mr. Sadatoki Mawadaira usually talked us into buying more than we came for.

Every. Damn. Time.

I liked to grumble about it, sure, but there really was no one better than the Mawadaira's for sweets and snacks. And I couldn't even really be mad that he talked me and Vi into more than we needed because it wasn't like it went to waste. On the contrary, we always ate every last bite and came back for more. Of course, it also helped that the genteel man had a knack for pairing people with the right kind of treat for any kind of occasion... even if that meant sitting in front of the TV and watching garbage movies.

As I stepped inside, I wasn't fully present as my eyes scanned the place out of habit. The left side of the shop was laid out like a grocery store, with isles for all the different kinds of sweets, and the right was where the ice cream bar and tables were set up for customers to dine-in. Vi and I liked to come several times a month in the summertime to get sundaes...

I paused, the thought almost making me cry.

No, don't think about that right now. I can't afford to have a meltdown in public about not getting to come here again with Vi.

Forcing myself to at least pretend to be alright, I made myself be present and took a cursory glance around to see if Mr. Mawadaira, his wife, or their daughter, Ikuko, was working. When I saw Ikuko at the register, I relaxed. This meant that I could go in and out with my wallet intact. I grabbed a basket and meandered back to where the ice cream was on pure muscle memory.

The freezer was stocked full of delicious-looking options, but as I was weighing my choices, my luck with escaping Mr. Mawadaira ran out as his voice called out from across the aisle. I held back a cringe of defeat.

"Rose! It's so nice to see you again!" he said, making his way to my side.

The man was the epitome of joy, his whole demeanor alight with it. At first glance, he looked like many other Japanese middle-aged men did with his slacks, short sleeve button down shirt, and well-styled black hair. But it was the twinkle in his eye and his genuine excitement about the work he did that set him apart. It was infectious, and I wanted to soak that in as long as I could before my grief set back in.

"It's always a pleasure, Mr. Mawadaira," I replied, pasting a smile on my face.

"I see you're in for some of our treats. Do you need some help choosing? We just got a lot of new flavors in this week."

Bracing myself internally—and mentally apologizing to my wallet—I said, “Of course. You never fail to disappoint with your selections.”

Twenty minutes and a basket full of enough cake, ice cream, and wine to stock a birthday party for the entire island later, he walked me up to the register, chatting away about his attempts at making the perfect ice cream cake. Ikuko looked at me with sympathy.

The woman was not much older than I was, but she had this eternally youthful aura about her. She favored her mother in looks more than her father, her features more serious and her dress a little nicer than her father’s business casual, yet her smile came just as easily.

“Father,” she chided with an exaggerated sigh that did very little to hide her amusement as she rang up the items, “you do know there are only two people in her household, right?”

“I do, but this way, they are stocked up for a while!”

Both of us gave him an indulgent smile, and I handed over the money without having my eyes bug out of my head... too much.

After walking me to the door and before I could leave, Mr. Mawadaira put a hand on my shoulder, his smile turning to concern. “Are you alright, Rose?”

“Yeah. Why?” I asked.

“You seem a little off today.”

That had me choking back tears. “I’m fine. I just finished therapy.”

“Ah, yes. That will make even the heartiest of people a little mushy. Well, I hope the sweets will make you feel better, even if only for a little bit.”

“They always do.” I smiled, this time genuinely.

“Have a safe drive back. It looks like it might rain.”

“Of course. Thank you again, Mr. Mawadaira.”

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. For a moment, my eye burned again, and an aura surrounded the lovely man, a sickly grey color. But when I blinked, it was gone. I said one last goodbye to Mr. Mawadaira, and then I was running out to my car as the Ferry Theo was pulling in. Thankfully, it was docking just across the street, but it had my anxiety skyrocketing, pushing against the new bonds around my soul.

The rest of the trip back to Nora was a blur. I was so wrapped up in my own mind I couldn't focus on anything else, not when every breath was incomplete and painful. It was a wonder I got home safely with how dissociated I was, but I managed it somehow.

After I parked my car in the driveway behind the house, I sat there for a long time, frozen in my thoughts as the sky darkened around me. A hundred thousand questions burned in my mind, each one more pressing than the last, but there was no answer to a single one of them that would make any of this better.

Death.

Or becoming Otherkind.

Truly, I didn't want to die. I'd fought too hard to stay alive to give up now, but the alternative? To have my body and soul changed irrevocably? It might be better than death, but fuck was it the last thing I needed.

Everything had been going so well in my life.

"Eli," I whispered as the sky opened and rain pelted the earth. "Is this the thanks I get for wanting to help you? Is this a punishment? I don't understand."

As usual, silence greeted me.

In the quiet, though, something else entirely hit me: I wasn't just going to lose Vi by changing. I'd lose everyone else, too. Iris, Declan, Ava, Aira, Aeden, even Milo... All of them spoke so venomously about the merfolk. Given everything Joseph and his people had done, I couldn't blame them. Hell, I could barely stand the thought of them, even

though I knew statistically merfolk couldn't all be bad. So, for me to turn into one?

They'd hate me, too.

It didn't matter what platitudes Aeden gave about having a great support system. I knew the truth. I knew I was going to lose them faster than I was about to lose everything else I'd worked for.

Either by death or by change, I was going to have my whole life taken from me.

More tears threatened to spill from my eyes, but I took deep, shuddering breaths to steady myself. I didn't need to cause Vi more concern. And if I had little time left with her, I wanted to make sure I used it as happily as possible so that when I did go, she'd have good memories...

Who the hell am I kidding? Do you not remember what happened after Eli died, dingbat? She's going to be distraught! This will destroy her!

A tear escaped, falling down my cheek. I dashed it away quickly, then patted my cheeks to bring myself back to the present. *Just another harried day at therapy. Nothing more. I can do this.* After another solid minute of pep talk before grabbing my bags, I slipped out of the car and went into the house.

The scent of dinner cooking filled my nose as I shut the door behind me and locked it. It was utterly mouthwatering. I found myself drawn towards it.

"What are we having for dinner, Aunty?" I called out a little louder than necessary given the kitchen was right there. I put my therapy bag on the stairs and walked in to put the wine and sweets away.

"Grilled cheese with bacon and tomato soup," Aunty replied, looking over her shoulder as I opened the fridge. "Did Mr. Mawadaira rob you of your money again?"

"He always does. I hope you like chocolate pistachio ice cream."

She laughed. “I certainly do.”

Once everything was put away, I went over and kissed her on the cheek. “Want me to set the table?”

“Actually, I was thinking we could break Grandma Poppy’s rules a little bit and eat in the living room. I finally bit the bullet and signed up for that streaming service so we can watch that new series Miss Winnie’s been telling us about.”

“The scandalous one about monsters in leather pants?”

She laughed. “The very one.”

“Well, then. I’ll prep the living room and hope Great-Grandma doesn’t come to haunt us for the sin we’re about to commit.”

The sound of Vi’s laughter warmed the cold parts of my heart that had frozen up again today. The parts of me that hardened to protect myself when things went wrong. How hard had I worked to keep my heart open and light for it all to be dashed upon the rocks again? Would this be the blow that finally ended me?

As I sat down to have dinner and watch the silly monster show, I reached over to grab Vi’s hand and gave it a squeeze. She smiled at me again, bright and beautiful.

This I could hold on to. It might be all I’d have left in the end.

CHAPTER 9

Davis Brown



His approach was slow.

Davis didn't need to run, not when his prey was already limpin' along. The knife in his hand dripped with the vermin's blood where he'd gotten his first stab in.

The little bird bitch thought she'd hidden well enough, but there were always signs. There were always tells. In the harpy's case, it was those disgustingly bright green eyes that gave it away.

Davis hadn't actually planned to hunt this beast today; there were still weeks yet of reconnaissance he needed to do, especially with how little time he had away from his fool cousin, Perry. If he hadn't been out pretending to be a normal human—as if there weren't supes crawlin' all over the world, threatenin' the humans they hid among—he'd never have borne witness to the blessin', this obvious sign to do what he was made to do: to exterminate any and all supes he came across.

Good thing, then, that Davis was more than happy to do so.

His prey turned back to look at him as he advanced for it. But as it did so, it tripped over something and went sprawlin'. He laughed even as his pants tightened when its blood spilled across the concrete.

“Please! Leave me alone!” it begged, which only made this so much sweeter.

Images of everythin' he could do to it flashed in his mind. Flayin'. Vivisection. He'd done so much to so many supes... A hundred forty-two, to be exact. It excited him, more than any woman had ever.

Unfortunately, Davis didn't have time to savor this kill.

Unlike his idiot cousin, who was supposed to be his partner but was too fuckin' softhearted, he didn't care that it was broad daylight. When he saw a supe, he killed it. Didn't matter if he was out gettin' groceries and supplies or behind the large store where the dumpsters were.

The supe bit back a scream upon impact but kept crawling away. Now he quickened his speed until he was over it. He stomped the back of its head so its face smashed into the concrete, eliciting a sickenin' crunch as its nose broke.

Davis knew there was little time before it tried to shift into its unnatural supe form, so he bent down over the disgusting thing. He slipped his knife between its ribs. Once. Twice.

Fuck, I could come, he thought, revelin' in the feel of his knife sinkin' into the thing's body. There was nothin' like it, killing a supe. No better pleasure in the whole fuckin' world.

"May you rot in hell, demon spawn," he whispered into its ear, his cock throbbin' as it whimpered and struggled to breathe. Then he slit its throat, so deep its head nearly detached.

Davis then wiped the blood off the blade and went about his business, leavin' the body to be found by someone else.

CHAPTER 10

Rose



Throwing myself into work did wonders for helping me pretend like there was nothing wrong. That I wasn't about to lose my humanity... or my life. I kept shoving away the news from the day before every time it popped up in my mind.

The woman who was either going to be a mermaid or die? Not me!

I'm just the shopkeeper's niece. A nice, boring human woman with friends and a potential boyfriend and a nice, boring life. Nothing special or crazy here. Nope!

All lies, of course. No matter how many times I said it, the rational part of my mind reminded me of the contrary, and if it hadn't been that, then the painful tightness of my chest certainly did. Yet I tucked it away like a bad dream and set out to get the shop in working order. With so much to do, it took very little to distract me from the impending doom that was my future.

As I stepped onto the porch of Sutton's Sundries, I waved at the workers who were giving the shop a shiny new coat of paint. When the town council told us they were doing revitalization projects across Nora, we didn't realize what they'd meant at first until the new Mayor Forester sat us down to tell us what he'd planned. He'd given us a budget and told us we could hire part-time workers as well as do whatever we needed to the shop so long as we brought in proof of what we were getting done: receipts and what not.

And the budget? It was more money than I'd ever thought was possible for our tiny town. Apparently, the federal government had returned the money Joseph used to buy land from the geopark... and some extra as hush money to keep it from becoming a scandal. So, we were going to use it to our advantage, just to spite the fucker.

Quickly, I walked into the shop and gave Vi a kiss on the cheek before going upstairs. I wanted to make sure everything was prepped before Milo got here, but also, I wanted to avoid more teasing from Vi. My headspace wasn't right for it, not after getting approximately zero sleep, but also, I didn't want to show her I was feeling off in any way. She always expected me to be a little quiet after therapy, but this was far beyond that. For obvious reasons.

The entire top floor had been cleared out in preparation for the expansion of our home goods section of the shop. Vi had generously allowed me to design the rooms and designate each for a different purpose. It turned out, much to my *eternal* displeasure, I had a knack for interior design just like my mother, but I supposed it was to be expected when she forced me to minor in it at university with the intention of me helping her with her business... forever.

The memory had me shuddering.

Making my way around the upstairs floor one last time, I made sure to check that everything was ready for Milo when he came in. The new shelves were unboxed in little piles next to some tape I'd put down to show exactly where they needed to go. Was it a bit overkill? Yeah, probably. But as someone who thrived best with detailed, explicit instructions, this was how I'd have wanted to come into the project.

With the last check complete, I sat down at the computer which was to be the upstairs register. My task for the day was to continue to put our inventory into the new computer system we'd invested in, with the intention of adding the rest of the shop at a later date. Unfortunately for me, the previous system we used was so old it no longer received updates, so we needed to find a new one.

This meant we had to manually add each and every product in the entire shop, as the old system's files couldn't be transferred to the new one. It was going to take some time, but time I had...

No, I don't. I don't have much time at all.

I shoved that thought away, quickly grabbing the papers I'd need and turning on the computer. While it booted up, I pulled out the stack of invoices I'd started working on the prior Friday, as well as the stack I hoped to finish today, trying to think of anything else. It took several deep breaths and rounds of near rumination for me to settle on a topic that didn't have me on the edge of a panic attack: Joseph fucking Kelley.

The mayor and his council inherited an absolute clusterfuck of a mess that was going to take years to fix, all thanks to that bastard. It still boggled my mind how much he was able to do in plain sight that didn't alert other government agencies to his wrongdoings. Even with his mind powers, all he'd done should've been stopped much, much earlier.

After abandoning his post for 'reasons unknown,' the power he'd had over everyone seemed to fade, and the horror at what he'd done dawned on everyone all at once. An investigation into his time as mayor uncovered the most awful things, and the deeper we citizens delved, the more horrifying his actions turned out to be.

Under his tenure as mayor, he'd halved our already small population, buying the homes of Nora's citizens out from under them. Sure, he'd added a few dozen of his friends and allies to the population, putting them in places of power, like the town council and the police department, but it made our already tiny population unstable, and the blatant corruption was far-reaching. This meant when he and his lackeys left, it created a power vacuum we'd yet to fully correct.

Shifting in my chair to get more comfortable, I turned to the pile of papers to my right before sifting through them for the one I needed, an invoice with the product numbers on them so I could double check to make sure what I'd entered into the

system last time was correct. When I couldn't find one of the papers I needed, I let out a frustrated growl, going through the stack one more time. It took several minutes, but I finally found it stuck inside another invoice. I had to resist the urge to crumple it into a ball as I turned back to the computer and fell back into my thoughts.

How did he manage to buy federally-owned land? I asked myself. Doesn't that require paperwork and stuff? How did it go unnoticed?

The home he'd built at Five Islands Point was on illegally-obtained land, and the stairs he'd constructed down to the beach below permanently altered the cliffs, as he'd etched them from the stone itself. Of course, there was also the fact he'd made all public land private, cutting off all tourism to the island, losing even more revenue for Nora.

Him leaving didn't help either.

Because of course it didn't.

Assholes like him never fail to leave a scar, I thought, touching my stomach over the ones he'd given me. There was so much more he'd done, so many smaller things which avalanched into bigger problems. Nora was on the brink of ruin, and those of us who remained were scrambling to pick up the pieces of his failed attempt to make the island into a sanctuary for the merfolk.

The derision and the venomous way the Otherkind I knew spoke of him and those who'd followed him because of his actions was how I knew my change into one was going to be disastrous.

Even the merpeople that chose to stay had gone quiet, keeping to themselves for the most part, despite having not taken part in the attempt at Nora's demise. I'd even heard they'd chosen not to join in on leadership meetings between the Otherkind species here. Which made me worry even more that what was happening to me was going to ruin me, because if even the innocent merfolk were withdrawing, what chance did I have at being accepted?

Heavy footsteps walking up the stairs had me looking up from my computer, pulling me from my thoughts.

I was greeted with the same warm smile that made my insides melty, and all I could do was watch Milo as he approached me, his expression morphing into that wicked grin that had set me aflame last I'd seen him.

He walked right up to the counter, setting the box in his arms on it. Then he came around to the other side to pull me up from where I sat and straight into his arms. His warmth seeped into my skin, warming me from the outside in, then from the inside out when his lips caught mine.

For another dazzling, dizzying moment, I was lost in his embrace, the only thought in my mind of him. His scent, his warmth, the feel of his arms around me, the masterful way he kissed me... Everything about him encompassed me fully and left me wanting more. My hands fisted his shirt to pull him that much closer.

A low sound rumbled in him, and soon after, he pulled away, resting his forehead against mine. My eyelids fluttered open to look into his eyes, only to find the jade-green replaced with the dark cinnamon-brown. The intensity with which the beast stared back at me had my knees weakening, but since I didn't want to provoke him further, I unclenched my fists and ran my hands over his chest, feeling the muscle there. That rumbling returned, the strength of it vibrating beneath my hands.

"You've got to stop kissing me like that in public," I whispered huskily.

The seal's smile was predatory as he replied, his voice deeper than before, "Should I not kiss *my* girl?"

"Not when it leads me to..." I paused for a beat, trying to find the right words as my hands slid lower to his abs and marveling at how they tightened in response to my touch. "To want things you can't give me presently."

"And if we weren't in public?"

His own hands slid down my back to settle low on my hips just a breath away from my ass. A shiver ran up my spine. How I wanted his hands to slide the rest of the way down. How I wanted him to show me *exactly* what it would be like to be *his* girl. And judging by that grin of his? He knew it, too.

“Then I’d have to politely ask you not to tease. It’s not gentlemanly to leave a girl wanting.” My words were breathy, belying how much he was affecting me.

His laugh rippled into another rumble. “I shall keep that in mind for when I’m able to get you alone.”

“Oh, please do. It’s hard to get work done like this.” It felt so right to tease him even as I pushed that errant lock of hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ear.

“We wouldn’t want that, now, would we?” he whispered.

He planted one last kiss on my lips before stepping away from me. Though I was loathe to let him put any space between us when I so desperately wanted him, I could see clearly why *he* needed a little space, if the tightness of the front of his pants was any indication. Despite the heat in my cheeks, I couldn’t help but be flattered.

How did I get so lucky as to have someone as gorgeous as him desire me?

In an attempt to not stare at *that* part of him—which took more effort than I would *ever* admit to—I looked back at his eyes and watched as they bled back to their usual jade.

I smirked. “I’m beginning to think your beastly likes me.”

My comment caught him off-guard, and he laughed, saying, “You could say that.” He stepped closer again, and fully as himself, brushed a chaste kiss against my lips. “Hello, Rose.”

“Hello,” was my only reply.

I was weak. All I wanted to do was to pull him into the closet mere feet from us to have my wicked way with him, and I honestly might have if Vi hadn’t walked up with a box in her arms.

Milo looked over immediately then went to help her. She told him where he could take the boxes they'd both brought up, gesturing in that direction. All the while, all I could do was stare after him as he followed her instructions, my brain a scrambled mess as I indulged myself in a glance at his tight ass. I was so focused on him that I didn't even notice Vi had come to stand beside me until she leaned in and whispered, "He's very attractive, isn't he?"

I jumped, putting a hand over my heart. "Oh jeez!"

"I thought you'd seen me walk around to stand next to you, but I guess you were too distracted." Vi laughed, the last words of her sentence sing-songy.

She waggled her eyebrows, and I blushed, swiping my hand towards her and whisper-whining, "Vi!"

Dodging my swipes easily, she laughed harder, "Alright, alright. I'll let it go." A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes. "For now."

If he hadn't been in the shop with me, I might have wailed in dismay, but I settled on only a look of one. Milo strode back downstairs to get more boxes as Vi set down another stack of invoices on the counter with the others. My aunt just laughed, elbowing me. Soon, Milo walked by with another stack of boxes and set them in front of the storage room door before walking up to the counter.

"Alright, boss," he said, looking at Vi, "put me to work."

"Oh, don't look at me. Rose is the boss here," she replied with a smirk. "I'm going to head back downstairs. I'll be up in a little bit to check on you two."

Vi retreated, leaving me alone with a very pleased-looking Milo. Rounding the counter, I took him to the first set of shelves against the wall. I bent down to grab the instructions and handed them to him.

"So, I laid out the shelves where they are supposed to be arranged, and I even put some tape down to give you a reference for where they should stand." I gestured towards the tape on the floor with my foot. "These are the instructions for

the shelves on the perimeter of this room, and the instructions for the four inside shelves are there.” I pointed again, and his eyes followed to where the folded piece of paper was sitting on one of the as of yet unmade shelves. “And thank you for your help. I really appreciate you lending your brawn.”

“I’m happy to help.” He smiled. “I even promise to read the instructions before I start putting them together.”

“How kind!” I laughed, leaning in close to him. “Are you going to otherwise behave?”

He seemed to think for a moment, then smirked. “Only if you do.”

“Then I shall strive to be a good example for you.”

“I have no doubt you are already.” It was hard not to get lost in those eyes again, but with a squeeze of his hand on my arm, he stepped back. “And since you are, I shall let you get back to work. I should have these done before I leave today.”

“Thank you again, Milo. I really appreciate it.”

Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to my forehead, then said, “It’s no problem at all, Rose.”

I walked away from him before I threw all propriety out the window and made out with him right then and there. When I settled back behind the counter again, my eyes sought him out. It was hard to focus when he was around, but there was no doubt in my mind this was not magic or any such nonsense. What I felt was nothing more than hormones and the magnetism he possessed, but even knowing what it was didn’t help me in combating it.

I forced myself to focus on my work on the computer in front of me, only looking up a few—okay, several... hundred—times to roam my eyes over him. Part of me wanted to watch him while he worked, to observe him as he did things. It was something I did with my classmates and teachers in university, as well as with my coworkers when I worked at the advertising firm in Boston. I’d had to relearn social cues from years of being forced to basically be a scholastic robot. Not that that was why I wanted to watch him. No, I wanted to

watch him to understand him better. To know what he was like without me around.

That isn't much better, Rose, I chastised myself. Jeez, I'm such a creeper.

When Milo got on his knees to begin to put one of the shelves together across the room, Vi wandered back upstairs, catching me once again staring at him. She elbowed me in the arm, cracking a smile in my direction, whispering, "So, are we going to have to come up with a sock system for the house?"

"Vi!" I whisper-yelled, my cheeks flaming.

"What? It's only polite to warn each other if we need privacy, and seeing as you're looking at the poor man like you're going to eat him up, I'm going to assume some privacy might be necessary before you attack him in public."

I glanced over at Milo to see if he'd react, his supernatural hearing being so sensitive and all. He made no effort to hide his half-smirk, especially not when his eyes caught mine, his flashing brown for the briefest of moments before looking back at his work.

"I can assure you that won't be necessary," I said, loud enough he and Vi could hear.

"Are you sure?" When I huffed an exasperated sigh, she laughed, Milo right along with her, though she didn't notice. "Alright then, but if you ever do. Just shoot me a message or something."

"Sure, sure." I waved my hand dismissively.

"I'm going to head back downstairs. Let me know if you need any help up here. I don't want you to overdo it," she said with a pointed look I returned.

"I could say the same for you, Aunty."

"Yeah, yeah. I know." Her teasing smile came back. "Let me know if you change your mind about the sock system."

I groaned, "Vi!"

Vi cackled as she walked away, granting me a reprieve from *her* teasing. Milo, on the other hand, looked over at me and winked, clearly not willing to let up on his end. Taking the nearest thing to my hand—an invoice—I crumpled it into a ball and sent it flying.

Before it could ping him in the head, though, he caught the offending projectile. He laughed while I gave him an exaggerated pout.

Uncrumpling the paper, he looked at it then said, “This seems important. You may want to keep it.”

Standing up, I went over to his side to snatch the paper out of his hand, my cheeks still blazing with heat. Before I could retreat, however, he grabbed my wrist and tugged me down to his level. He pulled me close to whisper in my ear, his breath hot against my skin in a way that had me shivering again.

“I’d promise to keep it down, but it’d be a lie,” he whispered, and my breath caught in my throat as his lips brushed the shell of my ear. “I have *every* intention of making you scream.”

I had no witty comeback for that, no flirtatious retorts, not when his tongue traced my ear. The hand that had tugged me down moved to my stomach to steady me as I wobbled. The feeling only got worse when he continued, “And I love having you watch me while I work. You have my blessing to keep doing it, especially if you keep doing it with such hunger in your eyes.”

“I—I—” I stuttered on the word until I could get my words to come out properly. “I don’t think I could stop even if I wanted to.”

“Then don’t. I don’t mind.” He kissed me on the cheek. “I’ll be good now, but I can’t vouch for my seal.”

“Like I said, I’ll give him all the head pats.”

He laughed heartily. “I have no doubt he’d love that, and when you come to the engagement party, he’ll definitely take you up on that.”

“Then I shall prepare to keep both hands free for the occasion.”

There was a breath, a mere moment, where neither of us spoke. The possibilities between us sparked, making it impossible for me to remember exactly what I was supposed to be doing. *How easy would it be to shove him down and...*

“Oh, while I’ve got you down here...” he said, derailing my thoughts. He kissed down my jaw, eliciting shivers from me. “I was wondering if you’d like to come with me and my crew on Friday to see what we do, seeing as I’ve helped you with your work and all.”

“I’m not off that day,” I panted, trying to form words when they were slipping from my grasp with every press of his lips and nip of his teeth as he blazed a path to my neck.

“We usually head out before dawn. I can have you back before your shift starts.”

I leaned into him, letting him take the whole of my body weight as my head spun. My nipples tightened, heat pooling between my legs.

I whimpered my answer. “Yes, yes, I’ll go.”

He rewarded me with one last graze of teeth along my pulse before going back to my lips and completely shutting off my mind. I reached up and tangled my hand in his hair at the nape of his neck, wanting more. Needing more. But just as he had the night of our date, he pulled away.

I nearly snarled.

“We should get back to work before Violet comes back up here and catches us,” he breathed, his pupils blown wide.

“Okay,” I replied, knowing he was right but also hating it at the same time. I didn’t want that either, not when she was insufferable about this as it was.

Milo helped me stand and waited until my legs were no longer mush before he let me go. With one last kiss to my forehead, I left his side to go back to the counter before he could make any further remarks or lewd, and entirely wanted,

manhandling. Though, that didn't stop him from smirking mischievously regardless.

I returned to my work, and once he went back to his, it was a little easier to do what I needed to do. Or so I thought, as I ignored my work once again.

As I not-so-subtly perved on—I mean watched—Milo work and marveled at how lucky I was, a thought came to me. *What if he doesn't want me after I've—my mind stumbled over the words, but I forced myself to continue anyway—changed? What if he doesn't want to be with a mermaid?*

That thought alone cooled the heat in my blood.

How would I even tell him? It's not like I could hide it. From what I understood, Otherkind could always spot another Otherkind. Ava and Aira explained, for them at least, each species had a particular scent and aura even if they were in human form that was unmistakable. This meant he'd know when I'd changed.

I knew mermaids and selkies were not natural allies. What if that was enough for him to recoil from me? To despise me on principle? It was hard to imagine him despising anyone, but what if? Of course, this could just be me blowing my own anxieties out of proportion. He might actually be very supportive. Yet the darker outcome loomed over me more than the light one.

I'd have to tell him eventually; he deserved to make the decision himself whether he wanted to continue this or not. And there was no way he wouldn't be hurt if he found out on his own and learned I kept it from him. Were it me, I'd feel a very deep sense of betrayal.

I'll find the right time to tell him, but for now, I want to enjoy this. Even if it's just pretend or even for a short time, I'd like to know what it's like to have him.

It would be the last hurrah of my humanity, and if I could spend it in his arms, then I would be happy... I hoped.

CHAPTER 11

Rose



Waking up before dawn... I hated it.

Despite my excitement as to why I was up—seeing a hot selkie work his magic in the ocean, mmm—it had my feelings all in a jumble.

There were some good memories, of course, like when Vi and I went up to the tallest peak on Nora to watch the stars and then the sunrise. But most of what I thought of was hardly pleasant. The many nights of insomnia or me fighting sleep in the wee hours so I wouldn't be trapped in a continuous loop of nightmares were some of the worst. But there were bittersweet memories as well.

As I got myself ready, I couldn't help but ruminate on the bittersweet. The morning Will brought me out to the sacred cave the first time stuck out. It'd been magical and amazing. I'd learned so much about the world, Otherkind, and merfolk. But it had been ruined, like everything else, by Joseph.

Then there was the morning Will took me out to his favorite spot to watch the sunrise... before giving me the most memorable fuck of my life. He spent that whole morning before work lavishing me in pleasure I'd never experienced before, then asked me to be his girlfriend. I clenched a fist around my hairbrush remembering that one, my whole body shaking in anger.

One day. One whole day I got to be his girl before his father ruined that, too.

Joseph ruined everything he touched. He was a blight upon the world, and if it were possible, I'd have meted out punishment for him. I needed that retribution.

Fuck him. If I were strong enough, I'd wring the motherfucker's neck—

I stopped myself there when an inhuman snarl rumbled up from my own chest. Taking a deep breath, I counted to twenty to calm myself. It was no use dreaming of revenge I'd never get, even if sometimes the only way to defeat my nightmares was to pretend I was a vengeful goddess ensuring justice was served.

Besides, you're going on a cool trip with Milo. You know, the guy who didn't leave you on the beach? The guy who saved you from being trapped in the cave? The man who you'd like to climb like a tree—No. Stop it. You're starting to sound like Ava!

Not that that was a particularly bad thing. The woman made me laugh as much as she made me blush. I wasn't sure why she enjoyed the company of a wet blanket like me, but I was grateful, nonetheless.

I was finishing brushing and braiding my hair when my phone vibrated on my nightstand. Quickly, I wrapped the ponytail holder around the end, then got up to check it. The moment I saw Milo's name in my notifications, my heart pitter-pattered in my chest, and I clicked into his message immediately.

MILO

Good morning, sweetheart

Are you ready to go on a swashbuckling adventure?

I laughed out loud at that as I typed my response.

ME

Ofc!

I've always dreamed of sailing the seven seas

MILO

Good!

Bc I'll be there in about ten minutes

I await your arrival, Captain

After snapping a cheeky picture of me saluting him and then setting my phone back down, I chuckled again. There was just something about him that put me at ease every time I was near him or spoke to him. The man was a dream.

Of course, it also really helped that Ava basically gave me her blessing yesterday even without me having to ask for it. She'd called me to tell me personally and without beating around the bush, "I know you're probably going to be weird about this, but I really don't care that you're dating my brother. All I ask is that you get me up to speed on how all this happened on Sunday when you come to my party. I'm woefully lacking in details, miss! Oh, and it should go without saying, but if he mistreats you, I expect to be the first to know so I can kick his sorry ass from here to the next century."

The weight off my shoulders that talk had been.

Now, all I had to deal with was the whole turning into a merperson or possibly dying thing... But that was a topic best dealt with later.

Once I was ready to go with my bathing suit on, my bag full of everything I needed and phone in hand, I went downstairs. I taped a note to the back of the front door reminding Vi I was out with Milo this morning, then headed out the door, locking it behind me and re-engaging the security system as I did so.

It was already humid despite the sun not even being up yet. Sweat slicked down my spine as I used the path to walk between my house and the next to get to the docks. It was going to be a hot summer, I could already tell, and I thanked

my lucky stars that both the shop and the house had the central heating and cooling upgraded last fall. Otherwise, this already miserable weather would've been so much worse.

Milo was already waiting for me when I walked up, and he bounded off his boat to meet me halfway. He pulled me into his arms and tipped my head back to kiss me silly, all before I could say anything to him. When he released me, I was dizzy with how quickly the blood rushed between my legs.

"You're not even being fair anymore, mister!" I whined, nipping at his bottom lip before he could move away from me completely.

"Feeling a little lusty, are we?" He chuckled before burying his nose into my neck. "Mmm. You smell delectable when you're all worked up."

I groaned. The man wasn't fair. "You're going to incinerate me."

"Well, we can't have that now, can we?" With one last peck to the lips, he stepped away, grabbing my hand instead. "I'll be good, I promise."

"I don't believe you know the definition of that word." I playfully narrowed my eyes at him.

"Aye, you may be right about that one." He gave my hand a squeeze. "We should get going."

Milo guided me onto his boat, and as I looked around, I saw a suspicious lack of crew members aboard. "So, did you scare everyone off, or did you fire everyone in favor of hiring me?"

He laughed. "We split up for the day. There are three sections that were struggling the most, so we decided to cover more ground by going in groups."

He brought me to the helm and had me sit on the bench nearby. Within minutes, we were moving away from the docks and heading out towards the caldera. It was fascinating to watch him move so effortlessly, and I tried to focus on what he was doing so I could use it myself later.

If only my brain were so kind.

The ever-present awareness of my change clamored up into my thoughts in the silence as he navigated between the islands heading northwest. It was the last thing I wanted to focus on, so I scrambled for a question to occupy the space between us, my cheeks heating as I realized what I was asking. “What did you imagine your future would be like?”

“Ooh, a proper date-like question,” he joked, flashing me a smile. “You thinking about how to fit me into your life already?”

“Perhaps I merely want to know if we’re compatible enough to continue,” I replied, attempting to sound lofty and flirtatious but unsure whether I managed it.

Until the corner of his lip quirked up.

“Then please allow me to ask a clarifying question, if I may. Do you mean, how do I imagine the future to look like from now, or when I was younger?”

My lips curved into a slow smile. “I suppose we can start with from when you were younger and work our way up to your current vision for it now.”

Because really, *that* was on my mind most at the moment. The vision for the future I had was dying right before my eyes. I’d already achieved my own meager goals of having a home and purpose. I was happy being a shopkeeper with my aunt. Yet all of that meant nothing now. Either by change or by death, I would never get that future.

When Milo’s cheeks colored with the slightest tinge of red, my attention zeroed in on him. “Ah, well, I thought I’d be mated and settled down by now, to be honest.”

“Three hundred years is a long time to be alone,” I agreed. “Though, I have a hard time believing someone like you would be hard up for company.”

“Not that I wish to subject you to the particulars of my varied sexual history, but I’ve never lacked willing partners of any gender.” He laughed. “My best friend and I even met when we were looking to stir up some trouble at a convent at

the same time. I think it was in the 1800s, but I can't remember when exactly. But let's just say there was an epidemic of immaculate conceptions around that time."

"So, you've always been a horn dog?"

He smirked. "Bona fide since puberty."

"And do you and this best friend of yours still get into such trouble?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, no. He passed away about a hundred years ago."

I cringed at my fat, stupid mouth. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It's an old wound, so the sting has lessened with time."

The sag of his shoulders, the white of his knuckles as he gripped the helm, told me perhaps he wasn't being completely honest about how much it still hurt. I didn't call him out on it, though. If there was anything I knew intimately, it was that the gaping holes the dead left in our lives never truly healed. Sure, the sting of it lessened with time, but it ached when you least expected it.

Casting a glance my way, he smiled softly. "Anyway, that's not the answer you asked for. What I meant to say was that I've always wanted what my parents have, what my siblings have. To have a partner or partners by my side until it's time to return to the sea. To know at one glance they are meant for me and me alone. The certainty of it, that the Gods chose someone for me specifically to share the long years of my life with. That's what I wanted.

"Now, did I think it would take so long? No. I envy my siblings that they are mated and happy. But my mum likes to remind me that the best mates often take time, and the Gods want to ensure the perfect person is waiting for me just as much as I am waiting for them." His eyes flicked to me again. "I'd wait an eternity for my person."

I'd never thought about fate having decided who my perfect other half was, but with as much conviction as he spoke about it, it must've been a great comfort.

“How about you?” he asked, yanking me out of my thoughts.

“Well,” I started, unsure of how to phrase my musings, “I’m not sure someone like me would rate high enough for fate to intervene and provide me a perfect partner. Even if they did, there’d probably be some catch to it, I’m sure.” I huffed a bitter laugh. “I’m not lucky in really anything I do.”

“But would you accept someone if you were blessed with a mate?” he pressed, his eyes only on me now.

Chewing my lip, I really considered this for a moment before saying, “If I knew for certain, yeah. Though, I honestly don’t think I’m going to be blessed that way.”

Really, it sounded wonderful, and seeing how in love all his family members were with their spouses, I had to admit I wanted it for myself, too. Hell, I’d been envious of Eli and Vi’s relationship while it lasted. *I guess I’ll have to enjoy my time with Milo while I can. He’ll find his person. He’s too wonderful not to have one.*

Milo smiled at me before focusing on the water ahead of us. “I think you’d be surprised, Rose.”

“I’ll let you know the next time a God or Goddess gives me favor in anything. Or should I ask you to broker a deal on my behalf?”

“Your wish is my command, my queen.”

“Now I know you’re yanking my chain.” Leaning forward, I poked him in the side, making him jerk away from me and laugh.

“When it comes to matters of the heart, beautiful, I think you’ll find I never jest,” he remarked, even as a smile threatened to overtake his sincere expression. “Besides, it’s quite common for Otherkind to be mated to humans. It has its challenges, of course; you humans are so delicate and unpredictable about learning about the monsters living among you. But it’s just as deep and fulfilling as a pairing between two Otherkind.”

“Huh,” I replied thoughtfully. “How do those couples deal with the difference in life spans? Surely, it’d be a tragedy for one party to die of old age before the other partner did.”

“There’s a special kind of magic called the soul stitch. It ties the souls of the individuals together so that they live and die together. The humans in those relationships end up living just as long as the Otherkind they are bound to, which could be for hundreds of years.”

My eyes widened. “Do all Otherkind do this?”

“Many do, but there are some who don’t wish to. It’s as personal to the mates as anything about their mating is.”

Pursing my lips, I thought a little more about this. It was kinda romantic to have your soul bound to the one you loved, but... My earlier thought about betrayal and lies of omission popped up in my head again. “Can it be undone?”

Milo turned to me, a little startled by my question. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what if you grow apart or one partner does something so egregious that you cannot bear to be with them anymore? Or they leave you and never look back?” I hadn’t meant to say the last one out loud, but it was out in the open. All I could hope was that he wasn’t too upset at the vaguest mention of Will.

“Ah,” he said, his body relaxing again. “It is possible to undo the soul stitch, but I think the circumstances have to be, as you said, egregious or painful. The one couple I knew who undid their stitch did it because one was dying of a magical curse. Since they had small children and no other family in the realm, they chose to undo it. The whole situation was heartbreaking.”

“I can’t imagine losing my partner. I think it would break me if they left me like that.” *Or in a bubble. On the beach. Without even looking back once... I don’t know if I will ever get over that.*

“It would break me, too.” His eyes darkened, his thoughts haunting his eyes for a brief moment. Whatever had happened

to him to make him have that expression had my heart twinging in sympathy. “And on that note, I believe we’re here.”

‘Here,’ in the dawn light, was indistinguishable from any other stretch of the ocean. In all directions around us, only water and waves could be seen. Normally, I’d have reveled in the peace that was the nothingness of the open sea, but with the cinching in my ribs and the knowledge of the beast within me that was the talisman, calm was not what I felt. The edge of panic cut along my periphery, but I breathed through it. Merperson or no, death or no, I wasn’t going to let anything take my safe place from me.

CHAPTER 12

Rose



Milo and I walked to the back of the boat, where he produced two wetsuits. He held the smaller of the two out for me. “As much as I’d love to see you in a cute little bikini, I have to at least pretend like I’m going to do my job.”

I laughed and took it from him. “And here I thought you selkies just jumped into the ocean naked all willie-nillie.”

“We do, but not during work hours.” He pulled his shirt off and tossed it on a nearby bench before shucking off his pants and shimmying into his own wetsuit.

It took me a stupidly long time to remember to respond as my eyes took in every bit of exposed flesh he bared, leaving me—as always—wanting more. “Oh, yes. Professionalism. Forgive me for forgetting.”

I followed his lead, taking off my sundress and slipping my legs into the suit he provided, but I couldn’t keep my eyes off him. He pulled the top half of his wetsuit to cover that luscious, broad, muscly chest of his. The immature part of me wanted to pout and demand he take it back off so I could continue to admire the obvious strength of his upper body, but this was supposed to be his work, not ‘let Rose ogle at the hot man’ time. So, I consoled myself by getting a good look at his ass instead.

If Milo noticed my lecherous gaze, he didn’t let on when he stepped over to me. He fussed for a moment over my own wetsuit after I’d slipped my arms into it, making sure it was

zipped up all the way and that my necklace was tucked safely inside.

“You ready to be part of my world?” he asked, his eyes shifting to cinnamon for just a moment.

I grinned. “More than ready.”

“Oh, good! Here I was thinking I might have to sing the whole song to convince you.” His eyes lit up with amusement.

“I mean, you can if you’d like. Far be it from me to stop you from making me throw you overboard and turning this rig around.”

Milo looked mock-aghast. “Miss Sutton, you would dare steal a selkie’s ship? Don’t you know the grievous sin you would be committing?”

“Sin, huh? What sort of punishment would I incur should I get caught?” I quirked an eyebrow at him.

There was a rumble from deep in his chest as he stepped fully into my space, stealing my breath from me. Leaning down, his lips brushed my ear as he whispered, “I would be within my right to take you as my bride, bind your soul to mine so you could never leave, and fuck you so thoroughly every single day that you couldn’t even think to escape the prison I’ve put you in.”

The imagery that accompanied his “threat” sent heat straight to my core. “Seems disproportionate?”

“The rule for shifters of all varieties is that you should never run from them, because they will see that as flirting, playing hard to get. Stealing my boat and taking it away... well, my beast would take that as running. And he would pursue you.” He nipped my earlobe. “He would catch you, and then he would make you his.”

“He wants that?” I could barely get the words out as his hands slid up my sides to bracket my ribs.

Another deep purr was followed by a voice, this one deeper than Milo’s, answering me, “I want nothing more than to have you, little human.”

A whimper escaped me as his teeth grazed my neck. Not in fear but in desire. In desperate need. His words called to something deep in my soul and plucked at things within me I didn't know could even be touched. They spoke to a side of him I'd never seen before: his selkie side. I'd only had brief interactions with his beast, so to feel the full brunt of him like this, to hear words no human would utter so seriously, and it not be a threat? I loved it. More than I expected.

And lordy was I tempted to steal his damn boat.

In a smooth motion, he picked me up with one arm and brought me level with his face, showing me his lovely deep cinnamon eyes. "I'll take that as a sign of your agreement to be mine."

"Seems a bit fast?" I managed to say as he started towards the back of the boat. "We've only been on one date, after all."

"Hmm," he grumbled. "This must be a human thing. He's always telling me I need to slow down. He doesn't want to scare you off."

"I appreciate both of your patience," I replied, then kissed him.

"I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'm not patient," he said against my lips. "If I had my way, you'd have been mine a year ago, that merman be damned."

I pursed my lips, ignoring the sting a reminder of Will always gave me. "Still. Thank you for humoring me."

Those brilliant eyes of his caught mine. "I'll always do what's best for you and makes you most comfortable. Always, Rose."

That soul-deep feeling returned, truth ringing through me. He meant that. He really meant that. *I don't deserve him. I honestly don't and never will.* Yet that didn't stop me from kissing him again.

As he kissed me back, his tongue slipping into my mouth to erase my thoughts, he stepped off the back of the boat and sent us plummeting into the water. I barely even noticed the water enveloping us with how hungrily he devoured me.

Shifting, I wrapped my legs around his waist to feel him there as he landed on the ocean floor.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his voice halfway between Milo and Beastie’s. He pulled away even as his hands gripped my hips and pressed the apex of my thighs against the thick outline of his cock trapped in his wetsuit.

Now it was my turn to groan.

“I need to stop,” he said. It was clear he was struggling to wrest control back from Beastie, especially with how his hips bucked. “I have work to do, damn it.”

I chuckled even as a moan escaped me. “T-tell me about how selkies came to be.”

Beastie broke through to growl, “You want a history lesson right now, woman?”

“I require consent from both parties in the body for sexy times to happen.”

He wasn’t so gentle with his teeth against my neck as he snarled, the sound going right through me and making me so wet I could barely think. That in conjunction with him guiding my hips to grind against him melted my resolve. “He consents. He’s just a coward.”

“Let me hear that from him,” I said, slipping my fingers into his hair and tugging a little. If Milo himself said he wanted to fuck me right here and now, I’d happily allow it, but if he didn’t, well, I’d have to take care of business on my own again when I got home.

There was more struggling, but eventually, it was Milo’s voice who spoke the next words to me, his hands stilling. “Some say selkies were created from the souls of those who were drowned or are fae creatures hiding here on Earth. What I know to be true is that, much like sirens, selkies were blessed into creation by a Goddess. A young girl saved the Goddess’ creatures from being killed by the humans of her village, and when they went to hunt her down for stopping them, the Goddess gave her a pelt so she could escape into the sea.”

By the time he finished speaking, his breathing had evened out and he seemed completely in control of himself. Though from the stiffness in his wetsuit still nestled against my pussy, it was clear that part of him was far from ready to relax. Petting his hair and brushing it away from his face, I kissed his cheek.

“I’m sorry if I encouraged him too much,” I said, cupping his cheeks.

“Please don’t be sorry,” he replied. “I want you to like both of us, but thank you for caring about consent with both of us. As much as I want to have my wicked way with you,”—Milo ground me against his cock again, to remind me of what waited for me whenever we finally went to bed together, making me whimper—“I have to get you back by a certain time, and if I started fucking you now, you’d be late for work.”

The promise and heat in his words had me clenching, the ache between my legs intensifying. “Okay. And for the record, I’m ready for that whenever you are.”

Milo’s head fell forward as he groaned again. “Trust me when I say I know. I can scent your arousal, and it’s driving me mad.” Sighing, he disentangled our limbs and pushed away from me reluctantly. “Thank you, and I’m sorry to leave you wanting again.”

“That will make it all the better when we finally can.” I smiled.

“I’ll have to remind Beastie of that after he finishes pouting.” He took in another breath, and I looked away while he discreetly adjusted himself. “For now, let’s do what we came down here to do, hm?”

“Okay! I’m prepared to be dazzled.”

His playful grin returned, and he gave me one last chaste kiss before he said, “Welcome to my world, Rose.”

Turning around at his request, the sight before me took my breath away. The area of the ocean beneath the boat was alive with multicolored coral and an abundance of fish whose scales glinted in the morning light. The water was relatively shallow

here, allowing the sunlight to penetrate all the way down to the sandy floor below.

More than that, though, there were hundreds of sea sprites flitting about, all of which I could see plainly—another testament to my change. After they heard Milo whistle, they swarmed him, chittering happily. He laughed, the sound warm and full of joy, making my heart flutter for him. He played around with them for a moment before telling them he needed to do work, which made them sulk.

Milo gestured for me to follow him, then guided me over to a patch of coral that wasn't as vibrant as the rest, as if the color was being leached from it. Not as many fish swam over this way... Actually, there was a whole stretch where few to no fish swam at all. I cast him a curious look.

“This is why we're here,” he explained, his tone somber as he settled by one of the least bleached-looking corals. “I've been babying this patch for a while now. This whole stretch used to look like this before my crew and I came here.”

“And all this was from Joseph and his people?” I asked almost hesitantly.

The mirth and joy I'd felt before, even the desire, melted away to nothing. I had to guard my expression so he wouldn't see how stricken I was at the prospect that Nora's former mayor had ruined something else... and how I was hiding that I was about to number among the very Otherkind he and everyone else here hated.

His disdain for merfolk was blatant in his expression. “It wasn't all Joseph, though he and his people exacerbated the problem. A lot of this is from climate change. Seabound Otherkind do what they can to keep the oceans clean and the biomes healthy, but we're outnumbered by humans and cannot negate human influence completely. Unless there's a reckoning and they get their shit together... To say it's going to be catastrophic is an understatement.”

“I'm sorry,” was all I could manage to push out. It was one thing to see pictures or hear of these things on the news. It was

quite another to see the effects in person, and it broke my heart.

“Now that you know, you can help do your part to end the problem,” he said with a gentle smile. Grabbing my hand, he tugged me closer until my back was to his front, then put his hand atop mine, lacing our fingers. I shivered when he pressed his lips to my ear. “Let’s give this spot a little love.”

Goosebumps marched up my arm as a ripple of power traveled out of him, and I had to contain my reaction so he didn’t notice I could feel it... or see it. His power was the same color as his aura, a lush, deep purple, and it seeped into the coral beneath our hands. After a moment, color and vibrancy, the subtle thrum of life, returned to it, and the longer he pumped his power into it, the more it spread. I couldn’t hold back my gasp then.

Milo moved us down and started the process anew on the next section. We continued this for quite a while, and by the time his power wavered, the area held new life. The nearly dead section of the reef still stretched far too long, but I held hope that, in time, it could be restored.

When he needed to stop, he pulled me down to sit on his lap by the last section he’d healed, then whistled. There was a flurry of activity as the sea sprites came to him, and when he gestured at the coral, a round of excited chittering went up. The sprites dove into it eagerly.

“They’ve been integral to helping maintain the sections we bring back to life,” Milo explained. “They have attracted other fish and sea life over here, and with more places to live, the populations here flourish and increase. Unfortunately, it doesn’t always stick.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, turning my face towards him.

“Sometimes we don’t get to it in time, and no amount of power or babying can revive it. And there are times when it works initially, but then it dies again. We learned through trial and error that we needed to do a little bit at a time rather than

huge swathes. This way, the other wildlife can catch up and reintegrate more naturally.”

“And how do you do sustainable fishing then?”

“Well, there is a particular kind of fish that isn’t endemic to these waters. They have no natural predators here, so they breed quickly and are out of control. We usually catch those fish to bring to the islands for food, as well as carefully selecting other kinds of fish that may not be good for breeding or are incapable of producing new life. Most of all, though, we make sure we’re not taking more than can be replenished. Yes, it yields less money, but since we’re not doing this for profit, we don’t mind much.”

There was something about his passion, his care, for his work and the ocean around us that had my heart pitter-pattering in my chest. Were I not potentially changing into a creature he hated, I might have been okay with transforming... But that wasn’t the case.

Let’s hope that, if I turn, the ocean being my companion is enough, seeing as I’m going to lose everything anyway.

CHAPTER 13

Rose



My time in the ocean with Milo was too short, as he brought me back in time for a shower before I started work that day. Vi teased me as soon as I walked in about my hot “work date”, to which I blew a raspberry on her cheek in lieu of actually greeting her like I usually did.

I didn’t expect to hear from Milo afterwards, but a few hours later at lunch, he messaged me to tell me he had a great time... and that I had a job with him if I wanted to quit working at the shop.

It was odd and nice to have someone actually contacting me after we spent time together. Sure, Ava, Aira, and my aunt did this, but to have a potential romantic partner do so? It was weird! Neither of my previous romantic interests were very big on frequent communication—though, with Will, it made sense, given the threat of losing his mind and autonomy. But it was very welcome.

Throughout the rest of the day Friday, all day Saturday, and through the morning on Sunday, Milo and I texted back and forth. Not constantly, but it was enough to show me he thought of me throughout the day... even if one of the things he sent me was a picture of his mother’s cooking with the message saying, “You wish you were so lucky” with a laughing/crying emoji attached.

On Sunday morning when I woke up, however, any levity he brought to my mood was quashed by the anxiety about what my therapy session with Aeden and Corvin might bring.

So, I signed off with Milo and told him I'd see him at his house later.

When I pulled up to Aeden's, I didn't bother grabbing my bag with my bathing suit and stuff in it when I got out. I wasn't going to get in the water, not when I was already going to be swimming in a few hours with Ava and Aira before their engagement party. Besides, I didn't much feel like talking. If it hadn't been planned that Corvin would be there, I might've cancelled altogether—something I'd never done before, outside the weather or the waves cancelling the ferries. And as I parked myself on the beach where he'd laid out a towel for me, I tried to think about anything but that.

Today was supposed to be a happy day, a time where I celebrated my friends' engagement. The irony in getting what was basically a final diagnosis on whether I would live as a merperson or die wasn't lost on me, and it really pissed me off that this was happening right now, just when my life was finally in order.

We're not thinking about that, remember?

"Good morning, Rose," Aeden greeted as he walked up to me, his voice chipper but not as much as usual. He, too, was weighed down by this, it seemed.

"Morning," I replied. I pulled up my knees to my chest and hugged them, so I didn't turn around and run away.

"We don't have to talk today if you don't want to," he said as he sat down beside me. "We can just check your soul, and then you can leave after we discuss your prognosis and next steps."

"I don't want to do this." I couldn't state it any clearer. Ignorance might be bliss when it came to this.

His expression softened with sympathy. "I know, but this is not something you can run away from, especially when it's living in your chest."

"I really don't need the reminder."

He put his hands up in a placating gesture as the sound of tires on gravel came up the driveway. I tensed but leaned away

from Aeden when he went to put a hand on my shoulder to send calming energy into me. There was nothing I wanted less than to have more magic influencing me in these moments. Thankfully, he understood and withdrew his hand.

The good doctor came walking up a moment later, and the childish part of me was tempted to not even turn to look at him, as if that would save me from what he might have to tell me. The adult in me, however, had me turning to give him a wan smile for a greeting that vanished as soon as I saw a stack of papers and things in his hands. Something told me I wasn't going to like the contents therein.

“Good morning, Rose,” he said, not even pretending to be happy. “I know you don't want to be here, so why don't we make this quick, huh?”

He took a seat across from me and Aeden as I shifted to put the lake to my back. It took everything in me to unwind my arms from around my knees so he could have easy access to my soul. After getting my permission to look at my soul, he gently tugged it from my chest while I steadfastly studied a very interesting patch of grass growing out of the sand.

Until he sucked in a breath through his teeth.

My head jerked towards where he held my soul in his hand, enlarged so he could observe it more closely, and even I could see why he was wincing.

The light blue that was my soul was nearly completely gone, either replaced with a dark midnight blue where the light of the talisman touched or was altogether nonexistent. The furrows were beginning to fill with the talisman's magic, which I wasn't sure was a good thing or not. The only thing that had stayed the same was that the bindings seemed to be untouched, but even then, I couldn't be sure. I hadn't seen what it had looked like when they'd been freshly attached.

“It's as I thought,” Corvin said finally. “We have no choice but to encourage the change.” The unspoken words here were ‘or else you'll die.’

“Are you absolutely certain?” I asked, my voice thickening with unshed tears.

His reply was the final nail in my coffin. “I am.”

“And there’s no other options?” I pressed, needing a least a glimmer of hope... only to have them completely dashed when he answered me.

“I’m sorry, but no. It’s either change or die, and I cannot watch while your life needlessly ends if I can help it,” he said, guiding my soul back into my chest.

“B-but I can’t.” My mind wouldn’t work well enough to articulate any better than that, to explain exactly why I didn’t want to change.

“Becoming Otherkind isn’t a bad thing,” Aeden reasoned, trying to calm me. “It’s simply a different way of being in the world.”

“And how do you propose I hide this from my aunt, who I live with? How do I continue my life as I have been?” I asked, looking between them. I searched for an answer in their eyes that would be a comfort and found none.

“You wouldn’t be able to,” said Aeden after a long moment. “Just as your body is changing, so will your life. You’ll need to go away for a little while. At least until you can be among humans without giving yourself away.”

That had panic ripping through me, my heart skipping beats as it raced to catch up with the adrenaline flooding my system. They... they hadn’t mentioned that before. “H-how long will that take?”

Corvin, when he spoke, carefully chose each word... but chose all the wrong ones. “Some take weeks, others years. It depends on how powerful the merfolk in question turns out to be. I’m hoping that if I can arm you with enough information in advance, it will help speed up the process.”

He handed me the packet of papers. “I put this together for you. In here are many firsthand accounts from sirens dealing with their changes and how they were able to reintegrate back into society, if they chose to do so. There’s also information

about nutritional requirements, what to do if you feel the shift coming on, and any changes you might expect. Obviously, I've never dealt with or heard of a human being turned this way, so what you experience may not match any of this, but it's what we have."

Corvin said this like his words made me feel any better, and as I leafed through what he'd prepared, my heart sunk further and further. Almost all of the accounts reported never going back to seeing their families again, assuming a new identity, and the one that did go back ended up having to leave again after they couldn't hide what they were anymore. *My nightmare.*

There was another set of words that kept popping out at me, which only added to the fear bubbling in my gut: quest for vengeance.

The sirens in the account glossed over this without giving details, and it left me thinking the worst. When I pointed this out to them, the worst I could imagine was nothing compared to reality.

"A quest for vengeance is what a siren agrees to do in exchange for being allowed to live. They hunt down the person or people who wronged them or caused their death, and the siren kills them," Corvin explained. When he saw me about to burst into tears, he scrambled to say, "But we don't know if you will have a quest for vengeance. You're not being changed like a siren normally is, so you may be free from that."

"That doesn't make this better!" I shouted, shoving the papers away from me. "None of this makes me feel better! All this is telling me is that I'm going to have to murder people and leave my aunt alone!"

"She'll be alone if you're dead," said Aeden solemnly.

"That's not any fucking better either!" I jumped to my feet. "There's no way you can paint this that's going to make me want this to happen, not when Vi will be the one who has to suffer. Isn't it bad enough she's been lied to about what

happened to Eli? Are you going to lie to her about me, too, so she doesn't have any hope of finding me?"

"We aren't saying you'll need to stay away forever. It just may take some time," Corvin hedged.

"I have a dozen sirens' souls strapped to my soul that the talisman will be giving to me, and I don't know about you, but I think that's going to make me pretty fucking powerful. And by your admission, the more powerful the siren, the harder it is to blend in with humans." My anger was making it hard to breathe, as I wheezed through my words. Aeden raised his hand to touch me, but I jerked away from him. "No, I don't want you to mess with me right now. I have a right to be angry about this. I have a right to be upset!"

"You're right. You do, but you're going to pass out if your heartrate keeps going up. You need to be careful with yourself," Corvin warned.

"I don't have the emotional spoons to be careful right now!" I shouted, putting my hands to my chest and trying to regulate my breathing on my own. "And another thing. You said you wouldn't want to see what would happen if the talisman were to bond with a merperson. Why is it okay that it bonds with me?"

The two of them exchanged a look, and I could see how their auras interacted as they likely spoke to each other telepathically. This only pissed me off more, but I kept my mouth shut. Instead, I took the moment to take a breath and calm myself a little.

After a long moment of conferring with each other, Aeden finally answered me. "We're hoping your good nature will override any power-hungry urges that may arise within you. Not only that, but you don't desire power the way Molly did. We're sure you can be taught to use your powers well and not be an ass."

That... that I couldn't argue with. I never was one who wanted power. All I ever wanted or needed was peace. "Then what am I supposed to do now?"

“For now, you take care of yourself as best you can and acclimatize yourself with what you’ll need post-change. We can’t be sure how your body is going to handle this, and there’s still a fair chance you may not survive, but we can deal with this one step at a time,” said Corvin.

Nothing about what he said was comforting, and I didn’t want to do any of what he said, but with the way my heart was stuttering and had been for a while... I hated to admit it, but there may have been merit to what he was saying.

“It might also be good to inform your support system. Why don’t you talk with your friends or with the Kings—” Aeden started, only to have me cut him off.

“Talk with them? I’m not talking to them about this! They *hate* merpeople. As does everyone else,” I squeaked, a thread of panic rearing its head once again.

“That’s not necessarily true,” Corvin said, voice flat.

“Perhaps not, but do I want to find that out? Hell no!”

Corvin pursed his lips together for a second, then asked, “Do *you* hate merfolk, Rose?”

This was a loaded question, especially given that he was, himself, a merman. “I hate what Joseph and his people have done to my home and to the ocean surrounding my home. I don’t want to be painted with the same brush as them, and yet I know I would be because I’d be a fucking mermaid. You get a pass because you’re a doctor, but me? I’m not sure I’d be viewed as kindly, especially with everything Joseph did to divide the Otherkind here already.”

It was just another thing I loathed the man for: taking the once tight-knit community here and ripping it up so he could do as he pleased without being held accountable. I shuddered to think what that could mean for the future if he ever came back.

“That’s a valid concern, I’ll grant you that.” Corvin let out a heavy sigh which told me he knew all too well the disgust the other Otherkind had for his people.

“We don’t have to discuss anything today,” Aeden cut in, “but I do ask that you consider talking to them. This is a heavy burden to bear alone.”

“I’ll think about it, but nothing more,” I placated, hugging myself again.

“And I ask that, in the meantime, you at least give this portion of the paperwork a read? I’m hoping that if we encourage your body with what a siren needs, we can encourage your soul to move in that direction as well,” Corvin added, dividing the packet into a much smaller section that I took from him when he held it out to me.

“And you’re certain this is going to work?” I asked. I needed some sort of hope to hold on to.

“I... I cannot say for certain. Your human body is already very weak. There’s still a chance you will not survive this, even if you do everything perfectly,” replied Corvin solemnly.

My anger flooded out of me in the face of the very bleak reality that I might not survive this. That I might leave Vi alone regardless of what I did. *That Eli’s death will have been in vain.*

“Fine. I’ll do what you ask, but you have to promise me something in return.” I waited for both of them to nod before I continued. “If I do die, you make sure Vi is taken care of. You make sure she’s never alone.”

“We promise,” said Aeden, his eyes gentle and full of sincerity.

“And second, don’t tell anyone. If and when I want to talk to others about this, I will, but do not out me before I’m ready. Not even to one person, because you Otherkind are worse gossips than Miss Winnie,” I pressed. “This counts as doctor/patient confidentiality in my book.”

“Unless your safety is at stake, our lips are sealed,” Corvin agreed.

It wasn’t the resounding ‘yes’ I wanted, but I took it anyway. “Alright. I’m going to go now. We can check all this shit later. I need to not think about this for a while.”

“That’s fine.” Aeden gave me a small smile. “All I ask is that you consider talking to someone you trust about this.”

“Sure, sure.” It was a more curt reply than I intended, but the urge to flee was too strong to push down anymore.

I checked one more time that I had all the papers Corvin wanted me to take, and after a short goodbye, I all but ran to my car to get away from them. Shoving my key into the ignition and starting it, I sped away as fast as was safe to.

My hands gripped the steering wheel until it hurt, tears burning my eyes. There was one pervasive thought in my mind as I drove away, one truth that couldn’t be denied. And though I didn’t want to acknowledge it, it sunk in slowly anyway.

There was no going back to how things were, and the future I’d envisioned was gone.

CHAPTER 14

Rose



“He told you that? Giirrrrlllll,” said Ava, adjusting herself on her beach towel and pushing her dripping hair out of her face. “Like, I knew he had it bad, but he never told me he had it *that* bad.”

We—Ava, Aira, and I—were laying out on the beach beneath the bright early June sun. The two of them were nude, their skin glistening with the saltwater that still clung to them from the water we’d just gotten out of for swimming, whereas I was wearing a bikini. Otherkind propensity for nudity was not something I was comfortable with just yet. Though, I did envy their lack of tan lines.

Ava was the shorter of the pair, her coloring matching that of the rest of her family’s with dark tousled hair that reached between her shoulders, jade-green eyes, and golden skin. The most adorable freckles across the tops of her cheeks and nose now that she was getting more sun. She had an athletic build from many hours of swimming in both her human and her selkie forms.

Aira, on the other hand, was taller and more petite than her fiancée. Her Japanese heritage gave her a smaller frame, but she had muscle, likely also from swimming and from slinging around huge fish at her parent’s restaurant. Her almond-shaped eyes were so dark they almost looked black, matching her long black hair.

They were a gorgeous couple, and seeing the way the sun loved them, I had to admit I was envious of their beauty. Not that I thought myself unattractive, but being a staunch, long-

term member of the “sickly Victorian child” club, I knew I didn’t compare.

Though, it seems like Milo doesn’t mind, I thought with a smile. Well, at least until he learns... No. We’re not going to think about that.

On the drive and ferry ride over to Mariana, I somehow managed to shove my predicament into the furthest depths of my mind, locking it in the same box as Eli’s death. I embraced the cool numbness that came with such extreme compartmentalizing. Besides, I’d looked forward to this all week. Not only because I was happy to celebrate my best friends’ engagement, but also because I’d get to see Milo again—which I did feel somewhat bad about, considering the focus was my friends.

I’d not actually gotten to see him very much, as he’d been out to help his father and brothers with something. However, this gave Ava and Aira the perfect opportunity to grill me about the details of our date and our time out at sea. Of course, I’d left out the details of how I wanted him to rail me against the ocean floor, but there was a lot I was curious about outside of that.

“I feel like he was telling me something significant in regards to me defending him, some selkie culture thing, but to be honest, I have no idea what that could be,” I replied.

“It means you are a viable option for a mate, that you are strong and capable of defending him, his clan, and any future young,” said Ava with a wicked grin akin to Milo’s that made me blush. “And if his beast is threatening you with marriage, you can be damn sure he means it. There’s no subtlety or subterfuge to what a selkies inner beast wants. We pursue what we want to the ends of the earth if we must.”

Chewing my lip, I thought about this for a moment, trying to decide how I felt about this information. I must’ve been quiet for too long, as Aira sat up a little and looked at me, concern apparent in her eyes.

“Does that freak you out?” she asked.

“Oh, no. Not at all. I just...” I paused, trying to find the right words but failing. So, I sighed and asked, “Can I ask you a question about selkies? Like, about something intense and kinda personal?”

Ava’s teasing expression faded as she wrinkled her nose. “If you want to talk about sex with my brother, I really can’t do that.” She made a *hurrking* noise but stopped when Aira poked her in the ribs. “What? It’s my brother she’s talking about.”

“Well, yes, but who else is she going to ask questions? Your mom?” asked Aira.

Ava blanched. “Oh. Oh Goddess, no. That’s worse.” She made more exaggerated gagging sounds. “Fine, fine. Ask away.”

“Alright, how about this? For your sake, let’s pretend it’s not your brother I’m talking about, and I’m just talking about some random selkie guy... Jim. Let’s call him Jim.” I paused, giving them time to answer. When they nodded, I continued, my voice lower as I looked out at the seals whose heads were bobbing within hearing distance, just in case one of them happened to be Milo. “Are selkie men like Jim usually so intense? Like, all-encompassing?”

They exchanged a knowing look, and it was Ava who replied, “I mean, no more than any other kind of man, but can you elaborate?”

“Like, I don’t know. It’s like he’s all I can think about. When he comes into a room, my attention goes straight to him. I’ve never felt like this before with anyone.” I paused again to catch my breath and reorganize my thoughts. “Then there’s *him*. His eyes keep going back and forth between green and brown, and sometimes his inner furball decides to come out to play. He’s an absolute pervert—”

I stopped when Ava gagged again, and this time, Aira reached over and whacked her leg. “You’re being rude.”

“Sorry.” Ava didn’t look the least bit sorry, not with how she still grimaced, but I accepted her apology anyway with a

wave of my hand. “It sounds like you’ve both just got it bad. I obviously can’t speak for the menfolk of my species, but I know that when our animal chooses their mate, they’ll do anything and everything to attract that mate to their side. There are even cases of the animal choosing at first sight who they want to mate with, and if this ‘mysterious’”—she snorted—“‘Jim’ of yours has been pining after you for a whole year? Then I’d say that might be the case for him. As for you, well, I don’t know exactly since you’re human. But I’m sure he’d be happy to hear you’re just as bonkers for him as he is clearly for you, if he can’t keep his animal under control.”

I opened my mouth to ask another question or to rebuke the idea that I was “bonkers” about anyone, lie as it may be, but all thought fled when I saw Milo coming out of the water.

His pelt slung over one shoulder was the only thing hiding his body from my view, and holy *fuck* was his body a thing of beauty. An Adonis carved from marble. From the washboard abs to the swell of his pecs, arms, and shoulders, I couldn’t help but watch him as he walked closer. My eyes slid down his body, taking in every line, every detail, until I got to his...

Oh my goodness.

Though I knew that nudity wasn’t inherently sexual with Otherkind, I also was told it was rude to stare at *certain* body parts. Yet I couldn’t help but stare at his, *ahem*, manhood. All I could think was, *Proportionate. It’s proportionate to the rest of his big... his body.*

Forcing my eyes up and away from *that* part of him, I looked back up at his eyes which were that distinct warm cinnamon color and to the wicked smirk crossing his features as he advanced towards me. As soon as his feet were at the edge of my beach towel, he dropped to his knees and crawled the rest of the way to me, nudging my legs apart so he could kneel between them.

