

A MONSTER, PARANORMAL ROMANCE ANTHOLOGY

A romantic scene between a merman and a woman in an underwater setting. The merman has long, flowing, glowing blue hair and is looking at the woman. The woman has long, dark, flowing hair and is wearing a black strapless top and a large, patterned skirt. They are surrounded by bubbles and underwater plants.

# MONSTERS IN LOVE

VOL. 4: LOST IN THE DEEPS

# MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL. 4: LOST IN THE DEEPS

A Monster Paranormal Romance

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*DEAR MONSTER LOVER,*

*MONSTERS IN LOVE* IS AN ONGOING ANTHOLOGY SERIES. EACH volume is limited edition, and will be available for purchase for three months in digital and print format.

This volume will be available for purchase in digital and print format until December 26, 2023.

We have created a special edition *Monsters in Love* charity anthology that is available from October 1 to December 31, 2023.

It is available as a preorder on the Monsters in Love website until through September 30. Click [here](#), or enter this website into your favorite browser: <https://bit.ly/MILAlohaNuiLoa>

On October 1, it will be published on Amazon, Apple, Barnes and Noble, and Kobo as well.

It will also be available in print. All proceeds will be donated to Maui Strong.



FUTURE MONSTERS IN LOVE ANTHOLOGY VOLUMES and release schedule are listed below. We thank you in advance for preordering in support of our stories.

MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL 5: LOST IN THE FIRE

RELEASING MARCH 2024

MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL 6: LOST IN THE UNDERWORLD

RELEASING SEPTEMBER 2024

MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL 7: TITLE TO BE ANNOUNCED

RELEASING MARCH 2025

Thank you for all your love and support. Your preorder lets us know that you want to read more of our work.

Much love,



EVA PRIEST

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DARKLIGHT PRESS



*Publisher's Note*

Please note that this anthology features a diverse range of stories that span from sweet to spicy, and all the delicious flavors in between. Please consult each story's content warnings for further details.

They may contain the following themes, tropes, and triggers:

Abduction, Assault, BDSM, Criminal Acts, Dark Themes, Fighting, Forced Marriage, Graphic Sex, Heat, Hunting, Kinks, Menage, Mind-linking, Nightmares, Power Exchange, Size Difference, Trafficking, Why Choose.

Please proceed with caution.

# HER MYSTERIOUS MERMAN

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CLIO EVANS

A BARISTAVERSE STORY



*Author's Note*

Hello, my little monster loving creature.

This is just a friendly reminder to make sure you check your triggers before reading.

This short story has first date blowjobs, begging, vibrating cocks, cockpockets, glow in the dark cum, underwater aerobics, and more. If any of those things are not for you— do not read this story.

If those sound right, then maybe you need help.

But then again, maybe I do too...

Sincerely,

The Barista



## THE BARISTA

I FINISHED APPLYING SUNSCREEN, PULLED MY SUNGLASSES down, and leaned back in my chair. The sun was high, the sound of waves against the shore peaceful, and this stretch of beach was empty. Maybe because humans died here often, but I could contribute that to a rogue monster. At least, that was my theory.

A monster wouldn't be stupid enough to bother an ex grim reaper sunbathing on their beach.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a vacation, but it was about damn time I got away from the cafe. It was the center of my life and I loved it, but lately everything seemed to be going sideways.

Everyone *always* needed me. Even my friends.



Now I just had to stop thinking about everything. No monsters, no matchmaking, no thinking about Trixie.

*Trixie.*

“Fuck,” I growled, opening my eyes.

The human was haunting me. It didn’t matter how much I wanted to forget her, I simply couldn’t. She was a curse.

The hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood up. I gritted my teeth as I looked up, knowing someone was watching me.

I was about fifteen feet from the shore. Another thirty feet out, there was a head halfway above the water, a set of eyes watching me.

“No,” I said, knowing that they could hear me.

*Hello, Barista.*

“I said no,” I barked. “Not interested in your shit, fish man, I’m on vacation.”

*The fates have brought you to me, and I am in need of your assistance.*

If I had a fucking dime for every time I’d heard that.

“No.”

*I am a prince. I am demanding that you assist me.*

I lifted my hand, shooting him the bird. “Prince or not, you have my response. Did you not hear me? I’m on vacation.”

*I need my mate. Mating season is upon me and I must find someone. A human. One that will rule by my side.*

“No.”

*I have heard of your ability, Barista. You are on my beach. Set me up with my soul mate and I will reward you.*

I let my head fall back, a groan leaving me. I was torn between rage and annoyance. And also knowing that perhaps it would be a good distraction from... her.

*You owe my people.*

“I know,” I sighed. “Of course, you would know that.”

*Two hundred years is quick for us. Merely a blink.*

“You’re talking to someone who has assisted Death for thousands of years. Fine. I will help you. I’ll bring you your human. And somehow, you need to get your ass to the beach.”

Despite my bitching and moaning, I already had someone in mind.

Someone that would give this pompous prince hell.

Someone that was meant to be his.

I sighed and pulled my phone from my swim shorts, glaring at the merman as I called a phone number.

One that went straight to the beach rescue center.



## OFELIA

“I’VE GOT THIS. I REALLY DO. I’VE RESCUED A TON OF different animals. You can go,” I insisted for the thousandth time.

My boss winced as I practically shoved her out the door. “I can call Mike—”

“Anna, I need you to go. The school called because your kid is sick. I can take care of a stranded dolphin on the beach. If I need more help, I’ll call.”