His lips crashed into mine for a deep, thought-shattering kiss that lasted only a breath before he moved to nip my earlobe, whispering, “Don’t worry, sweetheart. The pull between us is very mutual.”

It took a second before I understood what he was insinuating, and once I realized that he'd heard my conversation with his sister and Aira, my cheeks blazed with heat. Kissing my cheek one last time, he pulled away just enough to grin at me again before he stood. The ridiculous man winked down at me as he continued on his way.

When he walked away, my eyes followed him, my head swiveling to watch as he went up towards the house. His back was just as perfect as his front, all rippling muscle and the most perfect ass I'd ever laid eyes on in my life; it was so much better nude than in the tightfitting wetsuit. My mind, like the sex-starved pervert it was, supplied images of me grabbing handfuls of those beautiful man biscuits of his, and I had to shake off the thought before it ran wild.

Being verbally teased by the man was hard enough on my long-neglected libido, but seeing what was in store should I ever be lucky enough to be intimate with him?

I'd never be able to tell him no.

Turning back to stare at the water, I felt like I was in shock. It wasn't until Ava and Aira snickered beside me that I was able to bring myself back into the present. My cheeks blazed at their amused expressions.

"Girl, you got it baaaad," teased Ava.

"She's going to be sporting the mating mark in no time, I can feel it," added Aira, laughing.

I furrowed my eyebrows. "'Mating mark?'"

"Oh, yeah. It's when you and your mate exchange bites," explained Aira.

"Think of it like a gorier, more permanent version of a wedding ring," said Ava, climbing over to Aira's towel to pull her girl into her lap.

"Do you have that?" I asked them.

Ava grinned while Aira's cheeks reddened.

"We're waiting until our wedding night to exchange marks." Ava smirked. "What do you think, babe? Do you think

we're going to have a double wedding with Milo and Rose?"

"It'd certainly please your mom," replied Aira, relaxing into Ava's arms after giving her a kiss on the cheek.

They looked at each other, then said in unison, "'Think of the grandbabies!'"

Laughing at what I knew to be one of Iris's favorite sayings, I then asked, "Is that even possible, a human and a selkie? Children, I mean."

"Well, yeah. We'd be awfully inbred if we couldn't," replied Ava.

"Do you two want kids? I don't think I've ever thought to ask," I followed up.

The pair looked at each other with such tender expressions, my heart softened on their behalf.

Aira looked back at me first, saying, "We were thinking of adopting one child from her people and one from mine, but we really don't care what Otherkind species the child is. Really, though, it's not a priority for a while. Maybe in a hundred years or so? But if the opportunity came up before then, we wouldn't turn it down."

Something about that statement caught me off-guard, and my mind spun out in two different directions, one thought springing off the other.

First, I lamented that I would not be able to meet the children they brought into their homes as I'd be very, very dead before then. But my second thought came right on the heels of the first, that that wasn't true. I *would* be alive then.

Because I was changing into a fucking mermaid if the fucking talisman didn't kill me first.

Aira's voice pulled me out of my thoughts before they spiraled out of control. "Oh shit, Rose... We didn't mean..."

It took a moment to realize what she was apologizing for: the fact that I wouldn't be alive when they were planning on starting a family. I smiled, waving my hand. "It's okay. It's just hard to wrap my head around the fact both of you are going to

live so long. My puny human”—*for now*—“brain just refuses to accept that as a thing.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Between Milo, Aira, and I, we’re going to change you into something cool just so we don’t have to deal with you getting old.” Ava looked down at Aira and grinned. “We wouldn’t want you to ruin our fun with dying and shit.”

Aira and I rolled our eyes even as the corners of our lips threatened to quirk into smiles.

“What, you thought we’d let you die? As if,” she said, doubling down.

“And what were you thinking of changing me into?” I asked, humoring her. “I mean, the only Otherkind I can think of that could be possible to be changed into is a siren, but I don’t think you’re really into the whole ‘drowning your friend at sea’ thing.”

She snorted again. “You’d be right. It’s not my first choice. What I was thinking was that there’s an old tradition about an older selkie giving their pelt to the human mate of a selkie so they could be together in the sea. If we could find someone like that, or find someone who no longer wished to be a selkie, that could work. If not, well, drowning you it is.”

I could tell she was mostly joking, especially given that Aira was looking at me thoughtfully. This was something it seemed like they’d actually thought about, and it gave me hope that once it came out that I was changing, maybe they’d accept me.

Chewing my lip again, I asked, “And what if I was a mermaid or a siren? You wouldn’t mind that? I know how you both seem to hate them.”

“Rose,” said Aira, sitting forward a little, “it doesn’t matter what you are. We’d love you regardless.”

“Even if you were a gremlin,” added Ava, then laughed when Aira poked her in the ribs again.

“What she means is, you could be a human, goblin, sea slug, what have you, and you’d still be our friend. And

besides, it's not like we hate the merfolk. We just hate a particular group of them."

The sense of relief that welled up in me caught me off-guard, especially when my eyes began to well up with tears. Knowing I wouldn't lose them after the change settled a small part of my aching heart, and it felt like a small victory in the midst of a thousand possible losses that this was going to bring to me... if I survived long enough to change, that is.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I willed them away, not wanting or ready yet to explain why those words reassured me as much as they did.

"Thank you. I really appreciate that," I forced out, trying to make the words as even as possible.

I mostly succeeded.

"I'll take that as you endorsing our plan. Perfect. I shall begin the search for a selkie posthaste." Ava's smile lit up with mischief. "Unless, of course, you'd rather go with drowning. We could even do it before Mum gets dinner out on the table. I mean, the ocean is right there." Her hand flung out towards the surf.

I laughed despite myself, her vicious sense of humor getting me again. "I think I'd rather wait, if it's all the same to you. I don't think your mom would like having a dead girl at her table."

She shrugged. "Your loss."

We stayed out there for another hour before we were told we should get ready for the party. All the while, we talked, and I watched my two best friends be affectionate and lovey-dovey in a way I'd always secretly been envious of. More than that, though, I was happy for them. Ecstatic. They were going to get to spend their lifespans together, and that was such a beautiful thing.

Gathering up our towels, we made our way back to the house, with Ava and Aira hurrying inside to get changed into their attire for the party. I had my therapy bag already at Iris and Declan's waiting for me, so I gave a knock before

stepping inside. I popped my head in the kitchen as I passed it to tell Iris I was going to use their bathroom to change but stopped, my words dying in my throat.

Now dressed in a nice set of slacks and a button-down but still barefoot, Milo stood next to his mother helping her with something on the stove. They were talking softly to each other, their conversation private, and occasionally, they would elbow and hip check each other with a laugh.

What really made my heart flutter was when he bent down to kiss her on the top of the head after something she said.

Just when I thought he couldn't be any more perfect, he has to go and do that.

I'm such a goner.

Not wanting to intrude or get caught, I called out to them, "Hey, Iris? I'm going to borrow your bathroom to change."

Half-turning towards me with an absolutely radiant smile on her face, she replied in that charming English accent of hers, "Of course, dear. You know where it is."

"Thank you," I said before rushing towards the bathroom to avoid seeing Milo's expression, which I just *knew* would make me blush all over again, the mischievous man he was.

Once safely inside the bathroom with a locked door between me and everyone else, I took my time putting myself back together again.

I peeled off my still wet bathing suit and put it into the plastic baggy I kept in my bag so as not to get everything else wet. After I toweled off my body and hair, I stepped into my undergarments and pretty sundress Vi bought for me for my birthday.

Then I moved to the mirror to style my hair and put makeup on, neither of which were going to be very fancy. My hair was going to be a simple braid so I wouldn't drip water everywhere but also so that my hair had a chance to dry. As for my makeup, I put on some mascara and lip gloss only before I counted myself as ready.

Stashing my things back in my bag, I stepped out of the bathroom...

And right into Milo's arms.

I gasped as he twirled me around and tugged me back into the bathroom. In an instant, his lips were on mine, my back pressed against the now-closed door. My bag dropped from my hand, forgotten as I succumbed to him. When he pulled away all too soon for my liking, he rested his forehead against mine.

"Goddess above, you make it so difficult to be a gentleman," he whispered, his breathing turning ragged. "The way you looked at me on the beach, the words you said to my sister and Aira... It's good to know that I'm not the only one burning."

"You weren't supposed to be listening to that," I attempted to chastise, but his lips moved to kiss my forehead, then my temple, down along my jaw, and finally landing on my neck, making my breath catch. "And Friday wasn't clue enough about how much I want you?"

"How could I *not* listen? My girl was talking about me. I wanted to make sure I wasn't doing anything that you didn't like. You keep your emotions so close to your chest that I can't always tell with you, but I am so glad I'm doing everything right," he murmured against my pulse. "And for the record, I'm trying very hard not to think about Friday so I can think clearly and not lose myself to my beast." Milo nipped my neck.

"Oh!" I gasped.

He chuckled, his hands moving up from my hips to bracket my ribcage on either side of my breasts. "Do you know how hard it was not to drag you away right then and there after seeing the way you looked at me? It was maddening." His tongue flicked out and licked my neck. "I loved seeing how much you enjoyed looking at my body. When I get you alone, I look forward to seeing you in nothing more than your skin so I can do the same."

I whimpered his name, my knees going weak as heat began to pool between my thighs. Though I couldn't form words of my own to reply to him, not when he was touching me like this, I wanted to tell him that I wanted that too. That I wanted him so much it ached and kept me up at night.

That if he didn't fuck me right now, I was going to combust.

Upon hearing my whimper, he chuckled again, the sound deeper, huskier than before. "Now that's a noise I'd like you to make again... and often."

His lips returned to mine, and he devoured my mouth, stoking the flame inside me until I wrapped my arms around his neck and yanked him flush against me. I didn't want this to stop. I couldn't take anymore teasing. Not when I was hot and aching and empty. Not with how long it'd been since I'd shared pleasure with a man.

Though I couldn't speak, I told him with my kiss all this and more, hoping that he would understand and praying that he'd take pity on me.

When he pulled away, I wanted to scream, but I stopped myself.

Barely.

"I know you ache, sweetheart," he said, his jade eyes boring into mine. "I can scent how wet you are. Were we alone, I'd give you everything you need. So, I won't tease you any longer."

"Promise?" My voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper, once again belying how affected I was by his kiss and touch.

"I swear this to you."

There was no lie in his eyes, no hint of guile or teasing, and the promise of getting to have him later made the ache both better and worse. Better in that there was an end in sight that I could focus on, but worse in that the end was so near yet still so far. Dropping my arms to his chest, I sighed.

“Thank you,” I whispered again.

Milo beamed down at me. “Trust me that I’ll make it all better.”

“I hope so. I may go mad if you don’t.”

He chuckled and stole another kiss from me. “I suppose we have to go join the family. You might want to fix your lip gloss, though.”

Shifting a little, I looked around him and into the mirror to see that my lip gloss was smeared all around my lips, but when I turned back to him, I laughed. “You’re no better.”

He looked into the mirror himself, and he laughed seeing it all around his lips too. Grabbing a washcloth, I gestured for him to sit on the toilet, and I went about cleaning him up. The way he looked up at me while I carefully removed the evidence of our kisses melted me inside, and I almost had to tell him to stop it; it was so adoring and puppylike. I did, however, have to smack his hand away when it climbed up the back of my thigh and up my dress.

“Sir, you need to behave!” I gasped.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know the meaning of the word. Could you define it for me?”

“You are incorrigible, Milo Finnegan King!”

“Oh no. My full name. I must be in trouble.” There was that damned smirk again.

I whacked him on the shoulder, then cleaned my own face as well as the errant spot on my neck where he’d kissed me. I went to reapply my gloss but decided against it, which only made Milo grin even more. “We’re about to eat dinner. What?”

“Nothing at all, sweetheart. Nothing at all.”

He pulled me back to stand between his legs, then cupped my cheeks, kissing me once again, chastely this time, though I wanted nothing more than to shove him back, yank off my panties, and ride him into the sunset right then and there. But he took pity on me and didn’t push it.

A prickle of magic went over my skin when he tugged on my braid, and when I looked at him, he said, “Mother told me to help you dry your hair.”

“She did?” I asked. She’d never bothered or cared about that before, though she’d dried it for me using magic plenty of times.

“Well, actually no. What she told me was to leave you alone, but as you already know, I’m supremely bad at behaving,” he replied, stealing one last kiss. “Come on. Let’s get out there before my siblings eat all the food.”

Grabbing my hand, we finally emerged from the bathroom and saw that everyone was already gathering around the tables. Iris gestured at us to come join them, putting us next to each other across the table from where Ava and Aira sat.

All around us were almost all the King siblings and their families, apart from Derek, Safiya, and Lina whose house I stayed in the prior year as they were away in England with Lina’s family. Then there was Andrew and his wife Kara with their three kids; Corina, her husband Simon, and their two kids; and Gavin and his wife Tamsin. They all greeted me with warm smiles as they, too, took their seats.

Once everyone had food and began digging in, Milo and Ava’s eldest sister Corina looked down the table at Ava and Aira and asked, “So, tell us how it happened.”

Ava’s smile split her face from ear to ear. It was clear she was eager to tell this story, even as poor Aira blushed from head to toe as she ducked her head. It wasn’t usual for her to be this embarrassed, so it was endearing to see.

“Well, we’d just gotten home from dinner with her family,” Ava started, “and her older brother and his wife just announced that they were expecting their first. She’d had this adorable longing face all night afterwards—”

“Ava! I did not!” Aira gasped, whacking Ava in the arm.

“Yes, you did. It was cute!” Aira huffed but didn’t rebuke her claim any further. Ava kissed her girl on the cheek, then continued, “So, we got home, and we were getting ready for

bed. I thought she was going to brush her teeth like usual, but instead, I felt the bed dip behind me and my pelt being wrapped around my shoulders before she hugged me. I was in such shock that I couldn't say anything for a moment. When I finally could react, I..." Ava paused, a blush crossing *her* cheeks.

A feat I'd never thought I'd see.

"She burst into tears and tackled me so hard we fell off the other side of the bed," Aira said, finishing for Ava with a defiant look on her face.

The whole table burst into laughter, and while the image of them sprawled all over the floor after falling off the bed was funny, I had a distinct sense once again that there was more to this story than I understood. I wasn't going to say anything, as I didn't want to call attention to myself when it was a celebration of their engagement, but Declan caught my eyes from across the table.

"Something wrong?" he asked, looking concerned.

Now it was *my* turn to blush. "I... I feel like I'm missing some important context."

His expression softened into one of understanding. "You fit in with us so well, Rose, that sometimes I forget you aren't Otherkind and don't already know these things. Forgive us."

I couldn't help but smile at that, even though I tried to hide it. "No offense taken."

"Good." Declan smiled back at me. "A selkie's pelt is the most precious thing to them. Without it, we can no longer take our other form or return to our home in the sea. So, when a selkie gives their pelt to another, it's a supreme act of trust that it won't be stolen or kept from them. When their pelt is returned to them, it shows the selkie that their trust is returned. That their partner trusts them always to come back to them when they go out to sea."

"Because of this," Iris said, continuing Declan's explanation, "the act symbolizes marriage and the desire to be bound for eternity to the selkie who's given their pelt to you."

Thinking back through the story, I now saw it in a new light, understanding now why Ava had acted like she had. Tears pricked my eyes.

“That’s really beautiful,” I said.

Simon laughed. “She really does fit in with us.”

The rest of the table laughed, one of the other King siblings remarking, “It’s no wonder Mum likes you so much, Rose! You’re just like her.”

I laughed at that too as I wiped away the tears from my face. “I can’t deny that.”

Iris gave me a gentle smile. “I love you like you are one of my own. Between Vi and I, you have enough motherly love to last you four lifetimes.”

“And enough henpecking for that long, too,” added Gavin.

Another peal of laughter from the table filled the room, but mine was cut short when I felt Milo’s hand slip into mine on my lap. He gave it a squeeze, and when I looked over at him, he had such a soft look on his face as he looked down at me that my heart flipped in my chest. I returned his smile, squeezing his hand back.

My attention was brought back to the table when Gavin verbally poked at Corina, who’d just finished ribbing Ava for basically shoving her mate off their bed.

“Didn’t you and Simon get mated because he caught you in his fishing net, then he put his pelt around you to keep you warm, but you were so pissed at being caught that you shoved it right back at him?” asked Gavin, the mischievous glint that all the King siblings seemed to have shining in his eyes.

“Yeah,” added Ava, “didn’t he then follow you around like a lovesick puppy for a month until you acknowledged him and your mating?”

“And was that before or after you whacked him in the face with a dinner plate for displeasing you?” Milo said, piggybacking off his brother and sister.

The conversation devolved into bickering between the siblings, and once Iris called everyone back to order with a stern word, all the mated selkies started sharing stories about how they became a mated couple after a short moment of chastised silence which was undermined by the conspiratorial glances between each other.

Hearing their stories, seeing the love in their eyes, it made my heart soft. Made me feel like I was included.

All the while, Milo never let go of my hand.

CHAPTER 15

Rose



The night was winding down. We'd had dessert, a rich brownie with vanilla ice cream, whipped cream, and chocolate syrup—Aira's favorite—and continued to chat with each other.

The more I looked at Ava's pelt around Aira's shoulders, the look of pride Ava had on her face that Aira was to be hers, the more I saw the longing on Milo's face when I looked at him. It was clear he was happy for his little sister, but there were moments when his expression changed subtly, showing me how much he wanted the same for himself. It wasn't until he caught my gaze and winked at me that I realized he might be thinking about that with me.

Which only made my face turn into a blushing mess.

"Alright," said Milo after a few of his older siblings and their families had gone back home. "I think I should take Rose back. She's already missed the last ferry to Nora."

Blinking, I checked my phone and saw that he was right: the last Ferry Theo was at nine-thirty, and it was already quarter past ten. There'd be no getting my car home now. I sighed.

Such is life on the Golden Isles.

I stood and went to give my best friends a hug, and when I pulled back, I couldn't hide the tears that'd sprung up.

"Congrats again, you two. I'm really happy for you both," I managed to squeak out before I teared up more.

“We’re happy you could share this moment with us,” said Aira.

“And we’re happy to see how nicely you fit in with the family,” added Ava, who then started waggling her eyebrows. “Don’t think we didn’t notice you holding hands under the table or how his lips were tinted the same color as your usual lip gloss.”

“I was ambushed!” I whisper-yelled.

I turned around to see if anyone else had seen or heard, or if god forbid Milo heard, in time to see the man himself talking to his brother Gavin, who was slipping something into Milo’s hand. What they were saying was too quiet for me to hear, but their expressions told me it was nothing nefarious... or at least I hoped so.

“Oh, don’t worry, friend. We have excellent hearing. Everyone in this room heard everything.” Ava grinned. “If I had to guess, you’re gonna get some tonight!”

My face exploded in heat. “Ava!”

The woman goddamn cackled at me. “You humans are so adorable with your prudishness about sex. It’s okay.” She leaned in. “Remember my offer: We could drown you whenever you like.”

“Ava, you need to behave. You can’t just go around joking about drowning people. It’s uncivilized,” cut in Aira, frowning cutely.

“Alright, fine,” said Ava, but then she mouthed the word *Anytime* while miming pushing someone’s head under the water.

If you only knew... If only I were brave enough to tell you that you won’t need to drown me for that to happen.

Before I could retort to hide the sudden sadness that welled up inside me, a warm hand rubbed my shoulder. Turning, I found Iris and Declan there, and I gave both of them hugs as well. Iris looked at her youngest with a stern expression.

“There will be no murdering of our friends while I yet live, not even to turn a wonderful human into an Otherkind,” she chided, but Ava was sincerely unrepentant.

“It’s not murder if she agrees to it,” Ava retorted with a pout.

“Sis, please don’t kill my girlfriend,” Milo said, his arm reaching around to grasp my hip and pull me into his side. “I just got her.”

The pleased look on Iris’s face was blatant and unabashed. Meanwhile, Ava and Aira giggled to each other as Declan grinned that signature King grin he and all his children had, and I was blushing up a storm.

“You get her home safely and make sure you walk her up to her door,” said Declan.

“I promise she will arrive back at her home in the same or better condition than she left here in. Scout’s honor.”

The insinuation—and his damned grin—had Ava and Aira in stitches, and I stepped away from him and them to say, “Thank you again for inviting me. I had a great time, as usual.”

It took another ten minutes before Milo and I were able to get out the door, as Iris insisted on packing up some leftovers for Vi and I. Once we were finally out of the house and walking towards where the family docked their boats, I let out a breath that had Milo chuckling. He’d insisted on carrying my therapy bag out and had tried to carry my purse for me as well, but I won that particular argument.

“So,” I said, breaking the quiet between us as we walked, “girlfriend?”

Milo smiled. “Well, what else would you be?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t expect to skip the dating stage and straight into the relationship stage.” I looked up at him to see a brief twinge of panic that had his brows furrowing. “I don’t mind. I was just surprised.”

His features smoothed out again. “We selkies aren’t known for being casual. Please let me know if I ever go too fast or too far for you, and I’ll slow down.” His grin returned. “Like my da said, it’s easy to forget that you aren’t actually Otherkind sometimes.”

“Well, I hope you remember that I’m human when it comes to the fact that I’m squishy and breakable.”

That was a hard-learned lesson for my friends. We’d gone ice skating on Aeden’s lake in late December, but the ice wasn’t thick enough in one spot, and I’d nearly fallen through. Aira, being closest to me, grabbed me under the arms and pulled me away, but she’d squeezed so tight she’d cracked three of my ribs. Everyone had been horrified and treated me like a porcelain doll for weeks afterwards, with Aira even refusing to touch me for about two months post-incident.

“I could never forget that,” he said, but his usual smile was gone. What replaced it was a haunted look. “Not after pulling you from the water that day last summer.”

Oh.

His expression twisted my heart, and I reached over to grab his hand and squeeze it, saying, “You were my hero. Without you, I’d never have made it back.”

“I know. But... you don’t know what you looked like when I pulled you out of the water. It haunts me to this day, remembering the bruises, the blood, the burn across your face, and the damage to your eye.” He paused and even stopped walking. “It’s not something I’ll ever, ever forget. Nor will I ever forgive who did it to you.”

His words cinched my already impeded lungs even more. I didn’t like to see his hurt or his hatred for Joseph, and I wanted to chase those looks from his face. Pulling his hand up, I kissed his fingertips one by one, then placed his hand over my heart.

“Aeden told me something that made a lot of sense to me, after I’d thought about it for a while.” I smiled softly up at him. “He said, ‘The world is unjust, and awful things happen

to those who aren't deserving of it. But you have a chance to defy all those who wronged you and wished you ill by taking this second chance at life and finding all the happiness you can.'

"I'm alive because of you. This heart still beats because of you, and I don't want to squander the gift I've been given." *Or Eli's sacrifice.* "As much as I wish it'd never happened, and you'd never had to save me in the first place, I'm happy you did. I don't think anyone else would've made me feel as safe as you did in that moment."

A purr rumbled from his chest, and I leaned forward to kiss where the sound was coming from. His other hand came up to pat my head and run over my hair.

"None of us deserve you, Rose McKenzie." He kissed the top of my head. "You're a good human."

"And all of you are good beasties, even if you're all actually the worst."

That earned a laugh from him, and he kissed me on the head one more time before pulling away and tugging me towards the docks, my hand back in his. "We'll train you out of your human principles in no time. Soon, you'll be strutting around naked and joking about sex with the rest of us."

"I don't know about any of that," I said. "Maybe after Ava drowns me to turn me into an Otherkind."

Or whenever the sirens finish what they started by turning me into one of them.

"I'll drown *her* before she gets the chance," he growled as I laughed.

"I'd like to see you both duke it out... before your mom knocks both your heads together."

We soon arrived at the docks, and I was helped onto his boat, then ushered to the helm where I took what was becoming my customary seat. He unmoored the boat and returned to me to start it up before taking her out to sea. I expected him to head towards Nora to drop me off at home, but instead he headed towards the open ocean.

He must have seen my perplexed look, as he said, “I never said I was taking you straight home.”

The way his eyes dipped to my chest had me in another fit of blushes, but I wasn’t displeased. Pulling out my cell phone, I shot an update text to Vi telling her that I was out with Milo, but that I would be home... sometime. She sent me a thumbs up and a row of eggplants that had me rolling my eyes and huffing an exasperated laugh.

Milo didn’t take us very far from the islands before he stopped and turned off the boat. He turned to me with a smile, then, without a word, grabbed my hand and brought me out onto the deck.

The night sky over the open ocean never failed to leave me breathless. With no light pollution, every star, every constellation was laid bare, like thousands of diamonds sewn into black silk. If Vi hadn’t been so nervous about me being out on the boat at night, I’d probably have spent every night looking up at the beauty before me. My eyes were pulled away from the sky, however, when Milo started to unbutton his shirt, baring his chest and torso for me to ogle and revealing a silver chain I’d never seen before.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked, walking up to him and running my fingers along it. There was a little spark as I touched it, and something within me told me it was magic.

His expression was unusually sheepish when he spoke. “It’s a form of birth control.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” he said, color rising in his cheeks. “I asked Gavin to get it for me. As much as I adore the idea of tiny little Roses and Milos running around and wreaking havoc on everyone’s lives, I figured neither of us were ready for that just yet.”

His admission had me stepping back mentally and promptly feeling a little stupid. I’d been so eager to hop in bed with him that the consequence of that action had completely been forgotten. *I’m so supremely dumb and so inexperienced in all this.*

“Thank you for thinking of that.”

His ever-present smile returned. “I figured we had to do something by human standards rather than rush into mating and parenthood like most of my siblings have done.”

“Yeah, I’m going to need a minute before we think about that,” I said, smiling back at him.

“I’ll be generous and give you two then.”

“Oh, thanks. How kind,” I deadpanned.

“You’re welcome,” he said, ignoring my sarcasm with a smile before it wilted a little. A little nervousness colored his expression. “There’s something I want to say before we continue with my plan for the night.”

“Okay,” I replied gently.

He took a deep breath then let it out. “You should know that there’s... differences in my anatomy from a human’s.”

“What kind of differences?”

“Selkies with cocks have knots.” He looked as if he were bracing himself for my response like he was expecting me to find the very idea of such a thing disgusting or repellent.

“Could you define what that means?” I asked, trying very hard not to make his anxiety worse.

“Well, for selkies, it means that the base of our cock swells upon release, locking us inside our partner until it goes down. It’s supposed to aid in insuring pregnancy.”

“Does it hurt?” That really was the most important thing.

“It might be uncomfortable at first, but it shouldn’t be more than pressure. Some of my partners have even said they like it.” An adorable blush turned his cheeks a soft red. “It takes a while to go down, so we’d be locked together until it unswells. It’s... it’s very intimate.”

Imagining how it would feel, to have Milo locked inside my pussy, to feel the weight of his body over mine... My panties dampened as I suppressed a whimper. It took

everything I had not to rip our clothes off and push him down to show him exactly how much I wanted him.

Closing the distance between us, I smoothed my hands over his chest, trying to soothe his anxiety. “Are you worried about how I will react to you being different?”

“Yes,” he almost whispered, his breath hitching when my hands went lower. “It’s why I haven’t taken you to bed yet even though I knew you’d say yes. I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I can promise you, Milo, it does *not* scare me at all,” I replied, brushing my hands along the waistband of his pants. “In fact, I can’t think of anything I want more.”

Bending down, his lips brushed my ear, and my pussy clenched. “You want my knot, Rose?”

“Yes please.” In fact, I might’ve combusted if he left me wanting again.

Another deep purr emanated from his chest. “Then you’d better get these clothes off before I destroy them.”

Were I not so turned on, I might have scolded him, but I couldn’t. “I’ll only undress if you do,” I countered.

“Woman, I would burn all my clothes if you asked me to,” he replied, his hands already moving up to continue unbuttoning his shirt. I stepped away from him, my eyes fastened on every inch of skin he bared. Though I’d seen him naked earlier, I was almost feral to see him again. As he pulled his shirt out of his pants and tossed it to the side, he let out a low growl. “Clothes off.”

Oh, right.

“Impatient,” I jokingly grouched as I kicked my flats off.

“Just as impatient as you are, if the scent of your arousal is anything to go off of.”

Now it was my turn to blush. “That’s not fair, and you know it.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I won’t use it to my full advantage.”

I pouted as I bent down and yanked off my panties... then chucked them at him.

He chuckled as they hit him in the face. "I do love a woman who will call me out on my shit, even if that just means I get her panties thrown in my face."

"You are the worst, Milo Finnegan." My pout turned into a begrudging smile as I unzipped my dress.

"And you love it."

He shoved his pants down and stepped out of them, leaving him gloriously naked. His cock stood tall in all its hard, delicious glory. I wanted to put my mouth on it. To feel it between my legs. To take in my hand and stroke him until he came. The very thought had my breath going ragged.

My hands shook, making it a struggle to get my zipper down so I could pull my dress off. I somehow managed it, but it took far longer than I wanted. Yanking it off me, my bra joined it shortly after joining the rest of my clothes... elsewhere. He sucked in a sharp breath of air through his teeth.

Milo was looking at me, enraptured, his eyes taking in every detail of my body. I was about to try to cover myself when he choked out, "You're so Godsdamn beautiful... More perfect than I even imagined."

"Thank you," I whispered, my heart racing.

I expected him to come over to me. Hell, I wanted him to, and when he didn't, I started to take a step, only to be interrupted by him asking, "Would you like to take a swim with me, Rose?"

His words almost didn't compute. "Pardon?"

He chuckled. "Come take a swim with me."

"Now?"

"Yes."

I looked over towards the water. It was dark, the moonlight doing very little to penetrate the depths there. A small twinge of fear crawled up my spine remembering what little was in

my memory about when Joseph had stolen me from my bed. But I pushed that away.

“How deep is the water?” I asked, turning back to him.

“We’re still in the shallows, so maybe twenty feet?”

“And what’s at the bottom?”

“Sand and fish probably.”

“Hmm.”

I pretended to think for a moment, but not about my answer; that was already decided. What I couldn’t get out of my head was what he’d told me: *The rule for shifters of all varieties is that you should never run from them, because they will see that as flirting, playing hard to get... He will catch you, then he will make you his.* Suddenly, there was nothing more I wanted to do than to test that theory.

With a smirk, I raced towards the back of the boat and dove into the water. My eyesight was ill-suited for nighttime at sea, so I picked a direction and swam that way. I knew there was no way in hell I’d outswim or escape him, but something wild in me needed him to chase me. To prove to me that he was capable of what he’d said.

Just as I’d expected, it didn’t take long for a pair of strong arms to wrap around my waist and haul me back against his chest. He nipped my neck as he grumbled, “I try to make our first fuck romantic, and you decide to provoke the beast. What am I going to do with you?”

I giggled. “Romantic, eh?”

Bringing us down onto the soft sand below, he turned me in his arms so that I was on my back beneath him. “Yes, romantic. It’s an important rite of passage for a selkie and his lover to swim together in the sea. It used to be a test for my forebears to see if the person they were attracted to was good enough to be their mate,” he said, pressing his body close to mine so I could feel *every* inch of him against me.

“It seems really soon to be testing to see if I’m mate material,” I whispered, having to force the words out.

My left eye burned for a moment, but just as before, my vision sharpened and I could see every detail on his face, every line of muscle on his body. *He's so fucking beautiful.*

“Selkies don't do slow-burn, sweetheart,” he chuckled.

“No kidding.” I took as deep a breath as I could before my ribs twinged. “What is this supposed to test exactly?”

“Are they fearless in the face of the ocean? Do they love the ocean as much as the selkie does? Are they afraid of Otherkind or ocean creatures?”

“And what's my test score? How do I rate?”

Not wanting any space between us, I wrapped my arms and legs around him, then squeezed his hips with my thighs until he made a delicious noise low in his throat. Needing to hear it again, I decided to be utterly shameless with how I rubbed my body against his, almost hoping that his cock would slip inside me, but he was trapped between our bodies.

His voice was deeper when he finally answered me, huskier than before, and it sounded like he had to force himself to form the words. It made me feel powerful. “Perfect. You are and have always been perfect. Even after everything, you still love the ocean and want to take care of it.”

His lips went to my neck again, and it had me shuddering. Slipping down my body enough for his mouth to be level with my breasts, he sucked one of my nipples into his mouth while his fingers pinched the other. My nails scoured his scalp as white-hot pleasure coursed through me.

“Oh, fuck. Milo,” I moaned.

“I fucking love the way you moan my name,” he said, moving from one nipple to the other. “You make me feral, Rose.”

He grazed his teeth over my nipple, just enough to make me cry out and arch into him. Then he did it again, a little harder, giving me a little more pain to color the pleasure. When I looked down at him where he still bent over my breast, his eyes bore into mine, one of jade and the other of cinnamon.

Both man and beast were in control at the same time, and I couldn't help but shiver.

"You have a choice now, lover." He circled the tip of his tongue around the taut tip of my breast. "You can either let me have you here, as a selkie, or I can take you back onto the boat and have you as a man. Or you can tell me you aren't ready, and I'll take you home."

My heart lurched in my chest at his concern, but... I grabbed him and pulled him up my body once again to devour his mouth. I nipped and licked my way to his ear to whisper, "I want you to take me as you are, right here."

"As if you weren't already the most perfect woman on the planet." Milo groaned then turned his head to recapture my mouth. "I hope you're ready for the ride of your life, sweetheart."

"I've been ready since you dropped me off at home after our first date."

"Good. Because I'm going to ensure you come so hard you forget your own Godsdamn name."

I threaded my hands in his hair and looked deep into his eyes as I rolled my hips up to tease him. "Then you better get started."

A wicked grin crossed his face, which was the only warning I got before he slid down my body. Milo grabbed my thighs and spread them further apart, opening me to him. His eyes zeroed in on my pussy. He licked his lips.

Then he dove in.

My hips shot up as I gasped, but that didn't stop him. In fact, it encouraged him. A hand wrapped around one of my thighs to settle over my lower belly to hold me in place while he used his other hand to slide two fingers into me. I was helpless to do anything but feel as his lips and tongue and teeth lavished attention on my clit and fingers curled inside me to work my g-spot, both working me into a frenzy.

There were no experimental licks. He didn't start gently. No, it was almost like he knew *precisely* how I liked to have

my clit played with. Even his fingers knew exactly where to touch inside me to make me writhe.

Pleasure built, not little by little, but like an incoming tidal wave. I moaned and writhed and cried out as it loomed over me, threatening to crash down on me at any moment. And I was desperate for it. I needed it. After all this time, after all this build up, I was ready for it, and I ran headlong towards it. When I was nearly there, my fingers laced into his hair.

“Milo, please. Please, please, please,” I begged. “I need... I need...”

He answered my pleas by rumbling against my sensitive flesh, and I absolutely came apart, my orgasm ripping through me as I writhed. He drew out my pleasure for as long as he could, making me scream and cry out his name over and over in a mindless chant. When he was satisfied, he pulled away and crawled up my body to capture my mouth with his.

He kissed me as if he were still starving, and I tasted me and the ocean on his tongue as he delved into my mouth. Despite having just had a mind-blowing orgasm, however, desperation still rode me. The feel of his body over mine as he devoured my mouth only added to my frenzy, and I arched my hips up, rubbing my wet flesh against the hard length of his cock to entice him to take me.

“Are you ready for my knot, sweetheart?” he asked, rocking against me in turn. “Because I’m ready to take you just like my forebears did with their mates, to make you mine with the sea and the Goddess as my witness. Do you want that?”

“Yes! Yes! Please!”

“Good, because you’ve been mine since the moment I first laid eyes on you.”

That rumble returned, and he reached between our bodies to take his cock in hand and line it up with where I needed it most. He slipped into me, the thickness of his cock filling the hollow and aching place between my legs as if it were meant to be there. As if it were the missing part of me. I gasped at the

same time he sucked in a breath through his teeth, our eyes locked together.

It was the aligning of stars and planets and the universe.

It was everything I didn't know I needed.

It was *perfection*.

Pulling back out of me nearly all the way, I began to protest until he thrust back inside my body, knocking the breath out of me once more. Then he did it again. And again. And again, his eyes never looking away from my face. His tempo sped up until he was thrusting between my legs hard and steady. I moaned with abandon, allowing myself to be as wild as I wanted.

My pleasure grew and grew, my whole body aflame for him. As much as I wanted to come, I also never wanted this to end. I wanted to stay beneath him forever, lost in him. My hands wandered down his back, my nails biting into his skin before settling on grabbing that luscious ass of his. His pace faltered for a beat or two, his own eyes closing as he moaned. When they opened again, he grinned. I sank my nails into his ass, and this was all the encouragement he needed to unleash himself upon me.

Tilting his hips just so, he now ground himself against my clit with every thrust. A litany of curses left my mouth as I crested towards another orgasm. "Oh god. Oh fuck! Milo! Milo!"

Without warning, my orgasm hit me. I came and came and came until stars sparkled in my vision. Soon after, Milo joined me, thrusting into me one last time before he grunted, the heat of his orgasm filling me up. That's when I felt it, his knot swelling.

It grew and grew, the feeling of it foreign within me. My pussy stretched to take it, burning as it pushed me to the very limits of what I could take, and I squirmed, unsure of whether I could take it or not. Unsure how to ease the ache. A whimper escaped me as a tiny flash of fear accompanied the increasing discomfort.

“Shh,” Milo cooed, his voice gentle as his lips brushed against my temple, featherlight. “You can take it. You were made to take my knot.” His breathing hitched. “Gods, your cunt is heaven.”

He kept talking me through it, whispering praise and encouragement until the panic subsided, long after he'd swollen as much as he could. He petted me, held me close, as I acclimated, the burn turning to discomfort, to something... more. His cock fit snugly inside me before, but this... this was tight.

This was perfection.

Overwhelming emotion came over me, a sense of fullness and completion I never thought possible. I felt Milo not just in my body but in my very soul. It was like I'd come home, like I'd been reunited with a part of myself I didn't know I'd been missing. My whole world shifted, the stars in my sky realigned until he was featured prominently among them, and all I could do was wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck as I cried as much as I was able to.

“I know, my love. I know,” Milo whispered, hugging me back just as tightly. “Taking your first knot is always overwhelming. Does it hurt?”

I shook my head, and when I spoke, it was not much more than a ragged whisper as I struggled to describe what had come over me. “I... I feel you.”

He didn't joke like I thought he would. There was no quip about ‘well, I'd hope you feel me!’ Instead, he pressed a kiss to the top of my head and replied with the impossible. “I feel you, too, Rose.”

I tipped my face up and kissed him. It was all I could do with how my words had failed me. Whatever this was, I didn't want it to end, and from the deep, rumbling purr vibrating against me, Milo didn't either.

We lay like that for a long time, basking in the intimacy of being one with each other, until our breathing evened out and

my tears stopped. At some point, I'd buried my face in his chest, enjoying the peace I felt being in his arms

"Is it... Is it always like that?" I asked, daring to look up at him. I was a little scared he'd find me clingy or be weirded out by my reaction, but what I saw was Milo's features etched in awe as he gazed down at me. More tears threatened to spill from me.

"No. I've never felt this way before," he replied simply, smoothing my hair away from my face. "You're even more perfect than I could've dreamed of, Rose."

The weight of this statement and all the words unsaid that softened his expression nestled into my heart, made a home there. Whatever this was, as impossible as it seemed, spoke to something in my soul, and I wanted to cherish it for as long as was possible. Just as I wanted to cherish him.

"You are, too," I whispered back.

And I meant every word.

CHAPTER 16

Perry Brown



Perry sat at his computer desk, a fan weakly blowing air in his direction. It did fuck all to alleviate the moist southern Louisiana heat, but it did a great job of helpin' him pretend he wasn't sweatin' his balls off. The air conditioner—a necessity in these parts, at least accordin' to him—had broken three weeks ago and left him and his cousin Davis to broil in the ramshackle cabin they'd inherited from their fathers.

He'd wanted to sell this place and move somewhere at least passingly livable, but Davis, who owned the other fifty percent of the dump pretendin' to be a house, wouldn't even consider it.

"This is our fathers' legacy. Six generations of Browns have worked out of this cabin, and by golly, we will too," Davis had said to him.

Though he knew their family's work was important, he disagreed that it had to be done out of a cabin that looked five seconds from condemnation and not to mention was an hour outside any town. It was a special form of torture to be denied the comfort of a cold beer and a nice shower after a long day of work, but he supposed in the name of tradition, he'd endure. He didn't like it, but he'd do it for the work they did, if nothing else.

One thing he *did* agree with and understand was the importance of their fathers' legacies.

There was a blight, a cancer hiding just beneath the skin of the world that they worked tirelessly to eradicate, and it came in the form of supernatural entities. Entities that hunted and preyed upon humans throughout all of time. The Browns were the frontline defense against these vile, evil creatures.

They came in many forms, some more “civilized” than others, but there was always a monster lurking just beneath the surface no matter how pretty their faces were. Whether it be demons, angels, yetis, what have you, they were all evil, and there was evidence of them throughout history. Perry had to admit that when he’d been told all the creatures that ever existed in mythology were real, he didn’t believe it. Not until his father and uncle took him to see with his own eyes that all that bullshit was real, and to this day, he couldn’t get the image out of his head of the first supe he’d ever seen: a half-starved vampire.

He hadn’t expected it to talk or to tell them it wasn’t from this world but from another realm close to Earth. He’d thought, *First, supernatural creatures exist, and now there are other worlds out there that aren’t ours? Good God in Heaven.*

But the evidence was right in front of his face. It was right there to see and touch and hear, and that kinda evidence just couldn’t be dismissed. From that moment on, he’d believed in what his father and uncle taught him about the world around them, and at dawn, when they executed the vamp by leaving him out in the sun before beheading it just to be sure, he learned the importance of killing such beasts.

Gettin’ up from the desk to stretch his legs, he walked over to the fridge to pull out a beer but found they were out. *God damn it, Davis! You always take the last one!* He bent down to get a better look at what they had to drink that wasn’t the nasty well water from the tap but found only one can of Davis’s favorite soda, leftovers from two weeks ago, and a stick of butter. Grabbing the last soda, he slammed the door shut.

“It’s a good goddamn thing you’re getting groceries,” Perry muttered to himself. *Shoulda been back hours ago, though. He always takes his damn time drivin’ to town and*

back, especially these last few weeks. “I got fed better in the fuckin’ Marines.”

He stalked back over to his desk and plopped back down into the chair, pissed all over again that his fool cousin was a dumbass and didn’t want to move to civilization where they could at least get day jobs to pay for enough food for two grown ass men. Their work wasn’t safe, easy, or even legitimate. He knew this goin’ in. But he never imagined it being *this* bad.

When he’d hunted with his daddy after getting out of the army, they never lived like this. Not once. They slept in the family home and had a full pantry. Not to mention, he and his daddy worked day jobs that helped fund their hunting trips.

But all that ended when Perry’s uncle took Daddy on a hunting trip and got killed by some creatures calling themselves ‘demonseers’ out in California. After that, Davis got him fired from his job and forced him to come to the cabin to find the bastards who’d done it. Unfortunately, they never were able to, but it’d lit a fire within Davis and himself to make sure that their cause was not abandoned.

So, he scrolled. Searchin’ through news articles, videos, and really anythin’ that might indicate where those supernatural pests were holed up was what he was lookin’ for.

They were wily creatures, hiding in plain sight sometimes, but there were always tells. There were always things that gave them away that most humans were keen to dismiss or explain away by other means, but the Browns and a dozen other families around the world were privy to all those secrets.

It was so damn hard to focus, though, when the air was thick with humidity, and it felt like he was trying to breathe in a goddamn swimming pool.

Still, he blinked at his computer and clicked here and there so it looked like he was trying to work for when Davis came back from town with dinner and groceries. He didn’t want to be yelled at again or to be told that he wasn’t as invested in their cause because he didn’t think about killing demons and shit 24/7. He was of the opinion that havin’ a break every once

in a while to, you know, sleep and shit was necessary, but Davis's need for revenge still burned hot.

Perry was upset too; his daddy didn't deserve to be killed like that, but the pain had cooled a little, and he could think straight.

Davis, not so much.

When the door behind him crashed open, Davis hollered at him to help bring their groceries in, and Perry gladly got up to go help. Anythin' that got him out of that seat, he'd be happy to do. The back of their shared truck was filled with two weeks' worth of groceries and supplies—not that they usually lasted that long—but between the two of them, they got everythin' inside in no time at all.

That meant Perry was back in the computer chair while Davis put it all away. Though, this time, he'd snagged a beer to make it more palatable after earning a punch to the arm for drinking Davis's sacred soda.

The stretch and activity did some good in helpin' get his brain to focus on the task at hand, even if Davis singin' off-key in the background made it hard to think of anythin' but knockin' him upside the head just to get him to shut up. But Perry knew this was more a symptom of not being on a hunt in weeks than actual irritation towards his cousin. If only he could find somethin', anythin' to give them a lead.

Just as Davis began the worst rendition of *Country Roads* he'd ever heard in his God forsaken life, he found something: a news article titled, "Missing Local Woman Found with Missing Memory."

Normally this wouldn't be of interest to him, but it was the tagline that caught his attention: "Found near the wreckage of a boat fifty miles from the Golden Isles, local woman had no idea how she got there." When he read the article, more keywords stood out to him.

The article talked about a woman, Rose McKenzie, that got into a boating accident that left another missing and presumed dead, but she didn't know how she got there or what

happened. The woman appeared human enough, if very thin and traumatized-lookin'. It was the man, though, Cornelius Young, that Perry *knew* was a creature of some variety, given that his eyes were a distinctive aqua color—a telltale sign of being a supe.

Theories began formin' in his mind as he furiously looked more into the town. The Golden Isles were a treasure trove of lore, sure, but the news articles comin' out of there in the last year only solidified his ideas.

“Nora Town Mayor Acquires Federal Land”

“Small Island Mayor Missing”

“Corruption Found in Town of Missing Mayor”

There were so many more. Perry's gut told him that this mayor may have been involved in the missin' man's disappearance, especially since both men shared the same odd ocean eyes. Turnin' to Davis, he grinned.

“Pack up the truck,” he said. “We're goin' on a road trip.”

CHAPTER 17

Rose



“**O** oh, look at you, little miss thing,” crooned a voice from just beyond my line of sight.

I was in the ocean again, the moon still full overhead, but the water around me was dark and terrifying.

Looking around to find the source of the voice, I found it was the same not-me siren from before. She swam leisurely into my view, waggling her eyebrows. This time, though, thin strands of lights circled her upper body, pinning her arms to her sides—the bindings Corvin had put on her.

“What the hell do you want?” I demanded, not bothering to hide my irritation.

“I’m just trying to make conversation,” she retorted, trying to look innocent. “I wanted to congratulate you on getting dicked down by the fiiiiiiine specimen of a selkie.”

“Can we not talk about that?” I glared at her, my cheeks heating despite myself.

“Fine. It’s your choice.” She shrugged.

Then she started to swim lazy circles around me on her back, the long, lithe muscles that were her tail undulating occasionally to keep her going. The moonlight reflected off her scales, making them glitter like opals and moonstone while her translucent fins flashed silver. Were it not terrifying, I’d have thought her beautiful.

“So, are you the representative of all the angry souls inside me, or are you just an asshole?” I asked, not knowing why I

was asking. Something in me told me I shouldn't trust her.

"Oh, those guys?" She snorted. "They aren't talking to you in your dreams. I just used the idea of them to get your attention. It's not my fault that you wouldn't listen to me any other way."

"You? All these dreams have been you? Why?" I exclaimed, incredulous.

I'd spent so much time in knots thinking I was displeasing the souls when it was... whatever this was? Anger surged in me anew, suffusing every nerve ending, every cell until I was shaking from the force of it.

"Again, I wanted your attention. Duh! Aren't you listening? I'm starting to think that you're mentally deficient."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to know who's responsible for upending your absolutely boring life." She stopped her circling to look at me very seriously. "You know you have the dullest life, right? Like, I've been dying of boredom in here."

"So, you're directly responsible for all this?" I gestured my hand around at, well, everything, ignoring her jab. I liked my 'boring' life.

"Yep! So, you better hold on tight, sea spider, because it's me who's about to take you on a spin on the death carousel," she said, then laughed at her own stupidity.

"I'd rather you not, actually," I muttered.

"Oh, darling, you have no choice. I'm not going to allow you to squander this wonderful opportunity to be the best you can be and not this... this pitiful human." She narrowed her eyes at me, her lip curling up in disgust. "Really, aren't you glad you're changing? You'll get to be with that hot piece of man meat for a long time to come."

"I'd rather have had a choice, thank you very much."

She resumed her lazy circles around me. "Oh, you did have a choice. You chose to have the talisman housed in your body. You really should have thought this through."

“Excellent. I love that for me.” I sincerely hoped she understood sarcasm because I was laying it on thick.

“Also, I really should warn you. The faster you run from me, the harder you struggle against this, the harder this is going to be for you.” She looked at me with an unblinking stare. “You could have been changed already, had you not added all this nonsense.”

“I told you. I don’t want any of this.”

She shrugged, “I mean, do what you want, but either way, you’re going to die. Either perma-death after your body collapses and your soul gives out, or you die and change so you can be with your precious Auntie Vi. If you just allow me to do as I want, all this could be so painless and easy.”

If I believed her, the offer might have been tempting... but the faster this happened, the sooner I’d have to leave my aunt. I wasn’t ready for that yet, if I’d ever be ready.

“You’d give me a painless death?”

“Well, yes. I’m not that cruel! You’d go to sleep then wake up ready to swim with the fishies like your heart has always cried out to do. Truly it’s a win-win!” Not-me Siren smiled viciously, flashing needle-like teeth. “Anyway, I know that you’re suuuuper tired from all your boring work and all, but I just thought I’d give you a little warning that these,”—she flexed against the bonds that were binding her arms down to her sides causing a few to pop and disappear—“are going to be gone soon, and then I’m going to really have a fun time changing you into, well, me!”

“Don’t you dare—” I started, lunging forward, but she poofed out of existence right before my eyes, her sing-song voice saying “Goodbyeeee” as she went.

Sitting up with a jerk, my hands grabbed at thin air as a feral snarl came from me. My eyes wildly searched for the source of my irritation for a long moment until I realized that I was in my bed. In my room.

I groaned.

Flopping back down, I grabbed my phone from the side table to check the time and my messages. It was just after 5 a.m., hours before my alarm was set to go off, but I knew that I wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep. Especially not when I could almost still hear her laughing in my head, taunting me with the reminder of how absolutely powerless I was in the face of all this.

With no point in staying in bed, I threw my blankets off me in a huff and stormed out of my room to go take a shower. My dream left my skin slick with sweat and the faintest hint of sea water on my lips, and it only served to piss me off more. During the day, I was mostly able to ignore my predicament. My days were busy enough as it was, what with the shop renos, Milo, and my deliciously sore pussy—which wanted nothing more than a repeat performance despite the ache and the fact that he'd had me twice more after the first round—to occupy my thoughts, but in the quiet of the night, as I lay down in my bed to sleep and in my dreams, it all came rushing back.

There were reminders, of course, over the four days since Ava and Aira's engagement dinner and subsequent 'dicking down,' as Not-me Siren so delicately put it.

The bindings Corvin had put on kept my chest tight, constricted. Any hint of exertion had me gasping for breath, and even just laughing too hard had my ribs twinging in pain, which only felt tighter and tighter as the days passed. It was an ever-present ghost that chased after me, nipping at my heels and taunting me that I would soon lose everything I'd built for myself. And it was the reason I still had yet to tell anyone about what was going on. I wanted to live in ignorant bliss for as long as I could, even if Corvin and Aeden disapproved.

Looking into the mirror after flicking the bathroom light on and turning on the shower to warm up, I could almost hear Not-me Siren laughing at me. I couldn't even look at myself without seeing her and what I was to become. My hands gripped the sink, squeezing it as her taunts barreled through my head.

I hated her. I hated her so damn much, and all I wanted to do was get my hands on her to wring her neck.

The porcelain of the sink protested my rough handling, cracking and groaning. When I looked down, thin lines radiated out from where my hands had been. Horror suffused every cell in my body as I looked at the offending appendages, Not-me Siren's laughter ringing through my head for real this time.

Soon, she whispered. Soon, you'll be perfect.

Fuck off!

Turning away from my reflection, I quickly shucked off my clothes and slipped into the shower as if, somehow, I could wash away the fact that she wasn't wrong. I'd chosen to take the talisman into my body. Someone had warned me that night that there might be complications, so I couldn't really blame anyone but myself for this. That didn't stop me from resenting the hell out of her, me, and Joseph for making this happen.

I went through the motions of getting clean and brushing my teeth, trying to think of anything other than the impending loss of my humanity. It didn't work, and dissociation took over as I continued to prepare for the day.

Before I knew it, I was dressed and ready, heading downstairs to make breakfast. Blinking, I checked my phone to see it was barely after six, much too early to be making breakfast, especially since Vi wasn't even up yet, but I had promised to make Norasagna for Milo's crew, and it wouldn't hurt to start prepping for dinner.

Around seven-thirty, Vi came in to start breakfast—it was supposed to be her turn, after all—but stopped when she saw the absolute mess I'd made trying to prep and make three separate meals. Still, I smiled at her confused and sleepy face, waving my spatula at her.

“Good morning, Vi!” I said with feigned brightness.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” She groggily ambled over to me to kiss me on the cheek. “What's all this?” She gestured to the disaster that was the kitchen.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I decided to, well, make stuff,” I replied, my eyes darting away from hers so she couldn’t see the panic in them.

“What’ve you decided to make?” she asked, heading to the cabinet to pull things out.

“I prepped dinner.” I pointed at the crock pot with my spatula. “We’ll be having pot roast. In the oven,” I said, gesturing at the oven now, “is Norasagna for Milo and his crew for helping me out the other day, and I’m making omelets for breakfast.”

“What time did you wake up, and what sort of drugs did you take to get all this energy?” she asked with a raised brow as she reached around me to grab the pan with sausages in it.

“I got up at five, and unfortunately, no drugs. We’re running on fumes at this point. Otherwise, I’d offer you some,” I replied with a cheeky grin thrown over my shoulder at her that earned me a whack on the arm when Vi came to grab something else.

“We both know I have to at least pretend to be a pillar of this community,” said Vi.

“Right, right. Suuuure.” I drew out the sound until she whacked me again, then I laughed.

I finished up the omelets and plated them before joining her at the table. Her eyes scrutinized my face silently as I grabbed some sausages for myself.

“Did you have another nightmare?” she asked, pouring me a glass of iced tea, her eyes flicking up to my face periodically.

I sighed. I wanted to tell her everything. It’d be so much easier to accept this if she knew what was going on, but I knew that it wasn’t possible. Humans weren’t supposed to know about Otherkind... But how was I going to just leave her here? How could I do that to her?

On a whim, I decided to bend the truth a little bit. “I had a nightmare, yeah, but this one was just weird. I feel silly for being so scared, to be honest.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“It was pretty cliché horror movie. I was in the ocean swimming around at night when a mermaid that looked like me came up and tried to kill me, only for me to realize that I’d actually turned into a mermaid.” I shivered, remembering what was actually happening. “You’d still love me if I was a mermaid, right?”

“You know, you asked me the very same question when you were a kid,” she chuckled.

“And what was your answer?”

“It’s the same now as it was then: of course.” Her grin widened. “Just don’t bring raw fish into the house and don’t track water all over the floors.”

I snorted. “I’ll do my best, Aunty. Wouldn’t want to ruin the two-hundred-year-old floors.” Though I joked, the knot in my stomach eased just a little bit.

We ate in silence for just a little while until Vi said, “Oh, right! I know that you’re busy with the new section at the shop, but Nina from the shop at the port messaged me earlier to ask if you’d be willing to step in for a bit this morning? One of her employees caught the stomach bug that’s been going around, and there’s only one person scheduled. I think she said you can leave after the twelve-thirty ferry when their other part-timer comes in.”

“Sure. I don’t have much I can do until we get the next shipment in anyway,” I replied after swallowing a bite of my omelet.

“Awesome. I’ll message her to let her know.”

Smiling at her, I dug back into my breakfast. *I hope this will keep my mind off of what’s going on.*



It didn't.

The rest of my morning was spent mired in my own hateful mind. Not even a brief appearance by Milo to pick up the Norasagna before I headed to the port could fully pull me out of my thoughts. Though, I had to admit it was nice to see him... and steal a few kisses as well... that Vi totally saw and razzed us for.

Now, I sat behind the register of the port shop waiting for any customers to come in. The twelve-thirty ferry was just pulling in, having announced its arrival with a long blast of its horn, while I sat fussing with a random string on my shirt and trying to stay present and calm. It was harder than I'd wanted it to be.

Casting my eyes around the room, I was pleased to see how nicely they'd settled into the space. Vi and I'd spent a considerable amount of time and effort over wintertime helping design and set up the shop at the behest of the town council. This shop, unlike Sutton's, was mostly made up of souvenirs and tchotchkes but with that lovely Nora flair. Most of the items were crafted on the island by local artisans, and I'd snagged a few myself since they were so cute. I mean, who didn't love wood carvings of seals?

A wave of nausea hit me out of nowhere. I staggered a little as the souls inside me started screaming, beating against my chest and making my heart race. A word chanted in my mind over and over, the first I'd ever heard from them outside my dreams. A word that had my anxiety skyrocketing.

Danger.

Putting on as neutral an expression as possible, I looked around the shop, trying to see what was making them freak out so much. There were only three people in the shop, aside from me and the part-timer working in the storage room: a young woman looking through the tchotchkes and two men who appeared to be related.

The moment I saw them, I *knew* it was them that was responsible for this feeling.

Looks-wise, they were just two normal men wearing t-shirts, jeans, and work boots. They had the same mousy brown hair, brown eyes, and pinkish tan skin from hours of work outside. Their auras, however, were unlike anything I'd ever seen or felt before.

Malice, pure and true, dripped from them and tainted the air around them, and everything they touched was tarnished. The closer they came towards me, the more my whole body felt like a million bugs were crawling all over me, and the more my stomach rioted in its desire to empty its contents. The defining feature of these men, however, the thing that had the souls inside me screaming so loud I could hear nothing else, was their hands.

In stark contrast to their tan skin was a deep crimson that crept up their forearms and almost up to their elbows, as if they'd dipped their hands in blood. But it wasn't static like a tattoo; it curled and moved at the edges, changing shape at will but never going past their elbows.

Though I didn't know what it was, everything in me told me that these men were dangerous and that I shouldn't be anywhere near them.

Even as they headed right towards me.

Under their gazes, I felt like prey, and it took every ounce of restraint in me not to run away and hide from them. When they finally reached the register, with nothing between us but the wooden counter, they smiled at me. I almost retched.

"Hello, miss," said the slightly taller one on my right, his voice having a very distinctive southern twang that was right out of a country music video. "I was wonderin' if you could tell me where we could find information on island lore and stuff? My cousin and I are interested in doin' some research on mythological creatures 'round these parts."

Lies!

I ignored the souls screaming at me and put on my best salesperson smile. "Sure."

I gestured for them to follow me to where our book section was, and I pulled one off the shelf called, “The Golden Isles: Islands of Lore.” It’d been written by one of the kelpies on Charlotte but was full of absolute nonsense—on purpose—so I felt safe selling and suggesting it.

“This is probably the only book we have on that subject, though I can’t verify the claims inside as true.” I leaned in, though I didn’t want to, and stage-whispered to them, “Between you and me, the author wrote this for their children as a way to get them interested in island history, but I don’t think there’s any truth in what was written.”

The shorter one took the book from my hand and began to thumb through it without so much as a glance in my direction, which was more than fine with me.

“I think you’d be surprised at what’s real and what’s not, ma’am.” After a second, he handed it to his cousin, then looked to me to say before I could reply to his original statement, “We’ll take it.”

“Okay! Great!” I forced myself to smile from ear to ear. “Let me just ring that up for you. Would you like anything else today?”

“We’re fine, thanks,” he grunted.

The taller one handed the book back to me, and touching it made my stomach lurch with how many black spots were covering it. My heart pounded harder in my chest, and audible *pops* zinged in my head as the bonds broke one at a time in quick succession, like popcorn popping.

Carefully making my way back to the register, dizzy and seeing spots in my vision, I rang it up and told them their total. The taller one handed me money as I listed a little on my feet.

“Are you alright, miss?” he asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

Lie! Lie to them!

“Oh, yes. Sorry. An old head injury. It gives me fits and makes me dizzy if I walk too fast. It’s nothing to worry about,” I said, putting his money in the till and pulling out his change.

“Is that why your eye is like that?” he asked.

LIE!

My chest constricted again, and more *pops* sounded in my head. Swallowing thickly, I replied, “Yeah. Left me mostly blind in that eye, but thankfully, the doctors saved it. Now I have most of my vision back. Thank goodness for modern medicine, am I right?”

“Thank God indeed,” agreed the shorter one.

His eyes never left my face, and that prey feeling ramped up even more. I was on the verge of a panic attack, but trying to hide it even as the sound in my ears was like rapid-fire gunshots.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” I asked, keeping that fake smile plastered all over my face.

“Yes,” said the taller one. “Could you please direct us to the nearest hotel?”

“Of course,” I said, then pulled out a map to point to where the nearest lodging was. I didn’t want to tell them. I wanted to scream at them to leave the islands and never return, but I couldn’t. They said their thanks, and as they exited, I called out to them with the sweetest voice I could muster, saying, “I hope you enjoy your stay!”

The shorter one turned to offer me a vicious smile. “Oh, I have no doubt we will.”

The screaming in my ears drowned out anything else they might have said.

Long after they left, my heart pounded as I tried to understand what had just happened. Something about them nagged at me, and I couldn’t put my finger on what made them familiar. What made me know that the souls within me were right in telling me that they were dangerous.

And when it hit me, when I realized where I’d seen those hands before, I fell to my knees and threw up in the little trashcan we kept behind the counter.

Hunters.

They were hunters.

I'd seen depictions of them in the sacred cave with Will.

Once I'd finished emptying the contents of my stomach, I tied up the bag and told the part-timer that she should come up front to watch the shop while I headed to the bathroom. Then I hurried outside, throwing the bag in the dumpster and going into the bathroom for some privacy.

Stopping in front of the mirror for a moment to lean against the sink, I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror, and I gasped. My skin was deathly pale, my lips tinged blue. My eyes, no longer mismatched in color, stormed and raged like a volatile ocean, the color shifting from blue to green to grey and back again seamlessly. The longer I stared at them, the more the color bled into the whites of my eyes until there was none left to see.

When I lifted my hand to my face, the webbing from before spread between my fingers that were now tipped with milky white claws.

I bit back a scream.

Rushing away from the mirror, I hid in the stall farthest from the door, all but slamming and locking the stall door behind me. It took four tries to get my phone out of my pocket between the claws and my hands shaking so badly, but even when I had it out, pressing the right part of the screen was even more difficult as my whole world shifted and swirled around me.

The harder my heart pumped, now unfettered but by a single bond, the odder my body felt, like something was surging in my veins trying to reach every part of my body. My feeble human body wasn't built for this.

I thought I was going to explode into a million pieces as the souls and the power within me pulsed harder and harder.

Finally, I opened my contacts. My hands shook hard enough that I missed the call button for Aeden several times, but when I finally got it, the world swam. He picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Rose, what’s—” he said, but I cut him off with a harsh whisper.

“Aeden.” I had to stop to breathe as panic welled up inside me. “Hunters are here in Nora, and I think the bonds just broke.”

I didn’t hear what he said in response. Everything in me was seizing, full-scale panic riding me so hard I couldn’t get a full breath in. The sirens were screeching so loud I couldn’t hear, and I crumpled onto the floor of the bathroom stall. Every ounce of effort I had left in me was spent trying not to make a noise, to not alert any humans that might come into the bathroom.

Black spots grew larger in my vision until they were all I saw, and I allowed myself to be taken under just to be free from the torture that was being awake.

CHAPTER 18

Rose



C onsciousness came back to me in bits and pieces.

Awareness of my body lying on something soft came first, and I took mental note of each part of me. My whole body ached and pinched, the tightness in my chest back again. My hearing came next, the sounds around me muffled like my ears were filled with water. There were people around me talking, that much I was certain of, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. At least the sirens were no longer screaming, and I thanked all the Gods ever to exist for that fact.

However, I didn't want to open my eyes to check my vision, not when all I wanted to do was sleep and forget everything. But someone called my name softly, a warm and gentle hand brushing my hair out of my face before resting on my forehead, and I knew I needed to wake, much to my dismay. So, I forced my eyes open.

Familiar dark wooden planks stretched above me, ones I'd looked up at many times before but for some reason couldn't place where I'd seen them. My vision was still a little hazy, a little shaky, so I closed my eyes again tightly before reopening them. This time a face entered my field of view, a very concerned Aeden peering down at me. His hand smoothed over my hair again.

"How are you feeling?" he asked gently.

"Like I was hit by a truck," I replied, my voice hoarse.

He chuckled, “That, I suppose, is fair.” His smile faded, his features troubled. “Can you sit up, or would you like some help?”

“I think I need some help.”

He nodded, putting his hands under my shoulders and slowly sitting me up. The world around me spun, and I lilted to the side, barely catching myself before I fell back, but Aeden was there, holding me steady until everything stopped spinning. When I was fully in control of myself again, I looked around me to see where I was.

When I realized I was at Aeden’s house, sitting on his bed over the covers, I furrowed my brow. Turning to him, I asked, “How did I get here?”

He sighed, moving around to sit in my field of view. “I heard you pass out while we were on the call, and I immediately called Corvin, then your aunt to make sure she wouldn’t worry when you didn’t return. We found you in the bathroom...” He pursed his lips together in that way that told me he was choosing his words carefully. “We found you partially changed on the bathroom floor, and we brought you back here so that he could put the bindings back in place where no one could interrupt us.”

The way he looked at me, his expression, told me that there was more he wasn’t saying.

“What else?” I asked.

“It took a lot more out of Corvin to get the souls under control enough to put the bindings on. He almost passed out trying, and you struggled worse than the first time.” I let that sink in, though I didn’t know what to say in return or really what it meant. But Aeden continued. “Can you tell me what happened, Rose? How did you know they were hunters?”

Taking a deep breath, I replied, “The sirens started freaking out first before I even noticed them. It felt like a panic attack the way my heart was pounding in my chest. Then I saw their hands. They were blood-red up to their elbows, but it wasn’t a tattoo. The mark kept moving, like liquid sloshing

around in a jar. The sirens were pushing so hard against the bindings that they started snapping.”

The look on his face, the knowing flinch at the mention of the red upon their hands, told me everything I needed to know: I was right in that they were hunters. I didn't want to be, but I was.

He was lost in thought for a long time, but when he looked back at me, there was something in his expression that made me shrink back. His voice was gentle and reluctant when he spoke, but it pooled dread in every cell of my body. “We have to tell the others, Rose.”

Though he didn't say it, I knew exactly what he was talking about. I shook my head, tears springing to my eyes. “No.”

I wasn't ready. No part of me was even near being ready. I wasn't ready to deal with the change in how the others would look at me, nor the mere idea that they might hate me for what I was to become.

And having to leave Vi?

No.

Just no.

“Darling, there are hunters on the islands. If you have another attack like you did today in full view of them, they will kill you. If the others know, they can help you and cover for you. They can help protect you.” He sighed when he saw me shake my head again like a stubborn child. His next words were harsh against my fragile nerves. “Whether you want to admit it or not, you are one of us now, and because you are so new, because your situation is so precarious, you are a liability to us all. If they discover even one Otherkind here, they will stay to find if there are more. We cannot allow that.”

Before I could speak, Corvin joined us, looking as pale and shaky as I felt, walking in to stand next to Aeden, saying, “He's right. We told you that these measures were temporary, and we were patient in allowing you to come to terms with this, but the situation's changed. I can only put the bindings on

you one more time before I risk permanent damage to both you and myself. I'm sorry. We must tell the others whether you like it or not. This isn't just about you anymore."

Looking between them, the way they had their jaws set, I knew I'd never be able to convince them now. Not when they'd added the caveat before about not telling so long as my safety wasn't in question. I fought the urge to scream.

"Both of you suck," I snarled.

Tears burned my eyes as I shoved off the bed and stormed off, leaving the house entirely to get away from them. I stomped towards the lake and plopped down onto the sand to hug my knees and bury my face in them, feeling every bit as helpless as when I was a child and had my choices taken from me. Though I tried to stay quiet, my tears came, staining the fabric of my trousers.

Unlike my life as a child, unlike all those times my mother made choices on my behalf that benefitted her and her alone, I knew that Aeden and Corvin were right. I knew that they were doing what was best for them *and* for me, even if I was too cowardly to admit it. No amount of crying or protesting or ignoring was going to make this go away, and it would be deadly to more than just me if I had another episode like I did today. It was a threat to everyone I cared about and loved. I was a threat to them, and it ripped at my heart.

Despite knowing this, though, and understanding everything they were saying—the weight of all the stories I'd heard about hunters from so many Otherkind I counted as my friends—the very idea of admitting that I was changing burned. Because it meant admitting everything was wrong.

What had happened in the cave that night was a secret so few people knew about, a safety measure, and though I'd thought binding the talisman to me was the right decision at the time, now it made me feel stupid. It had failed in every way except to keep the talisman from Joseph. I'd thought that if I did it, if I let Eli bind the damn thing to me, that we'd leave the cave and be able to live our lives like normal. He

wouldn't have to leave, Vi and him would make their family, and we'd all be happy.

But it didn't happen that way.

Because of course it fucking didn't.

Whatever he was trying to do was never completed as Eli's heart had been ripped from his chest, and my whole world had shifted once again. The life I'd been building crumbled like a sandcastle in the wake of the tides. Now, it was happening again, and I despaired.

I don't know if I'm strong enough to remake my life a third time. I can't do it again.

You don't have a choice, Rose.

Inwardly, I cursed my upbringing for teaching me to be such a doormat, to sacrifice everything for others and leave nothing for myself. I cursed my parents, especially my mother, for making me this way. Selflessness to the point of detriment... to the point of destruction... that's the lesson they screamed and abused me into learning, and it was a lesson I learned all too well.

Yet it wasn't just them who was responsible for all of this.

New anger brewed in me as more tears came. None of this would've happened if it hadn't been for Joseph. I'd have never known about Otherkind or been abducted from my bed that night. Eli would be alive, and Vi would finally have the family I knew she wanted.

But no.

Joseph had to ruin *everything*.

My mind wandered, imagining my aura reaching out to the ground as I'd done so many times before for the comfort I desperately needed. As I did so, the energy from the island reached up and entwined itself with my roots, filling me with its warmth, welcome, and comfort. I let it cradle me just as it had that day on the beach, letting it hold me while I fell apart again.

I don't know how long it was that I cried out there, stewing in my anger, but it was long enough for me to have cried myself out and just stare out at the lake, only angry now. Aeden came to sit next to me a while after that. He didn't touch me or speak for a long moment, and I didn't even lift my head to acknowledge him, knowing that if I did, I'd lash out at him.

"The others will be here soon," he said finally. "I'm sorry it had to be this way. We're just trying to keep all of us safe, you included."

It's not fair. I only ever tried to do what was best, but it didn't matter. Nothing I do ever matters in the end, I thought bitterly.

"You have every right to feel that way, Rose," said Aeden, after reading my thoughts. "Everything that's happened to you has been unfair, just as this is unfair."

Finally, I turned to him, barely holding back my anger that wasn't wholly directed at him. "You're right. It isn't fair. I'm going to lose everything because of this. I mean, how the hell am I going to explain the changes to Vi? How am I going to continue my life after I've changed? I won't be able to. I'll have to leave and start over, and Vi will be alone, which is something I know she's afraid of. How am I supposed to do that to her?"

Aeden's face was neutral as he looked at me. "Let's discuss this with the others when they arrive. They might be able to help—"

"No," I snapped, cutting him off. "No. I don't want false hope. Look where that's gotten me so far. Do what you must to keep yourselves safe, but don't try to make this better. It's not going to be."

He let out a frustrated sigh but nodded. "Alright. Why don't we talk about this later when you've had more time to process?"

"That's probably for the best."

He patted me on the shoulder, then stood up and left to give me some space. Unfortunately for me, there wasn't enough time to do so, not when the first of the others arrived just minutes after he left.

Behind me, Declan, Iris, and Milo's voices greeted Aeden, and I flinched. More tears pricked at my eyes as I realized they would now know that I'd been lying to them, keeping something huge from them for a while now. Were I them, I'd be pissed, and I braced myself for that eventuality.

And for the possibility that they'd cut me off from them.

It wasn't long before the others joined Aeden, Corvin, and the Kings. Thankfully, the Kings hadn't seen me sitting by the water, or if they had, they didn't come to talk to me. It was hard enough what was to come, and I didn't have the emotional bandwidth to handle trying to be civil.

Corvin was the one who came over to me to say, "It's time."

I wanted to run screaming.

I nearly did.

The river that came out of the lake led straight to Titan Falls, and I'd already survived a jump off one cliff before, so I knew I could likely do it again. But I didn't do that. I stood up, brushed myself off, and faced the Otherkind gathered in a haphazard circle behind me.

All the group leaders were there, Tomas Marin for the krakens, Declan for the selkies, Nagamasa Shioji for the... whatever he was, and two others I'd never met before—both women—representing the kelpies and merfolk, I assumed. Based on the shifting ocean-blue eyes, I could guess the taller of the two woman was a merperson.

None of them had come alone, as they all had a companion or two by their side. I recognized only Mr. Shioji's companion, Aira's brother Oshuke, who, like everyone else there, eyed me in confusion, clearly wondering why I was there. But no one verbalized that question. My eyes turned firmly to the ground; their watchful, suspicious gazes made me uneasy. I couldn't

even look over at the Kings, especially not at Milo, and I was grateful when Aeden spoke, taking the attention off me for the moment.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” he said. “We have two very urgent problems that we need to discuss today, and I’ll waste no time in explaining it.” Taking in a deep breath, he continued, “Hunters have come to the islands.”

An unnatural stillness and quiet settled over everyone. Not even the wind rustled the leaves, nor did bugs or birds make any noise, and I peeked up from the ground to see if everyone was still there. They were, but none of them looked like they were breathing.

“Have you confirmed this?” asked Mr. Shioji. “Did you see them with your own eyes?”

“I did not, but Rose did. They came into the shop at Nora Port earlier this afternoon and checked into a hotel. They were asking about island lore and supernatural creatures. It’s clear what they’re here to do,” replied Aeden.

“And how did Rose know they were hunters?” asked Tomas, his voice suspicious in a way that lanced my heart.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Shioji, nodding as he looked from Tomas to Corvin, Aeden, and I. “How do we know she didn’t bring them here?”

Oh.

That one hurt.

Everything in me screeched to stand up for myself, to tell them I’d never tell their secret, but they had every right to be suspicious. I was a human, after all. Humans weren’t to be trusted.

“That is the second problem we must deal with tonight, and no, she didn’t betray us. She’s kept our secret,” said Aeden, putting a hand on my shoulder, “but I’m going to let Corvin explain the particulars.”

My eyes bored holes into the ground beneath me, and my fists clenched so hard that my nails had blood dripping from

my palms. Even with the new set of bindings, claws had sharpened and lengthened my nails until they sliced into the fleshy parts of my palms, just another sign of how far it had progressed even in just two short weeks. I braced myself as much as I could for what was to come.

“Rose is changing,” started Corvin. “The night Eli Young died, he had in his possession a talisman that had trapped within it nearly a dozen sirens’ souls. His mission was from his deceased wife: find another siren to complete the talisman and bring her back to life and grant her immortality and power. He himself never harmed a soul, and he decided to try to destroy the talisman but was unable to do so.

“The night Joseph stole Rose from her bed, Eli took her to the Goldens’ cave for safety and to heal her. It was there that they mutually decided to bind the talisman to Rose rather than keep it in its previous vessel, to keep it out of Joseph’s or anyone else’s hands. But during that process, they were interrupted, and the spell was left incomplete when Eli was killed. Enough bindings had been put in place before his death, and the souls and the talisman lay dormant within Rose for the last year.”

There was a soft murmur from several of the group, and many of them shuffled their feet. Corvin continued as if he hadn’t heard them.

“However, for reasons unknown to us, those bindings have deteriorated, and only one of the original remains. We also don’t know why or how, though we have many theories, but it’s causing Rose to change into a merperson. That’s how she was able to see the red stain upon the hunters’ hands. She was able to alert us of their arrival before passing out.”

Aeden picked up where Corvin left off. “She cannot yet control the change when it occurs. This makes her a liability to herself and to us, and we need to watch over her for as long as they are here. We need to help ease her transition as much as we can.”

Humiliation and anger in equal parts washed over me, and I couldn’t hold back the tears, though I was barely able to keep

them silent. Their eyes bore into me, and it made my skin crawl. The urge to flee grew to near unbearable heights. It felt like being a child once again, having someone tell on me for doing something I shouldn't have.

"If she's that much of a liability, then she should leave," hissed Mr. Shioji. "I'll not allow her to bring death to my family."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and my eyes finally flew up to look at him. The way he looked at me held pure anger and suspicion. I wanted to die then and there.

"And where would she go, Nagamasa? What support network would be there to help teach her how to deal with what are no doubt already traumatic changes?" asked Declan, his voice just as harsh.

"It doesn't matter, so long as she's nowhere near me and mine," Mr. Shioji growled back.

"As much as I agree with the sentiment, Nagamasa," started Tomas, "it would be too suspicious if she were to just up and leave after they've already met her, especially with an eye like that. They'd hunt her down and kill her, then come back here to root out the rest of us. Forcing her out will not help any of us."

"And we do not force out any of us so long as we aren't doing anything egregious. Isn't that what we decided after the fiasco with Joseph?" asked one of the women I didn't know.

"The circumstances are very different," said the other unknown woman.

"It is, but this is not our way. This cannot be our way. Rose is no different than you were when you were first changed, Lillian, and what sort of monsters would you have us be to turn away someone who needs our help?" challenged Iris. "It'd be a travesty to basically send her off to be hunted to death."

The conversation devolved into a full-blown argument, with the different sides yelling at and over each other as they tried to make their point. Their words began to blend into each

other until it was nothing more than an annoying buzzing sound all around me.

My vision tunneled. I shook as it fully hit me that they were debating whether I deserved to live or die. My fate was being decided here and now, and I had no choice in the matter.

I couldn't take it anymore.

“Stop it!” I screamed, my body shivering just as it had right before I changed. Warmth spread from my chest outwards, filling my body with power, just like it had when I'd escaped the cave. “Enough!”

The crowd quieted out of surprise, if nothing else, their eyes turning to me as if they were unsure of who they were seeing. I stepped forward, pinning all of them except the Kings—whose eyes I could not meet—with a glare. Rage unlike anything I'd ever felt before rose up in me, feral and inescapable.

“I have given all of you everything I have. I have lied for you, put myself in danger for you, took this fucking talisman into my body to protect you, and you think you can sit here and debate whether I should live or die? I didn't ask for this!” I screamed.

“We don't need your protection,” Mr. Shioji snarled, raising to his full height as if to intimidate me.

“No? Because the way I see it, if Joseph were to have gotten his hands on this,”—I pounded on my chest—“you'd, at best, be out of a home. At worst, he'd have had the power to do whatever he wanted to you, and you would have done nothing because all of you are too worried about yourselves to think about anything else.”

I looked around, still not looking at the Kings, at the people gathered.

I scoffed. “All I ever wanted was to live my life. I was happy without knowing all of you exist, but that ship has long since sailed. No amount of erasing my memory will make this go away.”

“I’m not expecting any of you to help me. It’s clear you don’t want to, and I most certainly didn’t want any of you to know this was happening, but if I’d known you all were going to start debating whether I should be killed or not while I stand right fucking here within earshot... you can sure as hell bet I wouldn’t have stuck around.”

One of the woman, a kelpie by my guess, huffed. “We don’t owe you anything, Sutton.”

“I didn’t say you did, and *I’m* not the one who asked you here. If I had my way, none of you would’ve known.” Only then did I risk a glance at the Kings, at Milo, and saw the hurt in their eyes. I suppressed a flinch. “I’d have been happy pretending like this wasn’t a thing. But we can’t, because now hunters are here.”

“And here they’ll stay if you are here,” said Mr. Shioji, his eyes shifting to something... inhuman. “Your volatility will keep them here, especially if you expose yourself as you’re doing now.”

I don’t know what came over me or what prompted me to march right over to him, grab his wrist and put his hand around my neck, but it surprised both of us. I lowered my voice, though I knew everyone could hear, to say, “If you’re so eager to have me die, then do it yourself.”

There was a moment, a tense pause, where he considered this. His fingers tightened ever so slightly as he lifted his lip to show the beginnings of sharpened teeth. Just when I thought he might, he shoved me away with a feral snarl, his wrist covered in the blood still dripping from my palm.

“You cannot ask this of me,” he said, pulling out a handkerchief and scrubbing my blood off him.

“No, but that’s what you’re asking of me. If you vote to leave me to die, it would be a kindness for you to kill me yourself.” I turned around and looked every one but the Kings in the eyes. “I’m not going to stick around and listen to you debate whether I get to live or die. Just know my blood”—I held my bloody hands up for them to see—“is on your hands.”

I stalked off into the woods, ignoring Aeden calling after me to stay. I continued until I couldn't hear them anymore, then walked even further. The energy in me thrummed through my muscles, begging for an outlet that my feeble human body couldn't provide. When it became too much, I stopped.

It was all too much.

My body shook from head to toe, that same feeling I'd had in the bathroom going through me, but I took a moment to breathe. I counted to ten, twenty... forty... a hundred before the feeling subsided. Yet my anger, my humiliation, remained.

It was all over now.

Declan, Iris, Milo... they were going to cut contact with me for lying. Ava and Aira probably would, too. I was going to be all alone when I eventually died or changed from this. Then I was going to have to leave and spend the rest of my miserable life on my own... just how I thought my life was going to be when I lived in Boston.

Maybe I should just snap the bindings myself and let the talisman change me. Rip the band-aid off. Then I can just swim into the sea and never be found again... never have to be a danger to anyone... But Vi...

Snapping twigs and the call of my name alerted me to someone having followed me, and I tensed, recognizing that voice. Milo. Instantly, my eyes filled with tears that burned as much as my shame did. I couldn't even turn to look at him, keeping my eyes firmly on the ground when he circled around in front of me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Milo asked, his voice full of hurt.

"I didn't want you to hate me," I replied, still not able to meet his eyes.

Suddenly, he was there, his hands cupping my cheeks and turning my face up to his. "I could *never* hate you, Rose."

His eyes bore into mine, trying to convince me he was telling the truth, but I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't.

“You hate the merfolk. All of you hate them, and I... I’m turning into one.” Tears flowed freely down my cheeks and onto his hands faster than he could wipe them away. “I just wanted to pretend for a little while so I could enjoy being with you before you pushed me away. I’m sorry I lied.”

That pained expression returned before he did something I didn’t expect. He kissed me. He kissed me until my eyes closed, and I melted into him. Until all I could think about was him... and how much I was going to miss him.

When he pulled away, there was an intensity to him I’d never seen before. His eyes had shifted to cinnamon-brown and when he spoke, his voice was much lower. “I want you to listen to me closely, Rose. Okay?” When I didn’t answer, he repeated himself. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered as I braced myself.

“First, I’m not angry at you, so please don’t worry about that. Second, I don’t care what you are. It doesn’t matter to me. You are *my* girl. You will *always* be my girl,” he said with an inhuman quality to his voice.

“But—”

He cut me off. “No buts. I need you to understand that no matter what, unless you send me away, I will be by your side. Always.”

The relief that poured through me sent the power of the sirens back into where it belonged. Milo pulled me into his arms, squeezing me tightly as my tears turned to sobs. “Milo...”

He held me for a long time while I cried myself out, but when it slowed, he said, “I need you to understand that I don’t hate the merfolk, only Joseph and his crew for what he’s done to you and to our home. Do you understand?”

I nodded. It was all I could do with my heart in my throat. He kissed the top of my head.

“We don’t have to talk about this right now. I know that you have a lot to think about and grapple with, but I’d like to talk about this sometime. I want you to trust me with what’s in

your heart, even if you think I won't like it. Do you think you can do that?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I can do that."

"That's all I ask. And I promise I'll do the same with you."

"You won't yell at me?" I hated how my voice shook.

"I swear on the sea, I won't yell at you. Not ever." We stood like that for a long while, and I let myself absorb his warmth and take in his comfort. All too soon, though, he asked, "Do you think you're ready to go back?"

I pressed my lips together. Would I ever be ready? Yet I answered, "I think so."

"Alright." He kissed my forehead again, then grabbed my already healed hand and guided me back.

If I thought this man was perfect before... oh jeez, was I wrong. The absolute understanding, the patience of this man was far more than I deserved, and it rocked me to my core. It wouldn't be hard to fall in love with him. It wouldn't be hard at all.

We walked back to the clearing where only Aeden, the Kings, Tomas and his people, Corvin, and of the ladies—Lillian?—and her entourage from before were standing close together. Everything about them was tense, and I stiffened back up.

Milo kissed me on the head, then whispered against my hair, "I've got you."

I forced myself to relax, and once I did, we walked the rest of the way to the group, his hand in mine the whole time.

"You okay, Rose?" asked Iris when we joined them.

I sighed. "I don't know."

"Don't you worry about a thing, Rose," said Tomas. "We have everything under control. All you need to do is avoid the hunters and tell any of the Otherkind around you if you need help. We'll take care of the rest."

"What about the others?" I asked.

“We’re going to give them time to adjust. They’re well-known for not handling change well. In the meantime, just assume that they aren’t going to help you, unfortunately,” replied Declan. “But I think as long as you stay on Mariana and Nora, you should be fine.”

I nodded. There wasn’t much else I could do aside from that.

While they all tried to make it seem like this was going to be so easy, there was not a single bit of me that believed them. Every part of me, sirens included, told me that this was going to end in disaster. What kind of disaster, though, only time would tell.

CHAPTER 19

Rose



My body ached in places I didn't know could ache almost as soon as I plopped into the chair near the helm of Milo's boat. My chest, my legs, my arms, my freaking hands, despite the fact they'd healed. There was such a deep soreness everywhere, almost like I had a fever, that no amount of stretching helped alleviate it. So, I hunkered down into the seat, somewhat dissociated as Milo took me home.

The rest of the meeting had gone by so fast. They spoke about so many things that I couldn't really wrap my head around at the time.

The only instruction they gave to me was to try to avoid being stressed out—which I wanted to yell at them was impossible since I was *changing*—and to avoid the hunters like the plague, but unfortunately for me, I worked in a public shop. They said they'd figure that out, and though I'd balked at having anyone tell me what to do and make decisions for me, I kept my mouth shut, knowing I was in no position to handle something as big as this on my own.

It helped that Milo stayed with me the whole time, his hand in mine. His presence calmed me enough to try to listen to reason and not run away, and when he noticed I was getting tired, he'd promised to bring me home. *Bless the man.*

After we docked in Nora, he walked me up to the house, intent on tucking me into bed himself. Vi, however, had other plans as she gestured for us to join her in the living room. She was talking animatedly on the phone, and I knew from her tone exactly who it was she was talking to: Jesse.

Turning to Milo, I said, “It’s our weekly phone call with the kids. You can leave if you’d like. It’ll likely be a minute before I can head upstairs.” It was the polite thing to offer, even if I didn’t want him to leave just yet.

“I can wait,” he said. “Unless you want me to leave?”

My response was immediate. “I’d prefer it if you could stay.”

He smiled, brushing a piece of hair away from my face. “Then I’ll stay.”

We settled onto the couch next to Vi as she handed the phone to me, and as soon as it was in my hand, Jesse’s voice was shouting through the line, his voice brimming with excitement.

“Rose! Guess what!” Jesse all but yelled.

I forced a smile into my voice. “What?”

“Uncle Adrian and I went fishing over the weekend, and I caught a fish the size of a whale!”

“Did not!” Callie’s voice called out from a distance. “It was only a foot long! Stop fibbing!”

“It was bigger than a foot, dumb head!” he yelled back.

“Hey, buddy,” I said gently, getting his attention.

“Yeah, Rose?”

“Remember what we talked about? About not lying and not name-calling?”

The poor boy sighed dramatically, and when he spoke, he repeated my earlier words back at him almost verbatim from the last time we spoke about this. “I shouldn’t lie or name-call because it’s not nice and breaks people’s trust in me.”

“Exactly. So, please tell the truth, okay? Besides, I don’t know how to catch any fish, so you’re already going to be doing so much better than me at fishing.”

Before he could respond, there was some tussling over the phone, and after a moment, Callie got on the phone and said,

“You said we shouldn’t lie, but Violet told us you have a boyfriend. I don’t think she’s telling the truth.”

Ouch, kiddo. Ouch.

“She’s telling the truth. Do you remember Milo, the man who took us on the tour of the islands? He’s my boyfriend.” Looking up at Milo, I smiled at him, laughing silently with him.

“No way! Really?” she asked, her voice a near yell.

“Why don’t you ask him? He’s sitting next to me right now.”

Milo scooted closer and said, “Hey, do you remember me?”

Callie ignored his question completely and went straight in with her own that made Milo’s eyes light up in laughter. “Are you really Rose’s boyfriend?”

“I really, really am,” replied Milo.

Jesse cut in. “Have you kissed her?”

“Yes, I have,” laughed Milo.

“Gross! Rose! You have cooties!”

I laughed until it turned into tears. “You’re right. I’m going to have to ask Vi to get me some anti-cootie medicine.”

We spent another twenty minutes talking about cooties before looping back to the fish that Jesse caught. Callie talked a little bit, more interested in me having a boyfriend than anything else, but I didn’t care. I was just elated that she finally was, after a year of not speaking to me. It wasn’t until that moment that I realized how much it had hurt that she wouldn’t talk to me, but I couldn’t blame her. All too soon, both Adrian and Vi were coming to retrieve their phones, and I reluctantly gave it back.

Milo and I headed upstairs, and there he began to undress me and get me ready for bed. I hadn’t realized how tired I was, how much my body hurt, until he was brushing my hair and braiding it for me.

“You know how to braid?” I asked, my words a little slurred.

“Mhmm. Ava used to make me braid her hair all the time when she was a kid. She always said it was for when I have children in the future, but really, I think it was because she was lazy,” he chuckled.

I smiled at the image of him with a baby or two. “You’d be a great father, Milo.”

“You think so?” he asked, tying off the end of the braid with my hair tie. “I always did want to be a dad. What do you think about kids?”

He helped me stand up so he could pull down my blankets before guiding me into bed.

“I always wanted to be a mom, but I don’t know if I’d be a good one,” I murmured as he pulled the blankets up over my shoulders.

“If it means anything, I think you’d be a great mother.” He pushed a lock of hair away from my face.

I tried to reply to thank him for his vote of confidence, but the words came out garbled and unintelligible, even to me, as I struggled to keep my eyes open. Then I yawned, forgetting what I was going to say altogether.

Milo chuckled, kissing me on the head. “Good night, Rose. Sleep well.”

I was asleep before he even left the room.



The next day, with a somewhat brave face, I headed into work at the shop after sending an apology message to the part-timer about leaving her alone the prior day. My muscles were still sore, which, after a text to Corvin, I’d been informed was due

to my body trying to shift but being unable to. That fact didn't make me feel any better about the situation, no matter how much he tried to comfort me. I thanked him, and he said he'd come by later to check on me.

News of me getting "sick" at the port shop reached Vi's ears before I could tell her myself. From what she told me at breakfast, she'd asked if I was going to come down for dinner, and Milo informed her that I was well and truly knocked out.

This plus Aeden's vagueness about why I was going with him had Vi's expression twisted with worry for me, and she even threatened to close the shop down for the day to take care of me if I needed it. I declined her offer, telling her that it was probably just me not getting enough sleep. Thankfully, she seemed to buy that but relegated me to product input duty anyway.

Dragging myself inside, I moved around the shop on autopilot as I flipped on all the lights and started the music. It was hard to ignore the nagging thoughts that tumbled one after the other around my consciousness. *How much longer will I get to be here? How long will I be gone?*

Will I even get to come back?

I had to stop myself from crying right then and there, looking around the shop that was part of my blood, my family's legacy. Vi came up from the basement as I stood in the middle of the main room like a doofus, concern etched on her features. "What's up, sweetheart?"

"It's nothing, I promise," I said, trying to fix my face. "I think not feeling well has made me a little emotional, that's all."

"Are you sure you want to work today? Maybe you should go home and rest."

I forced a wan smile onto my face. "I promise I'm alright."

"Alright, well, if that changes, you tell me, okay?"

"I pinky promise," I swore, holding out my pinky.

With a snort, she wrapped her pinky around mine and squeezed three times, signaling 'I love you.' I returned the gesture while trying to hold back tears. "Good. Now, I meant what I said earlier. You're going to go upstairs, and all you're going to do is computer stuff. Nothing else."

I nodded, appeasing her enough that her worry transformed into mischief.

She added, "Besides, perhaps you could ask that hot boyfriend of yours to come help you on Monday. I'm sure he'll be happy enough to do anything and everything you ask him to."

"Alright, Aunty. I'll see how I feel about that later. You do know he has his own work, right?"

"I suppose you're right. In any case, up you go." Vi let go of my pinky only to whack me on the hip with the rolled-up newspaper in her other hand.

"Okay, okay. Fine. I'm going," I laughed.

She put a hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze before nudging me towards the stairs. Dutifully, I trudged up them, any levity I'd felt leaving with each step up into the darkness. The weight of everything sat heavily on my shoulders, and as I reached the top and flipped on the light, I looked at all the paperwork there was still to do, wondering how I could even think about work when my whole life was being undone, one loose thread at a time.

Booting up the computer, I idly toyed with the mouse. A sense of overwhelming pointlessness came over me, a feeling I was familiar with, and I knew if I let myself wallow in it, or entertain it at all, it would swallow me whole. But how was I supposed to combat it this time? How was I supposed to pretend like all was well and good when the very fabric of my being was being rewritten against my will?

I think I need to up my therapy again.

When I'd first started, I'd gone two to three times a week, when the nightmares were at their worst. My mind hadn't been able to cope with what'd happened to me, between Eli, the

cave, and Will. Every day had been spent dodging flashbacks and triggers or being completely dissociated. It was months before I felt like a mostly human person again.

Now, in a stroke of one night, all that was upended.

No amount of coping skills, escapism, or breathing exercises were going to help with this, and like the tides and the path of the sun overhead, a breakdown was inevitable. I knew it was. It'd taken a week or so after getting out of the hospital for it to happen last time when Will trapped me on the beach, the shock finally wearing off and reality setting in. This felt exactly like the prelude to my mind eventually cracking under the pressure of my guilt.

And here I was again.

With shaking hands and a body ready to either implode from my feelings or explode due to the changes it was undergoing, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was on the precipice of another breakdown. All the signs were there. Yet I knew there truly was nothing I could do to stop it.

But we need to try to put it off as long as possible, Rose. The stress of it will pop the bindings.

Signing into the system, I pulled the nearest stack of invoices towards me and did my best to throw myself into my work. Anything to stave off the panic that was brewing in the back of my mind. It did little to really help, but I pushed through, one item at a time. After all, what else could I do?

CHAPTER 20

Davis Brown



These people are hidin' things. I just know they are.

Davis had been huntin' demons and shit since about the time he could toddle and hold a gun at the same time, and in all those years, he learned to be a hell of a good read when it came to people. The shift of their eyes, shufflin' from one foot to the other as they stood in front of him... all of it told him they were not saying what they knew. But he'd get it from them. It'd just take time.

And by golly, will I take all the time I need to root out all the evil in this world.

His daddy always taught him to take his time to make sure that there were no survivin' beasts left. The only time his daddy'd failed in that was the trip where he and Uncle Jim died, havin' been killed by those damn demonseers or whatever the hell they called themselves. Demon spawn was more like it.

He and Perry'd gone to try to find them to finish the job, but those fuckers were wily and hid better than most supes did. Probably because they were supposedly at least half-human.

It didn't matter, though. He could be patient. After they finished with these fucking tiny ass islands, they'd make another trip to Atesorado, California to see if they could find more clues as to those demonseer bastards' whereabouts.

And God was he itchin' for another real hunt. It'd been eight days, sixteen hours, and twenty-seven minutes since he last sliced up a fuckin' demon spawn, and it was makin' him

awfully testy. With Perry practically glued to his side, he couldn't go out and scrounge around for the supes' hidey holes like he usually did, takin' extra time while he was out gettin' groceries and such.

He groaned.

It was so satisfyin' watchin' the light fade from their eyes. Before his daddy had died, he'd gone out on his own a lot to figure out the ways he liked to carve them up, the ways that felt most satisfyin' to him. And he'd tried many, many ways. Bleedin' out, cuttin' off limbs, drownin'. Whichever way made them struggle the longest got him off hardest.

With tiny ass towns like these, though? A death as gruesome as he liked and needed would most definitely be noticed, unlike in the big cities. So he'd have to wait. *Dammit.*

Marchin' up the road to the next house, he readied himself for another verbal tussle. He'd decided to talk to the mother of the mayor, Winifred Forester, after getting nothin' from her son. In towns like this, he knew to talk to the older folk. They had nothin' better to do than to chat and gossip about all sorts of nonsense, and usually somewhere within that nonsense was the information he needed to learn where the beasties were hiding.

This tactic wasn't really workin' in this town, but he was determined to find something. If not, well, the lady at the port shop was his first guess.

That eye of hers told him that even if she herself wasn't one of the beasties, she knew of 'em, and after learning more about her case on the way there, he was positive that she'd been hurt by them at the very least. At worst, she was one of them, and she was hidin' it badly. Of course, like his cousin pointed out, she didn't have any of the other hallmarks of being a supe, and her eye was likely due to having her memory wiped.

Davis wasn't so sure of this, but Perry wanted to observe her and talk to her first before any decisions were made. Which he fuckin' hated, but he'd do it, if only to ensure he didn't raise suspicions with the dumbass.

The next house came into sight just as he was about to find a spot on the side of the road to sit his ass down on. Damn mountains. He was going to have to start doing cardio in addition to his weight trainin' if their hunts were spaced out as much as they had been. His usual hunts were in urban areas where it was easy to corner them or set traps and had none of this uphill bullshit.

Not only was he winded from the trek, but since he'd told Perry to go to the old mayor's house with the truck, it meant that he had to walk up to each house on the windin' roads that went through the mountains. The map made the houses look much closer than they actually were, which was the only reason he'd decided to split up in the first place. Perry hadn't wanted to, of course, but Davis had thought people'd be more willin' to let one of them in their houses, not both. He'd been right on that front, but he'd gotten little to nothin' from any of the folk that he couldn't read in a history book or that garbage the woman at the port sold to him. The longer he walked, the angrier he got. All he needed was one of them to have loose lips. Just one.

Trudgin' up to the front door, he wiped the sweat from his brow with the already soaked rag in his pocket before he gave a good knock and waited. Sure enough, after a minute, an older woman came to the door with a smile that faded when she saw him. He returned her stiff expression with a smile of his own, turnin' up the charm to eleven and ready to lie through his teeth to get what he needed from her.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Parker Blevins. I was wonderin' if you have some time to answer some questions about the islands," he said, using a fake name and ready to rattle off his cover story.

"What sort of questions?" she asked in return, her eyes narrowing just a bit.

"Well, you see, ma'am, my brother and I are looking to write about rare and beautiful places in the world, and well, the Golden Isles are very beautiful, if I do say so myself."

"They are indeed."

She still didn't move to invite him in. Irritation sparked. He was gonna have to work a little harder.

Dammit.

“And you see, the book we're writin' is focusin' on the history and the lore of why these places are special, and we'd like to get stories straight from the residents themselves.”

Pursin' her lips, she thought about it for a moment, then sighed. “Alright, you may come in, but I have to leave for an appointment in about thirty minutes, so we'll need to make it quick.”

“Thank you, ma'am. I promise I won't waste your time.”

She moved out of the way of the door and gestured for him to come inside. All the while, he smiled to himself. He was gonna get something from someone, and if he had to sweat his balls off to do it, then so be it.



Perry Brown

Perry jimmied the lock to the house overlooking the cliffs. It'd belonged to the former mayor and his family before they disappeared a year ago and, by all accounts, had been vacant since then. He guessed they didn't know what to do with the house that had been built on illegally purchased federal land, but he was glad they hadn't touched it. It gave him the chance to sift through their house for clues.

The place was pretty posh. Lots of windows, the latest designs, the fanciest appliances. Beasties tended to be rich fuckers since they lived so damn long, and this place definitely was expensive. It wasn't a real clue, per se, but it was an

indicator that the former owners weren't humans because those supe sumbitches were always loaded.

Another indicator, at least in his mind, was that they'd left in a hurry. The house was in disarray. Cabinets half-opened, a kitchen chair overturned. The fridge had rotten and spoiled food in it that made him gag when the smell hit him. But he looked anyway, puttin' his hand over his mouth and nose. Inside, he found the rotten remains of a lot of fish, and when he checked the freezer, it was stocked full of fish as well.

Now *that* was a real clue.

Lookin' through the rest of the house, the bedrooms were also messy, but he found that five people'd lived there at one point. Their beds were all unmade, as if they'd scrambled from bed to leave, and all over the place were traces of the ocean. Seashells, pictures of the sea, sand in the rugs. If he had to guess they trudged in and out of the water a lot, especially since there was a stack of towels against the back door. His only question was, *where was the beach?*

He headed back outside and followed what appeared to be a former walking path that had grown over. It led to the cliff, and at first, he just looked around.

He could see them maybe jumping off the cliff if they were supes, but there was no way for them to get back up... Or was there? Lookin' closer, he finally noticed the steps that were carved out of the cliff itself but were perfectly blended in. Had he not been lookin' so closely, he'd have missed them entirely, which he suspected was the point.

Perry decided to go down to see where they led to. Down and down and down they went, all the way to a small beach that took him ages to reach, since the cliff was so tall. At the bottom, he turned to take a good look at the steps themselves. They were perfectly smooth, but there were no tool marks he could see. It was almost as if they'd been pulled from the rock itself. He'd have to look into it, but there was no way he knew of that they'd come into bein' by human means. He was sure of it.

The beach, he found, was nothin' special, but he looked around anyway for anythin' that they might've hidden. If they were smart, they'd have left nothing behind, and from what he could see after going up and down the damn thing twice, there wasn't anything special there.

It didn't matter, though. Perry was fairly certain that the former mayor's family was some form of supe, and if he had to guess, they were of the ocean-dwelling kind. That whittled the list of species down a little but still left many options. Of course, it didn't really matter what they were. They were gone, and supes were not fond of gatherin' in groups.

It might be that they were wastin' their time, but there was no way that they were leavin' until they made sure there were no others.

More than that, though, was the fact he and his cousin hadn't hunted aquatic supes. Their territory was inland, in cities and surrounding countryside. However, he did know of a fellow hunter family from up in Virginia who specialized in water-type supes.

As he took his phone out of his pocket to give them a call, his phone buzzed. It was his cousin. Perry had half a mind to shove his phone in his pocket and pretend like he hadn't seen it, but he opened the message anyway.

DAVIS

Come get me when you're done.

Sighin', he responded with an "Ok". He'd *told* Davis they should go together. The stupid bastard never learned that he wasn't the man his father was, and it was hot as fuck outside, even here on the beach. He was once again reminded why he wanted to move to town: blessed air conditioning. But no. They had to suffer in that swampy cabin for tradition's sake.

Decidin' to make the fucker sit cool in his heels, he went into his contacts and tapped on the one for Paul Martin. It rang twice before he picked up.

“Howdy, Perry,” Paul greeted. His voice was as rough as the man himself, with a strong Southern accent. “Been a while. Thought you mighta gone cuckoo after your daddy died.”

“If I go cuckoo, it’s because of my damn fool cousin,” he replied with a chuckle.

“Too true.” He laughed as well. “Now, what can I do you for?”

“I have reason to believe there were some aquatic supes livin’ on these islands, but we ain’t familiar with the signs. I was wonderin’ if you’d be willin’ to give me the lowdown, so we know what to look for.”

Paul was more than happy to oblige, layin’ out all the signs for merfolk, selkies, and the like. Merfolk had strange color-changin’ eyes, while selkies lived in packs. Their tells were that their eyes shifted, and they tended to live by the water alongside seals. Almost all water supes were fiends for fresh fish, so they’d likely have a lot of it in stock. Man even gave him the optimum ways to kill them. But there was one question left in his mind.

“What about if a person had only one fucked up oceany eye? Are they a supe?” Perry asked, trying to determine if that Rose woman was someone who needed to be extinguished.

“I don’t believe I ever seen anything like that,” was Paul’s reply. “Is there anythin’ else about the person that feels off?”

“Her story’s a little fucked up. She survived a boat accident about a year ago but has no memory of it, supposedly.”

“Ah, well, it sounds like she ran afoul of some sort of supe. Some of them, like kelpies and merfolk, can fuck with the mind and erase memories and shit. Real nasty stuff. One of my cousins, Lenny, had his gourd cracked five years ago, and we had to put him down ‘cause there was nothing left of him in there.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, man.” And he was. Shit hurt.

“Yeah, thanks. You be careful out there. Your idiot cousin is reckless and will likely get y’all killed.”

“I know. I’ll make sure to keep him on a tight leash.”

They said their goodbyes, and Perry felt marginally better having knowledge on how to deal with water-type supes.

Of course, now that meant he had to go all the way back up the fuckin’ stairs to get back to his truck. Fifteen minutes later, he managed to reach the top, but fuck was he panting for breath. Looked like he needed to get his shit in shape.

Another twenty minutes later, after getting’ lost trying to find his cousin, Perry found him sitting on the side of the road, lookin’ every bit as pissed as Perry knew he’d be. Getting’ in and slammin’ the door shut, Davis grumbled, “It took you fuckin’ long enough, dipshit.”

“Yeah, well, you took the map, and cell reception is shit out here, so I couldn’t look it up,” he shot back, driving back towards the hotel. “I keep tellin’ you we need to change providers, but just like with the damn cabin, you’re too stuck on what our daddies did to change.”

He huffed, “We’re not arguing about this again, Perry. I said no.”

“You ain’t the leader, just like your daddy wasn’t the leader. We’re equal partners in this, and before you give me that shit about knowin’ more about hunting, I didn’t serve three tours in Karakkas for you to tell me I know nothin’ about killin’ shit.”

“Do you wanna know what I learned or not?” Davis yelled.

Classic Davis. Upending every argument by switching topics. *Dumb bitch.*

“Fine, but we’re discussin’ this again when we get back after the hunt. And don’t think I won’t call Aunt Beth to get her to make you see fuckin’ reason.”

Davis glared at him but ignored his comment. *Because he knows I’m fuckin’ right, and he’s gonna get his ass whooped by his mama for being so fuckin’ stubborn.*

“Basically, none o’ these ol’ biddies’re willin’ to say a damn thing. They are so fuckin’ tight-lipped, you’d think I

was askin' about how they liked bein' fucked."

"So, you got nothing. Great." Perry didn't even try to hold back his sarcasm.

"It just means we need to look deeper or ask around on the other islands. Or we need to lean on that lady from the port. She was at least involved with them."

"Yeah, well, *you* should probably stay away from her. You scared her."

"If she were innocent, she'd have nothin' to be scared of."

"And it's got nothin' to do with the fact that you're a flaming asshole?"

Davis reached over and punched him in the arm, hard. "One of us has to be. You're too soft. I bet you'd let one of those demons live if they were pretty enough."

"I've killed more people than you've killed monsters, asshole. When you can surpass my kill count, then come fuckin' talk to me about bein' soft, you sack o' shit."

Perry knew that was a sore point for his cousin and never stopped using it to get him to shut the fuck up. Sure enough, it did, and Davis sulked for the rest of the ride back to the hotel. They'd talk about their plan for what to do next once they'd showered and eaten. It happened every time they had this argument. He'd tell Davis later what he found and about his phone call. Until then, though, he'd enjoy the silence.

CHAPTER 21

Rose



It had been a long time since my anxiety was this bad... Well, a long time for me, anyway. Every twitch or twinge in my body had me on high alert for the days after the meeting with the Otherkind leaders. But there was no popping or busting of the bindings; no differences in my body that I could see or feel, aside from what I'd already noticed and experienced.

Even still, I knew what was going on. Even if I couldn't see it, I was changing in ways that I couldn't imagine, and it *gutted* me.

I tried to find solace in work, but not even that could keep my thoughts away from the anguish in my mind. Several times over the few days since the meeting, I had to stop myself from telling Vi everything, just to get it off my chest. To find some semblance of comfort. My whole heart wanted nothing more than to have her wrap me in her arms and tell me that she'd love me regardless and that she would be there for me.

But I couldn't. Not now, not ever, and especially not when there were hunters on the islands.

This was another reason why, though the voice of Not-me Siren tempted me, I couldn't just pop the bindings and get it over with. Well, that and the fact that we couldn't be sure it wouldn't kill me outright. It wasn't like I could trust the being living within me who'd stop at nothing to fulfill her purpose, especially when I just knew she was going to torture me the longer she stayed bound. Which meant I lived in constant fear of not only the hunters but her, as well.

Milo, Ava, and Aira checked on me daily—Ava and Aira learning from Declan about what was happening to me. They also called me out when I tried to tell them I was okay, which I both hated and appreciated at the same time.

All I really wanted to do was curl up and sleep until this was over, but they were always there, encouraging me to keep going, sending me texts in the mornings, at lunch, and at night. They were the only reason I got out of bed that third day after the meeting.

MILO

Good morning, beautiful

Did you sleep well?

AIRA

Morning! <3

You're going to have a great day today!

AVA

Girl, you've got to see this meme I found!

Seeing their messages, I cried. I turned my face into my pillow to muffle the sound as I lost it, hoping that Vi wouldn't hear me like she had the day before.

Though I knew I could lie to her again and say it was PMS, I didn't want to lie anymore. Thinking about how many lies I'd told her, I cried even harder, sucking in deep breaths despite the pain in my ribs from trying to stay quiet.

I don't want to keep their secret anymore! I hate this!

Wait...

It's not their secret anymore. It's my secret now, too.

Fuuuuck.

It took a while to cry myself out after that, and with what little energy I had left, I got myself out of bed and forced

myself into the shower. From there, it was just a matter of going through the motions and getting myself ready, and when I was finished, I went downstairs to have breakfast with Vi, who clocked me right away.

“Sweetie, are you alright? You look like you’ve been crying again,” she said the very second I walked into the kitchen, stopping what she’d been doing. Her expression was full of concern, and my heart twisted in my chest knowing that I was about to heap more lies onto the mountain of them I’d already told her.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I think it’s just PMS and that stomach bug,” I replied, moving to grab the silverware and dishes to set the table as I used the lie I’d come up with earlier.

She looked like she didn’t believe me for a second, saying, “You know, if you need to take the day off, you can.”

“I’ll be fine, I promise.”

I couldn’t look at her. Though that wasn’t a lie, the fact that I’d lied about so many other things ate at me. *I hope one day I’ll be able to come clean to her about everything.*

She sighed and turned to me, the pan with scrambled eggs in it in hand. “Listen, you’re an adult. I obviously can’t make you do anything you don’t want to, but I’m worried about you, Rosie.”

God, how I wish I could tell you. I wish I could share everything with you. Because then you wouldn’t have to worry when I leave or drop dead, whichever my fate will be. You’d know I was okay... but I can’t. God damn it all, I can’t!

“I know,” I all but whispered, deflating. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make you worry.”

Vi portioned out our eggs, then went to fetch the bacon from the stove while I grabbed the kettle and prepped our morning tea. When she was finished plating our food, she pulled me into a hug before I could sit down. I couldn’t help but squeeze her back, holding back tears.

What was I going to do when I had to leave?

How was I going to tell her, and how was I going to cope?

I had to shove these questions aside, as they were making it harder to keep the tears at bay, but a few slipped out when she rubbed her hand in circles on my back, saying in a hushed tone, “I know I’ve said this before, and I know maybe you aren’t ready to talk about it, but whatever it is—and I mean *whatever*—I’m here to listen, no matter how crazy you might think it is.”

My resolve weakened. The words were right there on the tip of my tongue: *Aunty, supernatural fairytale creatures exist, and I’m turning into one of them.*

It’d be so easy to say, so easy to unload the burden upon my shoulders, but I didn’t.

I couldn’t.

“I know, and I hope that one day I feel strong enough to tell you,” I replied finally, pulling away from her before I really did start crying again.

It was as close enough to the truth as I could be without actually telling the truth, and maybe it was too much to even hint that something bigger was going on, but I was weak. I was weak, and in the face of someone I should trust with everything, I couldn’t stand what a bad person I’d become in lying for the sake of the safety of others.

Vi’s expression was pained. “You’d tell me if it were dangerous, right?”

“Of course,” I lied. “After... everything that’s happened, I couldn’t bear keeping anything like that from you.”

Except I was! And I was a hypocrite for saying such a thing to the one person who’d been my safe space my whole life. *I deserve a lifetime of hell for this... I wish I’d never learned about Otherkind. At least, not like I did. Everything would be perfect right now if I hadn’t.*

“That’s all I ask for, Rosie,” she replied, kissing me on the cheek.

She moved to go to her seat, but I stopped her, taking her shoulders into my hands. “You’d tell me the same, right? I know I’m basically a house of cards in the wind most days, but you’d tell me something big as well, right?”

“Of course, darling. I trust you with my life.”

Tears escaped down my cheeks. I didn’t deserve that. At all.

“Same, Aunty. Same.” I hugged her to me again, then wiped my tears away before saying, “Now, let’s eat before our food gets cold, eh?”

We spent the rest of breakfast talking about anything but our prior conversation, from the shop renovations to the weather. But the undercurrent, the tension, from our before never abated, and it was still all I could do not to blurt everything out. How I managed to keep it in, I didn’t know, but it was so difficult.

After breakfast, as was our routine, she went to the back of the house to get ready for work while I washed up. Dark thoughts welled up again without something to hold my attention, and I was overwhelmed by them once more, lost in my mind while going through the motions. Before I realized it, I was already at the shop, unlocking the doors and opening it up to the public.

Blinking, I stopped what I was doing and looked around me, checking myself and what I was doing. My finger hovered under one of the light switches, and I flicked them on quickly as I got my bearings. *Yeah, I think I need to up the amount I go to therapy again, but... I don’t know if I can stomach talking with Aeden.*

Before my mind slipped down that rabbit hole of darkness, my phone buzzed. Pulling it out of my pocket, I saw that Aira had sent me another message in the group chat.

AIRA

Hey! Violet said you’re feeling down

Would you like to have dinner at Oki tonight?

Tears threatened to spill from my eyes once again. That woman, my beloved Aunty, deserved better than me.

ME

First off, Vi's a snitch

AIRA

lol true

Second, I don't think your dad wants me anywhere near you

He was very clear that he thinks I'm a danger to your family

I also may or may not have traumatized him by asking him to kill me

Pfft. The old codger just doesn't like when things are an unknown

Besides, he got an earful from me and mom when he told us

So, he'll be sulking for sure, but he won't turn you away

Still. I don't want to be where I'm not wanted

I promise you, you are wanted

Come over when you're done with work

I'll make sure there's alcohol enough to drown a whale

Aira, you're a blessing

Ily <3

ily2, babes

Send me a message when you're on your way

ofc

See you tonight

Smiling at my phone, I then put it back into my pocket and sat down to wait for any customers. Vi came in about ten minutes later, asking if I had any plans for the evening as if she hadn't orchestrated me going out with my friends. I jokingly lied about throwing an orgy at the house, which earned me a whack with the newspaper in her hand. I hugged her again, thanking her for arranging my play date. Then we went about our tasks separately, her downstairs and me upstairs.

The day was quiet. Even from where I was in the shop, I could feel the sunshine on my face, warming my skin. Despite how pleasant it felt, I was happy to be inside as the heat and humidity were already climbing into peak summertime highs, which didn't bode well for having a cool summer.

Gotta love climate crisis.

Around noon, I came downstairs to take over for Vi so she could eat lunch. My focus was shot, but thankfully, there weren't many customers in then. However, within moments of relocating, the door chimed, and Miss Winnie made a beeline straight for me. She slapped her hands down onto the counter, her brow knit in obvious worry.

"Rose, have you heard about those two men who came to the island recently?" she said without preamble, which wasn't unusual for her. When she had hot gossip, she made her rounds around the island to make sure *everyone* knew what was going on.

"Which two men would those be?" I asked. I saw dozens of people every day, islanders and non-islanders alike, but I had a sneaking suspicion I knew *exactly* who she was talking about.

"Oh, you know the ones. They sound like they're from the South. I heard you were at the port when they arrived."

My heart sank. Of course. Of course, it'd be the fucking hunters.

“I was, yeah. They bought a book, and then asked for directions to the hotel. Why? What happened?” I asked, trying for nonchalance as my breath hitched and my chest twinged. My heart skittered a beat or two.

Miss Winnie took a deep breath, her agitation making her cheeks go red. “Well, since they've arrived, they've knocked on every door and tried talking to everyone who will listen. They *say* they're writing a book about the islands, but I don't think that's why they're here.”

Alarm bells rang in my head, but I took a deep breath and focused on Miss Winnie.

“What do you think they're here for?” I asked. The best way to handle her was to ask questions rather than comment, so I went with that strategy. Besides, this information was vital.

“Well, they certainly aren't here to write no book, that's for sure. I honestly can't tell you exactly what feels off about them, but I'm certain they're here for something nefarious. Why else would they go to everyone's houses? And I mean, *everyone*, Rose. They even forced poor Mrs. Lucas out of bed, and you know she's been sick with that heart condition for a while now.” She huffed, her hands balling into fists. “What did you think of them?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, debating on what to tell her. “They made me uncomfortable. I think we should be careful around them. Whatever they're here for, good or bad, they're making themselves into nuisances. I just hope they decide to leave soon.”

“I'm glad to see I'm not the only one who feels this way. The neighbors and I already decided to not tell them anything, and I hope you and your aunt agree to do the same,” she replied, her eyes fierce.

The last time I'd seen her so upset was when everything was coming out about Joseph. Hell, it was through her that Vi

and I learned about all that in the first place, as Aunty and I had been mostly sequestered in the house due to Eli's "disappearance." For all her gossipmongering, though, her instincts were usually right about things, and it made me that much more worried.

"I have no desire to fraternize with them unless I must to be polite," I said. "Please let me know if you hear anything else, okay?"

"Of course. You be safe now, you hear? I don't want you to get hurt again."

Me neither; Miss Winnie. Me neither.

"I promise."

Miss Winnie muttered something I didn't catch, then shuffled away, too agitated to even say goodbye. Meanwhile, bile rose up into my throat, threatening to make me vomit again. I had to take a few minutes to do some grounding techniques to calm myself, breathing through the nausea. When I finished, I pulled out my phone and messaged the King family group chat.

ME

I feel like I need to tell you all this, but I don't know the protocol

It's about the hunters

I carefully explained everything that she'd told me in as much detail as I could. My hands were shaking by the time I finished, fear streaking hot through my already frayed nerves. Declan was the first to reply.

ME

What should I do?

Not going to lie, I'm kinda freaking out

DECLAN

We need to keep you calm, for one, and for two, we all need to be very, very careful. All we can do is keep hidden until they leave.

Really, despite hating what he was saying, there was no other alternative. If we all left, they'd be alerted to the fact that the very creatures they were looking for were fleeing from them, and they'd pursue whoever they saw running first until they were dead.

Even though every instinct in me told me to run, to seek the sea to hide, I knew it was impossible. We'd have to endure this for as long as was necessary.

The hunters were hunting...

And I had the worst luck in the world.

CHAPTER 22

Rose



I stood in front of Okinohime—Oki, as the islanders call it —afraid to go in. The image of Mr. Shioji’s face twisted in anger stood at the forefront of my mind, the feeling of his fingers squeezing ever so slightly around my neck... It made me relive the memory again and again.

Prior to that moment, I’d really respected him and thought we’d had a good rapport, but witnessing his actions disabused me of that notion.

My non-confrontational nature screamed to turn around and go home. To hide. Hiding would be safest right now, and it was the option that meant turning could be done in the peace and quiet of my room or my boat without having to pretend that I was alright. But especially with the hunters here, I couldn’t, and I hated them even more for it.

My heart oscillated between fear and hatred, both like living entities in my gut that ate away at me and what little bandwidth I had to function.

What was I to do?

So, I stood there. Stuck in that space of being too afraid to go in and too tired to go back. What would I even say to Vi, who was so happy I’d decided to take her suggestion to go out with my friends when I texted her that I’d be back late? How would I justify it to my friends who wanted to see me and cheer me up? I had no answers, and it had me stuck.

“Hey, sweetheart,” said Aira, drawing me out of my indecision spiral as she walked out of the restaurant. “You

okay?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t think I’m welcome here,” I whispered.

“I promise you that my father isn’t going to come near you. When Osuke told us about what happened at the meeting, me, my mother, and grandmother ripped him a new one. We made sure he understood, under no uncertain terms, that you’re a friend to us and that we won’t abandon you when you need us most.”

“You didn’t see his face, Aira. He looked like he hated me.” *Nor did you see how he honestly thought about killing me.*

“He doesn’t hate you. He’s scared, and he lashes out when he’s scared.”

If *he* was scared, then I wished he understood how frightened *I* was.

I must have said this out loud as Aira hugged me, saying, “I know. I know, and I’m sorry this is happening this way. We’ll protect you, Rose. I promise.”

Hugging her back, I tried so very hard to believe what she was saying, even though everything in me screamed that it wasn’t possible.

“I guess I can try to go in, but if your father doesn’t want me there, then I’m going to leave. I don’t think I can handle being somewhere I’m not wanted,” I said after pulling away from her.

“That’s fair. I won’t stop you.” She gave me a soft smile. “Until then, let’s get inside, okay? I can practically hear your stomach eating itself.”

Aira led me into Oki, her hand in mine.

It always amazed me, no matter how many times I visited, how at odds the homy restaurant was with the owner’s icy demeanor. Everything was done up in shades of brown, green, and off-white that complimented rather than became monotonous. The walls had old black and white pictures of

Japan, as well as long scrolls with pretty calligraphic kanji—Chinese characters—or inky pictures of nature on them. The main part of the restaurant was open with a bar along the far wall and a line of booths on the opposite side with tables in between. By the bar was a hallway that led to private dining rooms for parties.

Aira took me straight to the booth where Ava was sitting already flipping through the menu as if she hadn't memorized the whole thing from working here for so long. When she saw me, her whole face lit up, and she got up from her spot to wrap her arms around me as well.

“Hey!” She smiled, squeezing me tightly before letting me go.

“Hey,” I returned wanly.

“I'm happy you came,” she said as she took her seat again, with Aira sitting next to her.

As usual, I sat across from them, pulling the menu out of its spot near the napkins and lidded box of chopsticks. “Thank you for inviting me. Even if it's only because Vi told on me.”

I meant it to be joking.

Mostly.

Ava smirked, saying, “Well, even if she hadn't, we've been wanting to see you anyway. After that meeting and learning about you changing...” Her voice trailed off. She was usually the cheerful one, making everything light and happy, but even she struggled with this, it seemed.

I couldn't blame her.

“There were bound to be consequences for what Eli and I did that night,” I said, minimizing my angst about the whole thing even as Aira narrowed her eyes at me, completely onto my game. “It's just unfortunate that it had to be right now with the...” I twisted to look around at the other patrons. There were plenty of people there that I didn't recognize as Otherkind, so I censored myself. “‘tourists' here.”

“Well, we’re going to get through this together, I promise.” Ava’s stubborn determination peaked through her words. “And for tonight, we’re just going to focus on us. A little distraction, if you will.”

“That’d be great,” I said, my lips curving into a smile.

Opening the menu, I went to flip to the back where the ramen options were. On the way to the restaurant, the whole time I was driving my boat, all I could think about was having the Hakata-style ramen with extra meat, but for some reason, the sushi section stopped me in my tracks. The pictures of the different types stared me in the face, and I swear I nearly drooled just looking at them.

“Hey, what sushi do you guys recommend?” I asked, my eyes fixed on those cuts of fish until I forced myself to look up at them.

“You don’t like sushi,” said Ava, tilting her head in confusion as she looked over her menu at me.

“I don’t, but it just sounds like the best thing I can think of to eat right now,” I replied.

The two of them exchanged a look, then Aira said, “Why don’t you pick some off our plates, and then you can order more if you find one you like?”

“That sounds great.”

I forced myself to smile, even as I sat uncomfortably with the idea that I was actually going to try to eat sushi. We’d come to Oki once to twice a month for the last year, and not once had I wanted it. In fact, just the smell made my stomach upset at times, so why now?

Well, I had a suspicion as to why, but I was *not* going to think about that.

Our waiter, Rashid, wandered back over, pen and paper in hand, and laughingly groused as his dark eyes twinkled in amusement, “You know, you’d think since both of you work here that you’d go to a different restaurant rather than hang out here all the time.”

“But the discount is too good to pass up.” Aira grinned.

“Says the owner’s daughter and her fiancée.” He dodged a swipe from Ava’s menu as she swung it at him with another laugh. “What can I get you lovely ladies tonight?”

“We’ll have two plates of maguro sushi, two plates of salmon sushi, and one plate of squid sushi. We’d also like two orders of edamame and one order of french fries with extra ketchup,” said Aira.

“For drinks, the two of us will have lemon sours,” added Ava.

Rashid turned to me after he finished writing that down. “Alright, what about you, Rose? Your usual ramen?”

“Uh, no, actually. I’m going to be trying some of their sushi to see if my palette’s changed. But I would like an order of tamagoyaki and a cassis orange, if you don’t mind.”

Why my cheeks were heating up was beyond me, especially since Rashid didn’t even notice. “Sounds good. If you don’t end up liking the sushi, I can put in that order for the ramen.”

“Thank you.”

He went to put our order in, and I set the menu back in its place before folding my hands on my lap. Otherwise, I’d start fussing with something, and my friends would know I was still in a bad way mentally. Unfortunately for me, though, my friends knew me all too well, and both pinned me with concerned eyes as they leaned forward.

“I know you don’t want to talk about it, but Rose, how are you feeling? And I mean, how are you *really* feeling? None of this ‘I’m fine’ bullshit. We can already see that you’re not,” said Aira, her voice low.

I let out a sigh. “I’m... not fine. I feel like I want to die. I don’t want to get out of bed.” Pausing, I started fussing with the hem of my shirt. “If I had my way, I’d go into my bed and come out when all this nonsense is over, but I can’t.”

“Oh, Rosie. I’m so sorry,” said Ava. Her jade-green eyes shined with concern and sympathy I wasn’t sure I deserved.

Aira wore a similar expression. “How long have you known?”

Oh, now it’s time to come clean. “Our suspicions were confirmed the day of your engagement dinner, but we’d discovered the problem the Sunday before.”

Pure horror crossed Ava’s face. “So, the whole time I was joking about drowning you, you knew you were already changing?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, bracing myself for them to be angry with me. “I wasn’t ready to talk about it yet, and I didn’t want to hijack your party. Besides, it was nice to pretend like it wasn’t happening.”

“That’s really big news to have held in,” said Aira, her eyes softening. “I’m sorry this is happening to you, especially right now.”

Ava nodded in agreement, looking from Aira to me. “This really is the worst possible timing, isn’t it?”

“It really, really is,” I agreed.

“If they hadn’t come, we could’ve helped ease you into this. We might not be, well, one of *them*, but we know enough to be able to help you,” said Aira. “But even with the tourists here, we can endure. We’ll get you through this, I—we promise.”

“Thank you, guys. For everything. I don’t know how I’m going to do this without you.” I really didn’t. They were my best friends, my confidants.

“Well, it’s a good thing you don’t have to do this without us,” added Ava, motioning towards me with her chopsticks. “We’re here with you from now until forever. Literally.”

“Literally forever. You’re stuck with us now.” Aira smiled, nudging her fiancé.

God, I didn’t think I could love them more than I did in this moment... even if that felt a little like a threat. But would

they even be my friends if they didn't menace me every once in a while?

“Speaking of forever,” I started, then took a deep breath. I'd given this a lot of thought since hearing from Miss Winnie about the hunters, but now that it was time to actually say something, my words didn't want to come out. Pushing past the lump in my throat, I continued, “I think it's time to figure out what the hell is happening to me. I think we should do some research.”

Feeling helpless wasn't something I relished. I was someone who liked to have plans for my plans and enough preparation done that nothing could surprise me. So many years I'd had all my decisions made for me by my parents, both of them thinking they knew what was best for me without consulting me, but I couldn't do that anymore. I couldn't let things just keep happening to me without pushing back.

It was biting me in the ass that I'd stuck my proverbial fingers in my ears the entire year in the hopes that I'd never have to think about the talisman ever again. If I prepped myself on what to expect or how this was going to go, maybe this wouldn't run roughshod over me. I'd not yet accepted but was more than aware that there was precious little I could do to stop this process, but if I knew what was to come, I could hide it better.

I still hated it, though.

Both Ava and Aira looked at me, their expressions softening. They were the ones who'd advocated for me to start this a year ago, but I'd been adamant about ignoring it. So, they knew the significance of this moment.

“Of course,” said Aira. “We'll talk to the others and see what we can find. I know Declan has a ton of books on magic and stuff, so we should be able to find something.”

Curiosity and dread waged a war in my stomach, and the moment Rashid brought our drinks over, I downed mine and ordered a second.

Time to be brave.



My head swam. It was hard to tell how much I'd eaten and how much I'd drank with the table being cleared so often, but my belly was full of more sushi than I thought possible, and I couldn't complain. Sitting back in my chair, I smiled up at the ceiling.

"So, all you ocean people just eat raw fish, like, all the time?" I asked.

Aira snorted. "I'd hope after a year of friendship that you'd know that answer by now."

Ava leaned forward to say, mischief in here eyes, "What she means to say is that yes, we do. All the time. We eat nothing else but fish. But what she won't tell you is that *she* enjoys fish more than most, especially *my* fish... Well, I suppose it looks more like a clam..."

It took both Aira and I a moment to figure out what she was referring to, but when we did, the noises we emitted were less than dignified. Aira whacked Ava on the arm, squealing, "You can't say stuff like that!"

"What? It's true! You love going down—"

"Ava! My father is in the building!" I couldn't help but laugh at Aira's outburst, and only laughed harder when Aira turned to me and scolded, "Rose, don't encourage her!"

"Sorry, sorry," I gasped between laughs.

Ava, completely unrepentant, leaned forward again as if she were trying to figure something out about me. "You know, I don't think I ever asked, but what way do you lean, Rose?"

I took another swig from my drink, finishing it before saying, "I... I don't know. I think I've been too focused on surviving to give it the thought it needed. It's clear to me that I at least like men."

“I mean, your taste in men is suspect, choosing my brother of all people,” Ava grumbled, “but at least it’s better than Will.”

Now that was a name I hadn’t thought of in a while. I winced, that old wound opening up again. The need to defend him was undeniable. “He wasn’t as bad as he seemed. One on one, he was great.”

“If you say so,” muttered Aira, gulping down the last of her drink to hide her amusement.

Ava wasn’t done with her questioning of me, though, and chose to ignore what I’d said to ask, “And you do like my brother?”

“I do, yeah.” I blushed.

“Oh, good, because selkies have no chill when it comes to these kinds of things.” She gestured between herself and Aira. “Our year and a half of dating was unusual.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, Milo told me—and I quote—‘Selkies don’t do slow-burn, sweetheart,’” I said, trying my best to imitate his voice and failing.

“Pfft. That tracks. You just tell me if he starts peeing on you to mark his territory, and I’ll tell him to knock it off,” Ava laughed.

I blanched. “Is that... is that a thing?”

Aira sighed. “It’s so *not* a thing.”

“How would you know?” retorted Ava, turning in her seat fully to look at Aira.

While they bickered, I rearranged myself to rest more fully against the wall, warm and getting sleepy. It felt like everything had relaxed a bit. Oh, my anxiety was still there, hiding beneath the calm veneer I had going on, but it was not overwhelming like it had been.

“Rose?” I heard someone say, and when I blinked a few times, I realized it was Aira.

“Hmm?”

“Did you need to catch the ferry? The last one is in twenty minutes,” she asked.

“Nah, I drove my own boat here.”

“You are too drunk to be driving any sort of vehicle, Rose.”

“Am not! I’ve never been drunk before in my life!”

“Dude, you got drunk with us on New Years,” said Ava, “and you’ve had, like, ten of those cassis oranges.”

“I was only tipsy on New Years because I had to take care of you ungrateful lot.” I wagged my finger at them.

“Oh no. You’re starting to sound like my mum.” Ava snorted.

Aira cut in before we went off on that tangent, looking down at her lap at what I assumed was her phone. “I’m going to message Milo. Maybe he can entice you to let him take you home.”

“You wouldn’t.” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“I already did. He said he’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Oooh,” Ava taunted. “You’re going to be taken home by your daddy!”

I choked when she said that. “I—He is not! And I’m not! I’m perfectly capable of getting myself home, thank you very much.”

Aira and I were still bickering—with Ava cutting in to egg us both on—when Milo came in. Of course, I didn’t see him walking in as my back was to the door, but Aira’s smug smirk and Ava whispering about my “daddy being here” was clue enough.

In my state of inebriation, I was ready to argue with him, too. But when he threaded his fingers into my hair and tipped my head back to kiss me, all the fight seeped out of me. My mind went blank for the duration of his kiss, and I forgot who I was, where I was, and everything else that mattered.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he said when he pulled away, his eyes roaming over my face as he smiled.

“Hi,” I replied dumbly.

He smirked. “Aira tells me you want me to take you home.”

“Aira’s a dirty liar who lies.” I made a face, scrunching my nose.

“Oh? So, you don’t want me to take you home? You want me to leave?”

The man’s smirk and tone alone told me that he knew *exactly* what he was doing, and dumb little me was playing right into his hand. Milo was well aware of his effect on me, and I didn’t like that he was using that against me.

“You’re not being very nice right now.” I pouted. “You’re not allowed to use magic to get me to do what you want.”

His expression softened. Using the hand that he’d had in my hair, he brushed a piece away from my face and tucked it behind my ear. “Oh, sweetheart. I’ve never used magic against you.”

“Then—then what is this?” I waved my hand between us.

“This is you being utterly and ridiculously charmed by me as a person. I’d never use magic against you, even if I had the capability of doing so.”

My eyes narrowed. “Promise?”

Visions of all the times Joseph had used his magic to coerce me into doing what he wanted to do popped into my mind... I had to shake my head to clear away the bad memories.

Milo leaned forward to gently kiss me once again. “I swear it to you, Rose.”

“Thank you.”

The moment was broken when the corners of his lips tipped up again, and I pouted once more.

“So,” he started, “what will it take to convince you to let me take you home and get you in bed?”

“What? No swimming naked in the ocean first?” I asked.

Whatever trance that fell over me was broken when Ava choked on her water and screeched, “You what?”