Anna stuck in the doorway for a moment, but ultimately caved. “Fine. Swear you’ll call me if you need me. Or call someone in if it’s too much. It’s on the creepy beach, too. I don’t know who would even be there...”

“Go,” I hissed. “Don’t even worry about it. I’ll be safe. It’s just a beach.”

She finally left. I stood there for a second, already planning how I was going to get the dolphin back to the waves. Shouldn't be too hard, right? I'd done plenty of solo missions. Our beach rescue was the only one that serviced this stretch of land. It was known as Dead Man's Cove, and was approximately two miles of shore that no one in the area went to. Sometimes, teenagers would sneak out on a dare. Sometimes, bad things would happen.

I would know, wouldn't I?

That had been ten years ago, but my stomach still twisted as I snatched my keys and bag. I rushed out to my truck and jumped in, cranking on the engine and peeling out of our run-down parking lot.

The salty air was hard on the infrastructure, which was clear as the pavement went from smooth to full of potholes as I made my way to Dead Man's Cove. I was curious about what brave soul had dared to venture out there alone, but I was glad they called us about the stuck dolphin.

*What if it's not a dolphin...?*

I chased the thought away. I couldn't dwell on that.

Ten years ago, I'd been one of those stupid teenagers that had been dared to swim in the Dead Man waters. I'd seen something that night, something that wasn't natural. Not human, not animal. Something...different.

No one believed me. Everyone thought I'd just been seeing things.

But then one of our friends drowned. He had been the best swimmer among us too.

I shivered, shaking away the memory. The sadness and pain had faded, but it was still there, coupled with the intense curiosity I had about what I'd seen that night. That was how I'd ended up at the marine animal rescue center. My entire life had been changed by the night.

The road narrowed as I drove down the peninsula. I didn't pass another soul as I sped, the truck jostling back and forth as I hit more cracks and holes.

I slowed as I spotted another truck, one parked haphazardly in the sand. I looked out, seeing a man that was as pale as a piece of chalk with bright red hair and many tattoos.

And abs.

Jesus christ, the caller was a hot ginger daddy.

I veered off onto the beach, the tires gripping the sand as I raced over towards him. I pulled to a stop and fixed my ball cap and glasses, wishing that I'd worn a wetsuit. A wet suit would show off my body perfectly....

He rapped his knuckles on the window. I rolled it down quickly. "Hi," I rushed out, trying not to blush. "Are you the caller?"

"Yep," he said, his voice gruff. "Listen, I'm going to cut to the chase. People know me as the Barista, I match humans and monsters. I'm on vacation, but this merman bastard demanded I bring him his mate. So there's not a dolphin out there wrapped up in a net, but there is a merman who wants to mate you. So, do with that what you will. I'll be down the beach getting a tan if you need anything."

I gawked at him as he simply walked away.

What?

What the fuck?

I had hardly registered any of his words.

“Hey—wait!” I said, throwing open the door and stumbling after him. “Wait!”

He turned around, towering over me. My mouth fell open as I realized his hair was burning.

His beard was on *fire*.

“Um...”

He waved his hand like he was just annoyed. The flames went out, a few stray embers drifting away. “It’s normal. Don’t worry about it. What else do you need?”

“Maybe a hi, hello, how’s the weather?” I bit out. “What the fuck is going on? Am I going crazy? Are you going crazy?”

He raised a brow and then his arm, pointing towards the waves. I stared at him and then looked out, seeing a figure wrapped in netting on the beach.

A massive figure. Way bigger than a dolphin.

“This is your first date,” he said. “Normally, it would be at my cafe, but as you can see, he would have difficulty getting there. Instead, he interrupted my time off.”

“This is insane,” I whispered.

The Barista chuckled. “Perhaps. But you’ve seen a siren before, haven’t you Ofelia?”

I stared at him. “How... How do you know my name?”

“Well, first it’s on your badge.”

“Oh,” I said, looking down. Yep, that was my name.

“Second, the same way I know you’ve been in these waters before. Go on,” he said, his voice softening. “Go satisfy your curiosity. He won’t hurt you.”

I looked back at the figure. I caught the iridescent glint of blue and green through the netting, the end of a beautiful tail lifted ever so slightly.

My feet seemed to move all on their own. I walked to them slowly, and as I got closer, I sucked in a breath.

A man was wrapped in the netting. He turned his head, his bright eyes meeting mine.

A bolt of heat worked through me, one that caught me off guard.

He had the face and upper torso of a beautiful man, one with cut cheek bones, chiseled muscles, and long raven black hair. His lower half, however, was not human. Fins and scales gleamed, all leading down to the end of his tail.

“Help,” he said, lifting his tail.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “You’re kidding me, right?”

He smirked. “I am in need of assistance. You are a marine rescuer, are you not, Ofelia?”

“I’m not sure you really fit in my rescue category.” My heart was beating wildly despite the fact that I kept my voice calm.

He tilted his head. “I’ve been waiting for you for so long. So, so long.”

Only slightly ominous. I swallowed hard and knelt down next to him, reaching into my shorts and drawing out a pocket knife. I grabbed the net, blushing as I felt him look at me. Watching me, all with a knowing smile.

Fuck. Was I really doing this?

“I’m going to get you out of this net and then go home,” I gritted out. “And forget that any of this ever happened. Anyone else could have come with me. Then they’d know mermaids were real.”

“I’m a merman,” he corrected. “Or a siren... You don’t want to ask me questions?”

His voice had a seductive lilt to it. I swallowed hard, holding his gaze.

Of course I had questions. I had a thousand questions. Like how was he real, why was I here, who was the Barista, and how come when I looked at him I *wanted* him?