“Nothing more than you’ve done with Aira,” Milo replied tersely, his gaze leaving me to snipe at his sister. He was blushing. Holy hell, the incorrigible flirt was blushing! I *loved* it.

“Yeah, but that’s—” she started.

Milo cut her off, saying pointedly, “None of your business, Ava. Please respect that.”

Ooooooh. This was some significant selkie thing I don’t know about... Or maybe I do, and the details are just a little fuzzy because I’m drunk. Either way, file it away for later!

When Milo looked back down at me, I found myself staring at his lips, wondering if there were ever a nicer pair than those ones. He chuckled. “I’ll ask again, what do I need to bribe you with to get you to agree to let me take you home?”

“Ummmm,” I said, drawing out the m-sound, “a present. The biggest, nicest thing you can think of.”

He leaned in to whisper, “I can’t give you that, sweetheart. It’s attached.”

Again, it took a moment to realize what he was trying to say, but when it registered that he was referencing his own anatomy, my face lit up in flames, and I gasped. “Milo, you dog!”

“I think the colloquial term for my kind now is ‘sea pupper.’”

“You’re the worst!”

“That I am, but I agree to your terms. I shall get you the biggest, nicest present I can think of that isn’t attached to my body, if you come with me without a fight.”

Puckering my lips exaggeratedly, I knew I'd been outmaneuvered. "Fine, but we're taking my boat. I don't want anything to happen to it."

I expected him to fight me on this, but he didn't. Instead, he merely nodded and said, "I thought you'd want to do that. I already asked Gav to pick me up later when I've got you tucked into bed." He kissed me on the forehead, then straightened. "Alright, say goodbye to your friends, sweetheart, and let's get going."

Ava, Aira, and I said our farewells after arguing about paying for my meal—and losing the argument—and I was made to promise them I'd message them when I got back home. After I grabbed my purse and slung it across my body, I moved to head towards the door, but Milo swung me up in his arms princess-style and carried me out of the restaurant. I wrinkled my nose.

"I can walk, you know," I said, poking him in the chest, which made him chuckle.

"And I can carry you," he replied, then glanced down at me before looking back up at where he was walking. "I want to take care of my girl."

"*Your* girl?"

"Mhmm. All mine. Maybe I'll even tattoo my name on that delectable little ass of yours just to make sure that you don't forget it."

I squinted at him, trying to figure out if he was being serious or not. "Only if I get to do the same to you."

"Perfect. We can match."

He carried me the rest of the way in silence as I looked up at the sky and got distracted by the stars. Milo stopped only once to let a car pass, and while he waited, he kissed my temple, then buried his nose in my hair, breathing in deeply. A deep rumble vibrated his chest when he did so, his eyes shifting for the briefest of moments from jade to cinnamon before returning to jade again.

I smiled, patted him on the chest, then looked back up at the stars. Before I knew it, he was sitting me on the seat near the helm of my boat and wiggling his fingers in front of me. I just blinked at him.

“Keys, sweetheart?” he asked, not bothering to hide his amusement. “I can’t get you home without them.”

“Oh. Right.” I fished through my purse, then dropped them in his hand after I found them.

“Thank you, love.”

Shifting towards the helm, he turned on the engine to let it run a moment before going back out to unmoor my beloved ship from the dock. When he came back, he went behind the helm again. Were it anyone but him or Aeden, I wouldn’t even have considered letting them touch my boat, but I trusted Milo, and the way he handled her with the utmost care reaffirmed that trust.

I stared at him for several long moments, studying him. There was still so much about him and our relationship that I didn’t understand. But it felt good, and I was trying—and failing—not to overthink about it.

“What’s on your mind, sweetheart?” he asked, and being too deep in my cups, I couldn’t even conjure up a blush knowing he caught me staring at him like a loon.

“Why do you like me, Milo?” I asked in return.

“There’s so much to like about you. I don’t think I could name it all even if I wanted to.” His voice, his features, were sincere and almost... wistful as he said this. The softness of it had butterflies fluttering in my belly.

“Can you name some?”

“Yeah, I think I can do that.” He cast me a sidelong smile. “You’re strong. You’re resilient. You care so deeply about your people and the islands that it shows in everything you do.”

I tilted my head in confusion. He really thought I was those things? I didn’t feel that way. In fact, I knew myself to

be a coward who fled from everything difficult in my life. But his expression, his earnestness, had me wanting to believe him. Well, were it not for one nagging thing.

“Do you think that’ll change when I do?” I asked, almost afraid to voice my fear.

“The only thing that will change is that you’ll be stronger, have magic, and you’ll be able to change forms.”

“And you really don’t care that I’m changing?”

“The appropriate answer would be no, I don’t care. But my selfish answer is that I’m glad I have the potential to spend more than just one human lifetime with you. Even if I’m not your lover—and I do very much wish to be that for as long as you’ll have me—I still want to be your friend. But again, that’s my selfish answer. I understand why you may not share that sentiment.”

I’d... never thought about it like that, that I’d get more years to have with him, Ava, and Aira. I’d get to meet their kids. Watch the world change.

I’d still lose Vi in the end, though. I’d have to watch her die or leave before she suspected something was up with me because I wasn’t aging anymore, meaning she’d die alone regardless. Either way, it’d kill me inside all the same.

“I’m not happy this was a choice that was taken from me.” Chewing on my lip, I thought a little deeper. “Actually, I guess that isn’t true. When I was in the cave that night, before Eli started the binding, a voice asked me if I was truly okay with what we were doing. It warned me there might be consequences later on, but I was too stuck in the moment to think about anything besides making sure Eli didn’t have to leave.”

“Do you know who spoke to you?” Milo asked, briefly glancing over at me.

I shook my head. “Nope. I haven’t heard them since, either.”

His expression changed subtly. “There are many forces in this world that are at play. Gods, beings from other realms,

other Otherkind. I pray that the being who spoke to you was no trickster.”

My brows furrowed in thought. “Hmm. I don’t think they were. They sounded concerned. Like they wanted to make sure I was really consenting to what was happening. Though, I’d like to have a word with them to ask why they couldn’t warn me beforehand as to what exactly the consequences might be.”

“Well, in any case, I just hope that after your change, you won’t have to worry about anything else.”

I blew out a breath. “Oh, great. Now you’ve jinxed me.”

“Sorry, darling.”

He wasn’t the least bit sorry.

Milo moored my boat in my spot right across from the house, and he picked me up again to take me home. We managed to sneak in and up the stairs without Aunty hearing me, which was a feat in and of itself, and I couldn’t help but snicker as I balanced in Milo’s arms trying to unlock then relock the door and engage the security system from his arms. When we were in my room, he deposited me on the bed, and he went about grabbing my pajamas.

Him undressing me sent heat coursing to my core, but his hands never strayed from where they needed to be to get me out of my clothes.

I pouted at him, especially since I saw the color of his eyes flicker once he’d bared my breasts only to quickly pull my nightie, a little silky thing, on. Once dressed, he moved to tug the covers down.

“Go brush your teeth and wash your face, sweetheart. I’ll be here to tuck you in,” he said, guiding me to the door.

“I will, but only if you kiss me,” I said, stopping before he could get me completely out the door.

“Still wanting to negotiate, are we?” He chuckled. “Alright. One kiss and no more. Despite being a wonderfully tempting morsel, I’m not in the habit of pursuing pleasure with those who’re drunk.”

“I’m sure I’ll find that respectable in the morning, but right now, that makes me sad,” I replied.

I stood on my tiptoes and cradled his face in my hands. This time I kissed him, and I tried to tell him with my kiss how much I wanted him. How much I liked him. And I didn’t stop until that delightful rumble vibrated through him and his hands gripped my hips.

Then I reluctantly pulled away. When I opened my eyes, I marveled at the hazy look of lust in his now cinnamon-brown eyes, and my body responded in kind.

“Please go brush your teeth, little one,” he rumbled, his voice deeper than before.

“Hello, Beastie.” I kissed him again. “I thought you deserved some love.”

Those big hands of his tightened their grip on my hips. “Let’s resume that thought when you’re no longer inebriated. Then I’ll show you how a ‘beastie’ fucks.”

Now it was my turn to groan. “You’re entirely unfair. I’m going to hold you to that.”

“I *sincerely* hope you do.”

I slipped from his grasp before I did something that might make him uncomfortable, but my time in the bathroom was basically a speed run to get back to him faster. When I returned, he was looking around at the unintentionally minimalist setup that was my room. Even in the year I’d lived here, I’d done very little to personalize aside from a few knickknacks, a corkboard over my desk that had pictures I’d taken on it, and some poofy deck chairs on the balcony for me to sit on when I was free. Otherwise, it was still the same as it had been from when I was a child with a queen-sized bed, a side table, a wardrobe, and a desk.

Not wanting to bother him, I fished my phone out of my purse to text Aira that I’d made it home in one piece before checking my alarm and putting it on the charger. I didn’t even get the chance to turn around to look at him again when his hands were on my hips again, but this time, he kissed my

shoulder before guiding me into bed, ushering me to lie down. I situated myself onto my side as he sat next to me. His free hand brushed my hair out of my face, his expression tender.

“My sweet Rose. You are so beautiful,” he whispered. “I’m a damn lucky man.”

My cheeks heated a thousand degrees. “Thank you, Milo.”

Now that I was laying down, exhaustion hit me all at once, and I struggled to keep my eyes open, but I forced myself to. I didn’t want this moment to end, nor for him to leave. As he turned to shut the light off, I reached out my hand and gripped his forearm, and when he looked back down at me, my heart flipped in my chest.

I whispered, “Please stay with me?”

Slipping his hand into mine, he said, “Of course.”

He shut off the light, and after a moment of rustling as he pulled his clothes off, he joined me in bed. Pulling me into his arms, he petted my hair and cooed gentle words at me, words I didn’t quite catch as I drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 23

Rose



Something warm vibrated under my cheek. It rose and fell as I slowly came to from a sleep so deep, I hadn't even dreamed. My alarm hadn't gone off yet, but something told me it wouldn't be long before it did.

As I became more aware of myself, the more I understood that I wasn't alone in my bed. One of my legs was tossed over another leg, my torso was pressed tightly against the side of the other person, a muscly arm was holding me close, and one of my arms held him to me. My head rested on his chest, which was the source of the vibrations. I smiled.

Opening my eyes and tilting my head up, I thought perhaps I was still dreaming, to see such a handsome face so close to mine.

Even in sleep, Milo was a vision, his features softened in slumber, and my already cinched-to-high-heavens heart jumped up into my throat. When I looked away from his face, I noticed the covers were tossed off us which, considering how much heat he radiated, wasn't a surprise. What was a surprise—and an absolute, mouthwatering treat—was seeing that he wore nothing aside from dark grey boxer briefs that were struggling to keep his manhood contained.

My desire for him blazed within me, frustrated from being denied the night before, and so much of me wanted to touch him. With him asleep, though, it didn't feel right. So, I contented myself with tracing shapes on his skin and basking in his warmth.

“Morning, gorgeous,” said Milo, his voice deep and thick with sleep. My fingers stopped their movements when he spoke, but he chuckled. “Please feel free to keep petting. I like it.”

I wasn’t awake enough to be embarrassed at being caught feeling him up and exploring him. Unabashedly, I slid my hand down his chest and over his abs again, then brushed my fingertips along the band of his boxer briefs. Another deep rumble and a groan accompanied Milo’s arm tightening around me, and it emboldened me to dip my hand just a little further down and over where he strained against the fabric of his dark-grey underwear.

His hips bucked up into my hand, seeking more contact. Looking up at him, I asked for permission to go further with my eyes alone.

“Please?” he pleaded.

With a pleased grin of my own, I tugged at the elastic of his underwear, and he shifted to shove it down enough to free himself. My eyes devoured him in all his glory as his cock stood tall before me. Wrapping my hands around it, I gave it an experimental stroke, making him rumble harder beneath my cheek. His hand came up and adjusted my grip, tightening it around him, then guiding my hand to show me how he liked it.

“Thank you,” I murmured, only to earn a groan in response.

“No, sweetheart. Thank *you*,” he moaned as his eyes fluttered closed.

“Before I continue, will there be any differences in how I handle this with your knot involved?” I asked, continuing to stroke him.

“Keep a firm hand around the base for a hand job and”—he moaned again when I squeezed the root of his cock where his knot would swell—“don’t have that part in your mouth when I come. Otherwise, it’ll get stuck in your throat. I can—I can tell you when I’m about to come.”

“Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

Milo’s mouth was open slightly, his eyes fixed on my hand as his breathing sharpened. Holy hell, he was handsome.

Stretching up, I kissed him, enjoying how hungry he was for me. But I didn’t stay there for long. I pulled away, smiling as he chased my lips, and I shifted positions, sliding down his body so I could look up at his face for when I took the delectable hardness in my hand into my mouth.

I hadn’t done this many times before, so I did what felt right. Tracing my tongue around the tip, I teased the sensitive underside just to feel him buck and see his eyes shifting color. And when I sucked the tip into my mouth, I was treated to him throwing his head back and groaning. It made me feel powerful, knowing I was making him feel that good, and it spurred me on to take more into my mouth.

I kept a rhythm: a little more in, then slide back out. A little more than before, then slide back out. It was a game to see how much I could take in before gagging. Down and down I went until my nose brushed his pubic bone and he was squirming, trying to keep still. He filled my mouth and into my throat, and I held myself there until I needed to breathe, then I came up for air. I plunged downward again, this time flicking my eyes up to watch him as I did so.

The man had stopped breathing, his eyes wide as he stared at me. At least until he was in my throat again, which was when he let out the sexiest, most profane noise I’d ever heard in my life. A sound that had heat and wetness pooling between my legs.

“I can’t tell you how much I’ve dreamed of having your knot again,” I whispered. I kept my eyes locked with his when I swirled my tongue around the head of his cock. “I ache for it.”

“Oh, fuck, woman,” he growled, his irises flickering color. “If I knot you now, you’re never going to leave this bed.”

“You want to knot me?” *Where was this coming from? Who is this naughty-mouthed girl?* I thought, sucking on just

the tip.

“Aye, fuck... I’ve never wanted anything more. I want to stay locked in your cunt for eternity, make you swell with my seed and my pups.” His hips bucked up off the bed.

My own arousal gushed between my legs, and I groaned. The mouth on this man... *Unf.*

Unable to tease him any longer, I went to work, bobbing my head slowly at first but going steadily faster as I found the right rhythm that made him thrust his hips up into my mouth. And I knew I’d found the way he liked it when he threaded his fingers into my hair, whispering words of praise mixed with such profanity I could’ve blushed. His breathing went ragged, the harsh sound filling the room and spurring me on.

It was utterly erotic watching this gorgeous man lose himself in the pleasure I was giving him, and I wanted to give him more, so much more. I kept going, listening and watching his cues to make sure I was doing everything exactly right.

Too soon, his fingers fisted in my hair, the sting of it delicious enough to make me moan.

“Rose,” he said breathlessly, “I’m... close...”

His words had me clenching, wanting nothing more than to stop and take him into my body so I wouldn’t be empty anymore, but I didn’t. I wanted to give *him* pleasure. I wanted to watch *him* come undone.

And soon, I was shown just that. Wrapping my hand around the base of his cock and sucking it into my mouth until my lips met my hand, he spasmed, his cum shooting down my throat in thick ropes. I drank down every drop happily, and when he was finished, I lifted off him.

The moment I pulled away, he yanked me up to him, his lips crashing into mine. He devoured my mouth, mastered me, left me panting and grinding against him. I was straddling him, my knees on either side of his hips, and his hands wandered down my back and to my ass before pulling up my nightie to expose my skin to him. A moan of my own slipped from my throat.

“Gods, you are a wonder,” he murmured against my lips before kissing me again, plundering my mouth. Those wicked hands of his touched and kneaded my flesh, building the heat between my legs until I couldn’t take it anymore.

Pulling away, I rested my forehead against his neck and whimpered, “Milo.”

“I can scent how wet you are, how desperate you are for my knot,” he rasped, his voice husky. Reaching between our bodies, his fingers slipped between my legs and brushed against my clit and down to my entrance. “Let me reward you for your eagerness. I wouldn’t want this perfect pussy of yours to think she’s been neglected.”

“W—what?” was all I got out before Milo moved.

One moment I was laying against his chest, and the next, I was straddling his head. He’d shifted me so fast that I couldn’t comprehend it, leaving me to grip the headboard to steady myself. Milo spread my thighs wider until I was no longer hovering over his face but on his face, and as I opened my mouth to protest, my cheeks heating, he derailed all my thoughts by sucking my clit into his mouth.

The sound that came from me was *inhuman*.

He ate me ravenously, eagerly, using lips, tongue, and teeth. One of his hands gripped my ass to keep me where he wanted me. With the other, he speared me with two fingers that went straight for my g-spot. In his pursuit of my pleasure, he was relentless.

And all I could do was let it happen.

It took so much effort not to scream, especially as I looked down to see his eyes fixed on me while he worked, just as I’d done with him. I stuffed my arm into my mouth to muffle the sounds I couldn’t hold back. My hips rocked, and when I dared to try to stop, he smacked my ass. I gasped, looking down at the man between my thighs.

“No. No holding back,” he said, the authority in his voice absolute. I could’ve melted. “You’re going to ride my face until you come.”

“But...”

He smacked my ass again. “If I’m meant to drown in your cunt, then I will do so with a smile on my face.” The fingers in my pussy rubbed that sweet spot again, making my hips buck. “Now, give me everything. Ride me. Use my body for your pleasure in every way possible.”

It left me with little else to do but to do as he told me to ride his pretty face.

I lost myself in the pleasure coursing through me. This was one of the most erotic experiences I’d ever had, but it was also the most *powerful* I’d ever felt. To be on top, to be serviced... it heightened everything I was feeling and intensified the bliss wrapping around my spine. Ecstasy was just beyond my reach, and I chased after it with everything I had with abandon.

After being denied the prior night to being insanely turned on by watching his pleasure, it wasn’t long before my orgasm ripped through me, his growl into my pussy tipping me over into ecstasy. My hips kept moving even as the rest of me stiffened, my spine bowing backwards as I stopped breathing. Only my hand gripping the headboard kept me from falling back.

His fingers kept moving until I stopped spasming, then he withdrew. Grabbing my hips, he repositioned me back on top of him, wrapping his arms around me and rubbing my back as I tried to catch my breath. Tried to remember that I was a living, breathing, thinking being.

“I think I’d like to start every day like that,” I whispered once my voice could work again.

He chuckled. “That can be arranged.”

My eyelids grew heavy again, and I drifted off in his arms again for a little while until my alarm began to vibrate on my side table. Milo was the one who shut it off, then patted my ass, saying, “It’s time to wake up, love.”

“But I don’t want to,” I grumbled, sounding very much like a grumpy child.

“But you must,” he said, sitting up and taking me with him. “Shower?”

I nodded and was about to get off him when he gripped my thighs and stood up, making me gasp. My arms wrapped around his neck as I protested. He was having none of it, however, and after my towels were grabbed off the hooks on the back of my door and directions were given, he took us into my bathroom and set me down in front of my sink. I was proud my legs only wobbled a little.

“Where do you keep your extra towels?” he asked, glancing around.

“The doorway across from here should be the linen closet,” I answered, pointing to where he should go.

“Thanks, love.”

Love... Oh, how that made my heart flutter in my chest.

He went to grab one of those while I rooted around in my drawers for an extra toothbrush. He came back just as I found one, and I held it up, beaming.

“For you,” I said, handing it over to him.

“Thank you,” he replied, bending down to slant his lips over mine.

Holy hell, I couldn't get enough of him. I could have kissed him forever and never gotten tired of it. But he pulled away all too soon, being the sensible one of the two of us, and didn't even laugh when I pouted at him.

“One of these days, love, I'll kidnap you away from your job and sequester us in my bedroom to give you everything you need until I'm forced to return you. It is, after all, my job to please my girl's cunt in every way possible and ensure she's sated and filled with my seed,” he purred, brushing a kiss on the top of my head.

My pussy throbbed at the visual that made. “Oh, fuck. That's not helping me to not jump your bones right now.”

“Lusty girl. I'm so fucking lucky.” He brushed his thumb over my cheek. “Let's shower before I go all caveman and

steal you away from your life to be my bed slave.”

I twisted around to turn the shower on to warm up before I decided to play hooky from work to bang my boyfriend, then went about brushing my teeth, which shouldn't have been as difficult as it was, but it really, really was.

As I cooled down, though—as much as I was able to—the intimacy of the moment had butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Standing next to him, doing something as mundane as brushing our teeth together, made my heart feel fuzzy, and when he put his hand on my lower back to bend around me to rinse his mouth, it sent shivers up my spine.

Down, girl! We just had an orgasm!

To distract myself from *that*, I rinsed my own mouth out, then pulled my nightie off and unbraided my hair before reaching in to find the water warm. I stepped inside, and when Milo didn't join me, I turned back to ask, a cheeky smirk on my face, “You coming?”

He grinned and quickly shucked his underwear off, climbing in behind me. Between washing our hair and bodies, taking turns in the water, and for me, shaving and conditioning my hair, we shared soft touches, gentle kisses, and murmurs of affection.

Milo was the gentlest, most affectionate soul, and he lavished me with attention.

I loved it.

I never wanted it to stop.

Seeing him like that... experiencing him this way... it would be so very easy to fall in love with him, so natural. Part of me wanted to. Part of me wanted to fall so headlong in love with him that I couldn't imagine being with anyone else. But it was too soon. It'd only been a few weeks, and we'd only really gone on one date—three, if I counted dinner with his family and going to work with him. It'd be inappropriate to let myself fall so early... wouldn't it?

If it's too soon, then why does it feel so right in my soul?

That was not a question I could answer.

When we both finished, we got out of the shower and headed back to my room wrapped in our towels. I tossed my nightie into the laundry basket and went through my closet to pick out my clothes for the day, throwing them onto the bed for when I was ready to get dressed. But when I sat down at my desk to deal with my hair, I turned to watch Milo toweling off.

It's a shame to cover that beautiful body.

I must have said this aloud, as Milo laughed.

“I’ll mark that down for when we’re alone,” he said, still laughing a little. “‘Keep clothes off around Rose.’ Got it.”

There was that mischievous grin, and I gave him a very exaggerated pout. “I mean, you furballs like to be nude anyway, so I doubt this will be any different than normal for you.”

He shrugged. “You’re not wrong. Though, no one around me seems to appreciate my body the way you do.”

“Well, considering that the people around you most of the time are your crew and your family, I’d say that’s a good thing.”

He pulled on his underwear and pants when he asked, “Is that what has you looking so wistful and pensive? Admiration for my body?”

Now my cheeks heated. *He’d noticed that? Of course he’d noticed that.*

“Actually, no,” was all I said back, now well and properly embarrassed.

“Then what was it? You okay?” His brow creased in concern. “Am I going too fast?”

Now his shirt was on, and though I didn’t want to say what my thoughts were, they came out anyway, as I turned away from him to brush my hair out. “It’s not that.” I pursed my lips together to find the bravery to say what was on the tip of my

tongue. “I, um, was thinking about how natural it feels to be with you. That it would be easy to fall in love with you.”

Silence.

Oh no. I shouldn't have said anything. It's too early!

I was pulled out of my thought spiral when he came up behind me, threaded his fingers into my hair to tip my head back, and kissed me breathless. When he parted from me, his lips still brushing against mine, he said, “I very much feel the same way, Rose. I've liked you for a long time, and I'm so glad that you're willing to give this—us—a chance.”

All I could do was stare wide-eyed at him, scarcely believing what he'd confessed. “You feel like you could fall in love with me?”

“Yes, I could. I might actually already be a little bit.”

I wasn't sure why, but that made tears well up in my eyes as I beamed up at him. “That makes me really happy, Milo.”

“Good. I want you to be happy. I want this to work.” He gently pushed a piece of hair out of my face. “And I will reiterate what I said before, I don't care that you're changing. You're still going to be you, and now I'll get to enjoy lifetimes with you instead of just a handful of years. If nothing else, I'm grateful for that.”

That only made more tears slip down my cheeks. “Thank you.”

“Any time, love. Any time. Now, I probably should get going so I can catch the first ferry and you can get to work.”

I sighed, hating that he had to go. “You're probably right.”

“Don't worry. I'll darken your doorstep again very soon. I promise.” He kissed me again, then after tugging his shoes and socks on, he went to the door. “I'll text you later, okay?”

“I look forward to it.”

“See you soon, Rose.”

I waved, and then he was gone. Though I was still reeling at his confession, I pushed myself forward to get ready.

Speeding through doing my hair and getting dressed before grabbing my phone and purse and flying downstairs, not wanting to miss breakfast. I was halfway down the stairs when Milo and Aunty Vi's voices registered in my mind. Mid-step, I froze, my face already flaming in embarrassment.

"We had a lovely night, thank you for asking," said Milo.

"It sounded like it, with all that giggling!" Aunty laughed.

Death.

I wanted death. I wanted the ground to open up and take me right then and there. Anything to avoid the embarrassment I was feeling.

"Are you going to stay on the stairs all morning and eavesdrop, Rose?" Vi called out, and that feeling tripled. Quadrupled, even. Milo chuckled as she continued, "When she was a kid, she used to stand outside the kitchen doorway to try to scare me. Little did she know that I could hear her come down the stairs no matter how quiet she thought she was being."

Deciding to just rip off the proverbial band-aid, I walked the rest of the way downstairs as Milo said, "She sounds like she was a cute kid."

"Oh, she totally was." She beamed, then turned to me. "Good morning, sweetie. Milo was telling me you had a good night with Ava and Aira."

"I did. It was nice to relax a little."

It was easiest to ignore my feelings of utter embarrassment by getting the rest of our breakfast stuff ready. I mean, I'd just sucked this man's dick not more than an hour ago, and now he was sitting at my table, talking with my aunt as if nothing happened. How? How did he do it?

"I hope you don't mind," said Vi from her place at the stove, "but I asked Milo to have breakfast with us."

"Of course not." I smiled over at her. Turning to Milo, I asked, "Would you like tea or orange juice this morning, sir?"

"Orange juice sounds lovely, *miss*." He smirked.

He was fucking with me. Clearly, obviously, fucking with me. When I walked by him to get to the fridge, I hip-checked him lightly in the shoulder, which only made him chuckle.

Grabbing what I needed from the fridge, I made sure to do it again, adding in a poke to his ribs after I poured his drink for him. He jumped, his chair screeching a little as it slid across the floor, and he arched an eyebrow at me as if to say, *Are you sure you want to start this fight?* I smirked back at him and was about to do it again when Vi's voice stopped me.

"No fighting back there, children." She chuckled. "Or no scrambled eggs for either of you."

"Oh, but Violet," Milo mock-whined.

"No buts, Milo Finnegan."

I snickered at his continued dramatic pouting, gathering up the rest of our breakfast things and pouring Vi and I's iced tea. His eyes watched me as I moved around the kitchen, his pout softening into something else entirely that I couldn't read, and I had to ignore it as best I could so I wouldn't blush any more than I already was.

After a few more minutes, Vi and I joined Milo at the table, and we began eating. It was nice to see how well Milo and Vi got along, which was definitely a relief, but it assuaged the silly fear of mine that Vi wouldn't like him. It still made me happy, though, to know that she approved of him... even if it made my heart twinge that that wasn't something that could've happened with Will.

"Milo, you must come to dinner sometime," said Vi between bites. "Rose makes a wonderful New England clam chowder I think you would really love."

Milo smiled over the rim of his glass of juice, pausing mid-sip. "I'd love to join you. I'm busy most of next week, though. I'm prepping for the fish festival, but after that, I'm free whenever."

"Ah, are you and your crew in the contest again?" she asked, then looked at me. "He's won the competition five years in a row."

“What competition?” I asked, spearing another piece of egg with my fork.

“The goal is to catch as many fish as possible using old timey fishing rods, and whichever team gets the most wins. Milo and his team always win.” Vi beamed with pride.

“I was going to ask you if you’d like to come. It’s on a Sunday afternoon,” said Milo.

The fact that he remembered my day off made my heart flip-flop in my chest, silly as it was.

“I’d love to go,” I replied, failing to keep the color from rising to my cheeks.

“It’s a date then.” He smiled. “And if you’d like, I can get you fresh clams for your chowder. I know a good spot to get them from not far from here.”

“That’d be really nice. Thank you.”

When I glanced up from my food, Vi looked ridiculously pleased with herself, and I blushed again. Then I blushed even harder seeing Milo’s smirk. *Incorrigible, the both of them!*

“We’ll have to hash things out later then,” she said, taking another bite.

“You both have my number. Perhaps we should make a group chat,” said Milo, glancing at me as he took a swig from his orange juice.

“The last time I was in a group chat with you, Milo Finnegan, you had to be kicked out because you spammed memes for hours straight,” replied Vi, giving him a stern look.

I snorted as he tried to defend himself. “To be fair, Violet, I was in university at the time, and there was a blizzard, and all my classes were canceled.” He set down the glass with an amused eyeroll.

“Yes, but did we need memes about how men can’t find the clit?”

That time I choked on my food, then looked at him incredulously. “You did *not*.”

“I did.” He didn’t have the grace to look even a little bit embarrassed.

“I’d say I’m surprised, but I’m not, you ridiculous creature,” I said, shaking my head at him.

“You like it,” he retorted, waving his fork at me.

My cheeks heated again, but he was right, even if I didn’t want to admit it. So, I just rolled my eyes at him, only for him to pat my knee under the table.

“You know, it’s not too late to back out of this relationship.” Vi smiled at Milo from behind her glass of tea.

“Nope. It’s too late. I’ve been introduced to the family. We’re as good as married,” he said, his voice solemn. When I looked at him with an expression of absolute confusion, he smiled at me.

“You’ve known Vi for forever,” I replied.

“Exactly. So, Violet, you’ll have to contact my father about a marriage contract and the dowry.”

Vi thoughtfully finished chewing her piece of sausage, then said, “Your mother and I are already negotiating. We’re up to six cows as part of her dowry.”

“Perfect! I’ll make sure to have my father sweeten the deal for you to hurry this along.” Milo’s eyes lit up at the prospect.

“Oh my *god*.” I laughed. “It’s a good thing you’re cute. Otherwise, I’d have to toss you into the sea.”

He smiled broadly, then elbowed Vi. “You hear that? She thinks I’m cute. This bodes well for the longevity of our marriage, *and* I can use it to my advantage when she’s cross with me.”

“Only if you survive long enough to reach the altar.” She smirked back at him. “Sutton women are known for being exceptionally picky and for outliving our partners.”

“I shall endeavor then to ensure I avoid any arguments with her.”

“That’s probably for the best, laddy.”

Milo grinned again anyway, but relented with his teasing so we could finish eating. When she was done, Vi left us to get ready for her day after saying her goodbyes to Milo, and I started to clean up. I didn't expect him to start helping.

"You're a guest," I insisted, waving him off. "You can sit and relax."

"But I want to help, and between the two of us, it will get done faster. Besides," he said, bringing me the plates from the table before leaning in close with his lips brushing my ear to whisper, "maybe I'm trying to show you that I'm as good domestically as I am in bed. We both already know I'm good at finding the clit."

The man freaking *winked* at me while I sputtered in shock. When I could finally string words together, I hissed, "You can't say that! My aunt is just down the hallway!"

"And she's more likely to have heard your outburst than my whisper, but if you insist," he teased.

I pouted at him as I started washing the dishes, and as soon as he'd brought the rest over for me and wiped the table, he stepped up beside me to start rinsing. We didn't talk. We just went about our tasks, and at one point, he leaned over and kissed me on the top of the head. Once again, warmth spread through me, and I was reminded of how easy it would be to fall in love with him.

This could be my every day, I thought. This would be perfect.

I wrapped up washing and a moment later, he finished rinsing the last dish and putting it on the dishrack. Grabbing my purse, I pulled it over my head and checked to make sure I had my phone and keys with me, considering it was my week to open the shop. Looking back up, I saw Milo was on his phone but quickly pocketed it.

"The next ferry isn't for another thirty minutes. May I walk you to work?" he asked.

"I'd like that very much. Thank you." That boyish smile of his returned, and I couldn't help but mirror it. Moving to the

door, I shouted to Vi, “We’re headed out. See you in a few hours!”

“Okay! See you!” she shouted back. “And get back home safely, Milo!”

“I’ll do my best, but I make no promises!” he replied.

Vi laughed, the sound echoing down the hallway as I opened the front door and stepped out, and when Milo followed me, I shut it behind us. My jade-eyed furball gave me his most charming expression and held out his hand. I, unable to deny him anything, took it, my cheeks heating just a little bit. He laced our fingers together with another smile, then tugged me down the side street and towards the shop.

Milo held my hand the whole way there, walking with me right to the shop. There, he stopped and waited for me to open the doors, and after I did, I turned to him, warmth spreading through me when I saw how he was looking at me.

“What?” I asked quietly, stepping closer to him.

“I was just thinking how lucky I am that you’re taking a chance on a guy like me,” he replied, wrapping his arms around me.

“An extremely handsome furball like you, you mean?”

He laughed. “Exactly.”

“That’s where you have it all wrong. It’s me who’s lucky. You deserve so much better than me,” I admitted.

“I don’t believe that for even one second, Rose. You’re exactly the person I’ve been waiting my whole life for.” His words whispered to my heart, bringing forth a dream I didn’t know I’d ever had: to be someone’s person. It hit me so profoundly that I couldn’t even reply as my eyes welled up. He kissed me. “Please never doubt the depth of my affection for you. Not when you are so very close to becoming my entire world.”

Still, there was nothing I could say to that. So, I hugged him close and whispered, “Thank you. I’ll... I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.”

I hugged him close, my hands fisting his shirt at his back, and he kissed the top of my head before resting his chin there. I could've stayed like that forever, ignoring the world and being cocooned in his arms, but he pulled away, tilting my head up to look at him.

“If you need anything—and I mean anything—message or call me anytime, okay?” he said, his tone as serious as his expression.

“I promise,” I replied solemnly.

Milo searched my face for a moment, then satisfied with what he found there, he bent down and kissed me until my head swam. I threaded my hands into his hair, wanting him closer, to make sure he couldn't leave yet. To make this last forever. This morning, all of it, had been a revelation. It was the future I wanted for myself, even if I wasn't sure I deserved it.

When he pulled away, both of us breathless, he whispered against my lips, “Have a great day today, Rose.”

“You, too,” I replied, even as I thought, *I'm the luckiest girl in the whole world.*

CHAPTER 24

Rose



“Little, little Rose, scared of what she’ll be. Little, little Rose, terrified knowing she’ll soon be me!” Not-me Siren was once more wrapped in strands of light, her body immobile save for her head and her tail which was swishing agitatedly back and forth in front of me. “Little, little Rose looks like she’s going to cry. Little, little Rose so soon will she die!”

We were in the endless midnight ocean again. The darkness below me seemed much closer than before, and the light from above much farther. Everything in me told me I needed to swim away from her, to reach the surface, but something kept me from moving, stuck in the same place as before.

As her prisoner.

She cackled at me as I treaded water in front of her. The strands of light were wrapped around her shoulders to where her knees would be if she had legs, and they looked like they were barely containing her, as if they were going to burst apart at any moment. Seeing her testing them, straining against them, had anxiety creeping up my spine.

“Of course they’re about to burst at any moment. Everything that I am is more powerful than these measly bindings. All it’s going to take is a little time and the right opportunity before I break these, too. Then you’ll continue to change as you were meant to. I’m just waiting for the right moment to make my move.”

She couldn't be serious. She couldn't be.

"Do you want us to die? Don't you understand there are hunters here? They kill Otherkind. They'll kill us!" I yelled, wanting to shake the hell out of her.

But the vicious smile that crossed her face... My blood ran cold in my veins, and my heart stuttered in my chest at the sight of it. When one of the bonds blinked and then died, that smile only widened, baring sharp, pointed teeth.

"Oh, you naïve little thing. That's exactly what I want. For death is the only true way to be remade."

"I won't let that happen. I refuse."

"It doesn't matter what you want because..." She paused for dramatic effect, then began singing at the top of her lungs. "I'm near! I'm far! I'm wherever you are!"

At her outburst, I could only stare, my jaw hanging open. I wanted to strangle her. So bad.

"What? It's true. I live inside you, and any harm you do to me, you do to you. But if you insist." She stopped to look at me with deranged eyes. "Strangle me, mommy. I'd like it."

I recoiled, revulsion coursing through me. "What the hell is wrong with you? What even are you?"

"I'm you, but better in every single way. I'm what you are going to become, and I'm going to make sure that you become me. And none of this crying and panicking bullshit. You made the choice to have the talisman grafted to your soul. This is the consequence of that. And as I keep saying, all this could be so much easier for you if you would just free me. It would be quick and painless, and you'd be stronger than those hunters could ever imagine. You'd be untouchable."

Untouchable.

The very concept was a siren's call, a temptation. It sang to the terrified child within me hiding underneath the bed to escape my parents' screaming and felt every bit like the armor I desperately needed. So much of me wanted to say yes and get all this over with. To finally have power over my life... But I

forced myself to ignore it. It wasn't safe for me or for anyone around me.

Turning the offer down, however, hurt more than I'd ever admit out loud.

"I was supposed to live out my life normally, and when I died, it was going to let the sirens' souls go. That was what the plan was," I replied instead of acknowledging what she'd said.

"Booooooring!" She rolled her eyes. "That might've worked if Eli had finished the job, but he didn't. Funny how having your heart ripped out puts a halt to things."

Screeching, freeing myself somehow, I shot forward in the water and wrapped my hands around her neck. "Don't you dare speak his name!"

"That's it," she wheezed, unfazed by my hands cutting off her air. "Choke the life out of us. You're doing so well! You're just like me." She drew the words of her last sentence out, punctuating it with an ever-widening, evil grin. Then, as if she heard my thoughts, she chuckled. "I'm only evil because you think I am, Rose, and that's okay. I don't need you to love me or even accept me. I'm your fate."

"No!" I screamed, and the dream shattered, her laughter chasing me into the waking world.

I shot out of bed with a speed I shouldn't have been able to possess, nearly falling on my face as I fought the blankets tangled around my legs. My chest was bound tight, my lungs fighting against the vise grip around them as I struggled to breathe. Finally climbing to my feet in the middle of my room, my entire body shivered and tingled.

As I scrambled to turn on my light, my speed tripping again, something large lurched within me. It pressed against the confines of my body, seeking escape. Pushing, pushing, pushing until I thought I'd burst.

The moment I flicked on the lamp, I rushed back over to the mirror on the door of my wardrobe.

What.

The.

Fuuuuuck.

My body was changing right before my eyes, the air around me shimmering and crackling just like I'd seen with Otherkind before. Both of my eyes were now the same shade of volatile ocean blue, storming and swirling like whirlpools. My teeth were lengthening and sharpening in my mouth, forming sharp points meant for ripping and shredding. And my hands... my nails were now claws with thin, almost transparent webbing between each digit. Climbing up my legs were opalescent scales, the skin puckering and shifting as they spread before my eyes.

A scream bubbled up in my throat, and I threw myself backwards to get away from the terrifying sight. I flew through the air before crashing into the wall behind me hard enough that the house shook from the force of the impact, the wall groaning in protest. Sinking down, my legs no longer held my weight as I held back my scream with a hand over my mouth.

I could still see myself in the mirror from where I was sitting, could still see my eyes as they darkened and the whites of my eyes gave way to a deep, endless blue. The person I saw didn't look like me anymore. She was... my nightmare.

Scrambling around my bed, unable to bear looking at myself any longer, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand. It was impossible to see the screen through my tears, but I tapped into my phone, trying to call Milo, Aeden... someone... anyone. My fingers tapped on a number, and I could only hope it was someone who'd help me as I put it up to my ear. Two rings later, I sobbed with relief when my call was answered.

“Rose? What's wrong?”

Without missing a beat or even thinking about who was on the other end of the line, all my worries exploded out of me.

“The change has happened again but worse than before. It’s not just the webbing and the claws. My eyes have gone all weird, my teeth are pointy. There’re scales on my legs! How do I make it go away? What if this happens again in public and the hunters see—”

A masculine voice cut me off mid-spiral. “What change? There are hunters there? Rose, are you safe?”

Those questions put a halt to what I was going to say next. Blinking my tears away, I pulled the phone away from my ear and saw the name on my screen, and when I did, I sucked in a deep breath.

Will.

I’d called *Will*.

Everything in me whited out for a moment, another wave of panic cresting over me. My body prickled with magic again, trying to fully change but not being able to. *I shouldn’t have... He doesn’t want to talk to me... He left me...*

“Rose, please answer me. Are you safe right now?” he pressed, interrupting my shame spiral and bringing me back to the present.

“Will, I’m so sorry, I—”

“Please tell me you’re safe.” There was a desperate edge to his voice that cut at me.

“At the moment, I think so. I’m in my room.” I scrubbed the back of my hand over my eyes to try to clear them of tears. “But there are hunters on the islands, and I’m changing into a mermaid or a siren... We don’t know which.”

Will let out a long breath. “I have a million questions, but let’s work on one thing at a time. Are you fully or partially changed?”

“Partial,” I replied, my voice wobbling as more tears filled my eyes.

“Alright, then I want you to breathe with me, okay? Panicking can keep you locked in one form.” There was a

gentle quality to his voice that soothed some of the frayed nerves in me. “Can you do that?”

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“Good girl.” My heart skipped a beat as forbidden pleasure coursed through me. He’d always been great with praise. “Alright. Close your eyes and breathe with me.”

For several counts, he guided me through the same calming technique Aeden had taught me: eight breaths in, hold for four, then exhale for seven. Slowly, so slowly, my body shifted back to normal. My claws slipped back into my nailbeds. The webbing disappeared, and my teeth unsharpened. Last to go were the scales, but soon enough, they too receded, leaving me human again.

“How are you doing? Are you human-shaped again?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

Now that the panic had subsided, shame flooded me. Shame and a deep sense of stupidity. There was no reason for any of this to have happened... to have called Will in the first place.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, forcing out the words. “I didn’t mean to call you. I... I know you don’t want to talk to me.”

There was a beat of silence before he said, his voice pained, “I always want to talk to you, Rose.”

This broke my heart all over again, those old scars bursting open inside me. Pressing my hand to my chest, I held back a wince. How many weeks, months, had I tried to convince myself that I was okay with him leaving and staying gone? This, on top of everything else, was too much. Far too much. And I tried to shove it away so I wouldn’t have to reckon with his admission.

“Still,” I said, trying not to get into feelings with him, “I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“Can you tell me why you’re changing? How did this happen?” he asked, thankfully understanding I couldn’t engage

with his statement even if my heart screamed at me to.

“It’s a consequence of what happened in the cave,” I replied. I didn’t want to say more; if he was anything like me, reminders of that night were wholly unwanted.

Silence followed a sound of utter pain. It was brief and quiet, but it was there. “Rose, did my father... Did he...” he tried to ask but couldn’t get the words out.

“Not directly,” I offered. How was I supposed to tell him this was happening because Joseph forced him to kill Eli? Why would I heap that upon him?

Unfortunately, Will understood completely regardless. “Oh. Oh, Rose.”

There was a hitch in his voice that nearly had me in tears again. The Will I’d known had been confident and brazen, so to hear him sound so broken? It devastated me.

Before I could try to deny that it was his fault, he pushed forward with another question. “Are you certain hunters are there?”

“Yes. I saw the blood-red on their arms.”

He cursed, the sound of glass shattering punctuating his words. “Leaving was supposed to keep you safe. I shouldn’t have... I should... Fuck!”

“Will, them being here is not your fault—”

“Even if it’s not my fault, it was stupid to have left you alone.” Will swore again. “Is the selkie at least doing whatever he can to keep you safe?”

“Milo?” I asked dumbly, then rolled my eyes at myself. *Who else would he be referring to, dingus?*

His reply was clipped. “Yes, Milo.”

“He’s doing his best, as are the rest of the Otherkind here. It’s just hard when we’re trying to pretend to live life like normal.” For some reason, I didn’t want him to get the impression I was all on my own.

Will growled, his frustration blatant. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“Talking with me has been more than enough.” And it was more than I deserved from him. *Remember how he left you. Remember how you have a boyfriend. Don't let your hurt cloud your thoughts, Rose.* “Maybe next time, we can chat about the weather instead.”

That's not better!

Yet he chuckled, and it eased a little of the tension in me. “That would be nice.”

There was another beat of silence before I could think of something else to say. “I should probably get back to bed now. It's late here.”

“Anytime, Rose. Please call me anytime.” The tenderness in his voice undid me, and it took everything in me not to blurt out a million things that would make all this so much worse. Thankfully, he kept talking before I could embarrass myself. “Before you go, I just want to say I'm sorry for how I left things. I've regretted it every day since then.”

That was the absolute worst thing he could have said to me at that moment. The turmoil within me, the implication in his tone, was enough to make my body start buzzing again, the change threatening to come over me once more. “And I'm sorry I'm roping you into my problems again. It's not fair to you that I fat-fingered your number and bothered you. I don't have the right to.”

“I'm glad you did. I just wish there was more I could do,” he whispered.

“Just stay safe where you are. That's what's important for you and your family.”

“I know but...” Will took a deep breath. “Promise me you'll leave if you sense the hunters are onto you. Please?”

I rubbed my hand over my heart. “And leave my aunt alone?”

“Fuck,” was all he said.

I wholeheartedly agreed with the sentiment. “I’m doing everything I can. I’m just... I’m scared.”

“I know, pretty girl. You have every right to be.” He stopped and started his next sentence. “I should let you get back to sleep. Being tired will make it harder for you to keep the change at bay.”

“Okay. Thank you for talking me down, and I’m sorry for bothering you.”

“Please don’t be sorry. It was nice hearing from you.” It seemed like he was going to say something more but held it back.

“It was nice talking with you, too.”

After a round of goodbyes that hurt almost as much as him walking away from me on the beach, we hung up. Rubbing my hand over my chest, I let out another pained mewl as my heart ached in my chest. Hearing his voice, speaking with him... it was too much.

I let out a breath. Thinking about Will wasn’t going to help anything. Besides, I needed to learn how to come to terms with this and to not panic every time my body did things.

Hobbling to my feet as shame suffused through me, my body feeling still unlike my own, I made my way back to the mirror. I stared at the woman who looked so much like me yet foreign at the same time. I acquainted myself with her, forced myself to learn her face and shape and colors until it was as ingrained in me as my human face was.

This was who I was to become, and I didn’t have the luxury of time to get used to it.

CHAPTER 25

Rose



I don't know how long I stood in front of the mirror looking at myself or how long it took for the changes to recede.

When every last scale was gone, I went back to bed for a few hours before dragging myself out of it once again to head to Ava and Aira's for the day so I could do some research about this freaking talisman. They'd promised pizza and other goodies to make it a 'whole thing,' and I'd never been more grateful that they were willing to indulge in my nerditry.

Before I headed out, however, I had to handle one last thing: my guilt.

Aside from my intense shame for panicking, it occurred to me that my phone call to my *ex* might've crossed a boundary. I had no basis for reference when it came to this, so I honestly had no idea how Milo would react, but I needed to tell him. He was my boyfriend, after all.

It should've been *him* I called.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I called Milo. My nervousness had me chewing on my lip as I waited for him to pick up. Meanwhile my mind, helpful as ever, supplied all the ways this was going to go wrong. In at least ten of those scenarios, he broke up with me. By the time he greeted me, I was close to throwing up from the uncertainty.

"Hey, love," he said brightly, making my heart warm. Even just his voice melted me. "I wasn't expecting a call from you until after my sister got you sauced."

I snorted. “I mean, I wasn’t planning on drinking that much... Though, I suppose with your sister, you never know.”

“I’m not going to grumble about talking to my girl no matter the reason.” He laughed, but as much as I wanted to return it, I couldn’t.

“Would you be opposed to me telling you something kind of serious?” I ventured, pushing down a swell of panic.

“Of course not. What’s wrong? Are you okay?” His concern nearly broke my resolve. My first inclination was, as always, to ignore difficult things, after all.

“I’m fine, I promise. I just... Last night I had another dream about the not-me siren, and when I woke up, I was partially changed.”

“Oh, sweetheart. Why didn’t you call me? I’d have come over to help.”

I winced. “That’s the thing. I wanted to call you, but because I was crying, I couldn’t see the phone, and” —*God, this sounds so pathetic. Just say it already before you chicken out.*—“I accidentally called Will instead.”

Milo was quiet for almost too long, and it took everything in me not to beg for forgiveness.

“Did he help you?” he asked finally.

“He helped talk me down. But nothing else happened, I promise.”

He let out a breath. “As long as he helped, I can’t be too angry.”

A few tears of relief streaked down my cheeks. “I’m sorry. I...” I took a second to collect myself. “I don’t know if this is a betrayal thing or if you see it as cheating. I don’t have a frame of reference for this.”

“I admit I’m not thrilled, but given the circumstances, it’s understandable. All I ask is that you not make a habit out of it.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“Thank you,” he said, his tone softening. “Are you sure you’re okay, though? That’s what’s most important.”

“I’m okay right now.”

“Alright. I’m happy to hear that.” There was a rumble on the line before a deeper voice, Beastie’s, spoke. “You will call *me* next time, yes?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I will. You can protect me from myself.”

This placated the beast enough that I was able to talk him out of kidnapping me and keeping me locked in his bedroom until all this was over... Though, I had to admit there was a certain appeal to having my selkie wrapping me in warmth and safety—not that I told him that. He’d have taken that as an invitation.

After Milo wrestled control back from his other half, we said our goodbyes, but all I could think was, *I don’t deserve him.*



As soon as I moored my boat, I made my way towards the little cul-de-sac of houses where the King family lived. Ava and Aira shared a house just across the street from the one I’d borrowed before. All the houses there had similar layouts and exteriors, which were a bit cookie-cutter for my taste, but there was something about theirs that felt homey in a way that my borrowed one hadn’t. Of course, the rainbow and lesbian pride flags probably helped.

I let myself in and was greeted almost instantly by both of them from where they were sitting around the kitchen table. All the available space was covered in books and papers, some in neat stacks while others were spread out and open in front of them. They apparently got a head start by deciding not to

wait for me. I'd have been mad if I didn't see that most of the materials in front of the two of them were not in English.

"Did you sleep well last night?" asked Aira, looking up from the book she had her nose in.

I was tempted to lie but opted not to. "Not really, no. I had another nightmare about the Not-me Siren, and when I woke up from it, I was partially changed."

"Oh, sweetheart! Why didn't you call?" Her dark brown eyes brimmed with concern.

"Because... I accidentally called Will instead." Her eyebrows shot up into her hairline with her shock, but I plowed forward, determined not to dwell on it anymore. It was finished; it wouldn't happen again... At least that's what I told myself. "Besides, I need to get used to the change. That version of me is going to be my new normal. I mean, not all the time, I suppose, but it's who I'm going to become." I pulled out a chair and all but fell into it.

"Is that what scares you? The change?" asked Aira, her eyes seeming to pierce my soul.

Gods, I was grateful neither of them pressed me on the subject of Will and my phone call to him, even if I knew I'd have to deal with that later.

"Actually no, surprisingly. I'm more worried about Vi. Me leaving means she'll be all alone, and I already feel guilty enough for being involved with the murder of her boyfriend. And I hate all this lying I'm doing. I hate that I have to keep secrets from her. I know why I must, but I want to tell her, so she'll understand if I can't come back as soon as I want to." I fidgeted with my skirt a little. "But if I'm honest with myself, the idea of doing magic is really interesting. I like the idea of being part of the Otherkind community and keeping up with you guys without everyone worrying that I'm going to break. I'm just..." I struggled to find the right words but failed. "I'm conflicted."

"You know, that's fair. Given how all this came about, I can't even blame you," said Ava, her usually jovial expression

somber for the briefest of moments before it turned to determination. “But that’s why we’ve done our best to go through all the non-English language material. We’ve to put together some likely theories as to what the talisman is for and why it’s decided that you are its first choice for mermaidifying.”

“That’s not even a word.” I laughed a little.

“Well, it is now!” She said it like it was the final word on the subject, so I relented... for the moment.

“Anyway, children,” said Aira with a roll of her eyes and a smile she could barely hide. “We started working on this last night before bed, so you don’t need to worry that we stayed up all night or woke up early to get a head start.”

I opened my mouth to protest that they hadn’t needed to do that, but she raised an eyebrow. I backed down. She had me there.

She gave me a *look* but continued, “We wanted to give you something to go off of, and if something sounds right, we have a basis to jump off of from there.”

“And while you nerds are doing that, I’m going to grab that pizza. I’m famished.” Ava was incredibly food-driven, and I loved her for it.

“We have several theories as to what the talisman was and why it’s been able to change you,” said Aira as Ava stood up and went into the kitchen, “but why don’t you tell us what you remember Eli telling you about it?”

I blew out a shaky breath, then thought back to the night I found out about Eli’s wife Molly being the Siren Killer. My memory of that night was a little fuzzy, but what I could dredge up had me hugging myself.

“My wife told me she wanted to gain true immortality, not just the long life we are afforded as merfolk, so she made the talisman to draw out the voices of sirens. I don’t think she knew it would kill them, but I can’t be sure. If she’d

accomplished it, she'd have accumulated power beyond anything ever seen outside of Atargatis Herself."

"I debated for a long time what to do with it. This abomination in the wrong hands could be devastating, so I knew it was too dangerous to discard without neutralizing it, but I don't have the skill to undo the magic that keeps them trapped in there. I've done everything within my power to undo the magic or even outright destroy it, and yet whatever magic she weaved to make this is beyond me," he said, his fists clenching as he looked down at the shell in my hand. "And I think that's by design. Molly knew I'd never have accepted this, which is why I think she made it so I couldn't go behind her back to destroy it if I found out about it."

"The magic was meant to be absorbed by one of my kind, and the spell yearns to be fulfilled."

"The shell itself is just a vessel for the magic on the inside, but it's rigged in such a way that if opened or broken, it will find the nearest merperson to give its power to."

I relayed everything I remembered to them, trying to avoid remembering Eli's death which happened soon after I'd learned all this. "So, we know what it was supposed to do but not how or why. And we don't know why or how it is able to change me," I finished.

"Well, that does disprove our theories already," said Aira, frowning in thought.

"What were your theories? Could there be a grain of truth to them?" I asked.

"Hmm. There might be. Let's check." Aira gathered up some papers and slid them over to me, a translation in her handwriting on top of the original source. "So, the first theory

we have is that the talisman was originally an anchor meant to help keep Molly grounded while she used the sirens' power. Usually, magical anchors are other people, and they help keep powerful individuals from getting lost in their magic if they're doing a particularly strong spell. If she was powerful enough, she might have needed several souls to keep her grounded."

Perusing the paperwork she'd presented to me, I let out a hum. "Yeah, definitely not. If that were the case, the souls would likely need to be in a living body to be of any assistance. It says here that anchors are supposed to help discern how and when to step in. As far as I can tell, the souls on their own can't do that."

"Which is why I think we can throw that particular theory out." Aira chewed her lip for a moment before replacing that stack of paperwork with another. "It does kind of match another theory we had, though. We assumed that the talisman itself was a vessel, like you said, a kind of holding cell for the souls until she had what she needed for whatever magic she was going to use them for, similar to how a lich uses a phylactery to hold their soul."

"I mean, that does sounds about right." I nodded.

Ava brought over several stacked boxes of pizza, as well as glasses of her favorite chocolate milk.

I raised a brow. "Ava, is this *the* sacred, cherished chocolate milk? The one you refuse to share with anyone?"

"Yeah. So what if it is?" She stuck her lip out, indignant.

Though usually generous, this was the *one* thing she hoarded for herself and herself alone, rarely—if ever—letting anyone else even have a glass. There was nothing particularly special about it, but it was hard to get on the islands since it was from some specialized farm in Iowa or something.

"Nothing at all. I just have to say I'm in shock that you would honor me with your elixir of life," I deadpanned... barely. It was hard to hold back my smile when she narrowed her eyes at me like that.

“I am actually capable of sharing, thank you very much, and I thought this would be a good gesture to make you feel better about everything,” she replied with a huff.

“We have been blessed this day,” I said, reaching over to grab Aira’s hand to raise it towards the sky. “Praise to the chocolate milk goddess!”

Aira echoed me with a laugh before saying, “We are thankful for our generous goddess.”

“The two of you are ridiculous,” Ava said, but her indignant pout faded, nonetheless. “Anyway, regardless of what the talisman was made for, how was it able to start changing her in the first place? It’s not like souls are easy to mutate.”

I reached for a slice of pizza with a shrug. “Corvin thinks that the damage from the explosion of magic not only hurt my eye but also my soul. When he last showed it to me, he pointed out that there are deep fissures in my soul that could have allowed the talisman’s magic in enough to make the changes it wanted. I mean, we already know that its prime directive is to bond with the most appropriate living creature, and Not-me Siren seems to think I fit that bill.”

“Have I told you that it’s weird that you have dreams about her where she basically memes at you?” Ava asked between bites.

“And royally creeps me out? Yeah. Yeah, you have. But I agree,” I replied, taking a sip of the chocolate milk. *Damn, she’s right. This is too fucking delicious for its own good.*

“If the magic itself is strong enough to personify, do you think it chose you?” Aira asked.

“Probably. When I talked with her last night, she said that the original plan of it merely residing inside me would’ve worked if Eli had finished the binding. Of course, she also said that I’m going to need to die for my transformation to be complete.” The thought had me clutching my necklace tightly.

“Well, that doesn’t need to happen for a while. We can put that off until the hunters have gone,” said Ava.

“If Not-me Siren doesn’t get me killed by them first,” I sighed. “I’m just not ready. I mean, I don’t know if anyone is ever ready, but I don’t even know what to expect. What’s it like going through the process, and what can I expect afterwards?”

“Well, you’re in luck because we, along with Corvin, have made a dumb-dumb’s guide to being a baby merlady.” Ava wiped the pizza grease off her hands and rifled through the stacks of papers on the table until she found what she was looking for. “Here you go! Everything you need to know about what to expect. A growing girl’s guide, if you will.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You’re making this sound like a book about puberty.”

“I mean, you’re not far off. Apparently, new sirens have the worst mood swings for the first few years. It gets *intense*,” emphasized Aira as she started organizing the mess of papers in front of us. “But the real question here is, will those rules still apply if she has the magic of the talisman affecting her? It can’t hurt to read about what it usually looks like, but I worry it won’t be the most accurate.”

I... hadn’t thought of that. *Ugh*.

“I’ll read through it just in case, but I think you’re right. We don’t know how this is going to affect things.”

I grumbled. I couldn’t help it. Nothing in my life could be as simple as it seemed. I wasn’t that lucky.

CHAPTER 26

Rose



Echoes from yesterday's dream and the proceeding change bounced around in my head as I pulled up to Aeden's house for therapy. Even though I'd spent all day... and night... Saturday with Ava and Aira, reading up on their theories about what the talisman was and what I was to become, I still felt uneasy. The uncertainty of everything—especially given Not-me Siren's erratic, deranged behavior—was further undoing all the hard work I'd done in therapy. But really, what coping mechanism could help with any of this?

Shoving Not-me Siren as far away from the forefront of my mind as I could, I got out of the car but hesitated. Though I'd seen him the prior week, my... condition being outed as it had been, the subsequent fight, and the reason why it'd been necessary still upset me.

I understood why it needed to be done, but it made me feel gross to the point where I almost didn't show up today. The only reason I did was because I knew I shouldn't burn this bridge.

This was tumultuous enough as it was.

Resigned, I brought my towel to my usual spot and sat down. My bathing suit was on underneath the dress I'd thrown on earlier just to have it on if I wanted to go swimming, but after that dream, I worried that it would only spur the change on faster. Not-me Siren certainly might take it as an invitation.

It wasn't Aeden who joined me on the sand initially, though. I startled a little but calmed when I saw Corvin sit on

the sand next to me.

“How have you been feeling? Any changes?” he asked, angling me towards him with gentle hands.

“The claws come and go if I’m upset. I’m having to be more careful about my strength. I cracked my bathroom sink the other day.” I pursed my lips, wanting to lie but pushing the truth out anyway. “And yesterday, after a nightmare where she spoke to me, I changed a little. Both my eyes were blue then bled into the whites of my eyes like yours do when you’re in merperson form. My teeth grew sharp, and my hands had claws and webbing. I had scales. It took an hour before it went away.”

The furrow in his brows spoke volumes. “I don’t know which to be more concerned about, the fact that you’re dreaming about her or that you’re changing even with the bindings in place. Let me take a look?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Pulling my soul out of my chest, he did just that. Even without looking at it, I knew he was going to find it was substantially less bound than before. I’d seen it with my own eyes in my dream with Not-me Siren.

His face told me everything I needed to know about how he felt about it. Corvin’s eyebrows furrowed even further until there was a deep crease between them, and his jaw tensed and untensed at random intervals. When he expanded the size to get a better look at it, only mere slivers of my once light blue soul had yet to darkened to a deep blue, which told me that the transformation would soon be complete. Panic skittered along my nerves.

“This is happening much faster than I expected,” he said after a long moment of tense silence.

“I wish I could say I’m surprised, but I think the Not-me Siren wants me to change. It wants me to fulfill its purpose,” I said quietly. “She told me I’d change instantaneously if I just popped the bindings.”

His eyes flicked up to me then back down again. “I don’t know that I trust a power source bent on fulfilling its end goal, to be honest. There’s still the possibility it would rip your soul to shreds, as the damage you already have doesn’t seem to be getting any better.” He shrank my soul back down and gently placed it back in my chest with a sigh. “For the record, I know that this isn’t what you want, but I hope you know I’m here to help. Think of this like a second puberty.”

I snorted. “That’s what your pamphlet said.”

“I worked hard on that, you know.” He smiled, nonetheless. “You’re going to be alright, Rose, I promise. Come hell or high water, all of us are here to support you.”

I thanked him before he walked away. Turning back towards the lake, I let my mind wander until Aeden came to sit with me. His presence was familiar and comfortable, even if part of me was still upset that he’d outed me.

Then again, it could’ve been the calming energy he always pumped me full of—at my request.

“Hello, Rose. How’re you today?” he asked, his voice steady and gentle. “I heard you decided to do some research yesterday.”

“Yeah, I was hoping that if I knew what to expect, I’d feel less awful about this.”

“And do you? ‘Feel less awful about this,’ I mean.”

“Not really.” I didn’t elaborate. I didn’t need to. My reason for not wanting to change was still the same no matter how much I learned about what was happening.

Silence lapsed between us, as I didn’t know what else to say. I stared out at the water of the lake, a thousand thoughts crossing my mind until I settled on one that would distract him from the fact that I wasn’t ready to talk yet.

“How did kelpies come to be, Aeden? I don’t think I ever asked,” I said, picking at a piece of grass near my foot.

“Hmm.” He scratched the stubble on his chin. “I suppose I should start from the beginning. Life as we know it began

much earlier than humans think, but not in the way that would provide tangible proof. Otherkind were living here well before there were any other living beings on the planet in the form of primordial spirits that embodied the elements. Whether they grew naturally or were brought here from other worlds, we don't know, but they are the basis for many of the Otherkind species here on the planet.

“As the planet evolved and changed, so did those spirits, and they multiplied. From simple air, earth, fire, and water spirits, they began to nurture and encourage the planet to grow. From earth spirits came the trees and their spirits, then eventually the dryad and the forest fairy, for example. Or from air spirits came the wind, then sylphs and so on. Then, from there, Otherkind helped cultivate and create the animals and landscape you see now.”

“So, by that logic, kelpies are descended from the primordial spirits of the water?” I asked.

“Correct. From the primordial spirits of water, there was a split between freshwater and saltwater. The saltwater spirits would beget the sea sprites and others, and my people were begotten of the freshwater spirits.”

I let this sink in, looking out over the lake. My mind conjured up the images of these spirits, visualizing their evolution from the time the earth was just a rock. Though it was a lot to conceptualize, it seemed to make sense.

Moving from picking at the grass to futzing with the hem of my dress, I asked, “So, if you were—are?—spirits, how did you get your shapes?”

“Our own evolution, if my history is correct.” He smiled and leaned in to say, “It might not be. It's been at least two hundred years since my mother taught me our history. But if my memory serves me, for kelpies, we developed our physical form a little later than other Otherkind in response to humans encroaching upon our territories. Though humans say our horse form was to steal children and take them into the water to die, we only did that to those who were harming the water or the land around it.”

My brows rose. “And your human forms?”

“Those were developed when humans began to outnumber and pose a danger to us so we could better blend in with them without being detected. Of course, there are some out there who claim they wished to take the form of their Gods, but I don’t think that was the case for kelpies.”

Leaning back onto my arms and stretching out my legs, I asked, “So, gods actually exist? Like, they live among us?”

“I’m sure there are some, but most of them live in their own realms with their own kind.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, sitting back up. “What do you mean ‘their own realms?’ There’s more than one? Like, there are different worlds... dimensions... whatever besides our own? How do you even get there?”

“Of course. There are more than we can even imagine, all leaves upon the great World Tree, Yggdrasil. All the different worlds are separated by a veil that takes *strong* magic or a connection to Yggdrasil to travel to.”

Aeden put an image in my mind of a large white tree that glowed, its branches miles above my head and its trunk too big around for me to comprehend. Just as he’d explained, there were millions of leaves of all colors, from reds to oranges, to yellows and greens. As he continued, he guided the image in my mind to different parts around the tree.

“Some realms are closer to our Earth and may even share the same branch. They could even geologically look very similar, like the Naturals Realm, Patchwork Realm, and the Athyrian Realm, all three of which share a branch with us. On the other hand, some do not, like Faerie or the Void, which are branches off ours. Or there are realms like the Firelight Realm or Palora, which are on completely separate branches and look nothing like our world. And those are just the ones who make visits or have populations that live here on Earth. Many of those realms’ inhabitants are what spawned human myths and legends.”

I looked at him incredulously. “So, dragons are real and are basically aliens?”

“There are many different kinds of dragons from many different realms, so not all work the same way, but yes. Dragons are real.”

“Demons?”

“Yes.”

“Angels?”

He nodded, amused. “Yes.”

Now my mind was properly blown. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“In truth, because you were trying to deal with a lot without me heaping the reality of our universe upon you as well. Also, you weren’t one of us then.”

His last sentence was quiet, almost a whisper, but it still made me flinch.

“I’m not Otherkind yet.” My words were stubborn, my denial apparent.

“But you will be. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Neither you nor Corvin need to remind me of that. Not-me Siren does that almost every night.” I flinched, then groaned. I hadn’t meant to tell him that. Not that it was a secret, but it just felt too weird to share.

“You dream of her?” he asked, stiffening beside me.

Sighing, I replied, “Yes. She likes to tell me how I’m going to become her soon and that I need to die to complete the transformation.”

Aeden went quiet again, pondering this a moment. There was a brush against my mind, and I knew he was looking through my memories to figure out what exactly was going on. If I’d had any way of stopping him, I would’ve, but he was already in there, so I had to live with it.

“Do you think she was being honest when she told you she wants the hunters to kill you?” he asked.

“I have no doubt. She ate my heart the first time we met, remember?” I clenched my fists just remembering it. “But even if she can’t get their attention, she’s straining against the bonds and doing everything in her power to escape. She wants out. It’s only a matter of time before she wins.”

And that was the reality I’d grappled with since waking up yesterday. No matter what I did, she was who I was to become. If I really looked into myself, I could feel the changes happening, like ice water in my veins. Not everywhere, not yet, but it soon would be.

I shoved those thoughts to the back of my mind.

“Can we talk about something else, please?” I asked, bile rising in my throat.

“If you’d like.” He paused, looking at me carefully.