“Nope,” I lied. “Not a single question.”

“I have a question for you,” he said.

I blushed as I cut away the netting. I was careful as I freed his torso, my fingertips bushing over his skin as I pulled it away.

“What questions is that?” I asked.

I worked my way down to his hips, to the scales that gleamed there. He sucked in a breath as my knuckles brushed over the scales, his head tipping back with a groan.

“Careful,” he huffed.

It was an accident, but my hand ran over the same spot, and this time the scales seemed to move, parting ever so slightly.

His hand gripped my wrist, clasping it like a cuff. “If you keep touching me there, you will see *more* of me.”

More of him?

I looked back down at the scales and realized what he meant.



“Oh,” I whispered.

If I wasn't already hot from the sun, I was hot now. I could see the head of his cock pressing against a slit, the tips of two tentacles pushing out from within the pocket as well.

“Oh my god,” I whispered.

His cock was unlike anything I had seen before. Heat flared through my body and I blushed as I stared.

And I couldn't help myself.

I slid my hand over his hips, around the area. He let out the softest groan, and I pulled back.

“I'm sorry. So sorry, I don't know what I'm doing. I shouldn't touch you there,” I sputtered, humiliated.

“Don't be sorry,” he huffed. “I want your touch. And in order to breathe underwater, you'd have to taste my cum.”

“*What?*” I asked, staring at him as if he'd just grown two heads.

Not that anything else would shock me at this point.

“My question is this. Will you go on a date with me? I will bring you back here after our date. And if you decide to continue to see me, then we will set another time after. I will take you under water, show you my world, court you...”

“Court me...” I whispered. “But hold on. I'd have to taste your cum to breathe underwater...”

“My seed has magical properties, and it will allow you to breathe, yes. There isn't another way...unless I completely mated you. But then I could not release you back to land. At least, not unless I knew you would return to me... So. Will you go on a date with me?”

A date.

A date with a sea creature.

A date that started with me giving him a blow job.

Today had really turned into something else.

“I have to...I have to taste your cum...to touch your cock...”

“Yes.”

We stared at each other for one second...two...

“I promise that I will reciprocate if you allow me,” he chuckled.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth and not just trying to get a free blow job?”

“Because I’ve been waiting for you for centuries and I will do everything I can to show you that you’re *mine*. Will you go out with me?”

We held each other’s gaze. He was offering to show me something I didn’t even know existed. Perhaps I could figure out who killed my friend all of those years ago...

“I will protect you,” he said earnestly. “And I promise it will be a date you’ll never forget.”

“Okay,” I finally said.

That was all the convincing I needed to suck off a merman, apparently.

“What even is your name?” I asked.

“Nerio,” he answered. “And yours?”

“Ofelia,” I whispered. “If you try anything fishy, then the deal is off. But I’d like to see what’s below the surface...”

Even if it was a risk.

“Deal, Ofelia,” he whispered.

I leaned down, running my hand back over the scales around his hips. They were soft to the touch. The slit parted more, and I gasped as his cock fully emerged, growing harder. It was dark blue with round ridges along the bottom. I ran my fingertips over them and gasped as they vibrated.

Not only was I about to blow a merman and be able to breathe underwater, I was about to blow a merman with a cock that should have belonged in my top drawer.

One hell of a way to start a first date.



## NERIO

HER TOUCH ALONE MADE THE END OF MY TAIL LIFT AND SLAP the sand, a groan leaving me as her hot mouth closed around the head of my cock. She stroked faster, my cock vibrating in her grip as she began to suck.

My plan had worked. The Barista had brought her to me, and she wanted *me*. She was truly meant to be mine.

I would do anything to make her happy.

Ofelia's name was branded into my mind as she sucked, taking my cock further into her hot little mouth. I wanted to pull her on top of me, to bring her every form of pleasure I could.

But not until she wanted me to.

"I can't last much longer," I rasped. "I want to cum in your mouth and take you to my home."

A soft feminine laugh left her, and she looked up as she kept sucking, swirling her tongue over the vibrating knots. My hips jerked, a curse leaving me.

Her mouth was heaven.

I reached up to pull her hat off and slid my fingers into her dark brown curls, gripping them as she took me. I couldn't help but give small thrusts, wishing that it was her cunt I was filling instead of her mouth.

Her eyes fluttered as I hit the back of her throat, and I couldn't hold it in any longer. With a low growl, I gave one last thrust and came. She moaned as she swallowed my cum, some of it dripping from her sweet lips as there was far too much for her.

She slowly pulled back, huffing as she licked her mouth. I reached for her, my hand sliding behind her neck.

My instincts were going wild. I wanted to push her onto her back and bury my cock inside her. I wanted to sink my teeth into her soft skin and create our mated bond.

I wanted to show her my world. To give her everything I could within it.

Instead, I massaged the back of her neck, enjoying the way she completely relaxed in my grip.

"That feels good," she huffed.

"Soon, there will be gills here," I explained. "The magic is already working. Let's get into the water."

"Okay," she whispered. "Should I roll you to the waves like a dolphin or...?"

"No," I snorted. "I'll take us to the deeps, my little sea star."

I lifted my hand, feeling the magic in my blood draw the waves towards us. I pulled her into my lap, holding onto her as an enormous wave rushed towards us. I heard the Barista's curses down the beach and couldn't help but chuckle as the wave hit us, sweeping us into its salty arms and drawing us back out to deeper waters.

She held onto me tight as the current pulled us, obeying my command. I kept our heads above water despite knowing that she would be able to breathe. I would wait until we were out further, away from prying eyes.

"Hold on to me tight," I told her.

Her arms tightened around my neck, her legs wrapping around my hips. The water calmed as the current dragged us further out, going until we could no longer see the land.

"This is crazy," she whispered against my neck.

The water lapped at our shoulders. I cupped her face, chuckling as her legs tightened. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. No. Maybe?"

"It's going to feel weird at first. And the way we speak will change. But I will be right here with you."

"Okay," she whispered.

My little mate was so brave. She closed her eyes as I dipped us under the water. My gills worked as I drew in a breath, watching as she did the same.

Sunlight filtered through the surface, highlighting our bodies. I watched in wonder as she took her first breath with me, her eyes flying open as she realized she'd done it.

She'd breathed underwater.

“How?” she asked, and then her eyes widened again as she realized we were now speaking.

I chuckled, still holding her close to me. Fish swam around us as I let us sink deeper, the water growing colder the further from the surface she went. About twenty feet away, I could see the reef that led back to the land. Behind us was the drop off, a trench that would take us down further.

“This is amazing,” she said, looking around. She sucked in another breath, clearly focusing on each one. “What about sharks?”

“Sharks are mostly harmless to us. It’s the dolphins I’m more wary of. For centuries, our people have lived in the depths. Sirens, mermaids, mermen, monsters, people of Atlantis—there are many names for us,” I explained. “All of them are the same. We have been gifted with magic, one that binds us to the sea. It is primordial and deep. The Fates sometimes bring one of us to a human, our souls bound together, and therefore we can turn a human into one of us if they want.”

“Wow,” she said. “This is...the strangest first date I’ve ever been on. But it’s amazing.”

I smiled. “Would you like to go deeper? You can hold onto me. I will take you to my home.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Climb onto my back,” I instructed.

I let go of her and turned around. She reached for me, gripping my shoulders as her legs wrapped around my waist again. Our long hair floated around us, tangling together as she rested her chin on my shoulder. It would be easier to swim this way.

I would take her to my home and show her how beautiful everything was. I knew she would love it.

I hoped she would want to stay.

“How will I see once we go deeper?”

“Your eyes will adjust. We don’t live in complete darkness,” I explained. “Hold on tight.”

“I will,” she promised.

I smiled and swam, my tail moving powerfully and propelling us through the water. I took us over the rocky edge of a canyon, diving deeper through the open. I welcomed the coolness, the silence that followed too.

Coral clung to the sides of the canyon, many fish bustling about their own cities. Eels hid, waiting to strike for their next meal. Seawhips sprang, their orange branches reaching for the soft light that filtered down from the surface.

Over the years, some reefs had lost their coral. As the humans crept more into our world, more damage was done. I sighed as we passed patches that were devoid of life, no longer alive the way they had been not long ago. Their beautiful colors were gone, bleached ghostly white like skeletons.

“What’s wrong?” she asked softly.

“Our world is changing,” I said.

“Because of us,” she sighed.

I nodded and quickened our pace, taking us down until we came to the mouth of a cave. She let out a soft squeak as I went into it, going through the dark passages until I came through another opening.

“Oh,” she whispered in wonder.

This passage was one of many that led to our hidden city. Hidden within a pocket between two canyons was where my



people lived. There were other places around the world just like this, out of sight from the humans and safe from natural predators.

The city comprised caves and stone, built in a way that was similar to human towns. I spotted other sirens as I took her towards my home, ignoring their curious glances at the human I carried with me.

It wasn't unusual for one of us to bring a human here, but it was for me. I was a prince, from the royal bloodline, and that meant that everyone would want to know about the woman holding onto me.

Including my parents.

But not now. Not yet.

This was just our first date.

"There are so many others," she whispered. "They're beautiful. All of the different types of tails."

"Yes," I chuckled, slowing as we came to my home. I went through the front door, one that appeared open but would keep anyone else out because of the magic I used. "This is my home," I said, releasing her.

She slid off my back and twirled in the water, her longer hair moving around her. "Wow," she whispered, looking around. "You like to collect things."

I did. My home was full of human trinkets, some ancient and others very new. The sea was full of many treasures.

"I do," I said, smiling as she moved around. I watched her, my eyes falling to the shape of her ass in her wet clothes.

I wanted to take them off of her.

I bit my lower lip as I watched her, doing my best to chase that thought away. The one that made me want to claim her, to hear her screams of pleasure as I drove her to the edge of release.

The front of my home was a spacious room with shelves and a collection of items. There was another doorway that led to where I slept.

Had I spent the last two days gathering soft items in preparation? Building a nest? Yes. I wanted her to be comfortable.

She reached for a silver chalice and picked up, smiling. “This is really incredible, Neuro.”

“Thank you,” I murmured.

I moved closer to her, ignoring the way my cock throbbed, already eager for more with her.

She set the chalice down and then turned, looking up at me. She swallowed hard as the gap between us became almost nonexistent.

“I can stop,” I whispered. “I can show you more...”

“I don’t want you to stop,” she murmured. She reached up, her palm sliding over my chest.

A low growl left me, and I tugged her hard against me. “What do you want, little sea star? I want to touch you, to devour you and please you.”

“I want those things too. I want you. I don’t care if it’s our first date.” She let out a soft laugh. “That’s never stopped me before.”

I smirked, cupping her face. She was beautiful. Smart, funny. I wanted to know more about her. What made her laugh? What made her cry? Did she have a family?

“Touch me,” she whispered. “And then you can ask me all the questions I feel you want to ask.”

I lowered my lips closer to hers. “Whatever pleases you.”

“And you,” she said, smiling.