“Thank you.” I scrambled for a topic and grasped the first one that came to mind. “Why are the hunters’ hands and arms red like blood?”

His lips thinned to a hard line. “It’s a curse. One of the Goddesses that looks over this world cursed those that kill Otherkind intentionally to forever show the stain of their sins. It is a warning to us of their intent, and in years past, it was a sign to hunt them in return, just as one might a rabid animal.”

“Why not now?”

“Technology has made it increasingly difficult to get away with these sorts of things, for hunters and Otherkind alike.” He was silent for a second. “And in the last fifty years, they’ve used this to their advantage. They’ve become more aggressive, have a larger variety of weapons available to them, and are far more radicalized. Beyond that, they’ve started going after humans associated with Otherkind as well.”

“Really?” I asked, even as I felt the truth of it in my soul.

“Unfortunately. This is how my mate, Iain, died a little over fifty years ago.” His eyes were haunted by the memory.

“I avenged him, of course, but I’ll bear that pain for as long as I live, knowing it was his association with me that killed him.”

I was horrified. “I’m so sorry, Aeden.”

“This is why I decided to tell the others of your condition. I simply wished to avert another tragedy.”

Oh, hell. I couldn’t stay mad at him for that. Being outed still rankled, but I couldn’t fault him for his logic. “Thank you for caring about me so much. I’ll appreciate it more once this is all over... probably.”

“When you survive this, you can be angry at me all you want. For now, though, I ask for your patience.”

I nodded. “I can do that.”

Aeden went silent as he stared, unseeing, at the water for a long moment until he blinked his thoughts away. When he turned to face me again, he changed the subject. “You’re dressed very nicely today. Do you have plans after this?”

I flushed. “I’m going to the fish festival in Mariana. Milo asked me to join him.”

“I’m also going, though I’m not participating in the competition this year.” Aeden smiled. “Are things going well with Milo?”

I blew out a heavy breath. “Yeah. We’re having dinner with Vi sometime this week, and I think Vi and I were invited to dinner with his family this weekend.” I paused, took another breath, then chose to open up a little bit. “I like him. I like him a lot. Perhaps too much for how soon it is, but it’s not hard to imagine waking up beside him every day.”

“Has he started the mating ritual?”

“The what?” I tilted my head in confusion.

“The mating ritual. Has he done things like taking you for a naked swim in the sea, formally giving you a gift in front of an audience, or showing you himself in his seal form? He hasn’t given you his pelt yet or anything of the sort?”

My cheeks heated. “We’ve gone skinny dipping in the ocean.” *And he fucked me there, but you don’t need to know that.*

Though he was most definitely still in my mind, he didn’t comment on my errant thought, which I was so grateful for. “Well then. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was angling to position himself as your mate.”

Part of me wanted to be freaked out by this, but when I thought about it, it made sense to me. It was no different than dating to marry. Thinking a little more, I pondered if I minded. But when I pictured Milo’s face, I knew that I didn’t mind at all. In fact, I liked the idea very much.

Maybe it’s a good thing he’s Otherkind. At least then I won’t have to face hundreds of years alone.

“That’s a very good silver lining to all this.” Aeden smiled, having read my mind.

“But what about Vi?” I asked, despondence threatening to come over me again. “She’s the only family I have left. How am I supposed to find a silver lining with her?”

“Some of the others and I have been talking about that, and we think you might be able to tell her in time.”

Though hope soared, I didn’t dare latch onto it. I narrowed my eyes at him. “What’s the catch?”

Because there was always a catch. Always.

“If she reacts badly or poses a threat to you or us, we’ll have to erase her memory of what you’d said and what she’d seen.”

Though he said it gently, I flinched at his unrepentant seriousness. Having her mind messed with was not what I wanted. More than that, I knew I couldn’t live with myself if she rejected me or didn’t believe me.

“No, I don’t think I’ll take that route, no matter how much I might want to. It puts her in too much danger, especially with the hunters here, and it’s a heavy burden to bear,” I said after a moment.

“Well, it’s an option if you want it.” He leaned over to nudge me with his elbow. “Though, you might be surprised at how she reacts.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. As much as I wanted to believe the fairytale that she’d take it in stride like I had, I couldn’t. Hell, I might not have taken it so well if I hadn’t just taken a running leap off a literal cliff and been tossed against a rock by a riptide.

And with the hunters’ propensity towards killing anyone even vaguely linked to Otherkind? It wasn’t safe... It likely wouldn’t *ever* be safe.

“Did you want to get into the water?” asked Aeden, pulling me out of my thoughts. “It might help you relax.”

I was about to retort that I wasn’t tense, but taking stock of my body, I found that wasn’t true at all. My jaw and fists were clenched so tight that it was painful, and the rest of my muscles were taut as well. Taking a moment to inhale a breath, I relaxed them as best I could. Yet as I gazed at the water, flashes of my dream obscured my vision, and I tensed up again.

“Not today,” I said softly. “I don’t want Not-me Siren to get any ideas.”

It’s bad enough that I considered not going to the festival today because the BBQ portion is on the beach, and the hunters might be there.

“I’m sure Milo would understand if you decided not to go, but you should know that me, Milo, Corvin, and the Kings... all of us would do anything to help keep you safe, even from ‘Not-me Siren,’ as you call her.”

I sighed. “I know. I’m just... I’m scared. This is terrifying on its own, but with everything else, it feels impossible. I’m not sure I have any more bravery left in me.”

“And that’s okay. It’s okay that you’re overwhelmed. This *is* overwhelming. But you will have time to adjust later. For now, all you should focus on is enduring this and enjoying what time you have left as a human.”

His words were a blow to my already fragile psyche, so I pushed them away. I could work through them, confront them, when I was ready. Right at this moment, though? I was so very *not* ready.

“That’s not as comforting as I wish it’d be,” I replied.

“I know, but I don’t know if there’s anything I can do or say to make you feel better. This is hard, and there are many unknowns, even for us Otherkind.”

“Which makes me even more scared. If you guys don’t know anything, then how am I supposed to handle this?” I asked, my voice small.

“One day at a time.”

I stared out over the water once more and hugged myself. He was right. As with all things, I just needed to take it one day at a time. What other choice did I have?

CHAPTER 27

Rose



After our session, I offered to give Aeden a ride to the fish festival, as he'd been invited by the Kings to join them for the BBQ after the contest. Aeden guided me to where I needed to go once we got off the ferry at Mariana Port, and after I parked near the docks, we got out and joined the growing crowd. Iris and Declan were there in the center, and they waved us over with smiles.

“Good afternoon, you two,” said Iris, her English accent prominent.

“Good afternoon,” I replied, not fighting it when she pulled me into a hug, then I moved immediately to hug Declan as well when he opened his arms to me. “And to you, too.”

“We're happy you came,” he said with a smile. “Milo will be very pleased you could make it.”

“He was worried that you wouldn't feel up to it today, what with everything going on,” added Iris.

I hid my cringe. *He'd seen right through me in my texts to him this morning.*

“I wanted to come to support Milo. This is important to him,” I said, blushing when they looked between each other.

“I have no doubt he'll be very happy you came,” replied Iris, unable to keep the smile from her face even as she turned to the kelpie beside me. “And how've you been, Aeden?”

“Very well, thank you. Missing Irish summers right about now, though.” He chuckled.

“And we still have so much summer to get through,” sighed Iris.

Declan leaned in close to me. “They’ve had this same conversation for the last hundred years. I swear, it’s like they live for complaining.”

I laughed; I couldn’t help it, especially not after Iris whacked her husband in the arm playfully, and he acted as if she’d pulled his arm off. The three of them began to chat idly until horns sounded in the distance and excitement washed over the crowd. Everyone turned towards the docks in anticipation of the coming boats. In time, they came more fully into view for all to see.

I’d recognize Milo’s boat from a mile away, even if he hadn’t led the crowd of boats coming towards the port. He stood on the bow, his stance wide, and that boyish smile of his lit up his face. I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

The way the sun made him positively glow, the way it caressed every curve of his muscles, made him look like a sea god come to life. Wind blew his hair back, tousling the strands. If I’d ever been asked to dream up a perfect man for myself, whoever I’d think up would pale in comparison to the selkie who had eyes only for me.

I really could love this man.

The moment he docked, he stepped off his boat and strode straight up to me. He picked me up, spun me around until a giggle escaped me, and before my feet could even touch the ground, his lips were on mine, devouring me in abject hunger. Everything around me fell away. The crowd, the boats, the sea. Nothing mattered but the two of us.

When he pulled away, he whispered against my lips, “Thank you for coming.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” I whispered back, lost in him. He was just so fucking beautiful.

That grin of his made its return. “Good. I need my good luck charm here today to make sure I win.”

“You’ve won five years in a row without me,” I replied, loving the mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Well, yes, but I want to set a new record. With you here, I think I can do it.”

“Then I’m happy to lend you whatever luck you need.”

He kissed me again, then said, “Let me help my crew, and I’ll be right back to stand with you during the announcements.”

With that, he was off, leaving me to reality once more... That everyone was staring and smiling, some even snickering at me. Iris and Declan looked pleased as punch, and when my cheeks burst into flames, Iris wrapped one arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze.

“It’s a lot, isn’t it?” she asked with a knowing smile.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“We... Kings,” she said with a pointed look at me, telling me she meant ‘selkies,’ “can be a lot. We’re an amorous bunch. If it’s too much, all you have to do is tell him, and he’ll tone it down. He wants to make you happy most of all, you know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I smiled, blushing again. “Though, something tells me he’ll get me used to it in time.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that. Declan did the same for me when we were first courting. My family was English, you see, and was very reserved in general, so when Declan came crashing into my world with his hugs and public affection, I thought I was positively going to *die* of humiliation. When he noticed it made me uncomfortable, he dialed it back as much as he was capable.”

“Have you two been together for a long time? I don’t think I ever asked.”

She lowered her voice so no one else could hear her. “Oh, yes. I was born just a little before the turn of the century in 1491 into a mortal family. We lived in a small fishing village

in the southernmost part of England, and he came to town when I was sixteen.”

I took her words in, then blinked as I registered what she was saying. “Wait, you were human?”

“I was, yes. On our wedding day, his great-grandmother gifted me her pelt, and I was changed. It was not too long after that, once I’d gained control of myself and my new form, that I made the move to be with him and his family. When there were too many of us on his ancestral island, we relocated to Mariana shortly after Thomas Golden made his home here. That was around 1840, I believe.” She had such a wistful expression on her face. “All of this to say that I understand that we can be a lot as a people, but we mean well. And should things get a little more serious between you two, we’d welcome you with open arms.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You... Kings... really don’t do slow-burn.”

“No,” she laughed with me, “no, we don’t. Declan and I were married and mated within four months of meeting.”

Declan gave Iris a smile that was the same as Milo always gave me and said, “And she’s regretted it ever since.”

Iris whacked him on the arm. “I have not, you lout.”

“That’s not what you said when we fought last.”

“The last fight we had was seventy years ago!”

“And I’ll never forget how you wounded me!”

Laughing at their good-natured bickering, I turned back to see Milo and his crew offloading their catch. The container their fish were in was put onto a cart with wheels labeled with his boat’s name on it, then pulled away by one of the officials, leaving Milo and his crew to join the crowd.

Milo came right over to me, slung an arm over my shoulders, and pulled me close enough that I needed to wrap my arm around his waist, which seemed to please him a great deal.

Guiding me away from the docks, he asked, “So, do you have a clue about what’s happening?”

“Not a one. I came for moral support.” I shook my head.

“Well then. Let me exposit at you a moment.” He grinned, looking down at me. “Every year before the Fourth of July, groups of fishermen go out to catch fish from dawn until noon, and then we come in and weigh what we caught. Whoever catches the most gets a prize, and the leader of the group gets to present the largest fish caught to their person of choice. Then we all go to the beach and have a BBQ with what we caught, and what we don’t eat, we share with each other and take home for later. Not much of a festival, but who am I to nitpick a name?”

“And you hope to not only win but also set a record this year?” I asked.

“I gotta impress my girl, don’t I?”

“Pffft.” I poked him in the side.

We stopped in front of a building between the beach and the docks and watched as five carts were pulled up to a heavy-duty scale with their labels obscured from the crowd, and they went about pulling each one onto the scale and marking the weight on the sheet.

I admit, I wasn’t paying too much attention to what was happening, other than to know that they were weighing each group’s catch, as I was watching Milo’s face. There was a nervousness I didn’t often see in him, and it was endearing to know he wasn’t all confidence and bluster. Just mostly.

My arm still around his waist, I gave him a squeeze to reassure him, earning me another of what was quickly becoming one of my favorite smiles in the whole world.

“We have a winner!” announced Mariana’s mayor, George Martinez. Milo’s eyes snapped back up to the front, his whole being practically vibrating. “This year, not only do we have a very clear winner, but they’ve also set a record, shattering the prior century-old record!” A hush fell over the crowd, and I

held my breath, waiting for the results as he prattled on for a little while more. “In third place, we have the *Yoshimaru!*”

There was cheering from the crew and their family a few feet away, and the captain came to stand next to the mayor after giving him a handshake.

“In second place is the *Regal Riptide!*”

Once more, there was cheering, and the captain came to join the mayor in front of the crowd. Mayor Martinez paused for dramatic effect.

“And in first place, for the sixth year in a row, is *Poseidon’s Glory!*”

The people around me erupted in a chaos of cheering and screaming. I was once again pulled up into Milo’s arms for a searing kiss before he was tugged away for high fives and pats on the back that landed so hard, he staggered. It took a moment, but he made it to the mayor and gave him a handshake, pride emblazoned on his features. Once he was facing the crowd, an assistant came up with a gigantic fish in their arms that was maybe three or four feet in length, if I had to guess. *How the hell did they catch that with a wooden fishing pole?*

“So, who would you like to gift the lucky fish to this year, Milo?” asked Mayor Martinez, bringing me back to the here and now.

“I know I usually gift it to my crew or my family, but this year, I have someone special I’d like to give it to.” His eyes locked with mine, and I *knew* exactly who he was going to say, yet still my heart stuttered in my chest. “This year, I’d like to give it to my girlfriend, Rose.”

All eyes landed on me, and I stopped breathing, my face flaming. The mayor smiled at me. “And do you accept this gift, Rose?”

“I—” I tried to get in enough breath to form words. “I accept the gift.”

There were more cheers, the loudest of which came from the Kings and Milo’s crew, and if Milo’s meaningful look was

to go off of, I knew something more significant had just happened.

The mayor's assistant handed the fish off to one of Milo's crew that came to claim it for me while the mayor kept talking. I wasn't listening, though. It was hard to when my mind raced to think of what context I was missing that made them react like they had.

It's part of their mating ritual, said Aeden in my mind. He gave you a gift in public, and you accepted it, meaning you accepted him.

Thank you, I thought back at him, my cheeks burning.

Milo came back over to me as everyone started to move towards the beach, and I tugged him down for a kiss and to whisper, "You're going to have to be more open about this freaky-deaky mating ritual you're putting me through. Informed consent and all that."

He pulled away, his expression sheepish. "You're right. I just didn't want to freak you out with how fast I was going, especially with everything else that's going on with you."

"I'm not mad. Just confused. I don't know what's going on, and I don't want to mess anything up or hurt you."

He cupped my cheeks in his hands. "Oh, Rose. There's nothing more that you need to do besides go with your intuition. If this doesn't work, then it doesn't work, and any moment that you feel like it's too much, I'll back off."

"I trust you," was my breathless reply. Because I did, with every fiber of my being, even if I didn't quite understand why.

The man looked at me like I was the sun in his sky, his most treasured possession, when I said those words, and he kissed me before pulling me in for a hug. It felt right. Everything with him felt right down to my very soul, and I wanted with my whole heart for whatever this was to always feel that way.

He finally pulled away, the crowd long gone, and took my hand to guide me to the beach. It was a lovely walk, the ocean sparkling under the midday sun to our left and a lovely breeze

keeping most of the heat at bay. To enter, we had to pass through a gap in the dark brown and red rocks that enclosed the beach on three sides, towering nine feet high in some places. Once through that little walkway, a stretch of sand was before us.

All along the length of the beach, little groups were setting up BBQs and fires as others divvied out the fish from the big containers that'd been wheeled onto the sand at the back against the rock wall.

Our group, Iris, Declan, Aeden, and Corvin was about fifteen feet from the entrance. Milo's crew right next to them. We sat between the two groups, and all of them were grinning at us.

"Did you want to save your fish for later, Rose, or do you want to eat it now?" asked Declan, trying to be nonchalant and failing. *Ah, this must be another selkie thing... Or he's just being ridiculous.*

"I wouldn't mind eating it now if you all would like to eat it with me. That's far too much fish for just me," I replied, and I knew it was the right answer when that nonchalance morphed into an all too familiar pleased grin I'd seen a million times on Milo's face.

"Would you like to prepare it?" he asked.

"I actually have no idea how to prepare fish, sorry. So, I'll have to bow to your expertise."

"Oh, don't say that," said Milo with a joking groan. "You'll give him a big head."

"It's far too late for that, my boy," interjected Iris, patting her son on the knee. "Your da is a proud man and always will be."

We laughed. The space with them was always comfortable, and this time was no different. I let myself imagine what it would be like to be one of them, to sit at Milo's side as his girl like Aira sat with Ava or like Iris and Declan. They were family, and from the moment I'd joined them a year ago to escape Joseph, I'd been family too. More than that, though,

everyone on the islands was part of the wider Golden Isles family, and I loved it so much.

Looking at the people huddling around their fires, my heart was warm. Everyone was talking and laughing. Children ran between the little groups, to and from the water, with smiles on their faces. Everyone was having a great time.

This was what community was supposed to feel like. These events were meant to build up and strengthen the ties between the people, and as I sat among *my* people, my boyfriend pressed close to me, I wished I could help that. The people on the islands meant so much to me, and I wanted nothing more than to give back to them, to add to the strength of them as a people.

My fingers and palms began to tingle as I focused on that thought. In my mind, I imagined ties between each person, connecting everyone there.

Each unique thread braided into the greater whole first at the nexus of the fire between them, then each of those connecting to a central strand. The different lengths pulsed with the beats of their hearts until they all beat as one, and I prayed strength into it, that it would be unbreakable. If only I had that power...

“Rose!” someone called my name in my periphery, but I wasn’t ready to let go of my thoughts yet. “Rose, you need to stop, love. You’re going to hurt people.”

That brought me back to reality, and I blinked away what I’d been focusing on to turn to them. It was Milo speaking to me, and as I looked at him, my vision was a little hazy. He didn’t quite seem real. I reached out to brush my finger across his cheek.

“That’s it, love. Focus on me.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes, and he pulled my hand away from his cheek to hold it, his expression twisting into one of concern before looking away from me. “Corvin, both her eyes are blue.”

The words didn’t quite register at first but when they did, it was like being slammed back into my body. Shaking my head,

I turned to look around to see that everyone's fires were burning high, climbing up and beyond the confines of their little pits and threatening to spread. But before I could even focus on that or the fact that the webbing and claws had returned, Not-me Siren's laughter rang in my ears, a delirious and evil cackling that preceded an explosion of pops that knocked the breath out of me.

Another pair of hands were on me in an instant as panic crashed through me. People spoke around me, their voices no more than a murmur beneath Not-me Siren's cackles. I couldn't focus on any of them to figure out who was who when my heart was trying to beat out of my chest.

"We need to get her out of here and somewhere private," said a voice behind me.

"Take her to my house. You can use her car," said another.

"Give me her purse, I'll go with her."

"I'll be right behind you."

"We need to ground her first. She can't be seen like this."

Milo pulled me towards him after cupping my cheeks with his big hands, kissing me on the forehead. My eyes zeroed in on him and his lips. "That's it. Focus on me. I'm going to need you to breathe with me, okay? Can you do that?"

I nodded.

"Good girl. We're going to breathe in together for f—"

Nope! cackled Not-me Siren. She pushed against the bindings, popping more with such power that I fell forward, clutching at my chest. She laughed and laughed and laughed knowing I couldn't breathe. *Have fun with the hunterssss!*

Hunters?

Turning my head, sure enough, there they were, standing against the rocks that enclosed the beach. Their eyes scanned over all those in attendance, and I nearly let myself pass out then and there. Instead, I reached forward and whacked Milo's chest.

“We don’t have time,” he said after his eyes followed where mine were. “We’ve got to get her out of here now.”

He pulled me up, and I vaguely registered that my purse was slung across his body. Milo pulled me close to him, wrapped his arm around my waist, and ushered me away from the beach as I continued to struggle for breath. Panic pulsed through me, spreading to the farthest reaches of my body with every pained pump of my heart.

I tucked my hands under my arms so no one could see them, trying hard to ignore the alienness of the webbing and claws. He took us towards the path, and I focused only on walking. One foot in front of the other.

One foot, then the other.

One foot, then the other.

I was so focused on that I didn’t notice I was being talked to until Milo stopped us, but when I looked up, what I saw wasn’t... who I thought it was. Mr. Mawadaira, along with his wife and daughter were in front of me. If I focused hard enough, I could see them as I knew them, all wearing regular beach gear and holding towels and things, but as I grew more and more lightheaded from being unable to breathe properly, their bodies flickered, revealing something horrifying.

In the overlaying image, all three wore white yukata with dark colored obi belts. Mr. Mawadaira’s yukata sleeves were tied back in a way that I couldn’t see, but his wife and daughter’s weren’t. They had black-tipped fingers that ended in claws, and their skin was as sickly grey and pale as death.

Their faces, though.

Their faces were unnatural.

My mind didn’t want to comprehend. Their eyes were round and large, and their hair was long, scraggly, and thin. Mouths almost too large for their faces had rows of sharp teeth made for the ripping of the flesh from bone. The longer I stared, the more prominent this image became until it was all I could see.

They were... were they... Otherkind?

More popping blasted in my ears, but I couldn't make a sound. They were talking—the gaping maws that were their mouths moved even if I heard nothing of what was being said—but I couldn't speak past my terror as my bound heart fought to free itself from my chest. I backed away from them.

Milo picked me up and hurried me away, but my eyes were glued to the Mawadairas and their strange, terrifying forms. In no time at all, I was placed in the passenger side of my car, he buckled my seatbelt for me, and once he was inside himself, drove us away.

“W—what are they?” I forced myself to say between gasps of air.

Reaching over to take my hand, he pulled it over to him so he could kiss my knuckles. “They’re called Aohanshi, a kind of spirit from Japan. He and his family fled with the Shiojis in the 1800s. But I don’t know much of the details.”

I nodded. I knew I’d have to revisit this later when I wasn’t having a panic attack, so I didn’t bother to, nor could I, ask questions.

Within minutes we pulled up to the little cul-de-sac where the Kings’ houses were, and I was tugged out of the car. Corvin and Aeden were already waiting for us on the beach, and Corvin pointed at the water.

“Sit her in the water,” he said as he was stripping down, “I’m going to need the ocean to aid me for this one.”

Not-me Siren laughed and laughed. *Aww, I’m too strong for the two-hundred-year-old merman. Maybe if he kills himself trying to bind us, I can eat his soul too. We haven’t taken anyone with a healing specialty yet.*

Aeden snarled. “Corvin, be careful. Whatever magic is in her might try to hurt you or kill you.”

Damn right I am! He’ll be a fine addition to the collection. And if you’re lucky, Mr. Horsey, I’ll see if I can add you too.

“Shut... up...” I gritted out, squinting my eyes shut.

She laughed and responded by popping more bonds as Milo sat us in the water, peeling my dress off and ensuring I was getting as much contact with it as possible. Once that was done, Corvin knelt next to us in the waves, but Not-me Siren kicked up a fuss the moment he tried to pull my soul from my chest.

Like a dog fighting being put in the tub for a bath, she kicked and screamed, squeezing my heart tighter and tighter until he gripped my shoulder and yanked it out of my chest. The searing pain from her claws ripping along the inside of my chest had me doubling over and retching, but she wasn't done with me or Corvin yet. No, she was just beginning.

With every binding he put on, she popped it within seconds of it being completed. It happened over and over until she lashed out in a flash of light against his heart, tearing a chunk from his own soul. Corvin grunted but kept going, this time protecting his soul from her.

I just took a piece of him, a piece of him, a piece of him! I just took a piece of him, and it was so tas-tyyyy! crowed Not-me Siren in her irritating sing-songy way.

Black spots dotted my vision as I struggled to keep myself conscious. I couldn't focus on what was happening, not when Not-me Siren pulled more and more of my energy to fight the bonds. It wasn't until Aeden stepped in, wrapping some sort of binding around the foul creature, that Corvin was able to make any sort of progress, but even then, Aeden struggled to contain her.

When she knew she couldn't win against the two of them, she turned the fight inward to me. She squeezed my heart in a vise grip until I thought it would burst, and I convulsed, my eyes rolling in the back of my head as I fell backwards.

How much time it took him to fully bind her, I didn't know. I struggled to stay conscious as he did so, but I knew he'd finally made enough purchase against her when my heart, though cinched, didn't feel as if it were nearly about to burst in my chest. At some point, I was sat back up. The world still spun, but the black around the edges of my vision slowly but

surely receded, especially after a cool hand over my heart began to spread warmth there.

When I finally could focus on the world around me, I saw the aftermath of the fight, and my heart stopped. Aeden lay a few feet away, awake but struggling. Corvin was on all fours in front of me, blood dripping from somewhere on his face, but I wasn't sure from where, as I couldn't see its source.

Milo was behind me, his legs on either side of me and his arms wrapped around me. He had his forehead against the crook of my neck, his own breathing labored.

No one said anything, not even a groan. Only the gentle sound of the waves crashing upon the shore filled the space between us, and when the silence was broken, I startled a little in Milo's arms.

"Rose, I can't..." started Corvin, sweat dripping from his brow and into the water as he wiped the blood from his face to look up at me, "I won't do it again. It will kill both of us if I attempt to bind you one more time."

"No," I whimpered, "Please don't say that."

I'm not ready.

"I won't do it again. I know you can't see what I do, but your body is on the verge of breaking down irreparably, and I will *not* facilitate such damage. She nearly burst your heart, Rose!"

"Corvin, I'm fine. I just—"

I'm. Not. Ready.

He cut me off. "No, Rose. No. You need to start making plans for how you are going to handle leaving until you can get control of your powers. If you can't do that, then we can make them for you, but this is it. This is the end of your life as a human. You can mourn after it's finished, but I'm done. I won't hurt you again."

I wanted to argue, to deny what he was saying. Tears sprang up in my eyes, disbelieving there was no other option. "Isn't there... anything else?"

I'm NOT ready.

Corvin shook his head, the hardness gone from his features. “There’s nothing else. I’ve searched everywhere, I swear it.” Putting a hand on my shoulder, he sighed. “At this point, all we can do is make you as comfortable as possible. If you feel compulsions to go into the sea, don’t deny yourself. In fact, you should go in every day possible, just to ease any pain the transition might bring you. If you’re determined to last as long as you can without fully changing, you need to avoid stressors, as that’s likely what’s deteriorating the bindings faster, but it’s understandable if you can’t. This is the worst time to begin such a change, I know.”

Still, he continued, as if his words weren’t sucker punches to the gut. “I know it’s terrifying and that you have reservations and questions, but you’re going to get through this, and you’ll be fine when you come out the other side, I swear it.”

I'm not ready.

I'm not ready.

I'M NOT READY!

I'MNOTREADYI'MNOTREADYI'MNOTREADYI'MNOTREADY!

There were no words I could speak, no vehement denials or curses to screech. There were no whispers or screams left in me. There was nothing but the soul-deep understanding that what he was saying was true.

So, I said nothing at all.

I stared at him, all my emotions a cacophony of noise warring within me for dominance until only numbness was left in their wake. My mind shut down, and all external things around me ceased to exist. Climbing inside that safe place in my mind, a familiar home, I let the numbness take me.

CHAPTER 28

Davis Brown



Davis knew they'd made the right choice in coming to this stupid fish festival thing the moment the fires started goin' wonky. They burned high in shades of blue and purple that couldn't be natural, not with the kindlin' they used, and he knew then and there that there was fuckery afoot.

It was Perry who nudged him and pointed towards one group of people. The woman from the port sat staring but unseein' out at the crowd in front of her. They were too far away to see her eyes, but if he had to guess, they were swirlin' up a storm. He watched as two of their group nudged her and tried to get her attention to no avail. When they did, somethin' akin to panic came over her, even as the flames died down and returned to normal.

"She has to be somethin'," he muttered, knowing Perry would hear him.

Perry looked over at her as she clutched the man beside her. "Nah, man. That's a panic attack."

"Then how the hell do you explain the fires goin' weird until she stopped starin' like a weirdo?" he demanded.

"I don't know about the fires, but I do know a thousand-yard stare when I see one." His cousin's voice lowered in that way he hated, showin' his weakness. "Seen it on too many of my brothers in the marines after Karrakas."

"Oh, fuckin' hell. Don't tell me you're going to discount her just because she looks like one of the dead-eyed fucks from your army days." Davis nearly pulled the knife out of his

boot and shanked the fucker right then and there, no matter how many people would see. “She can be both a fucking supe and traumatized.”

“If she was a supe, more woulda happened. Besides, water supes can’t control fire.” Perry’s tone told him that he wasn’t going to hear another word on the subject, havin’ made up his damn fool mind.

Davis nearly snarled.

At this point, he wasn’t sure he cared if she was a supe or not. He needed to fuckin’ kill something!

The entire time they’d been there, they’d not seen heads or tails of *any* supe, and the longer they stayed, the more close-lipped the locals were. It pissed him off. They’d driven out here using intel that mighta been good... if they’d arrived a year ago when that old mayor was still here. Davis had been about to call it quits, but somethin’ about that woman at the port had bugged him.

Even if she’s not a supe, she’d look real pretty gutted like a fish. I wonder what her screams sound like... The thought excited him, and he had to subtly adjust his pants.

They stayed a little longer to see if anythin’ else happened, but when nothin’ did, they got back into their truck and headed back towards the port to go back to the hotel. The fuckin’ GPS on Davis’s phone, however, glitched out and sent them around into the fuckin’ boonies on the opposite side of the island. To make matters worse, mangy seals blocked the road they were on, which was already too narrow to turn around with how big their truck was.

After waiting what felt like ages—only made worse by Perry’s God-awful choice of music—two men in a police cruiser came up behind them and parked. Davis tensed. They had enough weapons in their toolbox in the back to get them locked up, but he kept it cool.

One of the officers came up to the window and said, “Good afternoon, gentleman. Sorry about the seals. If you give us ten minutes, we’ll have them out of your way.”

“Thank you kindly, sir,” his cousin drawled, layin’ the charm on thick. He did have to give it to Perry, his cousin knew how to sweet talk people better than he ever could.

With another nod, the officer and his buddy started yellin’ at the seals, clappin’ their hands. It took some time to get all of them off, especially since one big motherfucker insisted on ignorin’ them. But one of the officers came up and smacked it on its hind end until it snapped at them yet moved anyway. The officers went back to their cruiser with a nod, and Perry drove forward...

And past a grouping of houses lining the road.

“Perry, Paul said that selkies live close to seals and often group up, didn’t he?” asked Davis.

“He did indeed. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinkin’ those houses were awfully close to where the seals roost and might be a good place to start lookin’ for some shifters.”

For a moment, Davis thought his cousin would tell him to fuck off again, but there was that glint in his eye, the one that told him he saw prey, and he knew they agreed.

“I think you might be right, cuz.”

It took forever to make it back to the port and another forever waitin’ for the ferry to bring them over, but finally they got back to Nora. Perry parked in front of the hotel they were stayin’ at but made it only three steps before a woman—who looked far too much like the freaky-eyed woman—walked up to them.

“Hello, gentleman. I was wondering if you had a moment,” she said, a wide smile on her face.

“Hello, ma’am. We’re free a moment, sure,” replied Perry.

“I noticed you two have been here for a while now, and I was wondering if you’d like to join my niece and I for dinner sometime this week. It seems a shame to be living off our poor excuse for ‘takeout’ every day.”

It was true; they'd been livin' off sandwiches for far too fuckin' long, and it was startin' to piss him off. The restaurants here closed at absurdly early hours, as did the piss-poor excuse for a grocery store. Like, he lived in a swamp more hospitable than this piece of shit island.

"We'd be happy to join you for dinner, ma'am," Davis forced out.

"Please, call me Violet, and I hope you like clam chowder."

"We love clam chowder," added Perry.

No, we fuckin' don't, thought Davis.

"Great! Come by on Wednesday around eight?"

Violet and Perry made plans, while Davis hung back. This was fortuitous timing. If this woman was in any way related to the woman they suspected was a supe, then maybe they could take them out like a two-for-one special. In any case, they'd be able to get more info on her.

A plan started to form in Davis's mind. Yes, he could suffer through clam chowder if that led to a kill.

CHAPTER 29

Rose



The next few days were hazy. Nothing more than me going through the motions in an attempt to not curl up and be one with my bed. I woke up, got dressed, went to work, came home, made dinner, then slept, only to repeat it the next day. My friends and Milo messaged me constantly, trying to cheer me up or send encouraging words, but I had little mental energy to respond.

What *could* I say?

Numbness made my mind and body into two separate entities. Sometimes, it was like I was watching my life from outside my body, and the energy required to make both parts work in tandem was far greater than I possessed. I tried to play it off in front of Vi, but she wasn't fooled. I didn't know what she wanted me to do. I didn't know what I *could* do. It's not like I could tell her what really was bothering me.

Any time emotion did edge out the numbness, it was pure despondence. I thought about how I might not ever get to eat breakfast with Vi again or sleep in my bed. On the way to work, I nearly sobbed thinking that I wouldn't be able to come back to the islands I called home anytime soon, if ever, as I saw no way to gain control of my powers and explain the changes I'd undergone.

It'd been hard enough to explain my eye after Eli had died, but how was I to explain both my eyes changing and my body being cold? I didn't know. So, I sought out the numbness. It was better than the alternative.

Of course, emotional numbness did nothing to stop the deep aches and pains in my body which went far beyond anything I'd felt outside of major illness. Not constantly, but it was getting worse as the days passed.

It wasn't just the vise around my ribs; it was also my limbs getting weak or losing feeling altogether. My skin occasionally felt like anything on it was made of needles stabbing into my flesh. Not only that, but there was a spreading cold, starting from my heart and radiating outwards that could be felt with my hands. It was terrifying.

When I'd called, Corvin said this was either due to the fight we'd had with Not-me Siren, or it was evidence of my human body breaking down. I think he meant this to be comforting, but it definitely was not. I had to all but completely dissociate to get through it.

That Wednesday, however, was only a little different. I'd forgotten that I'd made plans with Milo and Vi to make them dinner until he messaged me in the morning.

MILO

Good morning, love!

I'll be at your house around 5 with the clams

ME

Clams?

Oh, right. Clam chowder

Thank you

I look forward to cooking for you

I can't wait to see if your chowder is better than I remember New England clam chowder being

I don't know about that.

I only learned how to make it because I was bored with pasta

Well, the important thing is you feeding me

It pleases the 'beastie'

Belly rubs would please him

Oh, for sure

Have a good day, love and I'll message you later

You too

Be safe

My fingers nearly typed out 'I love you' out of habit, but I stopped myself before that happened. That was a bit too much for me to handle currently. Though, I could admit I was headed that way because of how amazing he was. More than that, the man had been my rock through all this.

His morning texts had been the only thing keeping me going, and his messages throughout the day helped me keep time as he always messaged me around noon, then again around five when he got back to the islands from fishing and checking the reefs and wildlife in the waters around the islands. It was nice. It was grounding.

I didn't deserve a guy like him, even if he thought I did.

But it motivated me to get up and put a little effort into my appearance. I didn't have the energy to put on makeup, but I did do my hair in more than a braid down my back and put on a nice dress.

Between then and when it was time for me to go home, I dissociated through most of it. I did remember to go to Jenny Mae's to grab what I needed after Milo messaged me to ask if I needed anything, but that was a miracle in and of itself. I made it home with enough of my wits about me to pour myself a glass of wine, then start getting everything for cooking.

Unfortunately, that left me just staring at my grocery bags until I heard a knock at the door.

Moving to the door, I opened it to see it was Milo, who offered me his best smile. “Hello, love.”

I gave him a pitiful one back. “Hey. Come on in.”

I moved out of his way so he could step inside before I shut the door behind him. Without prompting, he moved into the kitchen with his frankly ridiculous number of clams and set them in the sink, then turned to me and pulled me into his arms without preamble. He squeezed me tightly, and I breathed in his scent, sweet cinnamon and the sea, letting him help me feel safe for just a moment.

“Oh, Rose,” he whispered into my hair, “I wish there was a way to help you through this. I hate seeing you like this.”

I squeezed him closer to me, fending off the other emotions that wanted desperately to swamp me. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. All you need to focus on is you. I’m a big boy. I can handle myself until this is through.”

This is through, meaning I’m no longer human and have to leave behind the life I’ve worked so hard to build.

“Thank you for understanding,” I whispered into his chest, burying my nose there and taking in more of his scent.

“Of course. I want to give you what you need first and foremost.”

We stayed like that for a long time, with him simply holding me in his arms. It made me feel a little more human again, a little more in my body in a way that wasn’t painful, and it cleared some of the cobwebs in my mind so that I felt able to do what needed to be done next. It was as if he was holding the broken pieces of myself together, and I didn’t want to move, even knowing I had food I needed to get started on.

But before I stepped away from him, I asked, “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Of course.” He kissed the top of my head. “I’ll give you a wild night of hot monkey sex, too, if you need it. All you have to do is say the word, and I’m yours to command... or I can command you, if that’s your fancy. I do quite like being in charge.”

I snorted. “You’re such a horn dog.”

“Grade A.” He smirked, mischief glittering in his eyes that I couldn’t help but smile at. Damn if the man didn’t know how to bring me out of my fog. “So, what can I help you with?”

Letting out a long, deliberate breath, I looked over at my still-in-the-Nora-branded-reusable-bags groceries and set everything out that I needed as I tried desperately to remember how it was done. When my memory came up short, I slipped out my phone and pulled up the email that an old coworker from the advertising firm in Boston had sent me with her family’s recipe attached. This was what I needed to knock loose the knowledge of what I needed to do.

“Could you cook the clams?” I asked him as I showed him the recipe on my phone. While he read, I pulled out the pot I wanted to use and put the appropriate amount of water into it.

“Sure.”

Moving around the kitchen with him was as easy as it was with Aunty. We never bumped into each other, were never in each other’s way. As with everything with him, it was effortless. He prepared the clams while I got everything else ready, with him stepping in to help with chopping and whatnot while he waited for the clams to open.

Where he differed from Vi was the number of kisses he stole and the “accidental” groping he did, but everything he did helped keep me out of the fog and numbness. It helped me forget everything else but him and our tasks. And somehow, it helped push the pain away. It was nice.

Once the clams were done cooking, when he’d started cutting them, I reached over, trying to hide my smile, and ran my hand over the front of his pants to get him back for the

nipple tweak he'd done not two minutes prior. The low growl that rumbled through him was music to my ears.

"Oh, sorry," I said, not sorry at all. "Just trying to get into this drawer here."

I rubbed my hand along his hardening length for just long enough to make him strain in his pants before I moved my hand away to actually get into the drawer. His growl turned frustrated, and dropping the clam and knife in his hand, he yanked me close to him to press his hardness against my stomach and plunder my mouth with a kiss that ended any and all thoughts in my brain.

When he pulled away and looked down at me, his smirk was triumphant. He stepped away again, returning to his task, leaving me to gather up my scattered thoughts on my own, the jerk. I pouted at him, then whacked him on the ass with the utensil I'd pulled out of the drawer.

"Hey now! I didn't know you liked it rough like that. We can take turns spanking each other later if you'd like, and I'll let you call me daddy," he said, and all I could do was sputter, choking on my own spit.

"You're the worst," I said when I could string words together.

He flashed me yet another grin. "I am, but I'm also into trying anything once. What do you say?"

"I'm not using my aunt's cookware to satisfy your kinky weirdness!"

"We don't have to use her cookware. We have hands," he said, wiggling his fingers suggestively.

My mind stuttered over the words as I comprehended them. "I'm... You... You're such a pervert."

"I thought we went over this earlier. Grade A perverted horn dog."

Before I could say anything else, he stole another kiss from me, quieting any protests. This time when he pulled away, I went back to cooking if only so I wouldn't encourage him

further. Of course, that didn't stop me from leaning in once or twice to nuzzle his arm.

When it came time to start putting everything together, it was suddenly very obvious to me that I hadn't been paying a whole lot of attention to how much I was making as everything didn't fit into one pot, and I had to get a whole second pot to put the other half in, as I'd forgotten that the portions for this recipe were for a family reunion-style gathering and not just regular dinner. Milo laughed at me as I stared at the sheer amount of clam chowder we'd made.

"Perhaps you can take the second pot and give it to your crew for lunch tomorrow?" I suggested, blinking at the huge pots before me. "And maybe your family too?"

"I'm sure that will please the guys. My girl, providing for me and my friends? I might have to fight them off." His eyes twinkled with mischief.

"I'm going to assume this is some sort of selkie mating thing?" My confidence in that statement was wavering at best, but I wasn't left in the dark as he took the hint and filled in the blanks for me.

"Selkies, unlike some Otherkind, desire an equal partnership between mates. They provide equally for each other. In the old days, that meant one partner went out and brought in the fish, and the other cooked and prepared said fish. Nowadays, 'providing' equally is easier to do, but there's something instinctual about having my girl take what I've brought her and make delicious food with it."

"It pleases your beastie?" I asked, stirring one of the pots.

Milo came up behind me and wrapped me in an embrace, his face going into my neck as a rumble vibrated from him, and when he spoke, his voice had lowered. Even without looking, I knew his eyes would be that warm cinnamon I enjoyed as much as the jade. "It pleases me very much."

He nipped at my neck, and I shivered. "I... need to focus on this... I don't want to burn it."

"Hmm. Very well, then. Later."

Whether that was a threat or a promise, or both, I wasn't sure, but he did back off... But not before nipping my neck again.

"The two of you are so goddamn cute," said Vi from behind us.

I startled, jumping out of my skin, but Milo held me in place, unfazed. He said, "Good evening, Violet. How was your day?"

"It was the same as usual. Miss Winnie was in the shop again for *two hours* with the latest gossip from town hall. You'd think her son would know not to tell her anything unless he wanted everyone to know," she said, walking over to us. She kissed me on the cheek, then tugged Milo down to do the same to him before looking at the pots on the stove. "Goodness, you made a lot of chowder. You planning on feeding the army with all this?"

"If by army, you mean Milo's crew, then yeah." I blushed anew. "I forgot the recipe I have serves, like, twenty people."

"Well, it's good you made so much, as I invited two others to join us," she said, moving around the kitchen to start setting the table.

"Oh? Who's that?" I asked. It wasn't uncommon for us to invite people to dinner on the fly; it was kinda an island thing.

"I invited those two strangers that've been staying at the hotel recently."

Everything in me stilled, and Milo's arms went rigid around me.

"Oh?" I said, trying to keep my voice even. "Which ones?"

"Those two who sound like they're from the South. You know, the ones who've been going around town and asking everyone those weird questions about local lore that have everyone in an uproar?"

If Milo's arms hadn't been around me, I would've collapsed to the ground.

The hunters.

She meant the fucking *hunters*.

My heart began to beat wildly in my chest, testing the limits of the bonds until Milo's hand moved just under my breast. His fingers played out to cup the curve of my ribcage. Warmth spread through me, radiating from his hand, and after a few moments, my heart calmed, even if my mind kept racing.

“Why would you invite them?” I asked none too nicely. “They make everyone uncomfortable.”

“That's precisely why I invited them. I want to suss out what they're really here for, especially since I know that they're using fake names to gain access to people's houses.”

Stepping out of Milo's arms after kissing his hand, I turned to look at her. “What do you mean?”

“They've been telling people they're writing a book on local lore and giving fake names to the older folk in town, which we wouldn't have caught if they'd at least been consistent with their names. Legally, they've done nothing wrong, so the police and the town council can't make them leave, but me and the others I've spoken to think they're up to no good. I want to see what they're really here for so I can see if I can convince them to leave.”

“Are you sure that's necessary?” asked Milo. “If they're dangerous, then they might pose a threat to you.”

She smiled a little. “Which is why you're here. I'm sorry. I should've mentioned it before and given you both the choice, but...”

“No, it's fine. I wouldn't want you two to be with them alone,” replied Milo. Though he tried to sound nonchalant, the lines of his body were tense.

“Thank you.” Her expression softened. “They'll be here at seven. I'll try to keep their stay brief.”

When she left to go change out of her work clothes, all I could do was look at Milo in horror. Vi had invited the hunters into our home. When I was in the middle of changing into what they preyed on.

I wanted to throw up.

“Don’t worry. I can keep you calm while they’re here, if you let me,” whispered Milo so low I nearly missed him speaking altogether. “I don’t want you to pop your bindings.”

I nodded. Once more, what else could I do? They were coming whether I wanted them here or not.



The table was set with five place settings, and the food was brought to the table for easier access in case anyone wanted seconds. There was salad, bread and butter, clam chowder, oyster crackers, and wine, all of which was laid out meticulously. It was what I could do to ease the growing anxiety, but when that was done, I had nothing left to do with my hands, so I fiddled with my pearl necklace, running my fingers over the smooth spheres as I chewed on my lip.

The closer it got to seven, the worse I felt, until Milo came up beside me and wrapped an arm around me. Almost instantly, calming warmth spread through me enough so that I could breathe again, and my muscles untensed. I leaned my head against him, closing my eyes.

“How’re you doing that?” I asked in a whisper.

“I’m not an empath or telepath like Aeden, but one of the gifts I do have is to help stabilize moods. It’s not usually something I control, but in cases like this, I can focus on soothing my girl when she needs it.”

“I like it when you call me your girl.” I didn’t know why I was admitting that right now of all times, but here I was.

“Good. I want you to like being mine. I certainly like being yours.” He kissed the top of my head.

“I’d like to wrap you around me and hide forever.”

“That can be arranged.” He smirked down at me. “I’ll wrap you in my arms and my pelt when we survive all this and never let you go.”

A loud rap at the door had me jolting even as he pushed more calmness into me. Squeezing him one last time, I moved out of his arms to grab his hand, then went to the door, meeting Vi in the hallway.

It was showtime.

Vi opened the door with a broad smile that I recognized was her ‘I’m dealing with idiot tourists/customer service’ smile, and it made me feel a little better knowing she wasn’t looking forward to this at all either.

“Hello!” she said, her voice pleasant. “I’m so glad you came!”

The two hunters on the other side of the door wore plaid shirts, jeans, and work boots, and they were looking as spiffy as one would living out of a suitcase in a hotel for several weeks.

The taller of the two smiled at us and reached his hand forward to shake Vi’s, and I nearly retched seeing the bloodred all but dripping from their fingers. Some of that taint stained Vi’s hand when she pulled away. When it came time, Milo shook his hand next, then I did, though reluctantly, and we did the same for the smaller man.

“Why don’t you come on in? Dinner’s ready and waiting,” encouraged Vi with a smile.

“Thank you, ma’am. We appreciate your hospitality,” said the taller one.

Milo and I shuffled out of the way, gesturing towards the kitchen, where they took their seats. I desperately wiped my hand off on the skirt part of my dress, but when I looked down at it, the reminder of their touch was still there. Before I sat down to join them, I washed my hands, but it didn’t get any of the red off, and I had to sit down to avoid looking suspicious.

Milo and I sat opposite the hunters while Vi sat at the head of the table, and once I joined them, Milo reached over to grip

my thigh, sending more warmth into me, helping me relax even just a little bit. Everyone helped themselves to the chowder as Vi made sure they had drinks.

It was Milo who spoke first, giving them a smile as he ladled chowder into my bowl for me.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I don’t think I caught your names.”

“Oh, sorry ‘bout that! My name’s Perry, and this is my cousin Davis,” replied the taller one, returning my boyfriend’s smile.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” said Milo in return. “I’m Milo, and this is my girlfriend, Rose.”

“It’s nice to meet you both as well,” I said, pushing the words past the lump in my throat and making myself smile.

“Likewise,” said Perry.

Vi leaned forward to grab the oyster crackers. “So, what brought you to our lovely islands?”

“We wanted to explore and learn more about local lore,” answered Perry, his southern drawl prominent. “We’re tryin’ to write a book about various local legends, and we thought islands like these must have amazing myths.”

“Our own area of Louisiana is home to so many local legends that we grew up with, and we always wanted to learn more as we grew older,” added Davis. He took a big bite of the chowder, then wrinkled his nose. Clearly, he wasn’t a fan.

Good. Maybe then they’ll leave faster.

“So, you were close growing up?” I forced myself to ask before I took a bite of my own food. The flavor was rich on my tongue, and if the hunters hadn’t been here, I’d have moaned in appreciation.

“Oh, we practically grew up together. Our fathers were close as could be. Practically lived together even as adults, so we saw each other near every day.” Perry’s reaction to the food was one of appreciation. “Goodness gracious, ma’am. This is some good cookin’, if I do say so myself.”

“It’s a family recipe of an old coworker of mine,” I replied. “I’m sure she’d be pleased to know others love it as much as I do.”

He smiled. “Please pass on our compliments.”

Silence lapsed between us again for several moments before Vi spoke again. “Have you been successful in getting what you needed for your book?”

In that moment, I admired her guile. I certainly couldn’t pull it off.

“To tell you the truth, not really,” said Perry. He seemed to be the talker of the two, while Davis was content to watch our every movement warily. “The locals here aren’t very talkative, despite our best efforts.”

“I’m sorry about that. We’re a bit wary of strangers after what happened with our mayor.”

That perked them up a bit. Davis asked, “What happened with him?”

“Oh, it’s quite awful. There was corruption through and through. He came in five, six years ago and rigged the election so he’d become mayor, then started buying up federal land for his own use and running everyone off. Then he vanished,” said Vi with a sigh. “He devastated our island with what he’d done.”

“That’s awful, ma’am.”

“It really is.” She took a careful bite of salad. “Do you think you’ll be staying much longer? I can’t imagine there’s much else to do here.”

“We think we’ll stay until after the Fourth of July, and if we don’t find anything we like by then, we’re gonna head back.”

Fourth of July was all too close and all too far at the same time, but I took in a breath. I could endure for the week or so it would be until they left. I could... I hoped.

“If you don’t mind me askin’,” started Davis out of nowhere, his eyes locking with mine, making my blood run

cold, “what happened to your eye? It’s very unique.”

Milo’s hand squeezed my thigh again as I fended off shakes. The way he looked at me was how a predator looks at prey. He *knew* something was different about me, and it was all I could do to stay in my seat.

“I was in a boating accident last year, and something happened that damaged my eye and made me lose my memory,” I said, my voice as even as I could make it.

“How would an accident cause your eye to look so... unnatural?” he pressed. He’d stopped eating altogether and was staring at me with such intensity that I had to reach down and grab Milo’s hand, but I stared him back down in the way my own father would when he was arguing with my mother: utterly devoid of any emotion that gave away how he was truly feeling.

“I think they had to use lasers or something to save my vision, but I’m not sure. I was unconscious when I was brought to the hospital, and I nearly lost vision in that eye permanently from what happened. So long as I can see out of it, I don’t care what color it turned out or what the doctors had to do to save it,” I said pointedly.

Despite the calm flooding me, adrenaline spiked within me. This sort of forwardness wasn’t like me, and a little voice whispered in the back of my mind that I was outing myself somehow, but I wanted him to back off.

Perry reached over to hit his cousin on the arm, saying, “Please forgive him. He’s unsocialized, and his mother dropped him on his head as a baby.”

“I am *not*, and she did *not*,” retorted Davis, punching Perry on the arm.

“Well, then stop being an insensitive prick.”

Davis puffed up for a moment but then backed down, slumping in his seat. He grabbed his spoon and angrily shoveled a bite of chowder into his mouth, then wrinkled his nose once more. Perry looked at me again, apologetic.

“I’m sorry to hear about your accident. It must’ve been difficult for you,” he said.

“It was. It is. A friend of mine died that night, and I still don’t know how it happened.”

Vi steered the conversation away from that, her expression strained, but my appetite was ruined. I nibbled on a bit of bread, trying to get something into my system so I wouldn’t feel awful in the morning, but knowing that Davis suspected something about me set me on edge. Only Milo kept the anxiety at bay by pumping calmness through me. Even still, I felt like I would be sick.

They ended up asking Vi questions about supernatural creatures, but she gave no information to them that couldn’t be found in the book that I’d recommended to them, which they pointed out, and Vi only shrugged. “Those are our legends. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you anything different.”

When they finally left, I grabbed the bottle of wine we had in the fridge, popped the cork, and drank straight from the bottle until only a quarter was left. Both Milo and Vi looked at me with wide eyes once I pulled the bottle from my lips.

“I didn’t realize this was going to be so stressful for you, sweetie. I’m sorry,” said Vi.

“There’s just something about them that doesn’t feel right,” I said, and it was the truth. I knew exactly what was wrong with them.

They were butchers.

“You felt that way too?” she asked.

“A hundred percent.”

“How did you feel about them, Milo?” she asked, turning to him.

“I agree with both of you. I don’t trust them,” he responded, crossing his arms.

Vi thought about this, then nodded. “Well, I hope that they keep their word and leave after the fourth. At this point, that’s

all we can do.” She sighed. “Go on upstairs, kiddos. I’ll clean up down here.”

“Are you sure?” asked Milo. “We can help.”

“You cooked; I can clean. You can wash up after breakfast tomorrow. Now, go on.” She waved us off, already picking up our dishes.

“Thank you, Violet.” He grinned at her, then kissed her on the cheek.

“The second pot is for Milo’s crew,” I said, tired all of a sudden.

She nodded. “I’ll label the lid.”

We said our goodnights and went upstairs. After brushing our teeth, Milo had me in my pajamas and in his arms in bed. I clung to him, wishing I could just stay there with him until all this nonsense was over. He kissed me sweetly on the lips, then pressed a kiss to my forehead before tucking my head under his chin.

“We’re going to be fine. They’re only here a little while longer, and then they’ll leave,” whispered Milo into the dark.

As much as I wanted to believe him, something told me it wasn’t going to be that easy. And as I drifted off to sleep in his arms, a sound jolted me out of my descent.

Pop!

CHAPTER 30

Perry Brown



“**W**hy’d you give them our real names, dumbass?” Davis asked, seething, almost as soon as the door to the Sutton’s was shut.

Perry shrugged, nonchalant-like. “It’s not like it matters at this point since you can’t keep your fucking aliases straight. Maybe if you stopped thinking about killing and put more energy into finding out what’s going on here, I wouldn’t have.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

He threw a punch at his cousin before stakin’ off towards the hotel, which afforded Perry some silence to think. Something bugged him, and he was sure that his cousin wasn’t gonna like what he thought. So he stayed silent while he figured out how to bring it up with the idiot in a way that wasn’t gonna get him stabbed.

Before they got back to the hotel room, Davis insisted on goin’ to the vending machine to buy an armload’s worth of garbage, grumbling the whole time about how nasty Rose’s cookin’ had been. Perry’d thought it delicious, but knowin’ what he knew about his cousin, it didn’t surprise him that he didn’t like food that wasn’t his mama’s cookin’. Ignoring his bitchin’ as usual, he just rolled his eyes and started walking again once Davis’s arms were full, the glutton.

Davis went into that dinner one hundred percent certain that they were going to find all the evidence they needed to determine that the woman was some sort of supe. Perry wasn’t

certain, but he'd agreed to keep an eye out regardless. They'd planned to catalogue everything and make sure that they knew exactly what she was and make a plan from there on how to kill her... were she a supe.

As he expected, though, the woman showed no signs of being anything other than a human with an odd eye. And if he were really honest with himself? That little incident on the beach looked to be nothing more than a PTSD flashback, which he was all too familiar with himself.

Her story about the boating accident lined up with the injuries detailed in the newspaper articles, and lookin' back at what happened, he could easily explain away what he'd seen as nothing more than a coincidence with the fire. He knew that far-off look anywhere. It was amazing what the body remembered when the mind didn't.

They got back to the hotel room, and Davis went straight to the table to begin chowing down on his snacks while he sat on his own bed, thinkin'.

There really had been no other signs of her being a supe. Not her or her aunt or her boyfriend. Evidence pointed to selkies being on the other island, but they needed to gather more evidence first, so they didn't slaughter innocent humans in their beds—though he was certain his cousin didn't give a shit.

“What's got you sighin' like that?” asked Davis.

“I don't think she's a supe,” he replied. He braced himself for a fight. He knew his cousin was like a dog with a bone, never wantin' to let go of something until he was satisfied or had forgotten about it.

“She has to be. You saw what happened at the beach the other day.”

“Just like I told you then, what I saw was a woman having a flashback and a panic attack,” said Perry. “A boating accident would cause both of those things, even if she doesn't fully remember what happened.”

“And what about the ones who were with her and left with her, hm?” his cousin asked with his mouth full of chips.

“They were her doctor, her therapist, and her boyfriend. You were there when we asked about them.” He narrowed his eyes at his cousin.

God, he wanted to punch his cousin straight in the face sometimes for conveniently “forgetting” facts like this. It made him wonder if he’d killed innocent people before, just to make sure that he’d get a kill in... Perry didn’t want to think about that as a possibility.

“Even still, the dumb bitch’s fucked-up eye has to be some work of the supernatural. No one has eyes like that naturally,” grumbled Davis, shoving more chips into his mouth.

“I’ll give you that. But it seems more like she was caught in the crossfire than anything else. You know what that one old lady said. Rose had been involved with the mayor’s son, who we both know was a mermaid, but the mayor didn’t like her being involved with him. It’s most likely something happened that night, and her memory was wiped.” It was certainly possible. They’d both seen cases like that before.

“Then she at least knows about supes.”

Perry groaned loudly. He knew that look on his cousin’s face meant that he still wanted to kill her. “First, knowin’ about supes isn’t worthy of death, otherwise we should be put to death, too, and second, it’s most likely that any knowledge she might’ve had was wiped away when her memory was erased.”

“Fine. You don’t think she’s a supe. *I* still think she is. Why don’t we keep watch on her and check to make sure, and at the first sign that she is anything other than human, then we kill her. Can you live with that, ya damn bleedin’ heart?”

“Fine,” he groaned, “But if we don’t, we’ll leave here to make a trip down to Atesorado before heading back to Louisiana.”

Davis looked like he’d won the argument, but something his daddy told him came to mind as he looked at his cousin:

Your uncle and your cousin value the kill over the righteousness of our cause. You gotta watch out for 'im to make sure he doesn't stray from the straight and narrow. Otherwise, he'll be nothing more than a serial killer, and it'd hurt our cause more than help it.

Lookin' over at his cousin, Perry was beginnin' to think his daddy was right.

CHAPTER 31

Rose



My eyes were itchy, and my senses were intermittently so sensitive beyond what I could experience as a human that it hobbled me. There were hot flashes, and the need to go to the ocean was constant and grinding and more so each day that I denied it... But the worst part was the fact that every day my chest was a little less cinched, more of the bindings snapping.

My body felt less like my own, and I had to act like everything was fine, not just for the hunters, but for Vi as well.

It was maddening.

I'd never known how sensitive Otherkind were when it came to their senses. How did they live like this and pretend to be human? It was bad enough when I couldn't hear anything but the buzzing of the fluorescent lights, or when Vi found me staring at a rainbow reflected on the wall from one of the sun catchers in the shop. During breakfast the morning after our dinner with the hunters, she caught me running my fingers over the lace of the tablecloth because it felt so nice to touch.

Focus? We didn't know her.

I was stretched so thin that everything else was too much to keep track of, but the routine of my life made things a little easier to pretend like I was fine and not having my whole being rearranged from the soul outwards. Wake up, go to work, come home, sleep. Day in and day out, the broad strokes remained the same even as I fell apart, and I was counting down the days until the hunters would leave, even though I

had a sneaking suspicion that they were not going to go like they said they would.

The Friday after our dinner, I was a mess trying to get myself together enough to get to work. I'd gotten distracted by the feel of my sheets against my skin and had to skip my shower because I'd spent so much time rubbing my skin against them. Then walking to the shop, my attention was stolen away again by the way the sun's light reflected off the water in the bay and the intense urge to jump into it. Every ounce of self-control I had was used to keep me from doing it.

It was a miracle I made it to work on time.

Thankfully, I was able to focus on work and the new shipment we'd gotten the day before when I first arrived. I needed to put the items into the system, then place them on the shelves. What didn't fit on the shelves went into the storage room we'd made from one of the old bedrooms.

Reaching down as I meticulously placed the items on their proper shelves, I scratched at my left calf. It'd started just after I'd finished adding the shipment to the system, an itch that wouldn't go away. Given that it was June, the mosquitos were out in full force, and it didn't surprise me that I'd fallen victim to their bites. But holy cow, was this one annoying. Grabbing my phone and some itch cream from my purse, I went to use the bathroom.

As I rounded the corner to go to the bathroom, I looked out the window at the bay, as I'd done so many times that day. The sparkle off the water was mesmerizing, but that's not what caught my eye. I stopped in my tracks. There, in the parking lot by the boats across the street from the shop, was Davis.

My blood ran cold.

His eyes were trained on me through the window, not even bothering to look away when our eyes locked. From where he stood, I knew that he could see directly into the shop.

They know.

They have to know.

Turning away from the window, I hurried into the bathroom. My hands shook as I tried to latch the lock on the door which I knew would be a flimsy defense against two full-grown men, should they decide to hunt me down in broad daylight. I could only hope, as panic rocketed inside me, that they wouldn't be so stupid.

I sat down on the toilet, putting my bag on the floor next to me after I pulled out my phone to message the wider Otherkind group chat we had.

ME

Hey, one of the hunters is outside the shop

It looks like he's watching me

I think they know

Putting my phone back in my purse to wait for them to respond, I pulled the itch cream out of my bag. I stretched my leg out so I could get a good look at what the bite looked like, but when I did, the tube dropped from my hands and clattered onto the floor. There was no bug bite there on my leg.

There were scales.

Just like the ones on Not-me Siren and the same I'd seen the night I panic-changed, a growing patch of opalescent scales were forming on the outside of my left calf starting from my ankle and climbing up towards my knee.

Before my very eyes, I watched my skin pucker and shift one new scale at a time, and as I watched, an odd, prickly sensation washed over me.

Oh no. Oh no no no nonononoNONOOOOOO!

A scream bubbled up in my throat, but with the hunter outside, I held it in, pressing my hand over my mouth. Panic came next, rising from the pits of my stomach like a raging beast intent on ripping itself out of me. It dizzied me, and I scrambled to grab my phone. In my panic, I nearly called Will again, bypassing Milo's name completely and almost hitting

the call button for him instead. But I corrected myself, scrolling back to my boyfriend's name before I could make another mistake. He answered almost as soon as I put the phone to my ear.

“Hey, Rose. I wasn't expecting to hear from you until tonight. What's—” He stopped himself. “What's wrong?”

“I—I have scales on my leg.” I looked down at the offending limb, scaring myself anew and making myself whimper. “I'm wearing a skirt, and they won't go away, so I can't leave the bathroom. And one of the hunters is outside the shop...”

Without hesitation, he replied, “Okay. I'll be right there. I can get some pants from your house. Which ones should I bring?”

“There's a blue pair with a black strip along the side in my closet. C—Could you bring those ones?”

“Of course. I'll be there in just a few minutes. Don't worry. I'll be right there.”

“Thank you, Milo. Please hurry.”

With that, he hung up, and I was left huddling in the bathroom trying not to make any more noise than necessary. Getting Vi's attention was the last thing I wanted right then. How could I even explain it?

But this left me alone with myself and the scales. I watched in horror as they spread up to my thigh, the skin there hardening one scale at a time until nearly the whole left side of my leg was covered in them. The opalescent scales glinted pink to blue to purple in the harsh fluorescent lights overhead. Were they on any other person, were they not on me, I might have thought them beautiful, but they *were* on me, part of me, and I hated each and every one of them.

Though I'd seen this before and had made myself look at my new form that night, I still wasn't ready for this. Unable to watch any longer, my heart already threatening to punch through the bonds, I tried to do my grounding exercises. I named off so many different things I could see, hear, feel, and

smell, but my chest still was bound tight. Tears streamed down my face, obscuring my vision, but I still tried. I still pushed on, trying to calm myself even though it wasn't working.

"I can see the door, the lock, the hinges, the toilet," I whispered, my voice cracking, "I can feel the tiles, the fabric of my shirt, the breeze from the fan, the—"

"Rose?" Milo's voice called out.

"I'm here," I called back.

I reached up to unlock the door, and soon after, Milo's face appeared. Shimmying inside with a furtive glance behind him, his arms were around me the second the door was locked behind him again, and once they were, warm, soothing calm rushed into me. Little by little, my muscles unclenched, and I could breathe again. Only then did he sit me down on the toilet and kneel in front of me.

His fingers brushed the scales on my leg so gently they were almost reverent, sending shivers up and down my spine. Leaning forward, he kissed the ones on my thigh, then looked up at me. There was such tenderness and awe on his face that it made my spiraling thoughts center.

"They are beautiful, Rose. I know you don't want to hear that, but I truly think they are. Just as you are beautiful to me." Truth shone in his eyes as his pierced mine, the color shifting to cinnamon, and when he spoke, his voice had dropped to a lower tone. "I have the most beautiful girlfriend in all the worlds."

Reaching out, I put my hand on his cheek. "Thank you."

Those strong hands of his squeezed my calves. "Let's get you changed."

All I could do was nod. Procuring a reusable bag from behind him, he pulled the exact pair of pants I wanted out, and before I could do it myself, he started pulling my flats off. Then Milo had me stand, and when I did, he pulled my skirt down and off me, replacing it soon after with the pants. All the while, his hands were gentle in everything he did.

“I talked to Vi before I came here. I asked her if she’d be okay without you, as you were feeling sick, and she said yes. So, you have the rest of the afternoon off,” he said, his eyes and voice back to normal. “Why don’t we head to the beach by my family’s houses? No one’s there right now, so it will be quiet and undisturbed.”

I thought about it, and the idea of spending time in my bed was tempting, but I knew the moment my head hit the pillow, my thoughts would come crashing in, so I nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay. Let’s go, love.”

Helping me stand up, we went downstairs and said our goodbyes to Vi before he walked me to his boat. Thankfully, Davis was gone when we went outside, so I could breathe a little easier. But it only left me to worry where he’d gone and what, if anything, he’d seen. Milo tucked me into my usual seat while he piloted the boat to the docks near his family’s houses. The whole way there, we were silent, and I was grateful for it, as I was too mired in my thoughts and feelings to do much else. When we arrived, he ushered me off the boat and towards his house.

As soon as we passed the beach, that damned urge to go to it swelled within me more fiercely than before. It rushed through me, rising up and wrapping around my mind until I could think of nothing else. I stopped in my tracks in an attempt to stave off the compulsion, but it wouldn’t let go.

And I just snapped.

Pulling out of Milo’s grasp, I dropped my purse in the sand and kicked off my flats before stomping towards the water.

“Rose?” Milo called after me, but I didn’t answer him.

The prickly sensation washed over all of my body, and an elation bloomed in my chest the moment my feet touched the water, the souls all but sighing in relief. Walking until the water was up to my waist, I stopped, despite everything in me screaming to go farther, to dive beneath the waves and let them feel what they’d been missing since being attached to

me. But I didn't... I couldn't. Instead, I screamed, wordless at first as the worst of the prickly feelings came over me.

"No!" I yelled at the top of my lungs, slapping the water with hands which were no longer human. I don't know who exactly I was screaming at, but it didn't stop me from continuing. "I don't want this! I don't want to be a fucking mermaid!"