She closed the gap, our lips meeting in a hungry kiss. I groaned as I tasted her, her tongue meeting mine.



## OFELIA

HIS KISS LITERALLY SWEEPED ME OFF MY FEET. I GROANED against him as he pulled my legs around his hips and pushed me against a wall, pinning me there as he devoured me. His teeth were sharp, the tips dragging over my bottom lip as he bit me lightly.

I wanted him. I'd decided that while standing in his house, every part of me craving to touch him. The taste of his cum from the beach blow job still lingered, and I wanted to know what it would feel like to have him inside me.

This would be a date I'd never forget.

He carried me down a stone hall to another room, one that was much darker. I blinked a few times, my eyes adjusting to the lack of light. This must have been the equivalent of a bedroom.

He turned me over, the two of us floating to the floor as he pinned me beneath him. The feathery fins along his hips moved, the end of his tail waving gently. He grabbed my wrists, holding them above my head with one hand while the other explored my body.

“Will you tell me if I do something that is too much?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered. “If I need you to stop, I’ll say red. But I want this.”

His eyes were iridescent in the darkness, the fins around his ears glowing too. Light neon blue with streaks of fluorescent green.

He was beautiful and the way he looked at me made me want to melt.

I loved that. The feeling I had when I was with him was magical. No wonder humans told so many stories about sirens.

“Tell me what things you enjoy as I undress you,” he said. “Sexually, that is.”

“Okay,” I rasped. He offered a soft smile as he reached for my shirt first. “I like being edged. I like being submissive but also knowing that I belong to the person I’m with. I want them to want me more than anything else in the whole world.”

My shirt floated away as he removed it, followed by my pants. I sucked in a breath, which still felt strange to my mind considering I was under water.

“Go on,” he said, his fingertips running over my skin. Goosebumps rose, a shiver of need working through me as he unclasped my bra.

“Fuck,” I moaned. His touch was gentle, but firm. My pussy pulsed as he leaned down, taking one of my nipples between his lips as I continued. “I want to know that I’m being good—*oh!*” I squeaked as he bit down, my body erupting with pleasure. He sucked the bite, letting go with a soft growl.

“Do you like a little pain?”

“Yes,” I whimpered.

“Good,” he said. “Say red if you need me to stop, little sea star. Otherwise, be a good girl and spread your human legs.”

I let out a soft moan as he pulled my underwear down, yanking them free. I spread my legs for him, groaning as he lowered his head between them. His long hair floated around him, his tail behind him. He gripped my hips, his tongue brushing over my slit. I bucked against him, letting out another harsh yelp.

“Your body will naturally lubricate itself,” he said. “Since you have my magic, there are certain traits that you will have that would reflect if you became one of us.”

“Oh,” I gasped. “Oh, gods.”

He buried his tongue inside me. I groaned, pleasure rolling through me in harsh waves. I was wet for him, my body ready to take him.

He pushed his tongue inside me, thrusting it deep. Neuro held onto my hips, keeping me in place as I grinded against his face.

It was impossible to stay silent or to stay still. I couldn't help the noises that I made, soft yelps and moans leaving me as he pleased me. His tongue thrust in and out, finding that spot that absolutely drove me crazy.

“I'm going to come,” I gasped. “*Fuck*. I'm already going to come.”

It was a mistake that I said that. He let out a little chuckle against my pussy and then drew back. I let out a sharp curse, my eyes flying open. I look down between my parted thighs, seeing his very delighted smile.

“What? You said that you like to be edged. Isn’t that right?”

I flushed hard, nodding even though all I wanted right now was to chase the high of the orgasm he’d almost given me. He lowered his head again, kissing my inner thigh. He sucked there for a moment until I squeaked.

The idea of him leaving a mark turned me on even more.

He bit down again with his own groan, almost breaking the skin. He paused before doing so, working his way up and down my inner thighs until I was writhing again. The sharp pain mixed with the pleasure his tongue brought was heavenly.

He pressed two fingers against my pussy, slowly easing them inside as his lips found my clit. I let out a low whine, reaching for his head and curling my fingers in his long hair.

I groaned as he worked me, getting me closer to the edge faster than last time. I gasped, so close to coming.

So fucking close.

But then he stopped again, pulling his fingers free and his tongue from my clit.

“You bastard,” I rasped.

He chuckled again and then surprised me by turning me over. He pressed his hand against my lower back, pressing my body to the floor. I gasped as the cold stone touched my breasts. My nipples hardened against it as he held me down.

He parted my legs, keeping them spread as he teased my other hole. I sucked in a breath, my stomach erupting with butterflies. I had never played with that area much. He leaned down, his tongue rimming me in slow circles.

“You’re driving me crazy,” I moaned.

“I know,” he huffed. “Your scent is driving *me* crazy. My cock is so hard for you, little sea star.”

He worked me for a couple more minutes until I let out a noise that was close to a sob, feeling a wave of overstimulation. I wanted more, I wanted it to stop, but I never wanted it to end. The pleasure he was bringing me was unreal, even if he kept denying me what I wanted.

“Please,” I moaned. “Please, Neiro. I need you inside me. I need to come.”

I’d lost track of how many times I almost had for him.

He turned me over and pulled my legs around his waist, kissing my breasts as the head of his cock pressed against me. I moved my hips, desperate to take him.

“You’re doing so good for me,” he whispered. “Just stay still, little sea star. You can’t have my cock yet.”

Fuck. He was really driving me wild.

I held onto him as he continued to tease me. He’d move his hips just enough that for a split second, I’d gasp, expecting his cock to fill me—but then he would deny me.