I kept slapping the water over and over again, the sight of the claws and webbing only making my anger worse.

"Is this the thanks I get for trying to save my friend? Is this what it means to be Otherkind? Am I going to be terrified for the rest of my existence all because I dared try to help Eli so he didn't have to leave? So that Vi could have the family she deserved?" When I ran out of breath, I sucked in as much as I could before my chest tightened, then kept going. "I was doing what was right, and it didn't even matter! And now I'm being punished for it? Why?"

"I was *happy* with an ordinary, boring life! I was happy being the shopkeeper's niece! I didn't want anything else, and yet because one asshole decided to fuck everything up, I have to lose everything I've built! Why? Tell me why!"

My rant was cut short when a wave knocked me off my feet, but it just pissed me off more. Once underwater, I returned to screaming wordlessly until I had nothing left in me. I wrung out every bad feeling I'd been holding inside me, every bit of anxiety, anger, sorrow, terror... I let it all go, and when I was done, I curled up on the sand under the water and just lay there.

The tightness in my chest eased until I could breathe normally. There was nothing left in me to fight against what was going on, and the souls, the talisman, knew it. I hated that the pain subsided the moment I had nothing left in me to resist, just like Not-me Siren said it would. It left a bitter taste in my mouth.

There was no hope left to hold on to that this was all a mistake. Nothing could stave off the changes happening to my body. They were here, and they were only going to get

worse... if the hunters didn't kill me first. All this was my fault, for being noble.

A pair of hands smoothing my hair out of my face brought my awareness back to reality, and as I looked up, I saw it was Milo. He picked me up out of the water, cradling me to his chest, and took me a little closer to the shore, but not completely out of the water. He sat so our lower halves were still submerged.

"Rose, I think it's time—" he started, only for me to cut him off.

"Don't say it. Don't." My voice cracked as I trembled. "Please."

"Rose, if—when—you leave, I'm going with you. You don't have to do this alone, and I don't want you to. We'll find someone to train you; I have merfolk friends around the world who'd love to help. We'll get the hunters off your trail and off the islands," he said, kissing my temple. "But you won't be alone. Not for a minute. It would break me to know you were out there on your own while you're dealing with all this."

Despondence ate at me. All that I was about to lose... everything that I wasn't sure I could afford to give up for my own mental health... loomed large over me. "But how? How can we leave without it being suspicious?"

He thought for a moment. "We'll say that we're going on a couple's tour across the ocean. It will take quite some time to get anywhere interesting, and while we're gone, you can train and learn control over your powers."

"And what about Vi? She might not allow me that much time off. What if I never gain control of my powers?" There were so many questions, and they continued to tumble out of my mouth until Milo put his hand to my cheek.

"Rose, my sweet, Violet will be safe. My family will protect her. As for if she doesn't allow you time off, well, I'm sure you can convince her to. Worst-case scenario, you'll have to quit. Say you're taking time off for your mental health. In

any case, she'll still love you and welcome you back with open arms when you can come back.”

“It sounds so simple when you put it like that.” I put my head on his shoulder as he squeezed me tighter. He was warm, so warm, and his arms felt safe.

“I know it isn't. I know this is scary and overwhelming, but we can get through this, I promise,” he vowed.

If only I believed him.

How could I? Everything I loved was either taken from me or left me. It was only a matter of time before he would, too.

CHAPTER 32

Rose



The ocean stretched before me, lit up only by the shining stars of the Milky Way. There was comfort to be found in the waves lapping at my ankles, the water against my skin, and I sighed in contentment.

“It feels like home, does it not?” asked a voice beside me in an accent I’d never heard before.

I turned to find a woman there, as beautiful as the sea itself with hair dark as night, skin like glistening copper, and eyes that looked like the midnight sea. I’d never seen a woman as gorgeous as her. She exuded calm and peace, but the expression on her face was one of great sadness, a sadness I knew all too well.

Reaching out, I took her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. “It does feel like home,” I replied as she laced our fingers together.

“There’s not much time before you will join me here,” she said, turning to look at me so I could see the stars in her eyes. “I’m sorry that this has happened to you. The change was never meant to be this long or painful.”

“It’s my own fault. I was warned. I was just trying to make things better... but I failed. Everything turned out all wrong, and now I’ll lose everything.”

“I promise it won’t be so bad. Your aunt will be well taken care of until you return. I will ensure it happens.”

“Why?”

“You are to be one of mine. I want you to be happy.” She turned towards me more fully, then leaned forward to kiss me on the forehead. It sent a shiver through me. She really was achingly beautiful. “The worst is almost over. For now, rest. We’ll talk again later.”

“I’m scared,” I whispered, looking up into those amazing eyes of hers, overwhelmed by her.

“I know. I’ll be here every step of the way with you, and I will hear you whenever you talk to me, so don’t hesitate to reach out.”

There was that grief in her eyes again, and before I could even think about it, I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her to me. The woman returned my embrace and squeezed me tightly. She was so warm.

“When it’s time, I’ll be there. I will be waiting for you on the other side.”

My eyes fluttered open, the woman’s words still echoing in my head. A sense of peace settled over me, seeping into my soul. Whoever she was, she’d done a great job of alleviating my anger. My fear, however, still lingered. That, I knew, would stay for as long as this nonsense continued.

Looking up at Milo, who was still fast asleep and serving as my pillow, I smiled. *How did I get so lucky as to have a man like him as my lover?*

Waking up to Milo was a treat I wanted to always have; it was such a luxury. And knowing he would give that to me for as long as I wanted was enough for me to not totally dread leaving Nora, especially not when the dear man was purring. I’d have stayed here forever... if my body wasn’t screaming at me to go to the bathroom. Slowly extricating myself from his arms, I got out of bed and tip-toed towards the bathroom, trying not to wake him. The sun wasn’t even up yet.

His house had a similar layout to the one I stayed at the previous year, and it made it easy to find the ensuite bathroom, but only after I accidentally opened the closet door first. I

quickly did my business, then washed my hands, intent on getting back to bed, but curiosity about my boyfriend's house was too much to ignore. I'd been asleep when he brought me in, after having dozed off in his arms while we were in the water which robbed me of the opportunity to poke about the place while he was awake to show me around. It didn't stop me from doing it now as I stepped out of his room.

I could see surprisingly well in the dark—a gift from my turning, if I had to guess—and as I padded towards the kitchen, I took everything in. Unlike the house I stayed in, his walls were painted in soft earth tones and had many pictures of his family and friends. In the living room, I stopped to admire the ones he'd placed there, almost mural-like. These looked like the ones he really loved, all snapshots and candid of various parts of his long life. My eyes traced over each one, feeling like I was learning so much about him, until I stopped on one.

It was a picture of Milo and I.

Brushing my fingers over it, I stared at it, trying to think of when it could have been taken. It was taken from the side, and I was looking up at Milo as he cupped my cheeks. The expression on my face was one I'd seen on others before, soft and full of emotion...

Like I'd seen Vi look at Eli.

I'd never been one to be good at understanding my emotions, as I tended to shove them down to be as pleasant and neutral as possible. Anger, panic, grief. These were all emotions I knew and could recognize in myself easily, but looking at that picture, thinking about the man that I was with, something warm spread through my chest. Something I'd felt only once before, but whose name brought on an edge of panic.

Because what if he left?

What if Milo left me like Will had?

A pair of arms and a warm body wrapped around me, making that sharp edge of panic flee, and I leaned back into it.

Milo kissed my shoulder, then said, his voice thick with sleep, “Snooping around my house, are you?”

“I am. It’s only fair, since you did the same in my room,” I replied, threading my fingers through his as he hugged me to him.

“I’m not mad. I have nothing to hide. Besides, I like seeing you explore my den.” Before I could respond to that, he kissed my shoulder again and asked, “Why don’t you come back to bed for a little bit? You don’t have to be back for work for hours yet.”

“Okay,” was all I could say. As much as I wanted to savor the moment, make it last an eternity, he was right. And it would be plain cruel to keep him awake even when I couldn’t find rest myself.

“Good!” he replied, then nipped my neck. Picking me up in his arms princess-style, he carried me back to bed, purring the whole way.

CHAPTER 33

Rose



I 'd lied.

Then again, when hadn't I been lying recently?

Though I'd promised everyone to go to the sea more often, I didn't. Not because I didn't have time; I did. It was simply because I didn't want to. The stronger the urge to go to the water, the less I wanted to give in.

Stubbornness, I was learning, was very much a trait of mine and not one I liked about myself. Between it and the determination to ignore the spreading coolness in my veins, every pop of a broken bond, every switch into over-sensitive senses, everything... I reverted back to my state of denial.

I wasn't turning into a merperson. I wasn't being hunted. I wasn't about to lose everything that made me human.

Nope.

Not me.

But it wasn't sustainable, and it wouldn't be denied. Days passed after my screaming match with the ocean, and with each one, I woke with less and less energy. By Sunday, I was barely able to get out of bed to have breakfast. Even when I was there, I could barely stomach anything, my belly turned to acid. Vi was concerned seeing me like that, especially after I canceled my therapy appointment with Aeden. I'd nearly convinced her it was just the bug that the other islanders had been coming down with.

The day after, however, I wasn't even able to do that much, turning to run out of the kitchen when the scent of sausages hit my nose.

I barely made it to the bathroom before my stomach heaved, sending up nothing but bile, and by the time I was done, Vi was there, holding my hair out of my face and rubbing circles on my back like she used to do when I was a kid. Reaching up to flush the toilet, I laid my head against the cool seat and shuddered as the room spun.

"Are you sure you're okay, Rose?" she asked, handing me a cup full of water she'd seemingly procured from thin air.

I took it from her and rinsed my mouth out twice before answering, "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just that stomach bug."

"Are you sure? Everyone else has had a twenty-four-hour thing." Her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized me. "You still look green around the gills. Do I need to grab a test for you?"

"A what?" I blinked at her.

"A pregnancy test. You and Milo have been spending a lot of time together. It's possible."

My mind sputtered and died for a moment while I processed what she was saying before I could say anything. "Aunty, I'm... I'm not pregnant. I promise. I just got my period."

This was a lie, pure and simple, but it was all I could come up with.

"It wouldn't be a bad thing if you were. You're an adult. It's a bit early in the relationship, but Milo's a good man, and you clearly have a lot of feelings for him."

While I couldn't fault her logic, the absolute *last* thing I needed was to be pregnant. I sighed, pushed myself up off the floor, and sat on the toilet after closing the lid.

"I'm not pregnant. Though, I promise I'd tell you if I thought I was. We've been careful about birth control." Well, *he* had been, as he never took the necklace off, but the idea was there.

Vi sighed but gave me a small smile. “Okay. But if you were—”

“If I was, you’d be the second person I told.”

“Second?” She arched an eyebrow.

“After Milo, of course.”

“Ah, well, I suppose I can’t be mad about that.” She chuckled. “He, hypothetically, would’ve helped make the baby in the first place.”

I never imagined I’d have this conversation with my aunt, but no matter how much I cringed inside, reverting to my easily embarrassed teenage self, it was a normal thing to talk about with someone who was basically the mother I always wanted. It also was something I’d never given much thought to, having a family, so that added to the complexity of my feelings. Vi, of course, was relentless in her pursuit of why I was ill.

“Well, pregnant or not, you’re sick, and you’re staying home,” she said, her eyes alight with motherly fire.

“It’s okay, Aunty...” I trailed off when she gave me *the look*.

“You need to stay home. If not for yourself—which *should* be your first concern—but for the customers’ sake. It wouldn’t be good to have tourists see you visibly sick as the first thing they saw when they stepped into Nora. Besides, I don’t think you want the town gossip to start making assumptions like I did, do you?”

Her use of logic attacked my one weakness so cleverly that I couldn’t even argue. It didn’t stop me from giving her an exaggerated pout, however.

“You’re right,” I grumbled. “Damn it.”

“I know I’m right. You go on up to bed and sleep.” Resigning myself to losing this fight, I allowed her to lead me back upstairs, where she pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Rest well, sweetheart, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.” I gave her a small smile. “And if I need anything, I’ll call you,” I added before she could say it, earning me a playful scowl.

“Alright. Sleep well.” She turned and left me alone, shutting the door behind her.

I laid back in bed, not even bothering to get undressed except to kick off my shoes. I tried to rest. I really did. All I wanted to do was sleep.

But my extra-sensitive senses were running amok in addition to feeling fucking awful. Every sound in the house, from Vi on the phone with someone while she left the house, a fish hopping out of the water and splashing back down in the bay, to the buzzing sound from the electronics in my room, made my head pound and nausea churn my stomach.

I managed to lay in bed until after noon when Vi came to check on me and feed me some crackers, which tasted like ash in my mouth, before I begrudgingly gave in to the urging inside me. Grabbing my therapy bag, I snuck out of the house.

Without a particular place in mind, I set out to the open sea, trying to get as far away from the islands as I could without being too far out, in case something went wrong. I ended up near the wreckage of Thomas Golden’s ship, the *Elina May*. It was just past the purple hydrocoral, and the sand there was soft and comfortable.

Anchoring my boat and cutting the engine, I went below deck and into the cabin to change into my bathing suit and to undo my hair so I could braid it. I reached into my bag and pulled out my suit, but something about it made me pause. The fabric, though the same as it had always been, repulsed me in a way that confused me.

You better not be trying to get me to go into the ocean naked, I thought at my body as I put the suit down in favor of undressing. I pulled off the dress I was wearing and unhooked my bra while staring at the offending piece of fabric as if it’d grown spikes.

When I went to pull down my panties, I noticed something, a change I'd not taken note of before. My legs were smooth. Like, impossibly, oddly smooth. Poking around further, I found that it wasn't just my legs either. My arms were free of hair, and after grabbing my hand mirror from my purse, the hair between my legs, though still there, was much thinner and balding as well.

"You have got to be kidding me," I growled at myself, then turned my face skyward to shout. "No one told me I'd lose all my body hair, too!"

Angrily grabbing my bathing suit with the intent to cover myself before I got angrier, the repulsion hit me all over again. Stubbornness alone was what helped me step into it, but I only got it about halfway up my legs before I couldn't pull it up anymore. The slide of the fabric against my body made my skin crawl, and I ended up throwing it as far away from me as I could, cursing up a storm.

"Fine! Fine! You win!" I shouted again. Then I grumbled, "I see now why Ava and Aira always scrunch their noses when they see me in my suit."

I messaged this to them, asking to confirm it, but put my phone down before they could answer.

Okay, so... we're going in naked. We've done this before, I tried to convince myself.

Yeah, at night, I retorted. This is broad daylight.

I warred with myself, but the need to go into the water won, even though I desperately didn't want to go out there without something on. So, I compromised. Grabbing my towel—which didn't feel awful—I wrapped it around me and headed up on deck, mumbling my irritation at everything as I did so.

The sunlight glinted off the turquoise and sapphire water, mesmerizing me, and I took it in for a moment. The overwhelming feeling of *home* came over me, just as it had in my dream. The water called to me, singing an unheard song that coaxed me closer. I closed my eyes.

The sun warmed my skin, and the breeze ruffled the small strands of hair around my face. I'd always felt most at home and at peace on the water, even before all this nonsense had happened. Deep down, I knew I belonged here. It was the most natural thing to drop my towel and to step off my boat to let myself fall into the water. So, I did.

The relief was palpable.

The moment I slipped below the surface, all the aches and pains and nausea melted away, and I had a moment of absolute peace before another feeling came over me.

It started as a prickly feeling in my legs, and my head spun as the sensation washed over soon after. The prickling morphed into electricity crackling along my skin and in my belly. It grew and grew and grew until it was just this side of too much, but then it stopped abruptly, as if it hit a wall, jolting me in place. My body hit the ocean floor, in a patch of seaweed that provided shade on the sand, and all I could do was lay there in the aftermath of whatever had just happened.

When my world stopped spinning, I sat up to take stock of my body. It didn't come as a shock to see my hands with claws and webbing, though I hated to see it. What did come as a surprise was everything else.

Nearly the entire lower half of my body was covered in opalescent scales, but while I was expecting a tail there, I still had my two legs. My arms had patches of the same scales on them, but along the outside of them were a row of nubs that looked like they were supposed to have grown into something else. Everything else felt about the same as before, but from what I remembered from what Will looked like, I was missing a few key things, and I wondered why.

I must not be fully changed yet.

Laying back down, I stared up at the surface of the water, captivated anew by the way the light played along the waves. There was peace to be found in the quiet of the water, though I was loathe to admit it. Something in me pushed to accept what was happening, the changes within me. I *did* love the sea. I loved the water and the breeze and the creatures.

But was this all worth having to leave Vi alone?

Raising my hands above my head to look at them again, I knew without a doubt that I had no choice. If it drew the hunters away from Vi, if it kept them away from the islands in general, it was a no brainer. But it didn't stop the sorrow and guilt from eating at me.

In a way, I was lucky. I knew what was happening to me and what to expect... in theory. I'd read the packet Corvin had put together for me about becoming a mermaid, but reading and experiencing were two very different things. And really—though I really, *really* hated to admit it—this wasn't so bad. If I wasn't so scared that Vi would feel abandoned and that I would never be able to go back, I'd have gone to sea earlier. But I couldn't. Not when leaving her was what I needed to do.

“Eli, what am I supposed to do? Everything feels so impossible. How am I supposed to do this?” I whispered. “I know I don't have a choice, but... fuck. All of this is my fault. I shouldn't have tried to mess with things that are—were—so much bigger than me. But what else was I supposed to do?”

I lay there for a long time, wrestling with myself about this decision that wasn't really a decision. In the end, there really was nothing I could do, and all I was doing was delaying the inevitable.

Perhaps if I try really hard, I can gain control of my powers and come back before wintertime? It was wishful thinking for sure, but it eased something in my heart.

Sighing, I thought about going back up to my boat, but something niggled at me, begging me to attempt to see if I had any magic. Sitting up, I tried to think of what I could even do. I didn't even know if I had any particular ability in that arena, and my exposure to mermaid magic was limited to mind fuckery, which I couldn't do to myself, even if I'd wanted to. I pondered on this until I came up with an idea: try to check my soul myself.

But how?

Listen to your instincts, a voice whispered. What does it say to do?

I paused, looking around. *Great, I'm hearing voices now. Is this normal? Is anything about me normal? Maybe I'm just having a psychotic break.*

Despite my disbelief, something in me urged me to listen to it, and feeling supremely stupid, I did so. But not without making a disgruntled sound first.

Closing my eyes, I put my hand to my heart over where I'd seen Corvin and Eli pull my soul out before, and I visualized it coming out of my chest. I pulled my hand away slowly, and I felt the tug on my chest, but I got too excited, and it popped back in. So, I tried again. And again. And again.

On my fifth attempt, I slowed down and visualized what I was doing as I was doing it. I pulled my hand away from my chest, then kept my eyes shut when I felt the tugging. I ignored how it wanted to snap back inside me and pulled it out just a little further and held it there. Then I opened my eyes.

There, just above my hand, was my soul. So few of the bindings were left that it was easier to see my own soul underneath, nearly all of it dark blue now. There were still a few spots of light blue holding out, but there was no doubt in my mind that soon they, too, would give way. I couldn't tell if the deep fissures were healing or not, not with the bright white light of the talisman obscuring it, but they seemed to be smaller? It was hard to say for sure.

I sighed.

Before I could marvel at the fact that I'd done this myself, that I'd managed to look at my own soul with no one's help, vicious laughter sounded in my head.

My soul began to pulse as Not-me Siren, cackling maniacally, pushed against the bonds for me to see, and before I could react or try to stop it, one of the bonds snapped, and the power in it arced, hitting my neck.

I gasped.

But instead of gasping in air, I got a mouthful of water instead.

CHAPTER 34

Rose



Panic seized me as the laughter grew deafening.

My soul snapped back into my chest, and I had just enough thought to push up towards the surface, my lungs burning for air. My limbs couldn't move fast enough, as if every movement was being counteracted and hindered. Not-me Siren fought me tooth and nail, cinching my chest tighter and tighter so that I couldn't get to the surface as she chanted *Die! Die! Die! in my head.*

Still I struggled upwards.

My vision began to narrow, my need for air growing more desperate. It was as if I was stuck in the same spot, and no matter how much I moved or thrashed or paddled, I was no closer to getting my head above water. Slowly, my energy bled out of me, my limbs going sluggish, as Not-me Siren cackled in my head.

Death is inevitable, Rose, she crooned. Let it happen. Let it take you so you can become what you were always meant to be.

My limbs no longer did my bidding, and I sank back down towards the sea floor. I was tired. So, so tired. I couldn't keep my eyes open.

That's it. Join with me. Just close your eyes and go to sleep, and you'll wake up better than you ever were. It will be painless. I don't want this to continue as it has been. For once, her voice was gentle.

My hand still stretching upwards, I had to admit that maybe it would be nice to just get it over with. To finish this limbo of being human but not at the same time. Being a merperson wasn't a wholly awful thing, and it wasn't as if I'd have to leave Aunty Vi forever.

Maybe I should stop fighting...

Maybe it's time to give in...

Just as I was about to let go and relinquish myself to the insidious temptation that was Not-me Siren's call, an arm banded around me, pulling me flush against a hard, undeniably male body. Lips pressed against mine, a swipe of a tongue opening my mouth to breathe sweet, blessed air into my starving lungs as we shot upwards. My eyes flew open despite the salty burn of the water around me, and I was met with a pair of eyes I never thought I'd see again.

Our heads breached the surface and those lips unsealed from mine. I coughed then sucked in air before coughing again. It'd been so long since I'd had to worry about being completely magicless in the ocean and subject to its natural effects that I'd forgotten how awful it felt. Once my lungs and eyes were clear, though, I was face-to-face with my savior.

And all I could do was stare.

One moment dragged into two. Part of me couldn't believe who I was seeing. He'd left me. He'd left me without even looking back. Perhaps he had his reasons why, but that did nothing to assuage the still festering wounds on my heart. I never thought I'd see him again, and yet there was no denying that the man holding me in his arms was anything other than real.

Roiling, vivid ocean-blue eyes.

A mess of copper hair.

Tanned muscles that flowed into gorgeous rainbow-glinting black scales.

Will Kelley was alive and well and holding me close. The sigil on his chest glowed, beating in time with his accelerated pulse. My heart rattled in my chest as I took him in.

“Will, you—you’re here,” I whispered, scarcely able to believe my eyes. My fingers traced over his cheek in awe. If he hadn’t been holding me so close, I’d have thought he was an illusion.

“You called,” he whispered back. “I couldn’t stay away knowing you were afraid and in danger.”

I... didn’t know what to say to that. In fact, my mouth opened and closed at least a dozen times as I tried to find the words that clearly weren’t there. A whole year. A whole, agonizing, heart-rending year, and nothing had prepared me for having him in front of me again. A million different emotions crashed through me all at once as my eyes welled up with tears.

“Why don’t we get you on your boat, and we can talk there?” he suggested gently when I couldn’t muster up a response to his prior statement.

I nodded, wanting to be out of the water before Not-me Siren got any more ideas. “Okay.”

“Alright. Can you swim yourself, or do you need help?”

In my shock of seeing him there, I hadn’t even taken stock of my body or how I felt. Pride told me I should try to do it myself, but I was boneless, my muscles sapped of strength.

“I need help,” I admitted, even though I didn’t want to inconvenience him.

“Wrap your arms around my neck, and we’ll get you on solid ground.” There was a ghost of a smile on those sinfully full lips of his.

I did as he asked, and he pulled me closer. My ship was close by, thankfully, and it took no time at all for him to bring us to the ladder at the back. The feel of his body so close to mine brought up memories I wished I’d buried. Moments of intimacy, sexual and otherwise, floated in my mind. How many times had he held me so close? How many times had he saved me before?

His body shifted to his human form, leaving his bare flesh flush against me, and I had to turn my head away from him so

that he couldn't see the rising heat in my cheeks. I shouldn't have felt this way. I had a boyfriend... Yet my body found comfort in those strong arms even as I chastised myself for it.

If he noticed my internal struggles, he didn't show it as he readjusted his grip on me so he could climb onto my ship. So gently, he sat me down on the deck, quickly grabbing the towel I'd left by the ladder for this very reason before using magic to dry both of us off. With how unsettled I was, I almost didn't care I was naked, but I appreciated the gesture nonetheless.

"Do you have water or food here?" he asked.

It took a second for me to think about this. I honestly couldn't remember if I'd brought any. "There might be some in the fridge," I replied, pointing towards the staircase that would lead below deck.

"Alright." He brushed a hand over my hair, tucking a stray lock behind my ear before standing and walking away. He wasn't gone more than a minute or two, and when he was back in front of me, he pressed an open bottle of water into my hands and encouraged me to drink. Will watched as I downed half of it.

When I couldn't drink anymore without feeling sick, I handed it back to him. "Thank you."

He took the bottle from me and set it aside. I expected him to start peppering me with questions or to even ask for an explanation that would help him make sense of what just happened. However, his eyes were darting from one part of me to another, his expression stricken.

Will reached out and gently took my still inhuman hand into his own. His fingers brushed the webbing then over a long claw before he reached out to graze his fingertips along the scales on my legs. A wealth of emotion crossed his face when his eyes finally met mine.

"Oh, sweetheart," he breathed. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"This isn't your fault. It's a hundred percent all on me." And it was. Mostly. But I wasn't about to bring up his father if

I didn't have to.

“How? How did this happen?”

I took a deep breath and tried to think about how to explain this without retraumatizing us both. *How he can stand to even look at me, I'll never know...* Then something occurred to me that I hadn't considered in the year he'd been gone. *Maybe that's why he left. I would've been a constant reminder of how I ruined his family. Oh... Oh fuck.*

“The night in the cave,” I started, choosing each word carefully as I shoved my dark thoughts away, “Eli had a powerful talisman with him. It had been made by his wife using the souls of eleven sirens, and it was supposed to be able to bring her back from the dead. He'd been out trying to destroy it when he saw your father taking me out to sea.”

The pained sound that came from him nearly undid me. Taking his hand in mine, I gave it a squeeze, not just for him but for myself as well. “I told Eli to bind the talisman to me, so he didn't have to leave, but the process was... interrupted.” I had to clear my throat to keep from choking up over the memory. “Over the last year, the power within the talisman has slowly been changing me, and now I'm in the final stages of that transition. I'm going to be a merperson soon... I just need to die to finish the process.”

Those storming eyes of his met mine caught and held mine. “But why did you do it? Why did you choose to bind such unknown magic inside you?”

My mind spun back to the night it all happened for a moment before I brought myself back to the present. “I wish I could tell you it was for a noble reason. But really, it was me being selfish. I didn't want Eli to take the kids and leave because of the talisman, and I didn't want your father to have it either. So, I wanted to make it so no one else could have the power. What better way to do that than to make it inaccessible?”

“Still. That was... That was stupid.” His words may have been cutting but his tone was not.

I couldn't deny that. "I know. Trust me, I know. I just..." Pursing my lips, I tried to figure out how to explain my actions. "My whole life, I've heard it said that love means sacrifice, that if you love someone, you'll do anything to ensure their safety and happiness even if it means putting yourself on the line. I thought I'd help my aunt and Eli have happiness if I could get rid of the talisman so he wouldn't have to leave."

I huffed a bitter laugh as my eyes filled with tears again, my lip quivering. "The irony of all this is that I have to leave anyway. I'm going to be too much of a liability to everyone when newly turned. Hell, I'm a danger to everyone *now* with the hunters here."

"You're going to be alright, Rose, I promise. I won't let any harm come to you, not again." Will leaned forward and wiped my tears from my cheeks.

Despite myself, despite knowing I shouldn't, I leaned my face into his hand. His scent filled my nose and soothed the long-ignored ache within my chest caused by his absence. It was wilder than before, more natural. No more was the spicy scent of cologne. In its place was something akin to a fresh summer's breeze off the ocean, warm and comforting. Somehow, it was so much more *him* than he'd ever been before.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, closing my eyes and taking him in. "I know I shouldn't... I know you don't..."

"I don't mind. I'm happy I can comfort you."

And comfort me he did. It took but a moment for my scales, the webbing, and claws to recede. But even after they did, I stayed where I was. The sense of rightness, the sense of completion threaded through me, as if he was the last missing piece to the holes in my soul. I didn't want him to be, yet there was no denying how my heart hurt just a little less.

I don't know how long we sat there like that, but when he pulled away, I lamented the loss of his skin against mine.

“Let me get you something to put on, and we can get you back home, hmm?” he said. I nodded, a little bereft. “I think I saw a dress below deck. Let me get that for you.”

Before he stood up, he leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead, and I was left to stare after him while I processed what the heck had just happened.



The trip back to Nora was filled with tense small talk. It was a verbal dance around each other to avoid talking about what happened and how he left, but in all honesty, I was tapped out on emotional vulnerability. There were so many other things that needed my attention that weren't my feelings about my ex.

Despite this, the conversation was pleasant. It was nice to just be two people talking as if we didn't have a complicated past... or the fact that he'd left me in a freaking magic bubble. We mostly chatted about my ship, the least complicated topic we could broach without bringing up emotions, and since I loved my boat, I was happy to tell him all about her.

Sooner than I'd realized, we were back at the islands, cruising through the caldera and back towards the bay by Nora Port. As I pulled my ship up to the dock across the street from my house and turned off the engine, a voice called out to me just before I heard them hop on deck.

“Hey, Rose. Violet sent me to check on you. She said you weren't feeling well...” Milo's words trailed off as soon as he got to the helm and saw Will sitting there.

Milo's nostrils flared as he sucked in a breath, his eyes immediately switching to cinnamon-brown as his pupils dilated wide. His whole body tensed, then he shuddered. His gaze was fixed on Will, but his expression was unreadable to me. Whatever was happening to him was unlike anything I'd

ever seen from him before, and it sent a thrill of fear down my spine.

“What happened?” Milo asked after tearing his eyes away from Will to look at me.

There was a wild look in them, one I didn’t recognize, and I wasn’t sure whether it meant danger or not. Had I royally fucked up?

“I went to get some time in the ocean like Corvin suggested, but Not-me Siren tried to kill me. Will saved me from drowning,” I replied. I knew this didn’t look good, my ex being on my boat with me, but all I could hope was that he didn’t think anything else happened.

“How long have you been back?” he asked Will directly.

“I flashed directly here from Malutaga of my own volition. It was lucky I got there when I did. She almost died alone out there,” Will replied coolly.

I blinked. “Flashed?”

“It’s our word for self-teleportation,” Will answered before he turned back to my selkie. He tugged a necklace out of his shirt to show us a slightly glowing purple crystal. “I was given this by one of the fae. After I heard there were hunters here, I wanted to help. I have no other aspirations here except for her safety.”

Milo took that in for a moment, then nodded. “Thank you, then, for saving her, and thank you for being another set of eyes to keep her safe. We certainly can use all the help we can get here.”

The lines of their bodies relaxed, as if both of them had expected a stronger confrontation. I know I certainly had, and if I was being honest with myself, I wasn’t sure why they weren’t at each other’s throats. I was grateful, however, that they were not.

“Of course.” Will got to his feet in a motion that was much lither and fluid than one would’ve expected for a man as muscly and big as him. “I’ll leave her with you, then.”

“You may want to avoid your old home. There’re rumors going around that the hunters have already poked around there, so they might be staking it out,” said Milo.

“I figured that might be the case. I have other accommodations I can stay at for the time being. Thank you for the heads up, though.” Turning towards me, he reached out and gently squeezed my arm. “I’ll be by to check on you.”

Will and Milo locked eyes, and after one last tense moment, they nodded at each other. Then Will was off, turning invisible before our eyes. The only indication that he’d left was that my boat dipped a little when he hopped onto the dock.

Turning to Milo, I said, “I swear I didn’t ask him to come.”

“I know. There’s no need to panic, love. I’m not mad.” He sighed. “He cares about you, for better or for worse, and were I him, I’d have come, too. You—we—need the help.”

That I couldn’t argue with. Even on dry land I felt like I was drowning. “Thank you for not fighting. I couldn’t stomach it, not today.”

“Whatever our differences are, we both understand we have bigger priorities than a pissing match.” He cracked a slight smile. “Perhaps we can duke it out later for your entertainment, naked and covered in oil.”

The image sparked heat to course through me unexpectedly. “That’s—you’re—you’re the *worst!*”

He laughed, the joy of it easing something in my chest. “But you feel a little better, don’t you?” My pout was the only answer I could give him without admitting he was right. He pulled me into his arms for a short hug. “Come on. Let’s get you inside before Violet catches you and locks you away forever.”

That I couldn’t argue with.

CHAPTER 35

Rose



My necklace was gone.

My prized possession, the object that had been integral in ensuring I'd survived my ordeal last year, was gone, and in its place was a raised red welt marring the skin around my neck. I struggled to think of how and where I could've lost it as I stood in front of my bathroom mirror the next morning. It wasn't as if I *ever* took the damn thing off.

Not-me Siren's laughter echoing between my ears, a sound that would haunt my dreams for the rest of my life, was what gave away what happened.

How am I supposed to kill you if you wear that thing? she asked as if I were the stupidest person alive.

An inhuman growl rumbled up from deep in my chest, a sound I should *not* have been able to make as a human, as my anger eroded my control over my emotions. I wanted to lash out, to punch the mirror. I wanted to scratch out Not-me Siren's eyes and rip out her throat...

My violent, bloody thoughts—and the accompanying howl of laughter from the ghoul herself—had me clamping my hand over my mouth just before I burst into tears.

This wasn't me. I wasn't a violent person. I didn't envision killing people or maiming them.

You also thought you were a faithful girlfriend but look at you now. Cozying up to your ex and not even thinking about calling your selkie for help, Not-me Siren crooned. *Maybe it's*

time for you to realize who you were as a human and who you will be as a siren are going to be different.

“Shut up!” I whisper-screamed, pressing my hands to my temples and squeezing my eyes shut.

It's just some food for thought.

Despite getting one last word in, she backed off, receding into the depths once again. The reaction she wanted from me, however, lingered, upending any semblance of control I pretended to have. I sank to the floor to hug my knees to my chest to keep myself from falling apart all over again.

Of course she'd go after the one thing I'd been mentally skewering myself over. Why wouldn't she? She seemed designed to make everything so much worse than it needed to be.

So.

Much.

Fucking.

Worse.

As if me turning into a merperson while freaking hunters were on the islands wasn't enough, Will's sudden reappearance was wrecking me. The memories I'd tried so hard to shove into a box at the back of my mind to forget decided *this* was the perfect time to make their escape and parade around in my thoughts. The feel of his hands, the taste of his lips... He'd saved me once before by breathing air into my lungs while I was about to drown. He'd also made love to me the first time as a merman, and the feel of his scales against my inner thighs was not something I'd ever forget, even if I wanted to.

Remembering, though, wasn't the source of my guilt. My familiarity, my comfort and seeking out of his touch was. And I'd been self-flagellating over it since Milo left to go to work himself before the sun had even risen.

I had a boyfriend. A man who'd been by my side throughout this whole fucking thing and was going to continue

to support me. So why had I fallen right back into the same patterns with Will again? Why had I sought out his comfort and touch?

It didn't make any sense.

Forcing myself to my feet after ensuring I wasn't going to shatter, I went back to my room to grab my cell phone from my side table. I pulled open my messages and typed a quick one out to text my aunt.

ME

hey

I'm still feeling like warmed over garbage, so I think I'm going to stay home

VI

I'm so sorry, sweetheart

Please stay home and rest

Should we call Corvin?

I already did

If he can't stop by the house, I'll probably ask Milo to take me to see him

Alright

Let me know what he says, ok?

Ofc

I love you

Now get your butt in bed to sleep

Yes ma'am

I sent her a gif of a woman saluting aggressively which caused her to laugh so loud I heard it upstairs. The sound eased a measure of tension in my stomach, enough so that I could crawl back into bed and at least try to rest.



Sleep came to me in fits. My dreams were vivid and terrifying, a not so loving reminder of what would have happened to me had Will not been there to drag me to the surface. Around eleven, I abandoned trying to sleep in favor of an attempt at putting food into my belly.

This was also unsuccessful.

The moment I went into the kitchen to try to ladle out a bit of the chicken broth and rice my aunt had made the night before for me, however, dry heaves sent me running to the sink, and I was forced to abandon the idea of eating altogether. There was no reason to force it, even if I was getting weak to the point of shaking. Defeated and tired, I grabbed a glass of water then went back upstairs to sit on my balcony to get some sun after sending a text to Corvin asking what I was supposed to do.

The warmth of the day was divine against my chilled skin. Running a hand over my arms, patches of cold were blotched up and down the length of them, growing in number and size every day. Corvin's packet said this was due to my body shifting from hot-blooded to cold and not to worry, but it didn't feel right. Well, nothing in my body felt right, but this just added to the tally of things happening to me.

The wood of my balcony creaked as if someone had jumped onto it just as I was about to lay my head back to rest my eyes. I swiveled my head towards the sound, and at first I

saw nothing. My skin prickled with awareness, lit up by a sense of something in my vicinity I couldn't see. With one hand, I reached over to grab the empty wine bottle I'd forgotten to bring down to recycle, wrapping my fingers around the neck. When the wood groaned again, this time closer, I jumped to my feet faster than I should've been capable of and swung the bottle at whatever was there.

Before the glass could hit its target, a large hand stopped the arc of my swing with a meaty *thunk*... a large hand that materialized into a fantastically beefy merman.

"I never took you for the violent type," said Will, his eyes glittering with amusement once he was fully visible to me. "I thought the people of Nora were welcoming of guests."

"Oh, you jerk! I should clobber you on principle!" I snarled, pulling the wine bottle out of his grip then whacking him on the chest with my other hand. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Would a peace offering of food make up for the offense?" He raised his other hand to show me a large Tupperware container with a blue lid. Will peeled the top off to reveal rows of carefully placed cuts of fresh, raw fish, all deboned and cut into bite-sized pieces. There were several varieties in there, from pink to orange to white. Any other time, I'd have politely declined the offer, but once the smell hit my nose, my mouth started watering, and my teeth sharpened in my mouth.

"It's a start," I replied, trying to sound haughty but failing. After not having really eaten in days, it was near impossible not to tear into it like a rabid animal.

He chuckled. "Then consider it yours while I think about what else I can do to soothe your ire."

Will handed the container to me, and I moved to settle back down onto my deck chair so I could enjoy what he'd brought me after putting the wine bottle down. I gestured for him to take a seat as well as I tried to decide which color of fish to start with. In the end I decided to work from left to right, taking a piece of each color and trying to see which one I liked best. The first one was white, and I gingerly popped it

into my mouth, expecting my stomach to rebel again, but once the taste registered, I nearly moaned. It was so fucking good.

“I wasn’t sure which kind you’d like or if you liked raw fish before, so I caught several types just in case.” The slightest bit of pink colored his cheeks at his admission.

I blinked at him as I chewed then swallowed my bite. “You caught these for me?”

“Well, yeah. For new sirens and weaned merlings, fresh fish is best for their new or growing bodies, so I thought you might be similar, given the changes you’re going through.”

It was almost charming to see him so embarrassed, and I had to stop myself from melting a little. *He’s your ex. You can be friendly, nothing more.*

“Thank you,” I said, deciding to be polite, but it came out more softly than I’d intended. “You didn’t have to.”

“Perhaps not, but if it makes your life easier, then it’s no hardship.” The sincerity in his eyes made my heart skip a beat.

We fell into silence again as I ate. My plan to try one of each to determine my favorite backfired when I found out they were all freaking delicious, which pleased him to bits, if his expression was anything to go off of. I tried to offer him some, but he declined.

“I ate my fill while hunting, I promise.” Will gave me a lopsided smile.

“Would you like a drink then?” I asked. I had to more than just let him watch me eat... right?

“I’m alright for now, thank you.”

Stuffing another piece into my mouth, this time the orange one, I had to stifle a moan. Will’s chuckle made my face heat up a million degrees, and as he opened his mouth to probably tease me, I beat him to the punch to avoid more embarrassment.

“What’s the deal with the invisibility? How does that work?” I asked, then popped another piece into my mouth.

“It was Noemie’s idea. She wanted to make sure I’d have a safety measure since I told her the hunters were here,” he replied. “Maybe I should put one on your necklace just to make sure you are safe, too. Though, I have to admit, I’m not sure I’ll be able to do it myself. The fae woman who gave me the crystal was the one to imbue the power into the pearl, but I can try, if you’d like me to.”

My hand flew up to my neck, and I felt the keen loss of my pearls once again. “I wish I could have one, but the necklace you gave me broke yesterday.”

“You were wearing it yesterday? Then why did you nearly drown?” His brows knit together in worry.

“I don’t know exactly how it happened. All I know is that I haven’t formed gills or whatever yet, so I still wore the pearls. In fact, I never took them off.” My admission had him raising his eyebrows, his eyes going wide. “I didn’t want to have another situation where I was in danger in the ocean again.”

The breath went out of him in a long rush, as if I’d hit him in the gut. He opened then closed his mouth several times but nothing came out. It made me feel self-conscious enough I just shoved more fish into my mouth.

More silence. This time, it was stiffer, more awkward. There was so much left unsaid between us, yet it was impossible to figure out where to start. I wasn’t sure I was ready to begin to unpack the baggage between us.

Unfortunately for me, he decided he was ready to.

“So, you and the selkie, huh?” he said after a long while, finally landing on a topic after the disaster that was my previous comment. “How long has that been going on?”

For some stupid reason I couldn’t fathom, my cheeks heated. “Only a few weeks.”

Will looked surprised at that. “Oh. I would’ve thought...”

It took me a second to realize what he was getting at: he thought I’d gone from him to Milo right after he’d left. For some reason, that assumption hurt worse than I thought it would. It was enough for me to almost stop eating entirely. “I

wasn't lying that day on the beach. We were just talking. Nothing else."

He blew out a breath. "You're right. It wasn't fair of me to assume things then or to have ho—thought you'd not move on."

That... I didn't know what to do with that statement. He'd hoped I wouldn't have moved on? Had he wanted me to wait for him forever? *He* was the one who'd left *me*.

"You gave me no indication you'd come back, and you made it pretty clear things were over," I replied quietly. Part of me wanted to be petty and throw it in his face, to make him hurt as badly as I did, but I couldn't, not when his face twisted like I'd shoved a knife between his ribs.

"I thought it was the best way to keep you safe. If my father knew..." Will's voice cracked as he cast his eyes upwards. He blew out a breath to steady himself. "If he knew you'd survived, he'd have gone back to kill you. I thought I could kill two birds with one stone by leaving you here where you were safe and taking my mother and sisters to safety."

The man before me was not the man I knew. I'd seen glimpses of it the day before, but now, it was far more obvious. Gone was the confidence I knew, the unshakable belief in the solid foundation of his family and his world, and in its place was uncertainty. I saw it in his eyes, the haunted look that took up residence there. I saw it in the cracks and breaks in his brilliant silver aura... In him, I saw myself. A man faced with an impossible choice that still ended up being the wrong one.

"Are they safe?" I asked gently.

"They are. They're on an island called Malutaga in the south Pacific. My father can't pass the protective barrier surrounding the island, so he can't get to them. Though, the Gods know he's tried every day for the last year." He sounded so tired.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. My guilt reared up. "I'm sorry I caused him to snap."

“His delusion and his need for control wasn’t your fault. Even if you hadn’t been there, it would’ve happened eventually. Besides, you did warn me. I should’ve listened.”

I placed the now empty Tupperware container on the deck chair next to me so I could reach over and grab his hand. “Which isn’t your fault, either. You were in the thick of things. It’s hard to see what’s happening clearly when you’re in the fog.”

“That doesn’t absolve me of many of my actions or how abhorrently I treated you. I was an asshole, plain and simple. And between that and my father, I lost the most precious thing I had.” His eyes caught mine and held them, speaking without words that *I* was what he was referring to.

My heart leapt up into my throat. How was I supposed to react to that? All my old feelings, all my hurt, tore open fully. My hand left his to press my palm over the aching, fluttering organ caged in my ribs.

“I’m sorry,” he said, reaching up to rub the back of his neck as his cheeks heated. “It’s not fair of me to lay that on you, especially not when you have someone else in your heart. I just... I just want you to know I regret how I left things. I don’t expect to be forgiven for what I did, but I hope you understand I honestly wanted to keep you safe.”

The ache in my chest deepened, echoing down to my soul. He was telling the truth, and somehow that made what he did hurt all the more. I had to look away from him to collect myself, or I’d start crying. Opening my mouth to reply to him some pithy, polite thing, my words were cut off when all the air in my lungs *whooshed* out of me.

The souls in my chest stirred, alerting me to danger as they began to scream in panic. Turning my head, it took only a second to register that Davis was walking down the sidewalk. I gasped, lurching forward and grabbing Will’s hand to drag him into my bedroom so we wouldn’t be seen. I plastered myself against the door leading out into the hallway, my body shaking with the rush of adrenaline.

“What is it, Rose? What’s wrong?” asked Will, his eyes on the balcony doors.

“One of the hunters,” I whispered, pointing towards where I saw him. “I didn’t want him to see us.”

“Is he staying at the hotel?” I nodded, then he continued. “Maybe he’s going to Lena Mae’s?”

“I mean, maybe, but I caught him staring into the shop like two days ago. I’m worried he’s onto me.”

Only then did he turn to look at me, his gaze darkening. “And what has been done about this?”

“What do you mean? What can we do?”

A low growl filled the room. “I went to observe them yesterday after I left you with the selkie. They were discussing selkies being on Mariana and their game plan to kill them. Why haven’t they been killed yet? Isn’t that how they’re usually dealt with?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know how this is usually dealt with. I’m just trying to survive.”

His anger gave way to a softness I’d rarely seen from him before. “Wait here while I check out what he’s doing, okay?”

I nodded, not knowing what else I could do or what I could say. Will pinched one of the pearls on his necklace and went invisible. His weight caused my floor to creak as he padded towards the balcony, and then my doors opened. Otherwise, there was no hint of where he was, unnerving as that was.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm myself. The sirens were still on high alert, waiting for the worst to happen. I pushed a stray hair out of my face, noticing only then that my hands had shifted. Looking down, the scales had formed as well in my panic. I cursed, slapping my leg out of frustration. *Of course you would decide to show up right now. How does this help keep us safe from the hunters, body? I’ll tell you: it doesn’t!*

Closing my eyes, I did my best to do my breathing exercises, counting each breath in and out so I could calm

myself. I was almost successful—my scales mostly gone and my hands closer to normal looking—when Will popped back into my room. I squeaked, my body shifting right back to my partially shifted state. I swore again.

“Rose, I think you should message your boyfriend to come over. We need to have a discussion,” he said, his whole aura roiling and pissed.

Without thinking, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and did just that, terrified of what he was going to report.

CHAPTER 36

Davis Brown



Sutton's Sundries was a charmin' sort of shop—if you could ignore that a supe worked there. It reminded Davis of a lot of the houses in the south with its wraparound porch and contrasting shudders. It was the sort of house his daddy had always promised to build for his mama but never got the chance to, havin' been killed and all that.

But it wasn't the look of the house that brought him back to the shop.

Nah, it was the chance to watch his prey through the windows as she worked.

Ever since their dinner, whenever Perry was preppin' for their hunt of the selkies, he'd slipped away to watch the freaky-eyed bitch. Though Perry was set on the idea she was human, after watchin' her, he wasn't so sure.

And even if she wasn't, well, he didn't fucking care.

There was somethin' off about her. At the very least, there was somethin' not right with her head. His cousin mighta been right when he thought the supes wiped her memory like they'd done with Culver Martin. Otherwise, why would she get caught starin' at stupid shit all the time? Like, she was always starin' at the water awfully hard.

Maybe it'd be a mercy to kill her, just like it had been with Culver.

That thought dampened the pleasure he felt at the prospect of her death... This just meant, though, he'd need to come up with somethin' creative to compensate. There was no shortage

of ways to make them squeal and piss themselves in fear, and figurin' out how to get away with her murder would be just exciting.

And Lordy be, he wanted to slice into that pale flesh of hers.

After making his way around the shop, he determined the bitch wasn't in again. He cursed. This was the second day in a row she'd not been there, and he'd not been lucky enough to get a glimpse of her in her house the few times he'd been pokin' around there. It was interesting, however, to see the state-of-the-art security system which was in stark contrast to the rest of the houses here which weren't even locked. Davis had been able to waltz into several homes without any problem—including the former residence of Cornelius Young—but not hers. It pissed him off she was fuckin' smart.

Slippin' away from his spot by the shop, he hurried back to the hotel to wait for his cousin, who was supposed to be bringin' lunch for them back after scouting the selkies' island. Davis even sent his cuz a text to cover up the fact that he'd been out rather than researchin' ways to kill the seal fuckers, demandin' to know where their food was. He chuckled. Givin' Perry shit was always fun to do.

Makin' him feel bad about their daddies' deaths was also great.

His cousin held on to his guilt, and Davis always used it as a means to make him do their fuckin' job. Otherwise, he'd go to therapy or some shit and would probably stop huntin' altogether. Which was un-fuckin'-acceptable. This was the only reason why Davis insisted on keeping everything the same as their daddies had done: to make sure Perry was reminded every day of what happened so he wouldn't stop doin' his God-given duty.

Truth was, Davis wasn't very sad about his daddy dying. Hell, nowadays, he felt nothing at all when he thought about it. Unlike with his cousin, he was always told that the best way a hunter could die was to be killed by the demon spawn to

motivate the hunters who'd come after them. It certainly worked with Perry, though he never wanted to admit that.

Davis got back to the hotel and settled in front of Perry's laptop, pretendin' to be researchin' for when his cousin came back. He wasn't there five minutes before the door to their room slammed open and his fool cousin breezed into the hotel room.

"Davis, I think we might have hit the motherload," said Perry, that gleam in his eye that meant good things in terms of killin' shit. "I found another cluster of houses near a huge ass beach with seals on it. Some of those fuckers were even up by some of the houses and on the porches. And you know what's even better?"

Davis usually hated his cousin's stupid guessin' games, but he was willing to play if only to get the asshole off his back. "What?"

"It's close to where we saw the other colony of the fuckers. We may be able to root out more than we'd originally thought."

Killing a freak AND a colony of selkies? I might fuckin' splooge in my pants.

"How did Paul say we could kill them?" he asked, trying to hide the physical proof of his excitement.

"Cut the heads off 'em, of course."

Davis couldn't hide the shudder that went through him. This hunt was finally beginnin' to look up.

CHAPTER 37

Rose



Roughly an hour after I messaged him at Will's request, Milo was bounding up the stairs of my house and into my room. I'd filled Will in on the full details of the situation while we waited, hoping it would help calm him down, but it only served to piss him off more. My room was filled with his aura, shimmering and crackling around him as he paced a hole into my floor, while I sat curled up on my bed, picking at my claws which had refused to retract.

"Rose, what's wrong? Has something—" Milo started as he entered, but Will cut off his words.

"You're letting the hunters stalk her? The fuck is wrong with you? You're supposed to be protecting her!" Will accused, stepping towards him like he wanted to go chest to chest with the other man.

Shooting off the bed, I threw myself between them and put a hand on Will's chest to stop him from getting into Milo's space.

"Are you suggesting I'm not protecting my girl?" It was Beastie who spoke, the deep timbre his voice much lower than Milo's.

"It wasn't a suggestion."

That was the worst thing he could have said. Milo plowed forward, claws I didn't know he had out and ready to slice Will to pieces. I slammed a hand into his chest, knowing that he likely could still reach the merman if he really wanted to, but the moment I did, pure magic zapped through me. It

echoed down to my very soul, vibrating along my ultra-sensitive senses.

They were yelling at each other, obscenities flying left and right, but all I could sense was the power flowing between us. It sang to me, but the notes were in the wrong order, discordant and out of tune. I knew the perfect song was somewhere in there, but it wasn't going to happen right now. Especially not when both of them were pushing magic through me to try to get to the other, their auras reaching out to the other.

“Knock it off!” I shouted, quieting both of them. “You’re not allowed to fight each other! I forbid it!” Pushing them away from each other and pointing to opposite sides of the room, I took turns glaring at each of them, especially Will, the instigator. “Do you both understand me?”

They both murmured an affirmative, as they absentmindedly rubbed a hand over where I'd been touching them. *So, they felt it, too. At least I'm not going crazy.*

“What did you see that has you so upset, Will?” I asked, clenching and unclenching my still-tingling hands. The remnants of their magic made me feel jittery.

“That hunter, Davis, is stalking Rose. Did you know that? He's made her his *prey*,” said Will through clenched teeth.

“I'm aware he was looking through the shop window the other day,” Milo replied with a glare.

“It's much worse than that. He's decided to kill her regardless of whether she's Otherkind or not.” He let out a low growl. “He's a serial killer. Before he came here, he killed a woman he only suspected of being a 'supe,' as they call us, because she had particularly green eyes. He'd been stalking her for weeks. And now he's doing the same with Rose.”

His words sent a chill down my spine even as Milo was unsurprised. “We've been doing our best to keep everyone safe. We're trying to lay low so we don't alert them to our existence.”

“That’s it? That’s all you’re doing? I don’t think you understand how fucking dangerous these bastards are.” Will’s words were nearly an accusation, the seething anger in his eyes enough to scorch through the selkie across from him. I tensed, readying myself to get between them again as he continued. “If they suspect even just one person in the household is Otherkind, they will kill *everyone* in the household.”

He turned to look at me, his expression softening slightly. “That’s how my biological mother was killed. She’d been staying with a human friend who’d just had a baby. One night, hunters got in and killed everyone in the house, *including* the baby.” His features twisted in pain. “They *mutilated* them, Rose. It wasn’t a swift or painless death. These bastards are sadistic, and the one on your tail is one of the worst. His mind is filled with all the ways he wants to kill you, and he’s not even certain you are Otherkind. He doesn’t care. And if you think he won’t kill your aunt just to get to you, you’d be wrong. He enjoys the kill. He *gets off on it*.”

Images of the sort of violence he spoke of popped up unbidden in my mind as my eyes welled up with tears. “You think he’ll kill Vi?”

“It wasn’t on his mind when I looked through his memories and thoughts, but I have no doubt he’d do it if he thought she was in the way,” Will replied solemnly.

“Now you’re just trying to fucking scare her, you prick,” Milo snarled.

“No, I’m trying to give her all the facts since you and the others won’t. You know there’s a reason why we put hunters down as soon as they’re spotted.” Milo opened his mouth, but Will cut him off before he could speak. “And no, it wasn’t just my father’s policy. It’s the policy of every colony I’ve ever lived in. They can’t be allowed to live, especially not ones who’ve killed as many Otherkind as those ones have!”

“It was decided that they couldn’t be killed because they’d introduced themselves to all of the islanders here, asshole. We may be divided because of *your* father’s actions, but we aren’t

stupid. Otherwise I would have hunted them down and ripped out their throats myself.”

Milo’s features shifted, his eyes bleeding to cinnamon, until he looked less and less like the man I knew. On the surface, I knew he wasn’t human. I’d spoken enough to Beastie to know he harbored within him something powerful, but to see him so inhuman... to see the veneer of humanity slip... I didn’t know what to make of it.

“What?” asked Will, incredulous.

“They went to every house and talked to every resident here under the guise of trying to write a book about supernatural creatures,” I supplied for Milo, who looked seconds from ripping Will’s head off. “They weren’t exactly subtle.”

“Fucking Christ, what a disaster.” Will pushed a hand through his hair. “The fuck were you planning to do if she shifted in public? Or if she finally becomes a siren while she’s at work? How traumatized do you think her aunt would be if she found Rose dead on the floor only for her to pop back up alive but changed?”

Everything in me stilled. In all this time, I hadn’t thought of that scenario. It hadn’t occurred to me that it was a possibility. My eyes welled up with tears.

“I mean, come on,” Will continued. “Look at her. You can hear her heart weakening. You can see in her aura that her body is dying and transitioning. If her heart doesn’t give out first, then her body will. Human bodies aren’t capable of handling the kind of power that’s bound to her. It’s only a matter of time before she succumbs to this. How were you going to handle her Call if she got one?”

Milo was quiet as he looked to me. There was sympathy in his eyes, yes, but his expression was very pointed, as if Will was saying what Milo had wanted to for a long time. I flinched.

It was never more obvious than in that moment that my stubbornness was ultimately harming me. I’d refused to talk

about anything regarding me leaving or what sort of care I'd need right before, during, and after the transition. Hell, I hadn't even allowed *myself* to think about it. Milo had respected that boundary, but that one look told me he hadn't truly agreed with it.

"That's not their fault," I whispered, hugging myself as I retreated until my back was against the wall. "I haven't let anyone talk about it. I've not... I'm not ready. I don't want to leave my aunt alone. She's already lost so much. I don't want her to lose me, too."

"We've tried to assure her that she can come back once she's changed and has control over her powers," Milo supplied with a sigh.

I leveled an exasperated look at him. "But none of you can tell me how long that will take. One estimate in Corvin's packet even suggested it might take years. Years! I don't want to be gone that long. This is my *home*. I can't lose it," I shot back.

Some of Will's anger dissipated as he turned those ocean blue eyes to me. "They're right. It can take years, but if you had the right people guiding you, it might not take as long."

"Might." My skepticism bled into my tone.

"Rose," he said, his voice sharp, but he stopped himself and took a breath. "I know you're scared. I know you have zero desire to leave. But you're putting yourself and your aunt in danger by staying. Not just with the hunters but also with your aunt finding out about what's happening with you."

I didn't want to believe what he was saying even as it rang true. Turning away from Will, I looked at Milo. I wanted him to refute what Will had said or even to soften the blow. But the moment my eyes met his, I knew I'd find no comfort from him. Not when he was in agreement with the merman.

All of a sudden the room felt too small, the air too hot. Adrenaline coursed through my veins as panic curled around my spine and took hold. If Will noticed my reaction, he elected to ignore it, as he kept speaking.

“Do you know what the Call is going to do to you, Rose? It’s going to take over your mind, remove your free will, so you go after those that harmed you. All you’re going to be capable of is finding and killing your Marks. If you resist, it will hurt you and force your compliance. What happens if you finish your transition at work? How will you handle the fallout of terrifying your aunt like that? And with no one here willing to guide you once you fully become Otherkind, how would you know how to be a siren in a human world?”

Tears slipped down my cheeks, blurring my vision as I looked at the men in front of me. I couldn’t raise my voice more than a whisper to answer him. “I—I don’t know.”

“I know you have no reason to trust me given our history, but I hope you know I’m just trying to help even though it hurts to hear. For better or worse, this is happening, and it’s time you start planning for the inevitable.” I shook my head, my stubbornness getting the best of me. Will sighed. “How many bindings do you have left? How much time do you have before the talisman forces the issue? Go on. Take out your soul and show us.”

I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to give him more ammunition to prove his point, because I knew it wasn’t going to help me stay or allow me to continue to ignore the problem like I had been. But when even Milo raised an eyebrow, I knew I didn’t have a choice.

Choking back a sob, I pulled my soul from my chest. It took a few tries to get it out, but when I managed it, I didn’t even look at it. I couldn’t. With Not-me Siren’s antics the day before, I knew it likely was considerably less bound than before. All I could do was turn my head away as I held it out for them to look at. The sharp intakes of breath from both of them were enough to tell me how they felt about it.

“Rose,” said Milo quietly, “I think you know he’s right. I’ve been trying to be supportive, and I never want to push you to do things you don’t want, but it’s time to make a plan. It’s time to face this head on. This doesn’t have to be the end of the world.”

I shoved my soul back into my chest and hugged myself, avoiding their eyes. “It’s the end of *my* world. It’s the end of my humanity and the life I’ve created.” My words caught in my throat as I voiced the very things I hadn’t even dared to think about. “Even if I do come back, do you think I’ll be able to slot back into the life I’ve made for myself? You think my aunt won’t notice two freaky blue eyes instead of one or the odd behavior or the fact that I’m not going to be the same? I won’t be able to live here anymore. Maybe I could work at the shop, if she allows me to come back after I swan off for however long it takes to fucking die then be taught how to be a merperson.”

“We can figure something out,” Milo tried, but I shook my head again.

“What’s there to figure out?” I asked in a whisper. “Neither of you were there. You don’t know how long this journey has been to get to the point where I was happy and felt like I belonged. And now it all means nothing.”

I angrily wiped the tears away from my eyes. “You know, I wouldn’t even care I was changing were it not for that. I love the ocean. I love the idea of getting to spend years and years exploring it and being with people I love. I want to know what it’s like to do magic and not worry about drowning while I explore. But the cost... the cost is too much.”

Both of them were closer to me now, almost within touching distance from me where I’d subconsciously wedged myself against the wall at the foot of my bed. I looked between the two of them, wanting to see if they understood what I was trying to tell them. Their auras glowed bright around them, Milo’s brilliant purple and Will’s vivid silver, as little tendrils reached out to intertwine with each other. It was just like I’d seen on the ferry that day, between Mr. and Mrs. Harper, but I didn’t really know what it meant. Blinking, I focused my eyes on them instead.

“Violet loves you, Rose. She’d welcome you back no matter what form you came back in,” said Milo.

“What if it takes years? What if I never get good enough to come back? Like, let’s be reasonable here. We don’t know what I’m going to be like when I come out of this,” I snapped.

“We—You can go to someplace like Malutaga. There are whole communities of merfolk out there that would be happy to help you transition. They’d help you with your Call, should you have one, and they would help teach you. It’s how a healthy shimmer of merfolk should be. With their help, especially with older, more powerful ones, you can learn much faster than you could on your own,” Will tried, turning to Milo to back him up.

“And if it takes years, if she doesn’t accept you back, then it will be heartbreaking, yes, but you can make a new life. The world is going to be your oyster. You can make any life you want,” Milo added, nodding.

They were closer now, almost crowding me in, though I didn’t think they were aware they’d gotten closer. Even still, I felt cornered. I wanted to swipe my claws at them, snap my teeth, snarl... anything to get them to back up and give me space.

“You’re not going to let me say no, are you?” I asked when I shoved down the violence I felt bubbling up within me.

“You don’t have the luxury of saying no,” said Will, his eyes hard.

The dam holding back my feelings, that I’d been shoring up since all this started, broke within me, and I burst into tears. He was right. They were both right. And I hated it. I hated everything about how I got to this point, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

Two pairs of hands were on me in an instant, pulling me towards them and into one of their arms. All I could say, over and over again, was, “What am I going to do? Vi’s going to be all alone! I can’t leave her alone!”

They let me cry until there was nothing left. They let me mourn. But even when the tears ran out, numbness didn’t

come. Only pain and the knowledge that the very foundations beneath me were disintegrating as fast as the bonds were.

“We can say we’re going on a sailing trip,” said Milo as he stroked my hair. It was his arms I was nestled in. “We can take your boat and sail across the Pacific to Malutaga then spend some time there while you learn. Will’s right in that there are many wonderful merfolk there. With their help, you can learn in no time.”

“When?” I asked. I couldn’t believe I was entertaining this, let alone asking about it.

“I have a commitment on the fourth to set off fireworks,” said Milo. He unwound his arms from around me to wipe my tears from my face. “But I can cancel it if we need to. My crew is more than capable of doing it on their own.”

“That’s only a little over a week from now. You’ll need time to collect supplies and things, as well as telling Violet where you’re going,” Will replied. “I might suggest, though, that you don’t sail all the way there. I can meet you somewhere then flash you the rest of the way for the sake of time and because my father has been prowling the perimeter around Malutaga this last year. I worry about what he’d do if he saw Rose there.”

“You’re probably right. She doesn’t look like she has another three weeks before the last bond snaps,” Milo agreed.

“In the meantime, though, we shouldn’t leave her alone, just in case. I know you may not be a fan of this, but you also have things to do. So I can watch her while you’re busy. You guys were right in trying to pretend to go about your lives.” Will tensed like he was expecting a fight, but Milo just nodded.

“For her safety, I’d rather you be here than no one.”

Will blinked at him, as if he hadn’t just agreed, but eventually said, “Okay. Let’s talk about this trip, then.”

The two of them launched into in depth discussions about my leaving. They did ask for my input, and I gave it where I could, but my heart wasn’t in it. Eventually, as the

conversation wore on, their words turned to static in my ears. It was hard to look forward to what was going to be the end of my life.

CHAPTER 38

Rose



My stomach twisted into another knot, each new one worse than the last. I was leaving. This home that had been my haven for the last year would likely never be my home again, and there was nothing I could do about it. The need to scream, to cry, to throw up hit me in equal measure all at once the moment Vi walked in the door.

Will and Milo had spent hours talking about the ins and outs of this “trip” I was to be going on. Phone calls had been made; routes had been planned. I knew on a rational level why they were moving so fast on this, but the fragile part of me wanted to beg for a little patience. There wasn’t enough time for that, though, and so, all I could do was steel myself for what was to come.

Around six, I excused myself from the plan-making to make Vi dinner, even though the very thought had me gagging. I knew I needed to just rip the band-aid off, and the best way I could think to do that was over dinner. So, I went downstairs and began prepping something easy while Milo and Will went to find dinner themselves. The entire time I was making what would become spaghetti, meatballs, and garlic, I tried and failed to think of a script to broach the subject. Once she was here, though, I nearly lost my nerve and all the eloquent ways to say what needed to be said fled.

“Hey, um, there’s something I want to talk to you about, but I’m worried about your reaction,” I said as I handed Vi the garlic bread.

Her eyes flicked up to me for a moment, concern shining in them. “What’s on your mind, sweetheart?”

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly to give myself time to both give me courage and hold back my tears. “Milo and I have been talking about something. Something kind of big.”

Her eyes went wide, and a gleeful sparkle twinkled in them. “Marriage? Babies?”

I cut her off before she could go any further down *that* line of questioning, but my face was already flaming hot. “No, not that.”

She laughed. “Spoil sport.”

I had to ignore the mirth in her eyes so I could continue. “We’ve actually been talking about taking a trip together, just the two of us, in my boat. We were thinking about going to Hawaii and maybe even some south Pacific islands. It’d be a long trip, like months long maybe, but this is one of his dreams, and he wants to share it with me.”

Vi’s face lit up in a smile. “Oh, Rose! That’s wonderful! That’s amazing!”

“You think so? I was worried that you’d be upset because I’d be taking so much time off work...” I trailed off, only for her to reach across the table and grab my hand.

“Sweetheart, you’re young. You should be going on trips and falling in love. I’ll be fine here at the shop, especially with the part-timers we have. You must promise to send me lots of pictures, though. It’s my only stipulation,” she said.

“Of course! I wouldn’t dream of not sharing it with you.”

“So, when were you thinking about leaving?” she asked, taking a bite of her eggs.

“Pretty soon, actually. In July, I think. We’re still hammering out the details. We’re thinking we’re going to take my boat since it’s nicer.”

“That is really soon. Have you been talking about this for a while? Is this what you’ve been afraid of telling me?”

For a moment, I wasn't sure what she was talking about... until I realized that she knew I'd been hiding something from her this whole time. *Of course she knew something was up. She's a smart woman, and I've not exactly been subtle.*

Gathering myself, I nodded. "Yeah. I just feel bad, you know? I don't want to leave you all alone."

"Oh, sweetheart. You don't need to worry about me. I've lived for years in this house alone. It's not hardship, I promise."

"Sure, but..." My breath hitched as stupid tears filled my eyes. "You shouldn't have to be alone."

Vi reached across the table to grab my hand and give it a squeeze. "I promise I'll be just fine. And you'll be back in a few months' time. I can survive until you return. Besides, maybe a change of scenery will help with your health."

"I hope you're right," I whispered.

"If it would make you feel better, Adrian and the kids are considering coming down for a visit in late July, so I won't be alone for that long. It is just a shame you won't be here to see them."