Over and over again, all while he sucked and bit my nipples.

“Keep begging for my cock, little sea star,” he growled.

“Please,” I cried. “Please give it to me. I want to feel you.”

I’d never felt this desperate before. I had been with others in the past, but none of them had ever made me feel like this. How he held me, his touch, his kisses, his bites. All of it threw me into the deep, a place that I’d always craved to be.

I kept begging him, my voice growing louder. He finally pulled me tighter against him, the head of his cock slipping



inside of me. The reward was greater than anything I could've ever expected, the feeling of him making me gasp. His cock was vibrating, already sending shivers through my body.

He gave a hard thrust, giving me every inch I could take. I raked his shoulders with my nails, holding onto him as he fucked me.

"Fuck, you feel so good," he gasped. "You're gripping me so tight."

I whimpered, my eyes fluttering as he thrust in and out.

"I can't hold on much longer," I said. "I'm so close."

"You've been so good for me," he grunted. "You can come, little sea star."

My orgasm crashed into me and I gripped his cock, shuddering around him from the bolts of euphoria that went through me. It was worth the wait, every part of me relaxing as I came down from the high.

"That was beautiful," he whispered. "I want to watch you come over and over for me."

"Please," I whispered, holding onto him as the pace of his thrusts increased.

"I'm going to fill you," he whispered. "I'm going to make you mine. Mate you. Breed you."

His words excited me. "I want you to come inside me," I said. "Please."

"Fuck," he mumbled. "Every time you say please, it gets harder to say no."

I smirked as he pumped in and out, his cock vibrating, sending fresh shocks of pleasure through me. His grip on me tightened

as he let out a growl, giving one last thrust before he came. I gasped as I felt the heat of his cum inside me, filling me so much that I felt it drip out. He pressed his forehead to mine, the two of us panting as we came down from the orgasmic highs.

“That was amazing,” I whispered.

“More than amazing,” he murmured. “Now, I just want to keep you down here forever.”

I smiled, kissing his cheek. I cupped his jaw with my hand, sweeping back some of his long hair. “We can set a second date...maybe after you pull out...”

He chuckled and held me still as he slowly pulled back. I gasped as his cock pulled free, realizing that his cum glowed in the dark.

His cum.

Glowed.

In the dark.

It was bright blue. He raised a brow and pressed two fingers inside of me, scooping some of his come onto his fingers. My jaw dropped as he then used it to write M I N E over my breasts.

“You’re mine, little sea star,” he whispered, his voice soft, a little possessive. “I’ll take you to the surface since this is our first date, but just know that you will be mine.”

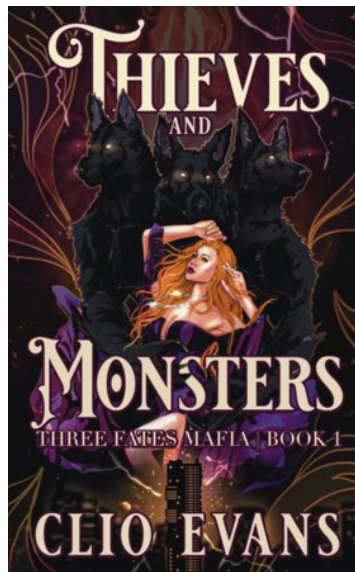
I already felt a wave of excitement at the thought of what our second date would be like...

TO BE CONTINUED...



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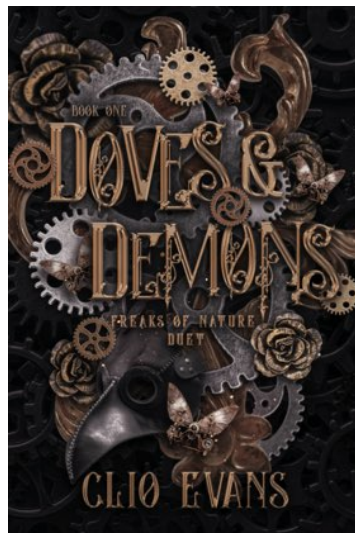
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# About the Author

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## **Hello Creatures!**

My name is Clio Evans and I am so excited to introduce myself to you! I'm a lover of all things that go bump in the night, fancy peens, coffee, and chocolate.

IF you had the chance to be matched with a monster or alien— what kind would you choose?!

Let me know by joining me on FB and Instagram. I'm a sucker for werewolves (and swoony tentacle aliens) to this day.

[Clio's Creature Newsletter](#)



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# DARKSTORM

VIVIENNE HART

A MONSTERS OF HAVEN'S HOLLOW STORY





## Author's Note

Ever-responsible Haven Bishop is used to taking on big projects to help improve her hometown, but when the mayor tasks her with renovating the old resort at Lake Eerie, she might be in over her head. The lake is rumored to be haunted, and it wasn't so long ago that a man drowned just off the resort's beach. But Haven is willing to give it her best shot.

However, the renovations don't go smoothly, and things get worse once Haven invites visitors to test the new and improved resort. Troublemakers and treasure hunters plague her, and her one ally at the lake is Wick, an unusual man with a powerful sweet tooth who seems to know more about what's happening than he should.

Together, Haven and Wick work to figure out exactly what's behind the mysterious goings on at Lake Eerie. But as they grow closer, Haven begins to wonder if Wick is more than he seems...and if he has a hand in all the problems that have been happening. Her heart wants to trust him, but her brain tells her

to be cautious. Can she really trust this mysterious stranger?  
Or is he destined to be her downfall?



This is a fairly sweet story, but keep in mind that it does contain consensual sex between a human and a monster, non-human anatomy, and sexual size differences. There are also mentions of murder. Please read at your own risk.



## HAVEN

TODAY CALLS FOR DONUTS.

Some days require red lipstick or a great pair of shoes. But days like this, when my to-do list is longer than my leg and the hassles of being a Bishop are extreme, there's only one thing that will make me feel better: sugar. And lots of it.

Fortunately, my friend Libra knows her way around the kitchen and owns the cutest bakery/cafe in the world: Queen of Tarts, which happens to be conveniently located in the middle of Main Street.

It's quiet when I walk in; 10:00AM is kind of the lull here. All the early risers have had

their pastries and gone about their days, and the lunch crowd hasn't arrived yet. So it's just me and two customers eating at a corner table. Libra is manning the register, which is unusual.

Normally, Oaklyn, her assistant manager, handles that task. It's wild that Libra is working at all, given what she went through recently.

"Morning, Haven," she says when I walk up.

"Hey," I say. "How are you doing?" I narrow my eyes at her so she knows I mean business. "Really and truly. How are you?"

"I'm actually okay. This is a horrible thing to say, but I'm relieved Evan is gone once and for all. I feel like I can finally start living and stop looking over my shoulder. I'm celebrating with sprinkles." She gestures to the pastry display and I see what she means. There are sprinkles in multiple shades and shapes on everything: donuts, brownies, cookies...it's a sprinkleganza.

"How are you?" she asks.

The question makes me blink. I'm the town fixer; everybody knows that. It's my job to take care of everyone and everything. Most people never wonder how I am, because it seems like I have everything together. Of course, my friends know better. Annie Winslow, my bestie—and owner of the local B&B—is fully aware about how stressed I am. I'm just surprised that Libra picked up on it, especially with everything happening in her own life.

"I'm fine," I say. "Great, even. Just really busy. I need pastries to get me through the day."

She squints like she doesn't completely buy my sunshine-y bravado, but she doesn't call me out.

"You got it." She grabs a white box and starts loading it, not even asking what I want. It's not because she's rude; it's because I come here so often, she knows exactly what I like.

"Where's Oaklyn?" I ask.

“Hiking, I think. You know how she’s been with the mountains lately.”

Ah, that explains it. Normally the two of them are always here, but after Libra went into hiding to escape her psychotic ex, running the business fell to Oaklyn. Libra gave her a vacation to make up for it, and while none of us knows exactly what happened when she went camping that week, something changed for Oaklyn. She spends all of her free time up in the mountains around Haven’s Hollow now.

That was always kind of her thing, but she’s been extra devoted to it lately. Her roommate, Adria, owns the bookstore on this block. Libra and I have both checked in with Adria to see if she knows what’s going on with Oaklyn, but she claims she’s as in the dark as the rest of us.

Libra drops her voice to a whisper. “Have the police found out anything more about...the body?”

I shake my head. “Not that I’ve heard. But I’m seeing Griffin this afternoon, so I can ask him. He might know.” My cousin, Griffin Bishop, is the current mayor of Haven’s Hollow. Griffin and I have always gotten along like hot chocolate and marshmallows, but lately he’s been driving me crazy.

He decided a couple of months ago that he wanted to renovate the old resort at the lake, and handed me that project despite my protests. I figured I could take my time with it, but when he saw how successful Annie’s B&B is going to be, based on her pre-opening reservations—and how big a tourist draw this town can really be—he accelerated all his plans. Now there are festivals in the works and we need lakeside lodging for the summer.

As Bishops, we’re the caretakers of the town. There are a lot of us, and we all do our part to take care of the place our

ancestors founded. So even though the resort is technically town property, no one batted an eye when Griff announced that the Bishop family was going to bring it into the twenty-first century. He couldn't imagine I would mind overseeing the project, especially because I'm always at the lake anyway. I live there.

Don't get me wrong, I love living at Lake Eerie. It's beautiful and quiet, the perfect place to spend my days. I just don't love the idea of turning it into my next job. That kind of takes the joy out of it, you know?

Of course, that's not the lake's real name. It's a nickname; a pun and a joke about the strange happenings that have been reported there over the years. The lake's real, official name, which most people don't even know, is Lake Bishop. An unimaginative, unsurprising name that my ancestors gave it.

It's weird enough sharing my name with the town. If people realized I also shared my name with the lake, they'd probably fire me on the grounds of extreme nepotism, if it were possible to fire someone who doesn't technically have a job.

I collect my box of goodies and a large coffee in a to-go cup. "See you tomorrow," I tell Libra, then head for the lake to start my day.

I park and stand lakeside, surveying the mess in front of me.

The resort, a dilapidated wreck from the eighties, is on the side of the lake nearest to town, about halfway around from where I live. There are six cabins in total, a little semicircle that surrounds a small, man-made beach with a small dock for diving, which everyone calls the Little Dock. Visible from the beach is a bigger, floating dock—the Big Dock—that's pretty far out, which doesn't make sense. It's beyond the rope buoy that marks the swimming perimeter, and honestly, it's too far

to safely swim to—though believe me, people always try. While it's easily accessible by canoe, there's no reason to go to it. It would probably be wise to get rid of it completely.

All of this is to say: Whoever designed this so-called resort either didn't know what they were doing, or didn't care. I know I can make improvements, starting with cabin renovations. I could also add a beach volleyball net, a couple of fire pits, and water accessories, like floaties and a banana boat.

I can see it in my mind: tourists crowding around in the middle of summer, kids splashing in the water while adults grill hot dogs and make s'mores. I can make this resort coveted, a little jewel in Lake Erie's crown.