My breath wheezed out of me, and my eyes burned with more tears. Not only was I going to be leaving Vi, but I was also going to miss seeing the kids? "Maybe I should can—"

Vi cut off my attempt to form words. "Rosie, if you even *think* about canceling your trip, I'll toss my garlic bread at you." I stared at her with wide eyes until she laughed. "Now, tell me about this trip of yours."

For the rest of dinner, I fed Vi lies about this trip, the whole time on the verge of tears. The urge to tell her what really was going to happen, to tell her the truth bubbled up, and I had to push it back down so many times. It was too dangerous. I'd have to live with my guilt for lying, but if it meant she would be safe—and alive—then it was a small price to pay.

If only I didn't feel so damn bad about it.

Once we'd both eaten our fill—me actually having been able to keep non-fish food down for once—Vi shooed me back upstairs, beaming and singing with how happy she was for me. Despite her assurances, I felt so much worse. So, so much worse. It didn't help that she all but forbade me from working for the rest of the week, telling me to rest and prepare for my upcoming trip after reminding me the upstairs part of the shop was only a shipment or two of product away from being finished. In fact, it wrecked me. It was just another step closer to this era of my life ending.

I wasn't ready.

I was *never* going to be ready.

Autopilot led me to the bathroom where I brushed my teeth and then hopped in the shower. I tried to meditate while I was in there, visualizing my anxiety and bad feelings going down the drain as I washed myself. However, like every other time I'd attempted this, I failed. My mind was determined to remain mired in the awful feelings plaguing me.

When I got out of the shower, a thunderstorm had rolled in. Lightning streaked across the sky and the winds howled as rain pelted the earth below. In one of the flashes of light, my sentry for the night was illuminated. Will was sitting in the rain, keeping watch over me. I softened despite myself. Crossing the room, I opened my balcony door and clutching my towel a little tighter so it would gape if the wind caught it, I said, "Why don't you come in? There's no reason for you to sit out in the rain."

Will looked almost surprised. "A little rain doesn't bother me. I'm okay."

"It bothers me to think you're out here, soaked to the bone when I could easily make you more comfortable." It was clear he wanted to argue with how conflicted his expression was, but I stopped him by opening the door wider and nodding my head towards my bedroom. "Come on. If not for yourself, then for me, please."

With a heavy, uneasy sigh, he got up and came into my room, using his magic to dry himself. "I can deny you nothing,

Rose.”

Shutting the door just as another crack of thunder split the silence. I didn't know how to respond to that question, not when the words were so raw and vulnerable. I padded over to my wardrobe to grab a new set of PJs. Recently, only the silky ones felt good enough against my skin but had far too few of. *I'll have to buy more when... if I come back.*

I shoved that thought far from my mind as I changed into them behind my wardrobe door. Somehow being naked with my ex on purpose felt like it was crossing too much of a boundary when I was in a relationship with someone else. Though, God knew he'd seen me bare plenty enough times. Once I was dressed, I closed the door and pulled the towel off my head so I could put them on the hooks on the back of my door.

Though the tension between us was heavy with so much unresolved and unsaid things, it wasn't uncomfortable. In fact, if I allowed myself to think about it, it was almost like no time had passed at all. I wasn't sure if that was a relief or not. *Then again, it's not like you've ever interacted with an ex-boyfriend before. Should this be awkward?*

I didn't have an answer for myself.

Turning around, Will was still standing by the door, looking around the room. “You know, I think I've only been in here once but not long enough to actually look around.”

“It's not really changed much in the last year... or ever, really,” I said as I went to grab my hair brush from my desk. “This has been the room I've stayed in since I was old enough to sleep alone. I used to think I was so special because I had a big girl bed.”

Will's gaze was so tender I blushed. “That's really adorable.”

“I've been known to be that from time to time.” I chuckled as I brushed through the wet lengths of my hair.

“I always thought you were.”

Now my face was really flaming. “As one would with their pet human, I’m sure.”

I finished fussing with my hair and returned the brush to my desk. When I turned around, Will was much closer than I’d thought, mere inches from me. Those turquoise eyes heated as he looked down at me.

“You were far more than a pet to me, Rose.” He raised his hand to lift a long lock of my hair from my shoulder. “Would you like me to dry your hair for you?”

The abrupt shift had my head reeling. “Yes, please.”

He smiled, as if pleased with my response, just as his magic filled the space between us. It prickled against my skin, like a caress. The moment was over too soon, and his power withdrew. I found myself missing it almost as soon as it left.

“There you go. All dry,” he said, staying close to me.

“Thank you, Will,” I replied.

There was a moment, however short, where we just stared at each other. Once again, it was Will who cut the silence short. “You should probably get in bed and rest. The last thing we need is for you to stress-pop your bindings.”

“Oh... yeah. You’re probably right,” I said stupidly.

After one last glance, I dutifully went over to my bed and slipped under the covers while Will made his way over as well. He settled down onto the floor across from the bed with his back against the wall. I checked to make sure my phone was on the charger and my alarm was set before pulling the chain to shut off my lamp.

Settling down on my side and getting comfortable, I whispered into the darkness, “How have you been? Have you been happy?”

Will let out a rush of air.

“Oh,” he started. Even in the dark, I could clearly make out his features as he thought about what to say. “I wish I could tell you everything has been peachy, but I don’t want to lie to you. The last year has been hell. My father really did a

number on my family, and we've had to really work on ourselves. It's been tough. To be honest, I'd just started to feel like things were going to be alright when you called me."

I winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disrupt your life."

"I'm glad you called me, even if it was an accident. I'd never forgive myself if something were to have happened to you while I was away." His eyes met mine, and my heart flipped in my chest. "I've only ever wanted to keep you safe."

"Oh, Will..." I whispered past the lump in my throat as I pressed a hand to my heart.

"I'm sure my actions don't match that sentiment, but it's the truth," he said, the sincerity on his face morphing into sorrow. "I've learned a lot in the last year, and I've had to unlearn a hell of a lot more. I know it probably sounds stupid to you after all you've been through with your own family, but I was in denial for a long time about what was going on in mine. My father really had me believing he was doing what was best for us when it was really just his own delusions and need for control."

"It's always hard when you're in the thick of it. No one wants to believe their parents would betray their trust on such a fundamental level." Lord knew I struggled with that for months after starting therapy.

"I know." He let out a harsh huff of breath. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry, Rose. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I didn't listen. I'm sorry I took away your choices even for small things. I'm sorry I was an asshole. I thought for sure you'd hate me after how I left you, and I've spent the last year trying to come to terms with that."

His sincerity, his contrition, broke my heart. "I could never hate you, Will."

"I don't think I could ever deserve you and your kindness, pretty girl."

No, I thought, it's me who never deserved you. Or Milo.

After another moment of silence, Will whispered, "Sleep, sweetheart. You'll feel better in the morning."

I wanted to refute what he was saying, but he was right. With a sigh, I said, “Good night. Thank you for being here.”

“For you, always.”

Within minutes of closing my eyes, I was out, slipping into a blessedly dreamless sleep.



The soft murmuring of voices filtered in from outside my room, teasing me awake. The rain had stopped, the sky clearing to show the nearly full moon. I blinked awake and looked towards my balcony where the noise was coming from to see Milo and Will silhouetted there.

“How’s she doing?” Milo asked, looking in through the window. I quickly closed my eyes so he wouldn’t see I was awake. I wasn’t sure why I did it, but he seemed to believe it. “Did she talk to Violet?”

“She did, and she’s doing about as well as you’d expect,” Will replied.

Milo swore. “I fucking hate this. I hate that this is happening to her.”

“Me, too.”

They were quiet a moment. I wished I could see their faces to see how they were feeling... until I reminded myself I was eavesdropping and shouldn’t be listening to this anyway.

“I know you probably don’t want me here,” Will started after a long moment, “but I hope you know I’m just trying to make sure she’s safe.”

“If I didn’t think you had good intentions, I’d have thrown you overboard the moment I saw you on the boat with her,” Milo replied with a chuckle.

Will didn't return that lightheartedness. "I can't stand the thought that she's hurting or in danger. Not after..."

"What happened?" he finished for the merman, his voice soft.

"Yeah." He drew the word out, then cleared his throat. "You know, none of this ever would've happened if I'd just listened to her. She'd been telling me that my father was dangerous for a while, but I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't let myself think he'd do anything to actually hurt people. I knew what he was doing to the islands and its people was bad, but he had me believing that he knew best, so I went along with it even though I had my doubts.

"But the longer things went on with Rose and her aunt, having my father attack her, I started to wise up to what he was doing. Again, though, I was stupid. When I'd gotten a glimpse of what life could be like without him clouding my thoughts and breathing down my neck, I decided it would be more noble to tell him I was leaving. I thought if I came at him like a man, he'd respect my decision. After all, he'd always told me I needed to 'man up', so I tried to tell him how it was going to be."

"I imagine that didn't go well." Sympathy laced Milo's words.

"It went so much worse than I could have imagined. My father used his magic to trap me in my own mind and made me his puppet. I had to watch as he ordered my body about, to do things I would never do. He made me kill..." Will choked up, the sound making my heart shatter again. "He made me kill Eli because he wanted Rose to forever have the image of his heart in my hand. He wanted her to hate me for killing her father figure. Unfortunately for him, I don't think Rose is capable of that."

"I don't think she is either. It's one of the most beautiful qualities about her."

"It's one of the reasons I fell in love with her. No matter what happened to her, no matter how dastardly my father's actions were up until that point, she sympathized with his

plight even though he doesn't deserve it." Will let out a breath, steadying himself.

How they spoke about me... the affection and reverence in their voices had my heart in my mouth. Tears pricked at my eyes. *They think so highly of me? After everything I've put them through?*

There was a beat of silence before Milo asked, "How were you able to break out of his control?"

Will laughed bitterly. "His grasp on my mind slipped. He'd ordered my mother to bed, but when he saw her awake in the kitchen when we returned home, he flew off the handle and let go. It—it wasn't pretty. Noemie had begun suspecting something was up a while before and had started building up a resistance to his mind control. To put it lightly, he didn't like that. There was a fight, and my mother, the girls, and I were only able to get away after we knocked him out.

"We found somewhere safe to stay, but I couldn't stop thinking about Rose. I worried that she might've still been in the cave, but when I slipped out one night, I went to there and saw she wasn't. It didn't scent like she'd died in there, so I went back to my mother and sisters. We spent the better part of a week jumping from one cave to another, trying to stay out of my father's path.

"Eventually, we had to call for help. I returned to the house to grab my cell phone which I'd forgotten in the pandemonium of our escape and saw that she'd been calling and messaging me. It tore me apart. She'd been left to die, and yet she worried about *me*. After everything, she needed to know *I* was safe.

"I agonized over the decision, but in the end, I thought it'd be safer for her if I brought my father away from the islands. He is obsessed with the idea of family, so I knew he'd follow us wherever we went, which has proven to be true thus far. So, I met with Rose one last time so she knew I was alive and safe, and I did the hardest thing I'd ever had to do: I broke up with her. I left her on the beach after trapping her in a containment sphere then walked away. I didn't even look back, because if I

did, I'd have taken it all back. I'll never forget the sounds of her screaming, her pleading with me. And what's worse, is that as I was swimming away, I realized she probably was in love with me, and I'd just thrown it away without telling her I loved her, too."

I had to shove my hand over my mouth to keep from making any noise as the tender, aching pieces of my shattered heart were all but reduced to dust. Tears burned my eyes. All this time... All this time I'd thought he'd chosen his family over me, when really, he was sacrificing what we could've had for my safety.

It was too much to bear.

"That was very noble of you. My mum would say it was the mark of true love," replied Milo softly.

No, Milo. Don't say that. It hurts. Especially since I like you, too.

"I heard you left, too," whispered Will, choosing not to respond to the other man's statement. "I'd thought you'd have stayed to be with her."

"I wanted to stay, but... but what I was feeling—how I was reacting—wouldn't have been good for her at the time. She was fragile after we pulled her out of the ocean. She was barely holding on by a thread. So, I left at the suggestion of my family, and it was the hardest thing I've ever done. My family kept me updated about her, which was the only thing keeping me away at that point."

Milo chuckled. "I wasn't even due back when I met her. Her boat had an electronic failure, and she was stuck out at sea. My father called me to go help because we were closer, and I was already chomping at the bit to see her as it was. From there, well, I guess you know what happened."

"Why..." Will stopped himself then continued despite whatever hesitation he may have had. "Why didn't you go after her before? It was clear you liked her."

"Well, even though I'm down for sharing and having multiple partners of any gender, Rose was human at the time

and was barely keeping up with the fact that monsters exist in the world.” The deck chair creaked as he shifted positions. “That, and you and her had a thing. I wasn’t going to get between you two.”

“I... Thank you for that.”

“Oh, to love a human, am I right?” There was Milo’s laugh again, warming the cold parts inside me.

“Well, she’s not so human anymore,” Will corrected.

“True.” Milo sighed. “We can worry about that later. For now, we just gotta make it through the next week or so without anything going wrong,” said Milo with a sigh.

“It’s going to be a long fucking week.”

Though I couldn’t say anything, I had to completely agree with the sentiment, even as Not-me Siren cackled in my head ominously.

CHAPTER 39

Rose



Music pumped out of the Bluetooth speaker on my desk, the notes drifting on the air. The melody had me humming at first, and my body bopped along with the beat. Ava’s “No Thoughts, Just Vibes” playlist was exactly what I needed.

It was also a huge distraction.

My wardrobe doors were wide open, and I was supposed to be packing or at least deciding what I was going to be bringing with me on this “trip” I’d agreed to going on a few days ago, but the music caught on something in my mind and held me in thrall. I wasn’t powerless as I had been when Will’s sisters had unintentionally ensnared me in their song; I could turn it off any time I wanted. But doing so would mean thinking, and I was desperate not to do any of that. Not after the house call from Corvin earlier.

“Violet called me this morning,” said Corvin after his usual greetings to Milo, Will, and I. “She said you’ve not been feeling well.”

“I’ve had trouble keeping food down,” I replied, fidgeting. “I can eat raw fish just fine, but other food is more difficult.”

He flashed a light in my eyes as he checked them before reaching down and pressing his fingers to check my pulse. “That may be just due to the changes happening in your body. Merfolk need more of the vitamins found in fish than humans

do.” His brows knit together as he released my wrist but said nothing about why. “Are there any other discomforts?”

“I don’t feel the temperature as much anymore. My ability to control whether my claws and stuff come out is non-existent. There’re also cold patches everywhere on my skin.” Fuck, I hated admitting any of that.

“Hmm. The lack of control is fairly standard for those who’ve recently changed. May I?” he asked while holding a hand over my arm. Lifting it for him, I nodded. Corvin laid a gentle hand there as he schooled his face to be a pleasant neutral.

His hand was no longer cool. Instead, it felt as if it were the same temperature as mine. I had to take a calming breath to settle myself before I freaked out. He didn’t say anything to me, though. Once he finished inspecting my arms, he gestured at my chest, asking permission to take a peek at my soul. Again, I just nodded.

The glowing ball that was the very essence of me popped out of my body with ease. His eyes studied it intently, turning it this way and that to see all sides of it.

“Your change is progressing well,” he said casually. He leaned closer to it, enlarging it so he could see it in better detail. “The furrows are actually closing up, which I didn’t think was possible, and the talisman’s power seems to be integrating with you very nicely. If these bindings hold, I think you have another few weeks before the change will be complete.” His blue-grey eyes flicked up to my face for just a moment. “Have you decided what your plans are?”

The words stuck in my throat, my tongue all at once feeling too big for my mouth. I’d tried very hard to come to terms with my impending departure in the few days since I’d been pushed to agree to leave, but I couldn’t. The anxiety in my heart screamed at me that I’d never come back, or even if I did, it would never be the same.

“We decided,” said Milo, speaking for me once he saw me struggling, “she and I are going to sail to Hawaii. There, we’ll dock her boat, and Will will meet us there to flash us to

Malutaga. Mataalii, Taial, and the elders there have already been notified of what's happening. They're readying things for us in the meantime."

Corvin threw an appreciative glance towards Milo, so many unspoken things being communicated between them with a single meeting of their eyes. When the doctor spoke, his tone was guarded. "I'm glad to hear it."

Something else flooded me then seeing that look, something decidedly worse than my terror at leaving. The overwhelming sense of being a burden, of not deserving the help they were giving me rolled over me like a tidal wave. How selfish I'd been to fight their help and be angry that they'd been thinking about me and my best interest.

Will who'd left his vulnerable family without him to protect them.

Milo who'd babied me this whole time while I threw a fit.

Corvin who'd risked damage to himself to bind the talisman to me three times and who'd overseen my health since being pulled from the ocean.

And Aeden who'd seen me through the darkest moments in the last year.

Shame burned through me, singeing every nerve ending and synapse. I'd been such a brat these last few weeks; I'd let my emotions get the best of me.

My mother's voice, once quieted through months and months of therapy, sneered in my head. I could see the disgust on her face clearly, as if she were right there in front of me. "How selfish of you to make me deal with your feelings. Put your emotions away. I don't want to see them. No one does."

She didn't stop there, though. No, even in my mind, she was relentless.

Worthless.

Burden.

I couldn't push them away fast enough to keep them from wounding me just as they had when she'd screamed them at

me as a child. All I could do was shut down my expressions, shove my feelings as far down as I could. It'd been a mistake to be so weak, I chastised myself, my own inner voice sounding so much like my mother's. They've done nothing but support you, and what have you done to return the massive favor they've done for you? That's right: you cried on them. You fought them. You've put them in danger because of your selfishness.

As I sat there letting Corvin look over my soul, I shoved my emotions down as far as they would go, reaching for that numbness that had protected me for so long. This was going to be unpleasant enough as it was without me being mired in my feelings. Besides, I had a task to do. I had something to occupy my mind. I just needed to get back to that.

"What's it going to be like to die?" I asked abruptly, trying to get my mind off my shame.

Corvin blinked at me as Will and Milo flinched hard enough to make me look at them. The good doctor recovered faster, saying, "I'm hoping that it won't come to that. You have nearly completed the transformation already."

"Still. I want to know," I murmured, catching his eyes with mine.

He sighed. "It would depend on how you die. There's no reason for it to be painful, and in fact, I have brought something that will ensure it isn't." After putting my soul back, he rustled through his back to procure a small, black zip-up pouch. "I don't want you to be in pain or to struggle between life and death if it comes to that, so I sourced some morphine, some lighter pain meds, as well as a medicine that could kill a dragon. This is only for if you are hovering between life and death, and I do not want you to use it unless you must. I don't know how your body will react to it, being in between as you are."

"What would it feel like?"

"It will be peaceful, like you're going to sleep. It works within minutes. You won't suffer."

Even with him saying that, it was obvious he wasn't answering my other question, which left me to surmise the death he wouldn't talk about was going to be horrendous and torturous.

I pushed the memory away.

If I didn't have Not-me Siren in my head refuting Corvin's claims I might transition without needing to die, I might've felt a little hope. As it was, something told me I wasn't going to be so lucky.

Choosing what to pack and what to leave wasn't going to happen, not until I got myself under control. I closed my eyes and let the music seep into me. Goosebumps marched up and down my flesh, making my fingertips prickle and my nipples harden. I gave myself over to the melody, letting my body sway and my voice sing out.

For that brief, shining moment, I allowed myself to pretend like none of this was happening, all the negative feelings as far from me as they could be. It was freeing to let myself dance and swan about my room like no one was watching. As if I wasn't about to break apart at any moment. I'd been trying so hard to put on a brave face for Vi, Milo, Will. I didn't want them to worry for me any more than was necessary, if that was even possible. If there was anything I was good at, though, it was pretending like everything was fine. And I used this moment to bolster the veneer of serenity I needed. When the song changed to one with more pep, I pulled all the positivity in from it that I could.

A soft intake of breath stopped my bebopping and singing. Turning to look at the source, I saw Will and Milo there on the balcony, staring at me, awestruck. Something about that look had my insides fluttering even before I could stop myself.

The last few days they'd barely left my side, not even to go to the sea. Milo came and went, doing what he needed for work and stuff, but Will was constantly there. I felt bad enough that I'd made Will a pallet on the floor from the extra bedding in the hallway closet, but that didn't help the

relentless itch beneath the skin, the ache of needing to have the saltwater against our skin. Yet he still stayed with me.

My cheeks heated as those storming eyes of Will's stayed fastened to me. It belied something deeper, I knew, but I didn't have the courage or the fortitude to broach that subject. Despite our forced proximity, neither of us dared to speak more about what had happened or our feelings. We'd held each other at arm's length, for both our sake's.

Moments like these, however, showed just how much still flowed between us.

Having both of them there, it was like there was static in the air. It crackled between us as my cheeks heated. Why were they looking at me like that? How could Will give me that expression with my boyfriend standing right next to him? I didn't know how to handle the weight of their gazes, the *heat*.

"Is there something wrong?" I forced myself to ask.

It took a second for them to register that I'd said anything at all. Milo recovered first and said, "What? No... No, there's nothing wrong. It's just..." He scrubbed his hand over his mouth. "You looked so beautiful."

Will's eyes never left me, and though he didn't say anything, he didn't need to because there it was, some of those unsaid words we'd not dared to speak. It didn't matter that it felt as if no time had passed from before his father's kidnapping. I'd desperately been ignoring how right his hand felt when we accidentally touched or how my body ached to feel his skin against mine. Things were over between us, but my body hadn't gotten the memo.

Nor did my heart with how it fluttered.

"Oh, um, thank you," I whispered.

"We didn't mean that to be creepy," Will stammered after finally shaking off whatever spell he'd been under. "I just mean, for a moment, you looked so carefree and happy. I've only ever gotten glimpses of it. It... makes me happy to see it."

There was a tugging in my chest, and I rubbed my hand there to soothe the ache. I didn't like that every time I looked at him, something in me wished to close the distance between us. It was a constant battle with myself in these last few days to remind myself I had a boyfriend—a very nice, sexy, handsome one who'd never left me... Not that it helped. My heart, my soul was very clear it was intent on ignoring my pleas to not go soft for my ex.

Will didn't give me a chance to respond as he forged ahead to say as he lowered himself into my desk chair, "Oh, I also wanted to let you know we checked the engine of the *Beloved*. She's in tip-top shape as far as I can tell. She should be able to make the journey roundtrip with ease, especially with the spells the selkies weaved on her. One of them must have a bit of mech magery in them to have worked it so well into the gears and such."

Spells? Mech magery? "What do you mean?"

Milo was the one who answered, stepping further into the room so he could kiss me on the temple before taking a seat on my bed. "A mech mage is a person of magical ability attuned to mechanical things. It's similar to a tech mage, who can work magic with technology. It's part of the ever evolving world of Otherkind." He chuckled to himself like he'd made a joke that'd flown right over my head. "As for the spell, it's nothing sinister. They fortified your electric components against magical currents and gave her an extension on her life. She should run right as rain, barring acts of god."

"That's a relief. Thank you for checking her." I gave both of them my best grateful expression.

"She's a beautiful vessel, Rose," said Will. The way his eyes traced over my body told me my ship wasn't the only thing he thought gorgeous. "Anyway, you get those things ordered? The selkie said he was trying to source a few things as well."

"It's all ordered. Now all we have to do is wait for it to come in."

Crossing the room, I leaned around him to turn the volume on the speaker down a little bit. Will reached out a hand and settled it on my stomach as if to steady me or catch me if I fell, and sparks ignited within me where he touched me. Turning towards him, my eyes met his as I sucked in a breath. The sigil on his chest was lit up, glowing beneath his shirt in my periphery as we stared at one another.

It would've been so easy to get lost in the ocean of his irises. So easy to bridge the gap between us like my heart wanted me to. But I steadfastly tried to ignore what I was feeling, deliberately turning down the music then thanking the merman before going to plop ungracefully onto my bed next to Milo, who said nothing of the interaction he'd just witnessed.

We were all quiet, but my eyes couldn't move away from Will, both of us just looking at each other for longer than should have been appropriate. The uncomfortable urge to return to him sat heavily in my chest even as my boyfriend picked up my hand to give it a squeeze. I wanted to. I'd missed his skin against mine, his arms around me. *He chose to end things, remember? That and you have a boyfriend who's right there. One who's done everything he could to help you since all this started.* My cheeks heated again, but this time in shame.

Forcing myself to turn away, I pushed back to a topic that had been nagging at me. I took a deep breath and broke the silence, asking what I needed to know even if it wasn't something I should ask.

“Did Noemie ever tell you about how she died, Will? Like what it felt like?” I ventured, unsure of his—or Milo's—reaction. Corvin's earlier answer hadn't satisfied me and left me thinking about how bad it *could* be.

Milo said nothing; the only reaction he gave me was his hand tightening around mine. However, Will's face twisted, his features tortured. “Oh, Rose. We won't let it come to that.”

“That doesn't help me not worry about it, though. And with my penchant for overthinking, I'm already imagining the worst.” Perhaps it wasn't fair to admit that, but it was the truth.

I pinned Milo with my gaze to show how serious I was then turned it to Will. “Besides, all three of us know I’m not lucky enough for things to go in my favor.”

He struggled with himself for a moment. It was clear he didn’t want to tell me or think about it himself, but in the end, his shoulders slumped ever so slightly. “She said everything that had happened prior to actually dying in the water was much more terrifying than drowning. She and her husband at the time had been on a ship for their babymoon when they were hit by a storm. The boat had capsized after being hit by a wave causing it to take on water. Noemie had gotten trapped under something and couldn’t escape before the ship fully went under. She’d tried so hard to get out to live so she could save her babies, but it was impossible.

“She held her breath for as long as she could, but when she aspirated the water, she said a sense of peace came over her. The water burned when she first breathed it in, and she lived for several minutes afterwards. All she could think about was how she wanted to live to give her babies a chance, but she succumbed. Everything faded away. Then she said she found herself on a beach where she met Atargatis. She was given a choice to live as a siren with her babies or to pass on into the afterlife. I think you can imagine which she chose.”

“Drowning didn’t hurt?” I dared to ask.

“Not for her.” His jaw clenched.

“Since your body is used to having water in your lungs, I suspect it wouldn’t hurt you at all,” added Milo in a whisper that was tinged with horror.

It was somewhat a relief that, at least with drowning, it’d be painless. Just as I was about to go down another spiral about the other “what ifs”, another voice chimed in, one I didn’t expect.

If you don’t fight me, it doesn’t have to hurt, Not-me Siren whispered to me. We could get this over with real fast.

I sighed, looking down at my lap. *I need to survive a few more days so my aunt doesn’t have to worry.*

Alright. I will refrain from pressing then. Her agreeing with me and the kindness in her voice really threw me off even as it lifted some of the heaviness from my shoulders. *I told you, Rose. I'm only a villain because you see me that way. It could've been so much easier if you'd have worked with me instead of fighting me.*

Well, I'm not fighting you now. It was a quiet admission, one that was met with a softness I'd never expected from Not-me Siren.

I could almost envision her smiling. *I'm glad for it. Let's be a team, Rose. We can get through this together.*

My hands were balled on my lap, but I forced myself to relax. It was time to accept this. I wasn't ready to, not yet, but it was time. *Okay.*

There was one last thing on my mind. I'd not dared to even allow myself to think about it, not when it scared me, but it was as necessary to square away as everything else.

"I know I have no right to ask anything of either of you, not after all you've already done for me," I started, my voice steadier than I felt, "but could you do something for me?"

Will's response was instantaneous. "Of course, Rose. Anything."

"Yes." Milo nodded eagerly.

"I hope it doesn't come to this, like really, really hope it doesn't, but if this goes wrong or if I don't survive—"

"I don't think you need to worry about that," said Milo after interrupting me.

"I know. I'm just saying, in the worst case scenario, could you please make sure my aunt is taken care of?" My breath hitched. "Can you please make sure that you bring my body back so she can have closure? I'd—I'd like to have my ashes spread here."

Will didn't need me to explain why I wanted this. Despite the pain in his eyes, he nodded. "I swear I'll make sure that happens, even if I don't think it will."

When I looked at Milo, he looked ready to cry, and it tore at my heart. “Of course.”

Everything in me wanted to ask to be held, to have either Milo or Will—or both—keep the pieces of myself from breaking apart, but I kept the request to myself. I was already asking too much of him and everyone else. That, and no matter what my soul was screaming, Will wasn’t mine anymore, and he’d never been mine again.

I just hoped I could trust them with this if the worst happened.

CHAPTER 40

Rose



48 HOURS UNTIL DEPARTURE

Multitudes of boxes were scattered around me on Milo's floor between the kitchen and the living room, most of our supplies packed and ready to go. A few things still hadn't arrived yet, but I'd made it my task to sit down and go through everything to organize it, labeling each box so it was easy to know where everything was. I'd begun doing this after getting off the phone with my credit card and cell phone companies letting them know I was traveling internationally for the next few months.

The last few days had been a flurry of activity, and through it all, Will had been my constant companion when Milo couldn't be with me, which wasn't often. The three of us stayed sequestered in my aunt's house as we prepared for everything, and it had been surprisingly pleasant. Though I prickled at the need to be babysat, I couldn't really blame him or my selkie for wanting to keep someone with me in case Davis got any wild ideas... or Perry for that matter, because—let's be honest—they were both dangerous.

However, his sentry over me came at a cost, as he'd not been going into the sea as he should've been. So, Milo and I hopped on my boat and headed to Milo's house for a change of scenery while he was out.

My stomach twisted in my belly, nausea threatening to make me retch. The urge to be in the sea hadn't really abated since I last went in, seemingly getting worse the harder the change hit me. But there was no way I was going in again.

Without my necklace, I didn't have the ability to breathe underwater, and with how close Not-me Siren was to the surface and free from the bonds, I didn't trust her not to try to drown me again. Corvin was near certain dying wasn't truly necessary to complete the change, but I didn't want to take that chance. So, I avoided the water even though my whole being cried out for me to go into it and punished me by making me sick and weak.

All I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and sleep, but with so much left to do, it was impossible. So, instead I sat there, looking around me at the frankly ridiculous number of boxes of everything we needed while Milo sat at the kitchen table nearby with his computer mapping out our course. Before the phone call, he'd been giving me a running commentary about his ideas, and it made me blush to see him treating this like it was the trip we told everyone it was and not me needing to get my act together in regards to being a mermaid.

When I looked over at him, his expression was one of pure contentment, and that made my heart flutter for a different reason.

This wonderful, amazing man hadn't left my side, and the whole time, that warmth inside me spread. I still didn't know what it was that I was feeling. Whatever it was, though, always left me hopeful for the future... the future with him.

However, the longer Will was also with me, all the feelings I'd had for him before had started to trickle back in, and it scared me, because it wasn't right. More than that, it wasn't fair to Milo that I could look upon another man and feel something more than platonic. But no matter how much I shoved at those errant emotions, they didn't seem to want to stay buried with the rest of the unwanted things in my heart. Especially not when he smiled at me or joked around with Milo.

Oh, did their newfound camaraderie twist my insides into knots. Whatever animosity they'd had seemed to have dissipated, and now they palled around like old friends. Well, until Milo said something vaguely flirty that sent Will into a sputtering blush, and I had to hide my laugh. Sometimes, I'd

just sit back and watched them as their auras entwined together, the beautiful purple and silver braiding at the edges, and it warmed the cold pit in my stomach.

If only it were possible to... No, don't even entertain the idea of having both. You don't even deserve one of them, I caught myself thinking more than once.

In front of me, my phone vibrated, pulling me out of my thoughts. When I picked it up, it was an email from the Milo with the subject line reading, "Milo and Rose's Amazing Adventure." I looked up at him from where I sat as he shut his laptop, a wide grin on his face.

"There. All done," he said, turning that grin to me, "I sent you, Violet, and my parents our itinerary."

Sure enough, when I opened the email, he'd attached a document with every step of our journey mapped out. *This man, I swear...*

"I know I've said this before, but I'm still not sure why you made this if we're not going to be actually doing the trip like this," I replied, my voice trailing off as he moved boxes aside to sit down and pull me sideways onto his lap.

"And I said the hundred other times you've asked, there's no reason why we can't do it. We don't need to stay in Malutaga the entire time, so we might as well go to fun places while we're over there." He nuzzled his nose into my hair. "In any case, it's important for you to remember how to be a human so you can blend in. Too much time at sea, no matter the reason, will make it harder for you to 'play human.'"

"Is that really a thing?" I asked, leaning more fully into him.

"It is, unfortunately, for all Otherkind. Some of us completely forget how to be human altogether. My grandfather, after losing my grandmother to a hunter sixty years ago, pulled on his pelt and never came out of it again. He's the big grumpy asshole who likes to yell and bite at the others."

“Oh, the one I thought was going to bite your hand off the first time you shooed him off the beach?” *And nearly gave me a heart attack?*

“The very one.”

My eyes widened. “Huh.”

I wanted to say that it was odd that his grandfather was an asshole seal, but really, it made sense. I could understand the desire to shove everything away and forget what was causing pain. For me, it was intense dissociation that happened when I did it, but for Otherkind, many were part of nature itself. So, returning to that was an option for them. I couldn't lie that it sounded peaceful.

“Did you get these boxes done, my sweet, anal-retentive darling?” he asked me, hiding what I knew was a smile from me by kissing the top of my head.

I wrinkled my nose at him. He thought it was good enough that everything we needed was checked off the list then organized when we were putting things away on my boat, while I insisted on organizing everything beforehand to help save on time. Really, he might've been right, but this gave me something to do with my hands since Vi had effectively banned me from working.

“If you must know, yes, I did,” I replied indignantly.

He chuckled into my hair. “Then I'm sure our moving into your boat will go very smoothly tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. Gods, that was so soon, yet almost too far away.

“It surely will, due to my excellent organization skills,” I replied haughtily, though I didn't feel that way at all.

“Of that I have no doubt, love.” He sighed contentedly, as if he were the happiest man in the world, even as what he said next wiped any levity from me. “How are you feeling about having Will here? It must be confusing for you to be around him after what happened.”

My breath whooshed out of me. We hadn't discussed Will at all since that one brief conversation on my boat, and I'd been happy to keep it that way. Everything was already difficult enough as it was; I didn't need to add my inner turmoil to the mix.

"I'm happy he's safe, and I'm happy he's helping," I supplied weakly, not knowing how to elaborate without spilling my guts to him and potentially hurting both of us.

Milo saw right through my attempts at avoiding the subject. "And?"

I huffed a sigh. "What else is there to say? He's my ex, and I'm happy things are no longer up in the air, sort of, but there's just so many other things I have to think about and juggle without worrying about my feelings towards him."

"It's okay if there are feelings," he replied lightly. "I admit I've enjoyed having him here, too. He's really grown this last year."

"Is that why you keep making him blush? Or is the raging bisexual in you unable to help himself?" I asked, turning my face up to look at him.

Milo didn't look even a little bit repentant. "I like what I like." He shrugged. "If the hunters weren't here, I'd have invited him to join us at the festival tomorrow. Alas, I cannot."

I... didn't know what to do with that information. There was a traitorous whisper in my heart, a hope, that maybe he was suggesting I could have both of them, that they could have each other, too. Once more, I punted that from my mind. *There's no way he means that, and even if he was, two men? At the same time? That's too much.*

"I don't know why you're insisting on going to the fair tomorrow," I grumbled, changing the subject slightly.

"I want to do it because I want to spend time with my girlfriend doing typical boyfriend/girlfriend stuff, and because it's good for you to spend time with Violet before we leave. Call it family bonding."

I looked up at him again. "You've known her for years."

“Well, yes, but not as her niece’s man.”

“Oh, you’re my man now, are you? I thought you were just some guy I hired to give me great hugs and go on a trip with me.”

“I’d be happy being your sugar baby, too.”

“Pfft,” I snorted, poking him in the side. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You started it.”

That I couldn’t argue with. But I was going to anyway. Laying my head on his shoulder, I poked him again. “I did not.”

“It’s okay. I like it when you tease me, even if you never admit to it,” he said after tipping my head back and brushing his lips against mine. Once he finished speaking, I nipped at his bottom lip, earning a chuckle from him before he patted me on the ass. “Alright, let’s get up and get you to the water.”

“What? Why?” I asked, not moving.

“Because I can see you’re struggling, and there’s no reason not to. Besides, it’ll be a good break before bringing you back to your house to make dinner.” He leaned in close, his eyes flickering between green and brown for a moment. “And I specifically heard that you’re going to be making beef stew, and I fucking *love* beef stew.”

“Well, yes, but we can just go to the house now and get started on it?” I did *not* want to go anywhere near the water. Not yet. Not when I was about to spend months on it and in it.

“Not before we get some water time.” His tone and expression were adamant.

“I promise you, I’m fine.”

Now, he looked unimpressed. “No, you’re not. You look like you’re going to throw up again, and you haven’t been able to stomach anything all day.”

“I often forget to eat when I’m busy...” My half-hearted excuse fell on deaf ears. Scooping me up in his arms, he

shifted me so that I was over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Milo! What are you doing?”

“It’s my sacred duty as your selkie to take care of you even when you won’t do it yourself.”

“Milo!”

Despite its futility, I fought him, but he was so much stronger than me that it didn’t even faze him. No matter how hard I hit—not that I was trying to hurt him—or struggled, he didn’t budge, and all I was left with was shouting colorful curses as he chuckled. Before I knew it, he was walking into the surf.

Then he fucking *tossed* me in.

My body splashed into the waves, and I was so shocked I sank to the bottom before I realized what he’d done. I surged upwards out of the water, coughing and sputtering as I did. When I could breathe, I looked over to where he stood, laughing at me.

“Milo! What the fuck?” I shouted, which only made him laugh more.

“You feel better, do you not?” he asked.

In truth, he was right. I *did* feel better, but I was never going to admit that to him. “That’s not the point!”

“That’s exactly the point. I wanted you to feel better, and now you do.”

His grin was spread wide across his face, and for whatever reason, that just pissed me off more. Suppressing a growl, I tried to march past him to go back to the house, but he blocked me. When I tried to step the other way, he blocked me then too.

“What the hell, Milo? Let me pass!” I growled, vibrating with the anger that was overtaking my irritation.

“You need more time. You still look a little grey,” he said, adamant.

In his eyes, there was a challenge, and it ignited something inside me that I didn't know was there. It was deep and primal and couldn't be denied. Gripping his shirt, I said through clenched teeth, "Let. Me. Pass."

"Not yet."

From where my hands were on his chest, I shoved him back with all my strength, and it moved him backwards just a little, so I tried it again. This time, he was ready for it and braced himself so that he didn't move at all. A snarl ripped out of my throat as the prickly feeling came over me. It didn't make me dizzy like it had the first time, but it was more intense, and when I looked down, my body had shifted as much as it was able to.

Which only made me angrier.

Wordlessly, I lunged towards him, only to have him bat me away effortlessly. His eyes flickered again before morphing completely into that cinnamon-brown I loved, and his voice deepened. "I don't think this is a game you are ready to play, little one."

I answered him with a wordless scream of my own, putting every ounce of anger into it. His response? A roar so inhuman that it vibrated my very bones. In any other situation, it would have terrified me to my core. Instead, it only pissed me off more even as it sent heat flooding between my legs. *What the hell? Why is this the time to get turned on?*

I ran at him again, screaming as I did so, but instead of merely withstanding my attack, he grabbed me and took me to the ground, flat on my back in the waves.

Beastie looked down at me, heat burning in his eyes, and rumbled in the way that made my body hot. There was a look of victory on his face at knowing he was stronger than me, and part of me responded in kind. When he leaned down, looking as if he were going to kiss me, I almost let him. I *almost* gave into the feeling of pleasure he promised in his eyes, but as waves crashed around us, splashing up my legs and around my head, I remembered my anger.

Maneuvering and shoving at him where he caged me in, I managed to roll over onto my belly before he moved again, one arm going above my head to hold his weight and the other wrapping around my waist like a steel vise. His teeth grazed the back of my neck, sharper than human teeth, and I froze as he rumbled against my skin.

“I can smell how wet you are, little fishy,” he said, nipping at my skin.

Bucking back against him, I growled back, “Of course I’m wet! You threw me in the fucking water!”

Beastie chuckled, the sound like velvet in my ear. “Not that kind of wet.”

The arm that was wrapped around me moved lower, pulling up my skirt and slipping into my panties. I bucked again, trying to get away from him, only to press against the very obvious bulge in his pants. My growl turned breathy when his fingers found the swollen bud at the top of my sex and began toying with it.

I tried to escape his touch but managed only to move against the hardness of his cock, sending more heat between my legs when he ground against my ass in return.

“You’re bare down here now,” he purred. “I like it. So sensitive.”

“Am not!” I lied.

Those wicked fingers of his played me like a fiddle, touching me how I loved and proving me wrong in every way. I panted, unable to escape, and with every passing minute, I was more unsure of whether I wanted to.

Beastie moved to kiss the sensitive spot on my neck that was a guaranteed way to amp up my desire... But I didn’t want to feel desire...

Did I?

My hands clawed at the sand, helplessly trying to get away, but the more he moved those rough fingers just the way I liked, the more I forgot about what I was fighting for.

When he spoke again, his words vibrated against my skin, making my nipples tighten beneath my sun dress. “I’m so fucking lucky I get to have this perfect cunt for the rest of my life. You were made for me, Rose, and I am going to spend *every* moment of our forever proving to you why this is a blessing.”

Clenching my teeth, I tried to hold back the noises he elicited from me, but this only served to make me that much more desperate for it. He kept speaking, though, coaxing me to come with dark words and promises.

“I can’t wait to sink my knot into you again,” he rumbled, his teeth grazing the back of my neck. “Can you imagine it? I’m going to fill you up with cock and cum until your belly is swollen with it. It’s going to feel so good to have you come with my knot locked inside you.”

His words had my pussy gushing wetness, clenching on nothing as I keened. My body wanted everything he promised—and more. Another traitorous whisper floated through my mind, and I nearly voiced it aloud before I clamped my mouth shut: *Own me. Use me. Knot me. Please!*

I wanted to fight what was happening. The wild thing in me didn’t want to be caged, even like this. But all too soon I teetered on the edge of an ecstasy that threatened to wipe away the remainder of my thoughts. I wanted to try to escape his grip and get out of the water, no matter how nice it was making me feel. When he started to rub his cock against my ass, miming what I knew he wanted to do, however, I was gone.

My orgasm ripped through me as the most ridiculous mewling noises escaped my clenched teeth. It left me hotter, more needy than before, my breath coming out in pants. When he removed his hand from between my legs, I whimpered, but he shushed me, running his other hand down my back as he straightened. Before I could protest or even acknowledge what he was doing, he shoved my dress up and panties down as far as they would go, and when I went to protest, to pull them back up, his left hand pressed against the center of my spine, holding me in place and pressing me down onto my elbows.

“Shh, sweetheart. I’ve got you. Trust me,” he cooed as his right hand went back to stroking me between my legs. When his fingers slipped inside me, I could no longer hold back the noises.

Damn him and his magic fingers.

“N—not here?” I managed to get out between gasps.

“No one’s going to see, and even if they did, they’d understand that I’m showing you that you’re mine,” he crooned, his fingers threatening to send me over the edge again. Before I did, though, he pulled them out of me only to press the broad head of his cock against my entrance.

I whimpered again, pressing my forehead to the sand as he slowly, agonizingly pushed inside me. I was filled to the brim with him, his body completing mine in a way that I hadn’t known possible, and when he was fully seated inside me, Beastie made the most wonderful sound of pleasure I’d ever heard.

The hand in the center of my back slid forward to grip my shoulder as he slid back out of me nearly all the way. I didn’t have time to mourn the loss of his body before his hips slammed against my ass, jolting me forward. It would’ve sent me face-first in the sand had his hand not held me.

Then he did it again.

And again.

And again.

He found his rhythm, brutal and punishing. It sent pleasure arcing through my body and scattered any last thoughts I may have had. I screeched and wailed and keened in sounds that were far from human, my breath knocked out of me with each thrust.

“Yes, that’s it.” His body continued to move within me, every thrust an angry, unrelenting slap of his hips against my ass. Curling his body over mine again, keeping his hand on my shoulder, he growled in my ear, the deep bass of his voice rumbling through me. “This is what you need, isn’t it? Let

your Beastie provide for you, sweet. Let me give you what you need.”

“Beastie!” I cried out, my pussy squeezing him harder.

He moaned. “You feel so good around my cock, sweetheart. I can’t wait to knot this pretty pussy, then you’ll truly know who you belong to. Who you’ll *always* belong to.”

He sped up. Each thrust sent me higher and higher towards that peak of pleasure, and every one of his noises against my neck felt like a victory. Milo/Beastie showed me they were reveling in my body just as I was reveling in his, and I legitimately thought I was in love as he brought me such bliss.

After a few glorious moments, I was tipped over the edge again, this time screaming and bucking as I came all over him. He coaxed me through it, praising me. “Oh, that’s it. Good girl. Good fucking girl. Fuck, you’re perfect, milking me like that.”

Not a moment later, his pace faltered as he joined me in ecstasy. His teeth sank into my shoulder hard enough I knew it’d bleed as he twitched and spasmed and filled me with his cum until I thought I’d burst, his knot locking him inside me. Completing me.

When he was finished, my body was jelly. My arms could no longer hold me up, and I slumped forward, my cheek against the cool sand. We didn’t stay that way for long, as my selkie shifted our bodies so that we were laying on our sides, the waves lapping up around us as he held me close to him.

“I’m so glad I get to spend eternity with you,” Milo whispered, pressing a kiss to the back of my head. “As much of an asshole as it makes me, I can only be grateful that you’re changing and are going to come into power. You’re going to be magnificent.”

I wanted to say something back, to snipe at him for being excited about my change, but I couldn’t. What I could say, as my eyelids drooped, was, “Promise me we’ll come back? She’s all the family I have left.”

“Of course. We’ll come back as soon as possible. I swear it.”

Though I was loathe to admit it, his words comforted me. Even his enthusiasm at my change lessened some of my reticence. I hated that it did. I was so tired of being scared of what was happening and what could happen. But in his arms, feeling every ounce of safety and affection for me, I could ignore all that. At least for a little while.

Drowsiness overtook me, and I let myself slip into sleep because, damn it, I did feel better.

CHAPTER 41

Rose



24 HOURS UNTIL DEPARTURE

“I got you good, didn’t I?”

Milo stepped up behind me as I grabbed my dress from the closet. His closeness to my scantily clad body sent heat rushing between my legs all over again, as if he hadn’t had me three more times after our little interlude on the beach the day before. As if he couldn’t get enough of me. The feeling was very, very mutual.

His fingers brushed over the bite mark he’d given me, and I flinched. He was right about one thing: He *had* gotten me good. There was a perfect imprint of his teeth there, deep furrows in the flesh of my shoulder. He’d tended to it just after we got out of the water.

When I looked back at him, though, his expression wasn’t one of repentance, but of awe as his eyes turned to that cinnamon I loved.

“You’re not even sorry, are you?” I asked, turning towards him and poking him in the chest.

His hands came up to bracket my ribs just under my bra as his eyes turned back to jade, and a cheeky grin spread across his face. My heart flip-flopped in my chest as he said, “Not even a little bit, no.”

“Jerk.”

“You like it,” he said, pulling me in for a kiss.

I couldn't even be mad; I did like it. Some weird, inhuman part of my brain liked how it looked, liked the idea that he'd claimed me.

Do I want him to claim me?

I... Maybe?

Actually... better question... hasn't he already since he's bitten me?

Let's unpack that later.

I kissed him back, letting myself enjoy the feel of his hands on my sensitive skin. My arms went around his neck, one of my hands threading into his still-damp hair before I remembered myself. We'd just gotten out of the shower after packing my ship with all the things we'd bought, and Vi was downstairs waiting for us to go to Nora's Fourth of July fair.

Though I wasn't too keen on going—my paranoia about the hunters at an all-time high—Milo had insisted, telling me, “This is the last time you're going to see Violet for a while. Let's enjoy this time while we can.”

I couldn't disagree with that. In fact, it made me feel guilty for having such narrow tunnel vision.

Of course, there was the practical reason why we shouldn't ditch or be late: We were going to be meeting Will before the fireworks were going to be set off. He was still getting in his sea time, last he'd checked in, and wanted to make sure he was at full strength in case anything happened. Even though he assured me he was fine, I couldn't help but feel awful for keeping him away from it for so long, especially as I knew intimately how it hurt.

My thoughts were brought back to the present when Milo kissed his way from my lips to the mark he made on my shoulder, all but purring when he did so. It left my breathing ragged, and I whispered, “If you keep doing that, I'm not sure we're going to make it to the fair.”

The damned man chuckled. “You're right. After I made such a big fuss about it, I shouldn't make you ditch Violet...

even if I think you'd relax after being knotted at least one more time."

I gasped, wanting to refute him while, at the same time, wanting to hide my blushing face, but he was having none of that. Milo took the dress from my hands and gestured for me to put my arms up before I could even sputter. It was a cute white linen dress with an empire waist that fell just below my knees. It was sleeveless, but the straps were thick enough to cover Milo's bite on my shoulder. I'd never gotten the chance to wear it before, so thought I'd give it a try on my first outing with my boyfriend and my aunty. Milo slipped it on over my head, then turned me around to zip it up for me before kissing me on the neck again.

"There. All done," he said, pressing himself against my back again. "We should head downstairs before Violet teases us more for being all over each other."

But I didn't move. I just leaned back into his arms and looked in the mirror at the two of us. We looked good together, and even when his eyes caught mine in the mirror, I couldn't help but smile.

"Something on your mind, sweetheart?" he asked, his words soft and quiet.

There *was* something on my mind. Words were on the tip of my tongue, but I held them in, if only because I wasn't sure exactly what they were. What I did say, though, what rang true in my heart, was, "How did this happen so fast? It seems like just yesterday you were stepping onto my boat to fix it, and now..."

"And now?" he asked after I trailed off. His eyes were locked onto mine, as if desperate to know what I was going to say next.

"And now I can't imagine life without you."

The smile that split his face with such blatant happiness made me want to tear up. He hugged me closer, his arms tightening around me until I could barely breathe, but I didn't mind, especially not when he captured my lips with his. When

he pulled away, he whispered against my lips, “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. I’m happy to be by your side for eternity.”

My eyes welled up, threatening to make my mascara and eyeliner run, so I turned to hug him to me, tightening my arms around him. “Thank you for your strength, Milo. I don’t know how I could do this without you.”

“Good thing you don’t have to.” He tipped my head up to look at him, and he wiped my tears away with his thumbs before kissing me on the forehead. “Come on. Let’s get to this fair.” He stepped away from me, allowing me enough space to head over and grab my purse. But as I was slipping on my sandals, he asked, “And what do you think you’re doing?”

I blinked at him. “Getting my sandals on?”

“And what do you need your purse for?” That mischievous look was back on his face.

“In case I want snacks or something?”

“That won’t be necessary. I want to pay for today.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why?”

“Because I want to, and it’s easier for you if you don’t have to carry your purse around.”

He had a point.

“Alright, but if I do this, you have to get a face painting with a design of my choice.” I raised my eyebrow at him, daring him to take my wager.

Now it was his turn to look at me dubiously. “You drive a hard bargain, fair lady, but I shall take the bet. You leave your purse here, and I’ll get a face painting of your choice.”

I stuck out my hand, and he shook it. When he released my hand, I went back to rummage through my purse, to which he said, “Hey! I thought we had an agreement!”

“We do,” I said, then pulled out the waterproof cell phone carrier and waved it at him. “I’m just going to put my phone in this, in case you get any wild ideas like yesterday.”

He pouted. “You needed to stay in the water, so I made it so you would enjoy being in the water.”

“If that makes you feel better, furball,” I retorted with a cheeky smile as I shoved my phone into the waterproof baggy and put it into my pocket.

Milo chased me out of the room, hell-bent on tickling me, and I ran behind Vi when I got down to her, laughing.

“Vi! Protect me! He’s trying to get me!” I cried out.

When Milo rounded the corner, he stopped running, then put on his best innocent face. “I am not, Violet! You see, she took something from me, and I want it back.”

Vi, bless her, struggled to keep a straight face as she asked, “And what did she take of yours, Milo?”

“My heart.”

There was a breath of silence before Vi and I burst out laughing, especially seeing as he pouted so dramatically. When Vi could collect herself, she turned to me and, wiping her eyes, said, “Now, Rose. You know we don’t take what isn’t ours.”

“But he gave it to me,” I responded, trying to be as solemn as I could.

“Did you?” asked Vi.

His mock-pout only got more exaggerated, and it was all I could do not to kiss it when he replied, “I did.”

Vi let out a fake, long-suffering sigh, casting her eyes skyward. “Oh, you both are ridiculous children.”

“But you love us!” added Milo with a boyish grin.

“Indeed, I do.” She sighed again, not bothering to hide her smile now. “Are you two ready to go?”

“We are.” I nodded. “But I have to make a request.”

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“Well, I know that we have a usual route we like to take, but I would like to stop at the face painting booth first. Milo

promised he'd get one done."

"I suppose that's alright." Then she pursed her lips. "Are you being coerced into this, Milo?"

"I am not. It was a fair deal I agreed to." He smirked. Because of course he did.

"You two can work out the rest of our route. I'm going to go to your office and draw out the design I want so it's a surprise." I smiled back at him before practically skipping back to her office.

Halfway there, he called out to me, "It better not have a dick in the design. There are going to be children present."

"I make no such promises!" I called back cheerily.

There was some grumbling, and I heard Vi say to him, "You walked right into that one, dear boy. Now she's going to incorporate one even if she hadn't originally thought of it."

"I should've negotiated better, you're right. I'll know better for next time," he laughed.

"She's the daughter of a lawyer, after all."

Tuning them out, I grabbed a spare piece of paper from Vi's desk, and using the markers she used for labeling, I drew out my design. When I finished, I folded it twice, then tucked it into my pocket with my phone before skipping back with the vilest grin on my face I could muster, which made Milo give me a look like he was questioning everything between us. He quickly recovered, though, and with a smile, ushered us out the door.

The "fair," like most of Nora's festivals, was being held in the parking lot area in front of the port. Rows of food stalls, game booths, and activities were laid out in a familiar pattern.

We went straight towards the face painting booth that one of the island's many-years-past-retirement elementary school teachers ran every year, and it was perfect timing when we got there, as she was just finishing up a little kid who'd had a dragon painted on their face.

Handing over the money when she turned to us, she asked Milo as she sat in the chair, “So, what design would you like today, young man?”

“Lady’s choice,” he said, gesturing at me. “It’s going to be a surprise.”

The woman’s eyes twinkled as she turned them to me. “I do so *love* surprises. What would you like to have painted on him, dear?”

I fished the paper out of my pocket, flashing him my evil smile again, and handed it to her. She opened it, looked it over for a moment, then put it in her own pocket before asking, “And where would you like this?”

Moving towards him, I patted his left cheek. “Right here.”

“Alright then. I’ll do my best to bring your art to life.”

Milo, the trooper he was, looked like he was doing his best to trust this decision as I stepped back to let the nice lady start working. I moved to stand next to Vi, so we were out of the way of the line that was forming in front of the booth.

Out of habit, my eyes scanned for the hunters, trying to see if they were anywhere near, but I couldn’t find either of them in the crowd. We’d confirmed they were still on the islands earlier when Garret drove by the hotel before work that morning, and it made me suspicious that they were planning something.

My attention was brought back to the here and now when Vi hooked her arm in mine and sighed.

“You know, I didn’t realize how much I’ve come to rely on you until just recently, Rose. While you’ve been sick recently, it’s been quiet and lonely. And now you’re leaving? What am I going to do without you to give cheeky looks behind Miss Winnie’s back when she’s gossiping?” she asked, her eyes a little misty.

Patting her on the arm, I tried not to tear up myself. “You know I’m coming back, right? You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

“I know. I just can’t help but feel like maybe I’m holding you back. Why would you want to hang around an old lady like me when you have a new, albeit ridiculous, boyfriend and your whole life in front of you? My life has always been small and contained. I don’t want you to feel like you must have the same.”

Her words lashed at my heart. “I don’t feel that way at all. I love the islands and our shop and our ice cream dates. This is my home; it always has been. I’ll always come back to it, come hell or high water.” I gave her my best smile, even as I cried inside.

What I was saying was true from the bottom of my soul, but I worried I wouldn’t get the chance to make it back, not when it may take years to gain control of myself. I was going to try, but it was a possibility.

I added, “Besides, Aunty. When I come back, I want to send you on a vacation. You’ve never really had one, and I think you deserve it.”

She hesitated. “I don’t know about that, Rosie. I—”

“—deserve to have a life full of adventure and fun and experiences too,” I finished for her. “Who knows? Maybe if I send you away from old man central, you can find a hot, hunky man of your own, and when you bring him back, we can have play dates for them when we need girl time.”

Vi laughed, but then grew serious again. “I don’t know, Rose. I’m not young anymore, and after Eli... after Eli, I don’t know if there’s room for anyone else in my heart, not until I know what happened to him.”

Her words were a serrated knife to my heart that I hid behind a sad smile. “And that’s fair if that’s what you want. But there’s something that Aeden told me one day in therapy that really helped me that may help you, too. He said that we don’t always get closure even if we want and deserve it, and that we must continue forward anyway, one step at a time. Holding onto the hope of something that we may never get only stymies us. All this to say, when you’re ready to move forward, I’ll be there to take that first step with you.”

Vi's eyes filled with tears, and she let out a laugh as she wiped them away. "Goodness, when did you turn into such an adult, Rosie-roo?"

I hugged her to me, laughing at her use of my childhood nickname. "I mean, I think Milo might have a differing opinion on whether I'm an adult yet or not, considering the design I chose to paint on his face."

"Oh, I don't know, I think it looks amazing. Gotta teach 'em early not to wager with a Sutton."

The woman painting Milo's face finished and handed a mirror to him to see what I'd chosen to put on his face: a huge embellished red heart with "RM's" in the center to proclaim he was mine and mine alone. A thousand emotions crossed his face, but he finally landed on amused. He paid the woman a tip for her good work, then came right up to me and kissed me right there in the middle of the fair.

When he tried to pull away, I stopped him to whisper in his ear, "You marked me. It's only fair I marked you." I nipped his earlobe. "Maybe if you're lucky, when I get my sharp teeth in, I'll bite you too."

Milo groaned, then turned to whisper in my ear, "Madam, we are in public. I can't dick you down like I'd like."

I snorted... and clenched my thighs together at the same time. "Too bad, furball." I pulled away just enough to kiss him one more time, then patted him on the chest. "Why don't we take a picture so we can add it to the collage in your living room?"

For a split second, his eyes shifted between colors. "We should."

Pulling my cell phone out of my pocket and out of its waterproof case, we quickly took several pics of us. One clearly showing my mark on his cheek, one of us normally, one of us kissing, and finally, Vi wrestled the phone from my hand to take a more serious one as she made joking comments about how puke-inducingly cute we were together. I sent them

off to the group chat before stuffing my phone back into its baggie and back into my pocket.

“Alright, come on before we make Vi actually throw up on our shoes with how cute we are,” I snickered.

We spent the rest of the afternoon walking around the fair, eating snacks, and playing games. Milo insisted on winning a huge stuffed bear for me, telling me that we were naming the bear Violet and were taking it with us on our trip to take pictures with. This made Vi nearly tear up again until he made a joke about her being his real true love, and all three of us laughed.

Once we’d made our rounds to almost all the booths, with not even one sighting of the hunters—which I wasn’t sure I was relieved or more nervous about—we joined the neighborhood BBQ on the beach for dinner.

The moment I saw the water, however, my body decided I needed to be in it. My stomach twisted, threatening to make me throw up the fair food I’d munched on earlier. I motioned to Milo to come with me so I could walk in the surf for a moment, to ease that unceasing ache deep within me to have the saltwater against my skin. After a few moments, thankfully, it abated for the most part, and we were able to join Vi on the sand to eat our hamburgers and hotdogs among the people I’d come to know and love.

My heart ached; I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to go on this trip, not for the reason I was going, not when I didn’t know when I’d be back, and looking around at everyone made it harder knowing I had no choice.

CHAPTER 42

Rose



12 HOURS UNTIL DEPARTURE

As the sun began its descent towards the horizon, lighting the sky in fiery oranges and pinks, Milo and I made our way towards the parking lot. When Will had messaged me earlier, we decided on where to meet him there for the changing of the guard as it were, so Milo could join his crewmates for the fireworks show. When we got there, my selkie pulled me close and kissed me silly. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“I know, but you must. You have a duty to entertain the masses,” I replied, hugging him.

“Promise you’ll stay near Violet or Will the whole time. Promise you won’t let either of them out of your sight.”

“I swear it to you.” I gave him a cheeky smile of my own. “And you promise me you’ll keep my mark on at least until I see you next, okay?”

“I’d keep it on forever if I could.”

“I mean, I don’t know about that...” My cheeks heated at the sincerity in his eyes.

“You’re right. I’ll keep it on until you can sink your pretty teeth into my skin to mark me as yours.” He leaned down to whisper in my ear. “I’d prefer if you did it while I’m fucking you senseless.”

Those words sent heat immediately to my core, and I couldn’t help but whimper. “If you’re a good boy, we’ll talk

about it.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m always a good boy.”

I wanted to throw back a witty retort of my own about how he was the opposite, but he went still in my arms. Milo’s head snapped up to look behind me, and whatever he saw had his pupils dilating and his nostrils flaring as he sucked in a breath. There was a moment of struggle between man and beast, his irises flickering back and forth between jade and cinnamon, but in the end, the selkie in him won out.

A deep rumble vibrated against my hand, though I wasn’t sure whether it was from anger or happiness. I turned to see why Beastie had taken over only to find Will about twenty paces from us, leaning against a car. His arms were crossed over his chest, making his muscles bulge and strain the fabric of his t-shirt.

I’d forgotten how handsome he looked in casual clothes. His jeans were slung low across his hips and the plain black shirt only accentuated the delicious—*Stop it! He’s not yours to ogle!*

“I stopped by the hotel to see if hunters had left to join the festivities, but I didn’t see them come or go. I hope your people are ready for them, just in case they have something planned,” said Will in lieu of a greeting.

“My people are ready,” Beastie replied.

“Alright, then.” Will pushed off the car and closed the space between the three of us. The closer he got, the more the air crackled around us. “You better go before you’re late. I’ll feel better once you’re back to help keep an eye on her with me. I have a bad feeling about tonight.”

Beastie nodded solemnly, looking ill at ease. He stepped away from me and out of my arms, only to grab my hand and somewhat aggressively put it in Will’s hand, lacing our fingers together forcibly. That familiar shock of energy went through me again as both of them touched me, and I shivered even as I looked at my selkie in confusion.

“Take care of our girl,” said Milo, his eyes shifting as he regained control. The corners of his lips tipped up in a pleased smile as he looked at our clasped hands.

“I swear it,” replied Will, giving my hand a subconscious squeeze.

With one last soul searing kiss and a clap on Will’s shoulder, Milo walked away, total gratification written on his face. All I could do was stare at him as he left, slack-jawed. When I finally gathered my wits, I turned to Will.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“I... I have no idea.” There was a bit of color rising in his cheeks. “I don’t mind it, though.”

Now it was *my* turn to blush. And yet... I didn’t move away from him or take my hand from his. It was a comfort to have him there, knowing he was trying to protect me.

“I think it’d be best if I stayed invisible,” he said, his other hand scrubbing the back of his neck. “In case the hunters show up and recognize me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, my hand tightening in his. Was he in danger?

He pressed his lips into a hard line. “I forgot to mention it before because I was pissed about you being stalked, but the reason they came here was because of what my father did. They found articles in the newspaper about him... and you.”

Everything in me went still. “So, they’ve known the whole time? About me?”

“From what I could gather, one of them doesn’t think you are Otherkind, but the other, the one stalking you, doesn’t give a shit. He marked you as his next victim regardless of your species.”

His outburst, while understandable before, made so much more sense now. But it ignited rage within me like I’d never felt before. *If Joseph hadn’t taken me, none of this would’ve happened. I’d not have been forced to change, forced out of my home. Eli wouldn’t have—*

“Rose, pretty girl, I need you to breathe with me. You’re starting to shift,” he said, calm as ever. As if I wasn’t about to expose myself to the humans of the world.

Looking down at myself, I could see that he was right. My claws had elongated and were sinking into his hand. In a fit of panic, I gasped, trying to pull away from him, but he held me fast. With his free hand, he cupped my cheek.

“Shh,” he whispered. “You’re alright.”

Just the feel of his skin on mine and the gentle cadence of his voice brought me back from the brink. Almost immediately, I reverted back to fully human-shaped, and I wanted to cry with relief.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“We all get emotional sometimes. You’ll learn,” he replied with a soft smile. “Why don’t we find your aunt and get settled in before the show starts.”

“Okay.”

Will pulled his hand away from my cheek to press the pearl on his necklace, and he disappeared from view, the only thing letting me know he was still there being his hand in mine. We walked back into the crowd and back to where Vi was chatting with one of the neighbors. They were discussing doing some renovations over the summer, which I was glad I was not going to be home for, as I had enough issues with my hearing being so sensitive as it was.

My eyes scanned the crowd, trying to find the hunters in our number, but I didn’t see them. Yet I was filled with anxiety. They could be anywhere, watching me. But I took a deep breath. *As long as I’m surrounded by people and have Vi and Will around me, I’ll be fine.*

I have to be fine.

I just have to survive tonight, and tomorrow I leave.

Just a few more hours.

Will’s hand squeezed mine as his voice whispered in my head. *It is going to be fine. I’m going to be right here with you,*

I promise.

I'm really grateful you're here, Will. The urge to lean over and kiss him rose up, but I stuffed it down. I ended up compromising with myself and leaned into him. Just a little.

I missed you.

My breath caught. His admission wrecked me, and all I could do was turn towards him to rest my forehead on his shoulder. God, that hurt.

I missed you, too, I whispered back. *I spent the last year terrified about whether you'd been captured by your father or not.*

Even though he tried to hide it, a long string of mental curses echoed in my head before he cut them off. *I'm sorry, Rose. I thought a clean break would make it easier and make it safe for you.*

You did what you had to do for yourself and your family. I'd burn the world if anything happened to Vi.

My phone buzzed in my pocket before I could dwell on that thought. Pulling out my phone, I sent Milo a text telling him I was okay, then opened the group chat to see what Ava had messaged me.

AVA

Biiiiitich

You better stop by tomorrow before you leave so we can give you a proper send off

AIRA

We have a gift to give you!

AVA

And it's not condoms!

ME

Ava!

AVA

Oh, speaking of, Mum said Milo bit you?

How would she know that?!

She saw you guys walking back from the beach yesterday

Welp, looks like I'm never coming back ever again

brb dying of embarrassment

AIRA

You know how nosy these selkies are

AVA

We have no secrets!

And I'm taking that as a confirmation he bit you

Guuuuurl, I didn't know you were ready for the mating mark

I don't know if it was premeditated

AIRA

Aahhhh, it happened when you were doing the *do*

AVA

Kinky!

You both are ridiculous

But I love you both anyway

And yes, I'll stop by before I leave tomorrow

AVA

I love you too!

AIRA

Ditto <3

There was a chuckle beside me. *You have really good friends.*

No snooping! My face flamed as I shoved my phone back in its sleeve and then into my pocket.

Hard not to when you're flashing your phone everywhere. He chuckled again, the sound warm against my mind before he sobered. *In all seriousness, though, I'm happy you made friends. I'm happy you made a life here. It makes me feel even more grateful that you survived.*

I didn't know how to respond to that aside from leaning my shoulder into his. Luckily for me, though, excited tittering went through the crowd just before everyone went quiet. It was full dark now, with little to no light on the beach for us so the fireworks would be brighter. Two boats—one I recognized as Milo's—moved into position in the center of the caldera between Nora's Bryony Beach and Casper's Pearl Beach.

Fireworks were handled a little differently here in the Golden Isles. Several boats would go out on the water and set off what they had while music played over speakers. The sound of the explosions was amplified and echoed off the water, bouncing between the islands. Nora and Casper usually combined their celebrations, but the other islands had their own, though all five communities usually coordinated the timing and their shows for maximum effect. It was always one of my favorite parts of summers here as a child.

It wasn't long before the first firework whistled its ascent and exploded overhead. The different colors sparkled overhead and reflected on the water as each one's sound going off

boomed loudly enough that it disoriented me just enough to be annoying. But if I focused, I could ignore the sound in favor of the fireworks and the music. It was beautiful, and I was glad I was able to share this time with my community—and Will—before I left.

Subconsciously, I moved a little closer to Will, so we were thigh to thigh. He'd let go of my hand in favor of draping his arm across my leg, his big hand resting on my calf. For a moment, I could almost forget a year had passed. It was a perfect, beautiful moment, but bittersweet. Because it had been stolen from me. Because it may have been my last. I'd forever be left wondering about all the possibilities if things had turned out every differently.

For now, though, I decided to savor the last dregs of whatever this was before reality came crashing back in.

I reached over to grab Vi's hand, needing her close to me. She squeezed my hand three times—meaning 'I love you'—which I returned about sevenfold, just like I used to do as a kid. Mine, though, meant 'I love you very, very, very, very much' with vigor. She snorted, then leaned over to whisper, "How many very's was that?"

"At least a million and a half." My heart rejoiced in her smile. "Next time, I'll aim for infinity."

"Pfft." Vi whacked me in the arm. "Dingbat."

When the finale was about to begin, a guitar rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" came through the speakers, which elicited a few gasps from the older folks. Will chuckled audibly with me at their reaction to having their beloved tradition of having a 50-something year old crackly recording of the song changed to something different.

Soon, though, the last of the fireworks was set off, its grand plume lighting up the sky and all the people beneath it. Then silence fell before the people on both Bryony and Pearl Beaches began to clap. Another playlist came over the speakers to fill the silence as everyone turned to start the fires. This was about the time when the alcohol was brought out and the adults were finally allowed to have fun.

I hate to mention this, but I need to make a trip to the men's room. Will you be alright by yourself for a moment? Will asked suddenly.

I turned to him, having totally forgotten he was invisible, which meant I was staring at nothing. *Of course. I'll stay next to Vi.*

Okay. He gave my knee a squeeze. *I'll be right back.*

Before he left, I could have sworn I felt the press of lips against my temple so tender I could have cried... Internally I might have.

Almost as soon as he left me, however, the screaming itch beneath my skin rose up with a vengeance. It shoved me so hard to go to the sea that I lurched with it, causing Vi to look over at me with concern.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?” she asked, her eyes sweeping over me.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Just startled myself,” I replied.

For a moment, she didn't look like she believed me but went back to talking to one of her friends after petting my cheek. This only left me to suffer alone with the ache. My body was acting like I hadn't been in the sea yesterday or even earlier. I tried to breathe through it; it shouldn't have been hard. I just needed to hold on until Will got back.

But my body wouldn't relent. I closed my eyes, centering myself and trying to overcome it. *Will will be back soon. Will will be back soon.* I chanted this over and over again as my stomach cramped, as my body threatened to make me lose my dinner.

Not-me Siren, if this is you, please stop. Please, I pleaded.

For once, this isn't me. You're in the final stages of your transition. Your body needs to heal in the ocean as it slowly dies, she replied. I still expected her to mock me or make a stupid song, but she didn't.

Another swell of nausea wracked my body. The itch beneath my skin had me wanting to stick my claws into my

own flesh and rip the offending organ clean off piece by piece. So I breathed. I tried to pretend I was elsewhere, my mind drifting to the ocean and the welcoming embrace of the water. After a moment, the horrid pain subsided, as if imagining being in the water was enough to quell the need within me. It was sweet, sweet relief, and I was proud that I'd managed to ease the discomfort all on my own. Happy, even, to have defeated it.

That was, until I opened my eyes.

I was standing in the surf, water reaching my mid-calf. I gasped. Spinning around, I searched for the rest of the people who were supposed to be around me but they were not behind me. They weren't there. They were on the other side of the beach from me, all still sitting and chatting as the smaller kids played with sparklers and the national anthem played over a loudspeaker.

How I'd gotten so far away without realizing it, I didn't know. All I did know was I needed to get back to my people. Alarm bells sounded in my head drowning out any and all other noise as I trudged back towards where I knew my aunt was, where Will would be looking for me. I made it about three frantic steps before something hard collided with the back of my head, and a blinding burst of pain knocked me out cold.

CHAPTER 43

Davis Brown



Too fucking easy.

The ease with which he was able to catch her sent a thrill through Davis. A week and some change of preparation, and all he'd had to do was wait until she parted from the crowd to dip her toes in the water. Her stayin' sequestered had nearly made this one chance impossible with the deadline he was on, but luck favored him.

Though he'd had to stop his stalkin' of the freaky-eyed bitch to keep Perry off his tail, he'd spent every wakin' moment devising her death and how to cover it up. When it came to him, however, it was like a revelation. God must've been smilin' down on him when he thought of the poetic balancin' of the scales. Even now, he had to chuckle to himself at how delightfully karmic it was.

While out with his cousin during this preparation period, he only caught glimpses of his prey. It was not enough to satisfy him, not really, but it was enough of a hit to keep him sane. Seeing her packin' boxes into her boat, however, pissed him off.

You're not getting' away from me, bitch, he promised himself. And he made sure of this by sabotagin' her boat and wreckin' everything in it out of fuckin' spite after his cousin had left to prepare for the main even for the night.

Heftin' her limp body into his arms, he slipped into the dark and away from the water. Stupid island fuckers didn't realize how much easier it made his job to have so few

streetlights to “avoid light pollution”. He didn’t even have to be sneaky about walkin’ the unconscious woman to his stolen car then throwin’ her into the backseat, her head hittin’ the other door with a loud *thud*.

His heart raced in excitement as he drove towards the secluded spot he’d chosen for her death. He wondered what her face would look like when she realized she was going to die. Would she fight? Would she scream at him? Threaten him? He fuckin’ loved when they tried to bargain with him to try to save their lives.

The thought made him need to adjust his pants.

There was a smaller beach on the south side of the island that he’d never seen anyone use—knowledge provided by the trail cam he’d placed to see how many came to this space and when. It gave him great cover for what he was about to do, havin’ to trudge through a bit of woods to get to it.

Davis turned off the main road and drove a little ways away into the tree line before parkin’. The 80’s sedan wasn’t built for this sort of thing, but he didn’t give a damn what damage he did. They were leaving on the first ferry out the next day, so he’d never have to think about this hell hole ever again, thank the Lord.

He popped the trunk before getting out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition. Davis was gonna need it to get to the boat he and Perry had stolen to get to Mariana for the night’s main event. Pullin’ out his backpack full of all the goodies and tools he’d need, he shut the truck then went to pull his prey out of the back seat.

It took ten minutes to get to the beach from where he’d left the car, but when he got there, he immediately dropped her onto the sand and went to work puttin’ her exactly how he wanted her.

Rocks jutted up from the ground, some larger than the others. The one he’d chosen was a good four feet tall which was perfect for his purposes. Earlier in the week, he’d drilled steel eye bolts into the stone to attach the chains to, one to hold her arms above her head and another to hold her feet and

legs down. Perhaps it was overkill for a human, but he wanted to be sure she couldn't move.

He clamped manacles meant for supes around her wrists and ankles before linkin' them into the eye bolts. Stepping back, he admired his handiwork. She was beautiful, all trussed up like this, her body stretched out for his perusal. It was such a shame she got tangled up with the wrong people.

He fuckin' moaned imaginin' what was to come.

Now all he had left to do was wait for her to wake. Then the real fun would begin.

CHAPTER 44

Rose



The darkness of unconsciousness was broken up by brief moments of hazy awareness.

My head hitting something hard roused me long enough to groan. Then the hum of a motor and vibration against my body registered for a moment before I was dragged back under again. But what woke me finally was the hard slaps against my face, on one cheek then the other.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty.”

For a brief, futile moment, I almost thought it was Milo or Will, but when a harder smack cracked across my face, the pain of it making stars explode behind my eyelids, that notion was thoroughly yanked away. My eyes flew open, my head pounding, and I was greeted with the one face I never wanted to see again: Davis.

“Finally. I was thinkin’ I was gonna have to start without you,” he said with a smile that haunted my very soul.

A scream bubbled up in my throat as I startled, jumping away from him. I needed to put as much distance between him and me as I could, but my movements stopped abruptly after the initial jerk of my limbs. I looked up at my hands and choked back a sob.

Around my wrists were manacles attached to a chain, and as my eyes followed the roughly two-foot length with increasing horror, I found the source. There, above my head and embedded in a large rock, was a piece of metal that was bent around the links, locking it in place. I yanked on it, once,

twice, willing my strength to be more than that of the metal's, but it didn't budge. When I tried to kick my legs, it became apparent they were bound as well, spread wide enough for him to get between them if he so chose.

My heart pounded in my chest, and the first tell-tale *pop* of a snapping bond went off in my head as panic coursed through me. Tears flooded my eyes as the boom of a firework went off in the distance. *I'm going to die here... He's going to kill me...*

"I do always love it when you abominations realize how fucked you are." There was a glint in the moonlight as he moved his hand to rest on my belly. Only it wasn't just his hand pressing there. From the shape and feel alone, he had a knife there as well, laying flat against me. It couldn't hurt me like this, but it was the threat he wanted me to feel. It filled his eyes with a gleeful malice, an eagerness, as he looked upon my prone form. Pushing the knife a little harder into me, he chuckled at my flinch.

"Please... please let me go," I begged, knowing I was playing into his fantasy. There was a whisper in my head that I should play it cool, to give him nothing so killing me wouldn't be as satisfying. But the box I kept my emotions in was near bursting, this so very close to being the thing that broke it open completely.

"No, I don't think I will. You see, I hunt your kind, and I won't rest until I'm dead or all your kind are," sneered Davis.

"My kind? What do you mean 'my kind?'" I asked, feigning ignorance. *Maybe if he thinks I'm human, maybe if I can convince them, he'll let me go... No, that's stupid... But what else do I have?*

"Oh, there's no need to play dumb. We both know you know what supes are," he said, then scoffed. "You may have fooled my cousin, but you can't fool me with your weird fuckin' eye and your freaky fire shit."

"S—supes? What are you talking about?" I whispered, really throwing myself into the not-really-a-performance performance.

“Supes. Supernatural creatures. Things that go bump in the night. All the legends and myths are true, and even if you aren’t one, your eye is proof that you’ve at least had run-ins with them.” There was something in the way that Davis stared at me, in the way that he spoke, that stilled me to my very soul.

“If you think I’m a supe, then why tie me up like this at all? What’s your goal here?” I asked, regretting asking but needing to know anyway.

“My goal? I’m here to watch you die.” He smiled.

He fucking *smiled*.

“But why? I’ve done nothing wrong!” I asked.

“If that were the case, you wouldn’t have that eye.” The knife lifted away from my stomach so he could press the pointed tip to the skin just under my left eye socket. I had to hold back another flinch so he wouldn’t puncture it. He tilted his head, his gaze boring into me like I was nothing more than a science experiment or a zoo animal. “Tell me, was it Cornelius Young that fucked with your head or was it Will Kelley?”

Tears pricked my eyes at those names coming from his filthy mouth. “I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He kept talking as if I hadn’t answered. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. You’re gonna die, and I’m gonna enjoy wringin’ out every ounce of pain I can before you’re shipped off to hell.” He hummed, his eyes raking over my body. “Now, where should I begin?”

I need to escape.

I need to escape!

I tugged on the chains again. Where were my claws? Where was my strength? I’d cracked my skin before, so why was it not enough now? At this point it didn’t matter now if he knew I was changing and mostly inhuman, but none of it showed up. *What was the point of all this if I can’t call on it when I need it?!*

Davis wasted no time in tugging my dress up so that it was bunched under my armpits, exposing my undergarments and bare skin to his eyes. He ran his knife over the inside of my thigh, just a hint of the blade rasping against my skin, but I grit my teeth, locking my expression down. He hummed again then smirked. Taking the knife, he pressed the flat part of the blade against my pussy, rubbing it up and down.

“It’s a shame I’m on a time limit. I’d have loved to fuck you before I put you down,” he said. He looked back up at my face, clearly trying to gauge my reaction. “You wouldn’t be the first supe I used to wet my dick.”

It was clear he was expecting me to be horrified, to struggle and plead, and though it made me want to throw up on him to acknowledge, he was enjoying this. His free hand went to the front of his pants several times, adjusting himself without care that I could see. The last thing I wanted was for him to get any pleasure from my death. So, I batted down my expression, drawing on every hard lesson I’d learned from my mother about keeping my emotions to myself. *I will give him nothing. There will be no satisfaction in this.*

When I didn’t give him the reaction he craved, Davis frowned. “Well, it looks like I need to warm you up a little bit. Why don’t I start with these pretty claw marks?”

He grabbed my hair and lifted my head so that I had to watch what he was doing. Absolute terror ravaged what little control I had as he so, so slowly brought the dagger towards my stomach. Desperation to avoid this had me trying to think of a way, any way, to end this or avoid the pain of what was about to happen. Only one, however, came to mind. Only one would ensure I’d come back to my aunt, to my boys.

Not-me Siren, you said you could kill me? I asked, my inner voice expressing every bit of panic I was trying to keep from my face.

She unfurled within me, as if she’d been woken from a slumber. *I can, yes.*

Please, I beg. Do it now. Kill me now. Spare me this pain.

This got her attention. It took but a moment for her to assess what was happening. When she did, without taunts or shaming, she said, *Alright. I need to break the rest of these bindings. You need to survive until then, though. I don't know if you can finish the transition with the bindings on.*

I wanted to sob and to beg her to make it quick, but the knife met my flesh on the bottommost scar where Joseph had clawed me. Davis reopened it with a shallow cut that had me sucking in a breath. Droplets of blood bloomed as the blade slid across the scar, and the sight of it released the tension he'd been holding, him sighing in abject pleasure.

“You know, I once cut a supe open and took out their organs one by one while they watched. You're very lucky I don't have time for that,” he said, going to the next claw mark up to give it the same treatment but this time much deeper. “I'm just gonna have to be satisfied by carvin' up this pretty body of yours.”

The third claw mark he dug the blade in, and it took everything I had not to cry out. But with it, one of the bindings released with a *snap!* in my chest. It would've been a relief if the pain of being cut open hadn't overwhelmed me. And if I didn't know how many bonds were left keeping her in place.

“Oh fuck, you bleed so pretty. I could come watching it drip from you,” Davis nearly moaned as he all but sawed into the fourth and final scar.

This one was up by my ribs, and when the blade bit into my flesh, I could've sworn it scoured the bone. A scream bubbled up in my throat that was near impossible to hold down, especially when the knife being pulled from my body almost hurt worse than going in. At that point, I'd stopped breathing with trying not to react.

Davis released his grip in my hair to reposition himself so he could see better. Wildness lit up his eyes, and I only had a moment's reprieve before he went to work, carving into my torso.

One slice.

Then another.

And another.

The pain was... beyond description. It was a burn, a hot flash of agony. There was nothing I could do to ignore it or pretend it wasn't happening.

I dug deep into the dwindling well of strength I had in me, trying to keep my noises and reactions to a minimum. I clenched my teeth so hard I thought they would crack under the pressure. Tears streamed down my temples and into the sand below as my lips trembled. On a particularly deep cut, my breath wheezed out of me, nearly unsealing my lips and letting the guttural grunts out.

This was enough, though, to spur him on, and when he pressed the knife deeper into me, connecting with another of my rib bones, what little control I had over myself dissipated. Davis laughed at the first scream, taunting me. "There it is! Scream for me, freak! Tell me how much it fuckin' hurts!"

Once the screams started, I couldn't stop, and it only made it worse for me. The bite of his blade was much crueler as he moved from my torso to other parts of me. Arms, legs, my face. No part of me was safe from his meticulous, gruesome work. My blood poured out of me, and I weakened with every drop.

Please... please hurry... Even my mental voice was a whispered plea to Not-me Siren.

Dark spots ate my vision; the rush of my racing pulse drowned out all other sound as he slowly, so slowly cut into my stomach again. An errant thought popped into my head, telling me I should try to slow my heart rate so I wouldn't bleed out as fast, but whether that was fact or fiction was beyond me. My head lolled to the side as I reached for the painlessness of unconsciousness.

Snap!

"Oh, no, no, no. I can't have you dyin' from this. What fun would that be?" crooned Davis, breaking through the cotton in

my head before slapping my cheek again. I was forced back to reality, and I cursed him mentally.

Pop!

Fireworks continued to shoot off in the distance, the explosions like gunshots amplified and echoing over the water. Beside me, Davis swore a long line of colorful curses for reasons I couldn't understand then embedded the knife into my lower belly. My breath was knocked out of me. I would've screamed if I'd hadn't already ruined my voice.

I barely registered that he'd unhooked the chains from the metal hooks in the rocks for both my hands and feet. What I did register was him yanking the knife out of my belly and his hand in my hair. Davis dragged me away from the rocks that had held me in place. He didn't take me far, but when a splash of cold water hit me, it was painfully obvious what he intended to do.

Pop!

Pop!

Pop!

Hold on, Rose. I'm almost done! Not-me Siren said.

The saltwater burned my opened wounds, sending a fresh wave of agony crashing through me as he pulled me to where he wanted me. Abruptly, he let go of my hair to straddle my torso, uncaring that he was getting wet with blood and ocean water. The water was shallow there, but it was deep enough that I needed to crane my neck to keep my nose and mouth above the surf, even though I nearly passed out from the pain of it. When he gripped my neck and pulled me forward I wanted to kill him.

“It's poetic, don't you think? You survived that boat crash—if it even was a boat crash—only to die at sea anyway. You can join your aunt's dead boyfriend in the depths! How romantic!”

Gripping one of his arms, I gritted out, “I hope you know you're going to regret doing this. I hope when you meet your

god, he punishes you for all eternity. I'm going to be the front of that line to torture you for your sins."

Snap!

"Oh, I don't think so, darlin'. My God is gonna reward me for helpin' eradicate your kind. I am nothin' if not a faithful servant, which I'll continue to be now by snuffin' the life out of you."

He shoved me beneath the surface before I could get a good breath in then held me there with a single hand on my ruined sternum. I almost took a breath to spite him and die faster, but Not-me Siren's voice warned against it as she shoved herself at the remaining bond. *Not yet! I'm almost out!*

I... don't know if I can. I'd not been able to take a single full breath since she'd been bound the first time. There wasn't enough air to hold out.

You have to. Just another moment...

My eyes burned.

My lungs burned.

Each push from Not-me Siren on the bond forced what little air I had out of my lungs. The surface was so close, yet too far, and struggling only made the pain in my chest worse. She pushed and pushed and pushed, trying desperately to free herself as Davis pressed his hand onto my chest. He reveled in the bubbles of air that escaped me.

She lurched against the bond one more time, and this time, the last bit of air in my lungs was knocked out of me. A loud pop echoed in my head as she stretched, breaking the last bond. In my shock, I gasped, water filling my lungs rather than air, and I knew then I'd lost. It was all over. It was just a matter of time before the end.

I breathed in more water. My limbs, my head were so heavy, but I used what little strength I had to turn my face away from Davis so he couldn't see the light in my eyes die. I wouldn't give him that pleasure.

My vision narrowed. Impossibly, Not-me Siren swam towards me out of the darkness. Her eyes were solid black, but the expression on her face was nothing but gentle. That once terrifying webbed hand of hers cupped my cheek. *It's going to be okay. I've got you now.*

She plunged her other hand into my chest, gripped my heart in her hand, and squeezed. Spasming, I breathed in more and more water as I gasped. My heart struggled to keep beating, struggled to keep me alive, but in the end, it was no match for her. And I was glad for it.

It beat once.

Twice.

Then, after the third it stopped altogether, the glitter of fireworks exploding overhead as my vision faded.

Dead.

CHAPTER 45

Davis Brown



There was nothin' better than to watch as his victims struggled and begged to be spared. All of them did the same thing. Davis relished how predictable they all were. Relished and got rock hard from it.

And Rose had struggled so beautifully.

Any and all dignity the woman had vanished in the face of his power over her life and death. Her screams as he ruined her flesh... the way her voice gave out after screaming for so long... Fuckin' *divine*. He couldn't have imagined a more perfect victim.

When the water went over her head, Davis nearly held his breath with her, countin' down until she sucked water into her lungs. To her credit, she lasted longer than he thought she might, but when she finally drowned, when he felt her take her final breath, he thought he might make a mess in his pants.

He looked down at her slack body to see her eyes wide open, unblinking and glassy. She really was a pretty thing, and seein' her dead, her body saggin' did things to him. Davis ran a hand over her face before he stood up and took a few steps away from her body. It took mere seconds to unbutton his pants and pull his dick out. Two tugs and a guttural bellow later, his jizz exploded from him and into the water, making him see stars.

It really had been too fuckin' long since he'd killed and gotten to cum.

After tuckin' himself back into his pants, he washed his hands then checked the time. *Shit. I'm late.* Leavin' her body in the surf, he headed towards the car so he could get to the rendezvous point.



Perry Brown

He was late.

They had a limited window with the selkies as close to the road as they were due to the high tide, and this bitch was about to ruin everythin'. They had one shot! Otherwise, they wouldn't get them all, and with their departure happenin' tomorrow morning, it was now or never.

Perry ought to have known better than to leave his homicidal cousin alone. As it was, Davis had been suspiciously helpful and quiet this last week, and it nagged at him. Usually at this point in the hunt, he'd have been ready to kill anything that moved. *He has to be up to something.*

Just as he was about to pull out his phone and call the bastard, Davis came zoomin' around the corner in a car he didn't recognize. Perry's eyes nearly bugged out of his Goddamn head. *This isn't what we agreed on! Why is he calling more attention to us! Fuck!*

Yet Davis strode up with all the confidence in the world. "You ready to kill these fuckers?"

"Where the fuck have you been?" Perry demanded. "Where'd you get the fuckin' car?"

"There was a kink in my plans. But I'm here now."

There was a shine in his eyes that unnerved Perry. It was like the humanity in him had been snuffed out, leaving behind

only the killer. He'd seen it many times before on a hunt...

But only after a kill.

Has he already killed someone? The thought sent a chill down his spine. He looked his cousin over, almost afraid to know. But the evidence was there in the form of a bright blotch of red on the top of Davis's arm, and he couldn't stop himself from starin'. In shock, in horror, he didn't know.

Perry shook his head to clear his mind. He decided then and there he'd deal with the problem after they did their job and got out of dodge. Just like their daddies always said, "the job always comes first." When they got back to their cabin, he'd assess whether it was time to put down his cousin once and for all.

CHAPTER 46

Rose



Death was... painless.
Death was quiet.

It was amazing how silent things were without the steady beat of your heart in your chest or the inhale of breath. My eyes saw nothing in the darkness, and for the first time, the constant hum of anxiety and fear didn't plague me. There was peace, unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

I floated in the darkness, numb. No thoughts. No worries. Nothing mattered anymore. Everything that had once been me seeped out of me like my lifeblood had. I no longer had a name or a family or a history. I simply existed. I simply... was.

Time passed. How long, I didn't know. It didn't matter. I didn't want to go back to the chaos that was living and breathing.

Something tugged against my awareness, my quiet peace interrupted by a whisper: *Rose*.

Oh. That was my name once, wasn't it?

Rose.

Rose, a voice whispered through the void. *There you are, sweetheart. Let's finish this.*

Then I was falling. Air rushed around me as I tumbled downwards, still in the dark and unable to see anything. Just as sudden as the drop, I hit water, a vast and endless midnight ocean that swallowed me whole.

The cold water was a shock to the system, and everything jumpstarted all at once. My heart lurched in the cage of my ribs; my lungs expanded. The freezing temperatures had my skin covered in goosebumps as it seeped into me, chilling me to the bone. Still, though, who I was remained a mystery, as my soul was nowhere to be seen. So I just floated there, lost and unsure of what to do.

In the distance, a tiny speck of luminance broke the dark. It grew bigger as it moved towards me, but it still was not more than a dot in the vast black water. That was until streaks of light, their source unknown, brightened the world around me and joined the little ball, seeping into it. One came, then two. Then three and four and finally five, each adding to the brilliance of it.

The orb warmed me, bathed me in light. It felt like home. When it was close enough, it took shape, morphing from just a ball to a mirror image of me, dress and all. The only difference was that her eyes were completely black.

Her name came to my lips, surprising me. “Not-me Siren.”

She smiled. “You know, I’ve always liked that name. It always made me feel more a part of you.” The softness of her expression faded. “It’s time I return something to you.”

“Return what?” I asked, confused. I was dead. What did dead people possess?

“This.” She pointed at her chest with a now clawed hand as it lit up, that orb from earlier shining through her skin.

I recognized it immediately. How could I not? It was the very essence of what made me up as a person: my memories, my personality, my feelings. It was my soul.

With gentle hands, Not-me Siren pulled me closer until I was flush against the front of her. “This may hurt. I’m not sure how much of your body I was able to change before I popped the last bond.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. So I nodded, unsure of what else I could do. What I did know was that I’d

understand when she gave my soul back to me. I had to wonder, though, if it would hurt getting my personhood back.

She said nothing more. Instead she slanted her lips over mine and kissed me. It surprised me so much that I gasped. I tried to jerk away from her, but she held me tight. Something frigid and freezing, the very essence of cold itself, slid into my mouth and down my throat.

I panicked, wanting to escape whatever she was putting into my body despite knowing it was the most important part of me, but no matter how hard I pushed and shoved against her, she would not budge. The ice cold that she was transferring into me spread through me, freezing me from the inside while also changing everything as it spread. It entered my very veins, and with every beat of my heart, it raced to reach every part of me. My hands were the first to be filled with it, then down my belly and my legs.

Pure, unadulterated pain lanced through my body, and there was nothing I could do to fight it. My head was the last place to be changed, and my efforts redoubled. Something in me didn't want it to finish its takeover of my body, that I didn't want it to remake me.

But it was too late.

It inched up my neck, up my face, and into my brain, and my whole body seized, drawn up tight and immobile. Not-me Siren let me go, her own body sagging, and she watched me with eager eyes as the very last parts of me changed.

Agony danced along every nerve, fired along every synapse. I could feel my insides being rearranged and remade anew. Nothing was left untouched and unchanged; even my DNA was rewritten. Everything that was me, that was my humanity, reformed into the vessel that Not-me Siren wanted me to be. Not even unconsciousness came to give me respite from the pain and terror that was my change.

A change that felt as if it lasted an eternity.

Eventually, little by little, parts of me ceased to hurt. First my hands and feet then my arms and legs, my torso, and

finally, blessedly, my head stopped pulsing with torment. My body untensed once the change was complete, leaving me housed in a body that didn't feel like mine and floating in the water limply as Not-me Siren held me in her arms and petted my hair.

"I knew I'd made the right choice in making you the vessel for my power," she whispered to me, her voice sounding weak and far away. "You're going to be magnificent."

I pushed away to look at her. Not-me Siren's body was shimmering, disappearing little by little. "What's happening?" I had to ask.

"I've done my job, and now it's time for me to integrate fully with you," she replied with a soft smile.

I opened my mouth to say something more, to ask if she'd stay as she was, as a voice in my head and a fixture in my nightmares, but I didn't get the chance. The once still waters came alive around us, and a wave swept us up. She was ripped out of my arms as I tumbled through the current. Unceremoniously I was tossed ashore before I could really comprehend what had just happened.

I coughed up the water in my lungs, tears springing to my eyes as oxygen, sweet oxygen filled my body. I greedily took in air one deep breath after another until I was dizzy. Despite this, I looked around to see where Not-me Siren had gone, if she'd made it to shore, but there was no sign of her.

The waves washed around me, and a flash of memory flickered through my mind. I tried to push it away. But in the relative silence of the beach, I was forced to acknowledge what had happened to me. Crawling away from the water, flashes from my death popped up, and as I sat down on the sand, I let myself sob.

I was dead.

Murdered by a hunter like so many Otherkind before me.

I cried at the injustice of it. I cried for the fact that Vi had no one left to be with her and that Milo and Will would have to live with knowing that the one moment they'd left me

alone, I'd been captured. My heart wept for them and for me, for the life I had to abandon because there was no way out of this. This wasn't the cave where I could ask the souls within me for help. I was at the end. There was nothing else left for me.

I don't want to die. I want to go back and be with the people I love. I can't leave them like this... I'm so sorry, Vi. I'm so sorry, Milo and Will. I'm sorry I wasn't stronger or smarter. I should've listened to my instincts... I should've...

Nothing.

There was nothing I could've done, not against a trained killer.

My tears dried up eventually, leaving me numb enough to get a good look around me. I was in the liminal dream space again, with the bioluminescent waves gently lapping against the sand and the millions of stars and colors of the Milky Way curving up just beyond the horizon. The beach itself looked very similar to the one I'd gone to for the fish festival with large dark brown and red stone walls encasing three sides while the fourth had a gap to pass through. It was beautiful and peaceful all at once. A fitting place to be dead in.

And yet the silence began to grate on me.

There was no wind, nothing to listen to, aside from my own breathing and the barely audible sound of the water lapping against the shore. *Is this what death is like? An eternity of loneliness and solitude? I admit I never believed in a god before, but... does this mean there are no gods?*

There was a chuckle from nowhere, followed by words in the kindest voice I'd ever heard but one I recognized. "For one of the few to stand in the presence of a deity to question if there are gods, well, I must be losing my touch."

A bright light ignited beneath the water several yards away from shore, and from it, a woman's head breached the surface. As she came closer to the shoreline, more of her was revealed to me. Even in the dim light of the galaxy above, the water glinted off her copper skin and black-as-night hair.

The dress she wore, white and sheer from the water, was unlike anything I'd seen before. It hung off one shoulder, leaving the other bare, and had beautiful shells and beading on it, the wet fabric clinging to every curve on her body seemingly hiding nothing from me. Not the dark brown of her nipples or the thatch of dark curls between her legs. I couldn't help but stare, my breath catching.

She was achingly beautiful, as I expected a Goddess would be. But there was something about her that reached deep inside me and made me shiver. Not out of fear... but desire. Never before had I looked upon a woman and recognized my own attraction, but the feeling was not unfamiliar. I just never had a name for it before.

I stood as soon as she stepped onto the sand. She looked familiar to me, and I wracked my brain as to where I might have seen someone as beautiful as her, when I remembered exactly where I'd seen her before: a dream, in this very same place.

"Yes, I visited you then," she said, stopping before her feet could leave the surf. "I knew that this wasn't going to end well for you and wished to give you comfort. It seems, however, that what happened was worse than even I could have predicted."

"Atargatis?" I asked stupidly before I could think of anything else to say.

She chuckled. "Yes, I am she. I'm the mother of all sirens, and the Goddess nearly all merfolk worship, though I do not require it."

"It's—it's nice to meet you," I replied, then cringed. *First, you dummy, we've already met, and second, did you really have nothing better to say? She's a Goddess.*

Atargatis laughed, the smile warming the usually sorrowful expression on her face. "It's very nice to formally meet you, too, Rose. Please call me Tisa." Her features sobered, returning to that sadness that seemed to permeate her very existence. "You must have questions."

“Only a million,” I half-laughed with my own half smile. “May I ask them?”

A twinkle of amusement shined in her eyes again, eyes that were mirrors of the ocean behind her: dark and mysterious but with stars reflecting in them. I was so bespelled by how beautiful her eyes were that I nearly missed her reply.

“Of course. After everything that’s happened, it’s only fair you get the full picture before you make a decision,” she said.

Make a decision? On what?

Deciding against asking that first, I went with an obvious question. “Am I dead?”

Sorrow and regret colored her expression again. She nodded. “You are.”

Though I’d already known that answer, it still was a punch to the gut to have it confirmed so bluntly. I let out my next breath in a rush, trying not to tear up, choosing instead to forge ahead with another question.

“What exactly happened to me?” I asked, hugging myself tightly enough that my arms hurt where I gripped them. “I mean with everything. With her.” I gestured at Not-me Siren. “With all this.”

The Goddess took her own deep breath, seeming to think about how to say what she needed to, and I waited. I was dead. It’s not like I was in a rush or anything.

“I’ll start from the very beginning, I think. A year ago, when you were in the cave with Cornelius—Eli—you made a choice which changed the course of your future. The magic being used was enough to capture my attention. When I saw you choose to have the talisman housed within you, I was the one who asked if you were willing to accept consequences for it in the future. You agreed to those consequences, whatever they may have been, so that your aunt and Eli could stay together. Your selflessness that night moved me to allow this transfer to happen rather than allow the magic to do as it was designed to.”

I nodded. These were all things I knew and had witnessed myself, of course. However, rather than interrupt her, I let her continue, wanting to know more about how she saw the situation.

“What I did not expect was for Joseph Kelley to use his son to kill Eli in the middle of the ritual. He was not aware the transfer was happening, but he sent William ahead of him to kill Eli, thus interrupting the end of the transfer. Had the spell continued as intended, none of this would’ve happened, and you would’ve lived out your life as a human as was promised. However, that single action ensured there were fissures for the power to seep into and begin to affect you and your soul, thus changing you little by little over time.

“Of course, I also did not expect Joseph to trap you in the cave in an attempt to kill you. It pained me to watch you struggle to get out, then pray that the souls within could help you. Though they wished to, moved by your promise to free them, it was not them that answered you. It was not me. It was your ‘Not-me Siren’ that lent its power to you for you to escape and get to the surface when you gave it what it saw as permission, moved by the souls’ desire to save you.”

That stopped me short. She tried to help me? What?

“Why? She wanted me dead,” I said incredulously.

“Well, to understand the ‘why,’ I must first explain *what* she was. The creature you, admittedly hilariously, nicknamed ‘Not-me Siren’ is nothing more than the personification of the talisman’s power, given shape so your mind would understand it and its purpose.”

Leaning down, Atargatis picked something up that was by her feet and turned it over in her hand, her eyebrows furrowed. It was the pink scallop shell, the same that the talisman had been in before.

She continued, “Its purpose was to bind the power of the souls it trapped to a vessel to effectively create a being with limitless power and immortality. It also served another purpose, your ‘Not-me Siren.’ When the talisman was made, Molly Young, without her knowledge, built into it a

component where the spell would choose the best vessel for this power, giving it the power to judge each person as suitable or not suitable and decide on its own who it would go to.

“The talisman, from that very day forward, judged you worthy of its power and decided you would be the one to obtain the powers within it. However, as human as you were, you would’ve burned up the moment such power was unleashed inside you. So, it waited, working on releasing the bindings little by little over the interim year and quietly preparing your soul for the change. When you started to have nightmares, it was signaling to you that it was ready for its next stage.

“The only reason it called for the end of your life is that death is the only way in our universe where one can change from one being to another. To the talisman, it was a simple next step in becoming the being it needed you to be in order to take on its power so it could fulfill its purpose. Then you fought it and tried to bind it. Sirens, much like most Otherkind, do not like to be bound, so it fought back. It wasn’t personal, but because you demonized it, deciding you didn’t want it and its gift, it took on that persona for you, playing the role you gave it because otherwise your mind couldn’t comprehend it as it had been.”

“So, it wasn’t real?” I asked, frowning my brow.

“Not in the way it seemed to you, no. Power itself has no true form or body or gender. It is merely another type of energy.”

This was so much to take in, so much to wrap my head around, and silence lapsed between us for a moment. When I found my voice again, I asked, “What if I hadn’t died? What would have happened then?”

“Of course, I can only guess, but you would have stayed in that halfway form that you experienced. Not merfolk enough to be, well, a mermaid, but not human enough to be human. When you went into the ocean that day, ‘Not-me Siren’ did not originally mean to try to drown you. It was just seeing how far it’d progressed your changes, but when it saw the opportunity,

it couldn't pass trying to end your life. And just now in the water, it transferred its power to you and fulfilled its purpose, hence it now being an empty shell. Which leads me to the present."

I took all of this in. Her explanation made sense, even if I didn't especially like what she'd said. "So, what happens now?"

"You have a choice before you. You may return to the world of the living, as a daughter of the sea, a siren with a piece of my divinity inside you, and complete a quest of vengeance, or you may surrender to death and go to whatever place in the afterlife you are destined for." She gestured towards another part of the beach, and there stood a girl who looked no more than sixteen—a hand scythe attached to her belt—watching us from a distance. "She is your reaper and will be your guide should you choose death."

"Why do you offer this choice? Why give little bits of yourself to puny humans and extend their lives?" I asked, my voice quiet. I needed time to think, and honestly, I was curious. However, her expression made me regret opening my fat mouth.

Sorrow twisted her features, fresh and new. She looked away from me for a moment, and when she looked back, she'd mostly composed herself, but sadness still tinged her words.

"A long time ago, I fell in love with a mortal man who I intended to make immortal by binding him to me so that he would not die until I did. Because of his affiliation with me, he grew fearless of the sea and one day went out boating while I was busy with a friend of mine. A great wave sank his boat, and he drowned after hitting his head. When I found out that he'd died, in my waters of all places, I went to the Underworld to retrieve him, but the Lord of Death would not even see me.

"I was turned away, and I became despondent. In my darkest hour, however, after my own attempts at ending my life were proven futile over and over again, I decided that no one else should suffer as he did. No one who wished to continue living should have to die at sea, or if they did not

have the fortitude to continue, I would stay with them until their reaper took them to find peace.”

She paused for a moment, her lips curling up just a little. “Though, now that much time has passed, I can honestly say that my desire to continue is more out of spite. I find great pleasure in thwarting both Lords of Death whenever I can.” She turned to the reaper. “No offense meant to you, of course.”

The reaper smiled. “None taken. Lord Samael and the Princeling are assholes. It’s well known.”

With a chuckle, she turned back to me. “So, I get the feeling you already have made your choice, but you’re hesitant.”

“Well, yes. I still have a bajillion questions, but I know there isn’t time to ask all of them,” I said, then sighed. “What about the souls Molly trapped in the talisman? Where are they?”

She pursed her lips. “They are still within you and will be until you die... if you die.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, tilting my head.

“The spell was for immortality and power, albeit in a bit of a convoluted way. I don’t know if you can die, once you fully become a siren. My divinity, plus the divinity of eleven other sirens, will make you as close to a goddess as you can be without being made into one or born one.”

That... That was something I was going to have to grapple with later.

“Is there a way I can still keep my promise to them? I don’t want them to spend an eternity with someone who personified a talisman that made ridiculous movie references.”

“There is a way, yes, and...” She paused, her eyes shining with some emotion I couldn’t name. *Lordy, her eyes are so beautiful.* “Thank you. Thank you for wanting to keep your promise. When the time is right, I will show you the way.”

“Thank you. I just... I can’t live knowing they aren’t at peace.”

“You are a good person, Rose. I appreciate that more than you know.” She smiled gently. “So, I’m assuming you’re choosing to live?”

I nodded. “I am. I’m not ready to die, and I don’t want to leave my people alone. I can’t bear the idea of it.”

“That I understand very much.” Her smile faded, and her expression turned solemn again. “You know that your return is contingent upon you completing your acts of vengeance, yes?”

“I do.”

My heart was pounding in my chest. *I’m doing this. I’m really doing this... For my people, I will do anything. Yes. I can do this.*

“There are three lives that you must take that I cannot help you with per my agreement with the Death Gods. Once that’s complete, you can live your life as you see fit.” She tilted her head thoughtfully, her gold jewelry glinting enticingly in the starlight. “I don’t need to explain the dangers of this choice or the fact that you must keep yourself hidden from human eyes, correct?”

“I am very intimately aware of why, yes.” I failed at keeping the sarcasm from coloring my words.

“Well then. If you have no other questions, we can do this, and I can send you back.” There was the wonderful smile again and the twinkling of her eyes, like she was proud of the choice that I made. An idea came to me as I was looking at her, something crazy, and I voiced it before I thought it through.

“Can I make one request?” I asked, my face burning hot with shyness.

“You may request, but I may not be able to provide,” she chuckled.

“Um, I know that most sirens have eyes that look like the ocean in the real world, but I was wondering if, maybe, I could have eyes like yours? They’re so beautiful.”

The Goddess laughed, throwing her head back and putting one hand over her heart and the other on her stomach. The sound was full of unexpected joy, and it made my heart warm. My heart fluttered in time with an unexpected coursing of heat through me.

Huh, maybe all those times Ava joked about me being a little bi were closer to the truth than I thought. My cheeks heated.

“That I can grant you, though perhaps I should give you the power to change like your dear Milo can so humans cannot see the stars in them,” she said, then nodded to herself. “Yes, I think I shall.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s an honor,” she replied. “Now, I usually go about this a different way, but for you...” Her eyes twinkled. “For you, I think I shall do it this way. Close your eyes, Rose.”

Tisa’s hands reached out to cup my cheeks after I closed my eyes, my heart pounding in my chest at what was to happen next. She pressed a kiss to one eyelid, then the other, before she tipped my head back—she was so much taller than me, I could’ve swooned—and pressed a kiss to my lips. It was chaste at first, but she deepened the kiss. It was wonderful, her lips against mine, and I responded in kind, enjoying the attention she was giving me more than I really ought to have.

When she gave a little of herself to me, unlike what the talisman had given to me, it wasn’t freezing or painful. It was warm, full of love and hope and just a little tinge of spite. Once inside me, the gift of her divinity ignited in my chest, taking my breath away and making me cling to her.

I almost wished the kiss would go on forever, but she pulled away, her hands sliding from my cheeks to my shoulders.

Looking me straight in the eyes, she said, “Now, go. Enact your vengeance, and then you can live your life as you dreamed. It’s not lost to you.” She leaned forward and pressed another kiss to my lips, making me soften, just a little. “You

are going to be magnificent, Rose. I look forward to walking through eternity with you at my side.”

When her hands left my shoulders, she shimmered away, and between one blink and the next, so did I.

CHAPTER 47

Rose



My eyes flew open, and I sucked in a lungful of water in a gasp as my soul re-entered my body and settled into me once more. My body had been pulled further into the water, though how far from the beach I'd died on, I didn't know. Sitting up, I looked around to get my bearings.

The boom of fireworks echoed overhead, the Fourth of July celebrations still in full swing elsewhere on the island. Somehow, they were louder despite being so far away. In fact, everything felt sharper, crisper, like I'd never truly experienced the world before.

My eyesight pierced the darkness of the water, seeing everything as if it were daytime rather than night. More than that, I could see the currents, feel the pull of the tides, hear the songs of the Earth. The world around me was alive and breathing. The interplay between myself and nature was laid bare before me as the ocean whispered its hidden secrets. More than that, it promised me freedom.

But only after I completed my quest.

A foreign power unfurled within me, as if waking up. It curled around my spine and gave a tentative squeeze. Without words, it made me aware of what it was and of the promise I'd made: It was the Call, and it was here to ensure I took the lives of those who'd wronged me.

The names and faces of three people flashed in my mind. It was burned into my memory, etched with pain and bitterness so I'd never forget. I was reminded of what each had done to

end my life. The Call fed power into me, urging me to start my quest.

I couldn't deny it.

Now it's time for them to die.

I gripping the chains that still bound my hands and yanked, pulling them apart as easy as ripping paper, but I left the manacles on for the moment. Then with a deep breath, I reached into myself and called forth my other form, my new form. This time, the change happened in a heartbeat, my body morphing from human to siren effortlessly.

And it felt like coming home.

White opalescent scales flowed down from just below my bellybutton all the way down to my feet, my legs fusing together into a long, lithe tail. Several wispy fins grew at my hips, butt, and at the base, each flowing like silk in the gentle current. My hands grew claws and webbing, and my teeth sharpened in my mouth.

I kept looking for more, but nothing else happened. No dorsal fin grew from my back. No fins sprouted from my forearms either. Was I broken? Frowning, I looked at myself.

I look like a betta fish.

A silky white betta fish.

Despite the differences in my appearance from what I remembered of others I'd seen, I couldn't deny the raw power flowing through me. Or the fact that this form felt more like my own than my human body ever had. My first instinct was to swim and frolic and experiment with what I could do. I wanted to reach for that freedom the ocean promised me.

But I couldn't.

The Call pulled at me, reminding me what I needed to be doing. Looking around, I searched for anything that would tell me where they were and how to find the hunters, the first of my Marks. I didn't have to look far.

Where Davis had killed me was a mass of sickly orange threads, all tangled up in knots of energy. Moving closer, I

touched the one closest to me, and the image of my murderer came straight to mind.

Oh, fuck, she struggles so pretty. Look at the way her tits bounce as she thrashes and the way her skin parts under my knife. God, it's so fucking hot... Shit, I'm so fucking hard right now...

I yanked my hand away, unable to stomach any more of his disgusting thoughts, especially not when I was shown how he came after seeing my dead body. *What a disgusting deviant.* I gagged.

His thread went over land, but I was confined to the ocean for the moment. Not out of necessity, but out of my lack of desire to be out of the water. If people saw me in my bloody dress, they'd panic, which I didn't need. So, I moved away from the beach to move towards my boat so I could get a new dress to put on in case I needed to go onto land.

My memory of Will teaching me how to swim aided me in figuring out how to move my body, though it didn't come naturally at first. It took several tries before my body cooperated in undulating in the way I needed it to so I could propel myself forward. But when I got it, I laughed in glee.

The water glided against my scales. The sense of overwhelming rightness was only impeded by the dress. Only the thought of my mission was able to take the shine from my elation in the moment.

I entered the center of the caldera, swimming as low to the bottom as I could to avoid being seen by the partiers still celebrating Independence Day. When I entered the bay near Nora Port, I popped my head above water and looked to see if anyone was around. Thankfully, it was clear.

Switching forms, I hoisted myself up the ladder and up on deck, uncaring that I trailed water all across it and into the cabin when I stepped down into it. I was surprised to see Davis's energy was all over, and I could see why: he'd ransacked the place and fucked with the engine, but it was clear he wasn't there anymore. Seeing the damage he'd done, seeing the destruction, only made the anger burn hotter within

me. I quickly grabbed another dress and shucked off the bloodied one to change.

I turned to leave, walking back up the stairs and onto the deck, only to stop when I saw Vi rushing towards me. I froze.

“Rose, thank god! Where have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!” she panted. I opened my mouth to say something—to lie—but she spoke again before I could. “What happened to you, Rose? You don’t look right.”

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I managed to say, “Milo and I will be leaving sooner than we said. Tonight. He’ll be by to get the boat.”

My voice sounded foreign, odd. Not quite like my own, but not completely different either. Magic threaded through each word and added a musical quality to my cadence. Though I hoped she wouldn’t notice, she scrunched her nose but forged ahead with her questions anyway.

“What? Why? What happened?” she asked, a hint of panic edging her voice.

There was an urgency within me to get back to the hunters, to kill them, and my willpower was frightfully inadequate in the face of it. It tugged at my soul, begging it to go back into the water to find them. It left no room for empathy or to give her the answers she deserved and needed. All I could do was lie.

“I must go, but I’ll be back. Just like I promised.” I willed her to understand, moving towards the ladder against my will.

“I—” she started, then nodded. “I don’t understand, but I trust you.”

I wanted to cry. I wanted to close the distance and hug her, but I couldn’t. Not with my soul being pulled in another direction. So, I smiled as I shattered on the inside.

“I love you, Aunty. Please don’t forget that.”

“I love you too, Rose. I’ll see you soon.”

Turning, I dove off the end of my boat, turning back into my siren form with barely even a thought. Once more, I

followed the orange threads through the water, to a place on Mariana—the same place I'd nearly died the year before when I almost jumped to my death—then I lost his trail again. Breaching the surface, I saw the trail continue over land, and when I saw the direction that it went in, I knew *exactly* where they were going.

Slicing through the water, I swam around to the Western part of Mariana where the wild seals made their home. Once my head was above water, I saw them, the first two on my list of three, with bats and machetes in their hands. Screams pierced the air as they slaughtered seals left and right. Several already lay dead, and the one they were currently beating was near death as well. Even if they stopped now, it wasn't going to survive, and I didn't know if I should be grateful that no selkies were among the slaughtered, or angry that they were so stupid as to think these seals were the prey they were looking for.

I chose to be angry.

A song spilled from my lips, coming from the very center of my being, from my very soul, the words in a language I did not know. I watched as the two hunters stopped in their tracks, mid-strike, and turned towards me. Their faces told me all I needed to know about how willing they were to do it, that is, not at all, but that unwillingness was blotted out by fear when they saw who it was that stalked towards them from the water.

Though I stopped singing, the magic still pulsed and crackled around me as their eyes bugged out of their heads. I couldn't help but smile, as vicious a smile as Davis had given me as he watched me die. The Call reached out and into their minds to show me what I looked like to them: a beautiful specter with hair floating around her head as chains hung from my wrists. They could feel my power reaching into their very souls to show me everything that made them what they were.

All of their kills, all the torture and pain they'd wrought upon Otherkind played in my mind. They were from a long line of hunters, taught from father to son for hundreds of years. These two were cursed to bear the mark of their kills from the time they were barely ten years old. They believed down to

their souls they were serving their God and saving humans, not even knowing that Otherkind came to be on this Earth first.

Davis's involvement in my death didn't shock me, not after seeing how he would stalk people he *thought* were 'supes' for months, needing the thrill of the kill to get off. I'd been a convenient target, and even though he knew I wasn't a supe, he decided to kill me anyway. His guilt was large and looming. Obvious. It was Perry, though, that surprised me.

He'd suspected Davis was killing for sport. He'd suspected that Davis had gone to murder me. Perry could've saved the lives of so many innocents had he only dealt with Davis sooner. *Seems like that plus your meaningless murder of my people is your downfall.*

When I finally spoke, Davis pissed himself, his blue jeans going dark in streaks down his legs.

"Do you know how sirens are made?" Neither answered as I stalked closer. Then again, I didn't think that they could. "You kill a person at sea who has a strong enough will to live to move a Goddess to spare their life." I paused, tilting my head. "I wonder how many more sirens you hunters have made in your quest to kill us... I guess I'll never know."

Moving at a speed too fast for them to see, I was in front of Perry. He screamed, the sound stuck in his throat as tears streamed from his eyes, but I was unmoved. He disgusted me.

"Tell me what brought you to Nora," I demanded, leaving no room for him to argue.

When he spoke, it was as if the words were being ripped from him, as if he were fighting and failing to hold back each word that escaped him. "We found articles about Joseph Kelley. We knew he was a fucking supe and came here to see if he left any of you behind."

Hearing *his* name, something in me clicked into place. The Call wrapped tighter around my spine and clouded my mind until it was all I could think about.

After these two are dead, you're next, Joseph fucking Kelley.

I smiled again, and the rest of the color drained from Perry's face. "I bet you feel really stupid for coming all the way out now, don't you? It's alright. You're going to have a wonderful time being punished for your sins."

Using one of the chains that still hung from the manacles around my wrists, I wrapped it around his neck and pulled on both ends. The hunter struggled and screamed, his lips turning blue and purple, but I held fast. I watched as the light faded from his eyes as he died, and when he hit the ground after I released the chain, I stepped on his neck, snapping it just in case.

Then I turned my sights to Davis, who was also trying his damndest to scream and plead with me.

"Oh, I have something special for you planned," I said, gripping him by the back of the neck and pushing him towards the water. "Now you, you disgusting creature. You enjoyed watching me die. It got you hard, exerting your power over my life. Well, guess what? Now you're going to know exactly how it feels to drown."

Davis whimpered but could do nothing more. I took him far enough into the water that he'd be submerged, but I wouldn't be, and I turned him around to face me. My hand wrapped around his neck, and then I slammed him down, moving to sit on his chest when his back was against the sand underwater.

He fought to live. He fought to hold his breath, but little by little, just as it had with me, the air left him, one bubble at a time.

Then, after what felt like an eternity but also a blink, he sucked in a lungful of water. Then another. Then another until those terrified eyes of his no longer were open and unconsciousness took him. Only then did I curl my fingers around his esophagus and rip it out of his body completely, ensuring he never took another breath again.

Standing up, I looked to the horizon, looking within myself to find the energy signature that matched my last mark: Joseph Kelley. The tiniest thread was there, shining a deep bloody

maroon against the black of the midnight sea, and I stepped towards it, ready to chase after it, when I heard my name.

“Rose!” called Milo from behind me.

The Call was forgotten the moment his voice registered in my mind. I turned, using what little willpower I had left to find him.

There, up the beach, stood Milo. When we locked eyes, he started running for me. I met him halfway, throwing my arms around him, my lips meeting his as his scent filled my nose, that wonderful ocean and cinnamon. He kissed me like a man who thought he’d never see me again, and I... I kissed him like a woman who knew I wouldn’t be able to see him again for a very long time.

When I pulled away, it wasn’t because I wanted to, but because my whole body screamed at me to follow the thread, to find Joseph. To get *vengeance*. But when I looked in his eyes, my heart, my soul, split in half as I saw the tears streaking down his face.

He cupped my cheeks. “Rose, I thought... I thought I’d lost you. I came to find you, but no one knew where you were... Did they...” His voice trailed off, his question clear: Did the hunters kill me? All I could do was nod. “Godsdamn it. I knew I shouldn’t have left you alone. I should’ve brought you on the boat with me or let my crew do the show without me. I should have...”

I shushed him with a finger to his lips. “You couldn’t have known.”

“But you’re alive? You’ve changed?”

I nodded again, this time my eyes burning with unshed tears. I wanted to commit his face to memory so I never forgot it, as my soul screamed at me to leave until my body began to hurt for denying it.

Milo didn’t seem to notice, though, as he answered himself. “Of course you’ve changed. Look at you. You’re so much more beautiful, it seems impossible.”

The pull had me taking a step back, and his expression changed from gratitude at me being alive to confusion.

I had to force words past the lump in my throat. “Milo, I have to go.”

“Go? Of course. We can go. Let’s get your boat, and we’ll head out as soon as we say goodbye to Violet.”

This is when my own tears spilled from my eyes and down my cheeks. “I have to go *now*.”

I took another step back, then another. I didn’t want to. I had no choice. The knife in my heart twisted as he realized what I meant, and he grabbed my hands, gripping them tightly. “No. No, Rose. You can’t leave me now. I just got you back. I thought you were dead, and I just got you back.”

“I’m sorry,” was all I could say.

“Leaving you the first time was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I won’t do it again.” His hands turned to vises around my wrists.

“Milo, please...”

“No! I-I’ll go with you. We’ll stay together...”

I broke into sobs, more of me being cleaved apart as my heart warred with my soul, but his hands wouldn’t let mine go. My heart knew he didn’t understand, and everything in me wanted to explain, to help him understand, but my soul, the need to find Joseph gripped me tighter and yanked, my body physically jarring with the force of it.

An arm slung across Milo’s chest, and Will stepped into my field of view. When he looked at me, his ocean eyes storming and brows knit with worry, there was pain there, too. It stabbed at my heart. But with one glance, I knew he understood what was happening here with the Call. I knew he got it.

“Milo, friend, you have to let her go. You’re hurting her. Look,” he said, his voice calmer, gentler, and more fragile than I remembered it being. “She’s shaking with pain.”

I was. My whole body shook from the force of my soul being denied what it needed to do. When Milo's eyes saw this, he dropped my hands. The moment he did, though, I took another step back.

“Rose, please. I'll help you. Just give me a moment to...”

Milo's voice trailed off as I took another unwilling step back. Lunging forward again, he tried to get to me, but Will held him back, nodding at me, giving me permission to go. My feet kept bringing me backwards, and Milo's eyes switched to that beautiful cinnamon brown I loved as he roared.

“Let me go, you finned fuck!” he screamed as he tried to shove out of Will's arms. His features sharpened as his humanity bled away, his selkie coming out in full force.

“I can't. You have to let her go.”

My vision blurred as I watched him trying to fight out of Will's grasp but failing.

“Rose! I love you!” he screamed, his heart breaking before my eyes. “Don't leave me! I love you!”

But I couldn't respond aside from choking back another sob, my heart shattering in my chest with him. All I could do was keep backing away, my whole being wrenched back towards the sea. Once my feet touched the water, against my will, I turned away from him to look at the water again, to where the thread was.

Then, without another look back, I dove into the water, listening to the man that I loved scream my name, begging me to come back.

CHAPTER 48

Joseph Kelley



A ripple of power blasted through Joseph's body, awareness of another siren being made singing in his mind. They were powerful, this new siren, and close, but he paid no mind to them. He had other, more pressing matters to deal with.

Standing on a rock half a mile outside the Golden Isles, he stared at the islands with a loathing, a hatred, that knew no bounds. These islands, or more specifically, Rose Sutton, cost him everything. Had laid waste to his plans. And now, he was going to exact his revenge upon them all.

Subtlety was no longer an option.

Playing the long game was not in the cards.

He was going to make Nora into an island fit for him and his family, and if that meant blood had to be spilled, then so be it. This time, he wasn't going to play around. He had a plan, and by the end of the month, Nora would be his.

And I'm going to start with the fucking Suttons.

Want Extra Spicy Scenes?

Need more after that ending? Would you like to read an extra, extended version of Chapter 33 from Will's POV from *Sunset* or a spicy extension to Chapter 32 in Milo's POV from *Midnight*? Then join my newsletter! In my newsletter, you can expect cover reveals, sneak peaks and progress on this series and future projects, as well as freebies, and much more!

Just follow this [link](#)!

My Dearest Readers: Thank you!

I truly hope you've enjoyed getting to know Rose and the amazing creatures that live in the Golden Isles and the Otherkind Universe. Rose's story *will* continue in *Sunrise by the Sea*, and I have so many plans in the works for after the Golden Isles trilogy comes to a close.

There aren't enough words to express my gratitude that you took a chance on my debut series. I understand that many people don't want to take that sort of risk, but I'm thankful that you did. You've truly helped make my dream come true.

If I could ask one last thing: if you enjoyed the book (or even if you didn't), please feel free to leave a review. It really helps indie authors like me to be able to reach more readers and to be able to write more in the future, and I'm so excited to give you more to read in the future.

Thank you again from the bottom of my heart.

Sunrise By The Sea

THE GOLDEN ISLES TRILOGY BOOK 3

Her worst nightmares come to life

Joseph Kelley has returned. Everything Rose has been working towards, the life she's built, has been destroyed, and her beloved Nora is in ruins. Worse yet, Joseph isn't finished with his destruction. He won't stop until the Golden Isles are completely and totally under his control and the talisman's power is his to wield.

Everything revealed

As if learning to navigate her new life wasn't difficult enough, secrets and omissions send her world spiraling even further out of control. Everything she thought she knew about the people she loves is shattered. Vi, Will, Milo... No one is exempt. The more she discovers about what they've been keeping from her, the more she wonders how she can reconcile the reality of her situation with what she once knew to be true.

Promises to keep

Despite the secrets and the desolation, the only way is to move forward. Rose's missions remain the same: free the souls trapped within her and kill Joseph Kelley once and for all. Can she keep her promises and ensure that no one gets their hands on the powers she possesses? Or will she, too, fall to Joseph's insidious power and doom everyone in the Golden Isles?

Sunrise by the Sea is a full length MMF "why choose" fantasy romance novel. It is the third and final book in the Golden Isles trilogy and part of the wider Otherkind Universe. These books must be read in order. The overarching story will have a HEA at the end of book 3. For more information regarding content, please check the author's [website](#).

[Pre-order](#) the stunning conclusion to the Golden Isles Trilogy today!

Acknowledgments

As always, I'd like to thank my bestie Zoe for being awesome and dealing with my anxiety regarding this book. I know this isn't your genre, but thank you for reading it approximately 90 billion times anyway... and thank you for pressuring me into changing the third act. You were right: it was very needed.

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Once again, to the people of my islands, thank you. This story wouldn't have a setting without your inspiration, and I wouldn't have been healed enough to embark on this journey of publishing without you. 5年間本当にありがとうございました。大好きです。

To my ARC readers who gave my beautiful book a chance, thank you so much. If you made it this far, I hope that you loved it. I'm eternally grateful that you were willing to give a debut author a chance.

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To Etheric Designs for my chapter header and scene break art: these are beautiful, and I'm so pleased with how they

turned out. Thank you!

Thank you to my map maker Melissa Nash who made this gorgeous map. One of these days, I'm going to put it up on my wall because I love it so much!

Lastly, I'd like to thank you once again, dear Reader. Your enjoyment of my books give me life and encourages me to keep writing. There are so many stories I want to share with you, and I hope you stick around for what comes next.

Thank you all so very much.

About the Author

From my earliest memories, I've always been a storyteller. Stories of all varieties fascinated me, and my interest only grew as I got older. I wrote my very first story at age 6 and never stopped.

I have an unabashed love for all things monster and fantasy romance that was kindled the moment Legolas rode across the screen the first time in Fellowship of the Rings. Vampires, elves, shifters, you name it. I've loved them all, and that love continues to this day.

Currently, I live on a remote island in Japan teaching English. When I'm not working or writing, you can find me reading copious amounts of smut, watching let's plays on YouTube, or listening to music as I daydream about my worlds.

Also By

The Golden Isles Trilogy

[Sunset by the Sea](#)

[Midnight by the Sea](#)

[Sunrise by the Sea](#)

Glossary

TERMS

Clan: This is the word used by selkies to describe a group of selkies.

Colony: This is the word used by hunters to describe a group of selkies. The seal folk usually prefer to call their groupings clans.

Demonseers: This species of Otherkind are very secretive and do not typically associate with other Otherkind. Little is known about them.

The Golden Isles: Three and a half hours by ship off the coast of California are a collection of five islands (Nora, Mariana, Casper, Charlotte, and Alexander, named after merman discoverer Thomas Golden's wife and children) that make up the Golden Isles. The islands were discovered in the late 1800s, and Golden, his family, and his human servants, the Suttons, developed the islands for their families to live on. Two hundred years later, the islands are thriving.

Kelpies: These beings take the form of large horses that lives in lakes and rivers. They are able to shift between their human form and their kelpie form at will, and they are telepathic. A group of kelpies live on Alexander Island around Rainbow Lake, the biggest lake in the Golden Isles.

Krakens: They are the many tentacled creatures of legend. They can take human, half-human, and full-kraken forms. They are secretive about their nature and choose not to speak of their powers. A group of krakens live in Charlotte Island.

Mermaids: They are the children of sirens. When a siren has a child, they are unable to pass on the divine spark within them to their child and thus, no siren song of their own, but their children have all the other powers a siren has. Several families of mermaids/sirens live on Nora Island.

Okinohime: This is the Japanese restaurant on Casper owned by the Shioji family. Ava King and Aira Shioji both work there.

Otherkind: The name for the supernatural, inhuman creatures that inhabit the world.

Sea bell trees: Found only in the Golden Isles, these trees, much like cherry blossoms, bloom for only a week or two between the end of March and the beginning of April. The flowers themselves resemble bluebells in their shape, but they range in color from white to pink to purple and seafoam green. No one knows how the trees came to be or how they evolved, but they are the mark of the beginning of spring.

Selkies: These individuals take the form of a seal. Like other shifters, they have an inner animal that is like another consciousness within them, but unlike their shifter brethren, they use their pelt to shift in and out of their animal forms rather than their bodies transforming. They also have access to magic which other kinds of shifters do not have, as they were created by a Goddess. Several families of selkies live along the ocean-facing beaches on Mariana Island.

Shimmer: This is the word for a group of merfolk.

Sirens: These beings are the divinely begotten children of the Goddess Atargatis. When an individual dies at sea and if they possess an extraordinary will to live, Atargatis gives them a choice to pass on to the afterlife or to be remade. If they choose to be remade, She imparts upon them a piece of her divinity, granting them the power to slay those that ended their life, if applicable, and to wield magic. Their siren song is proof of their divine making, and if stripped of it, it will end their life. Several families of mermaids/sirens live on Nora Island.

The talisman: The talisman is a spell made by Molly Young to capture sirens' voices, or the pure essence of divinity within them to make herself immortal. In order to keep the talisman out of the hands of Joseph Kelley who would use it for his own ends, Eli Young transferred the spell from the original vessel to within Rose McKenzie. Now, Rose holds the power of the talisman within her. The effect of this is yet to be determined.

PEOPLE

Aeden Byrne (kelpie): Rose's therapist; after witnessing the death of Eli Young at the hands of her former beau, Will Kelley, as well as the attempt on her life by Joseph Kelley, Aeden stepped in to help her adjust and learn to live with the trauma.

Aira Shioji (species unknown): Rose's best friend; Ava's fiancée.

Atargatis/Tisa: She is an ancient Assyrian Goddess who is responsible for the creation of sirens. Devastated by the loss of her mortal lover, She Herself became the ocean. It is through Her power that a siren is made, as She imparts a sliver of Her own divinity to remake and revive the dying individual, giving them a second, longer life. Sirens and mermaids worship Her as their Goddess.

Ava King (selkie): Rose's best friend; Aira's fiancée.

Declan King: (selkie): Father to Ava and Milo and clan leader of the selkies.

Dr. Corvin Kemmer (merman): Rose's doctor; after being injured the night of Eli Young's death, he took on the care of Rose's physical and spiritual health.

Eli Young (deceased, merman): father to Callie and Jessie and widower/boyfriend to Violet Sutton. His deceased wife ordered him to continue her mission to complete the talisman by collecting sirens' voices to bring her back from the dead and give her immortality. Upon realizing he couldn't bring himself to murder anyone, he attempted to destroy it, culminating in him transferring the spell from the original

vessel to within Rose Sutton. He was killed by Will Kelley who was being mind-controlled by Joseph Kelley.

Joseph Kelley (mermaid): father to Will Kelley and former mayor of Nora. He was attempting to drive off all the humans in Nora to make a safe haven for mermaids and sirens. He abandoned Nora after failing to secure the talisman for himself and attempting to kill Rose McKenzie. His whereabouts are unknown.

Milo King (selkie): brother to Ava King and son to Declan King. Graduated from MIT, but due to the economic collapse, he was unable to find a job, so he returned to Mariana Island and became a fisherman. He along with his crew saved Rose McKenzie after Joseph Kelley attempted to kill her.

Rose McKenzie (human?): niece to Violet Sutton and direct descendant of Markus and Bryony Sutton. After the death of her father and subsequent abuse from her mother, Rose fled to the Golden Isles to live with her aunt and work at Sutton's Sundries. Wrongfully accused of breaking into the library and town hall, she became the target/scapegoat of Joseph Kelley.

Thomas Golden (merman): He was the discoverer and is the namesake of the Golden Isles. He was closely tied with the Suttons. When humans came to the islands, he took his family and sunk his ship so they could start a new life elsewhere, leaving the islands in the care of the Suttons.

Violet Sutton (human): aunt of Rose McKenzie, direct descendant of Markus and Bryony Sutton, the human servants of Thomas Golden, and former girlfriend of Eli Young. She owns Sutton's Sundries. In an attempt to drive her out of Nora, Joseph Kelley attempted to buy Sutton's Sundries from her, but when he failed in doing so, he resorted to sabotaging her business. She was able to recover after he left Nora.

Will Kelley (merman): son to Joseph Kelley and former beau of Rose McKenzie. Though forbidden by his father, he attempted to have a relationship with Rose, and when it was discovered, Joseph mind-controlled him and used him to attack Eli Young then kill him. His whereabouts are unknown.