But I have my work cut out for me.

In some ways, it would be easier to tear the existing cabins down and start from scratch. Griffin vetoed that suggestion though; he likes the kitschy architecture. So I have to work with what's there, keeping the vibe intact while replacing all the roofs and windows and repainting all the siding.

Everything inside needs to be redone too: the tile floors, the plumbing, the décor. The kitchens and bathrooms need updating. The linens need to be burned.

And it's already April.

How I'm supposed to have this place up and running by the Fourth of July is anyone's guess. I dig my phone out of my purse and call Marlan Baines, my trusted contractor, who lives a few towns over. He answers on the first ring.

"Hey, Haven."

"Marlan," I say. "I'm at the lake, checking out our newest project. It's a mess. You're sure you can start on Wednesday,

right? And you have a good crew?”

He chuckles. “I’ll be there. Some of my regular guys are out on other jobs, but I’ve got temps I can bring in. Don’t worry. We’ll complete the work on schedule.”

“You’re sure? We only have eleven weeks and three days, and there are six cabins that need...well, a lot. Not gutting, but the next best thing.”

“I’ve got my end of it covered. You focus on your part.”

“All right. See you in two days,” I say, disconnecting the call. My part, aside from hovering around and making sure everything goes perfectly, includes shopping for everything required to furnish the cabins, as well as having new signage made and sprucing up the beach.

Phone in one hand and sprinkled donut in the other, I start touring the cabins, taking videos and making notes of everything that needs to be done. When the work really gets going, I’ll probably stay out here to oversee things, but until then, I want my to-do list to be as detailed as possible.

There’s also the matter of press. Haven’s Hollow depends on tourism, and the lake’s spooky haunted history can be a draw for some people—and a turnoff for others. I need to find a way to make it universally appealing.

And then, of course, there’s the matter of the dead body.

Libra has never shared the specifics of what happened that night. At least, not with me. I assume she told the police, but all I know is that her ex, Evan, tried to kill her. Libra’s new boyfriend Callister showed up at just the right moment and managed to fight Evan off. And then, somehow, Evan ended up dead.



It wasn't murder; Evan definitely drowned in the lake, only yards from where I'm standing. Libra and Callister were both adamant that they stayed on the shore when something spooked Evan and he ran into the lake of his own accord.

He just never came out.

The security cameras I have on the property back up their story, so the cops didn't press charges or anything. It was days before they finally found the body, and according to the local rumor mill, there was no evidence of foul play. It seems he simply got in over his head—literally—and never made it back to shore.

But something about the way Libra told me the story made it sound like she had doubts about his death, and I can't help but wonder if there's more to the tale, especially since that wasn't the first drowning to take place out here—though the others were years ago. If there's something dangerous about this beach, I need to know. I can't advertise it as a safe, fun place to spend the summer if there's an underwater sinkhole or something.

Anyway, we've all been waiting for the coroner to release an official cause of death. Griffin and I are meeting this afternoon for a late lunch, and I'm going to have to poke at him to get me the report. If it says anything other than "accidental drowning," we're in trouble.

Once I finish with the cabins, I make a few final notes and then head back into town for my lunch with the mayor. We're meeting at the diner, which is another Bishop favorite. Griffin's sister Aerin owns it, and she keeps family recipes on the menu. It's the perfect place for comfort food.

The place is classic, with checkered floors, chrome stools with red vinyl seats, and a spinning pie case next to the register.

There's even a jukebox in the corner loaded with golden oldies. The whole restaurant smells like cinnamon, and the neon sign out front invites everyone to come and enjoy the offerings at Knife, Fork, and Swoon.

Griffin's waiting in a booth when I get there, already sipping on a sweet tea. We order sandwiches, and I show him the footage I took of the cabins.

"It's going to take a lot. I don't know if I can get it done by the Fourth," I say.

"I believe in you," he says with a grin.

I snort. "That makes one of us."

He takes a bite of his sandwich, watching me steadily.

"Seriously, Haven, this needs to happen. What resources do you need? I'll help however I can."

"I don't think there's anything you can do," I say with a sigh. "Marlan promised his crew will be out on Wednesday, and I can start ordering décor stuff this evening. I'll do my best, Griff."

"I know you will. And given that your best is usually perfect, I'm confident that everything will work out."

"Why is this so important to you?" I ask.

"Tourism is down and it's affecting the economy. Without Chad Alder here developing real estate, our town has taken a hit," Griffin says.

I wrinkle my nose. "Good riddance."

"I know he wasn't your favorite. I don't think he was anyone's favorite. But he was good at what he did, and his proposals had potential to draw tourists to the area. Without him, we need other plans."

“Come on, he’s been gone, what? A month? That’s hardly long enough to know whether the town will miss him. And frankly, Chad’s ideas were terrible. I don’t think his absence has anything to do with the drop in tourism. He wanted to fundamentally change what Haven’s Hollow is all about. Instead, we need to lean into it. Play up the lore and the connection to the folk. Put up funny signs, like the ones on the mountain trails. Have town festivals. Bring back traditions, like salting doorways and feeding the water sprites at night.”

Griff takes a thoughtful sip of his iced tea. “That’s an interesting idea.”

“I’m telling you, it will work. Annie is already planning this kind of stuff with Mabon Manor, like honoring Wiccan holidays. I think she’s planning to officially open on Beltane. And Sabine could totally play into it at The Silver Serpent. Offer even more tarot readings and harmless cantrips to tourists. People are into this kind of thing, and if the whole town is sort of infused with it, I think people will come to check it out. Think about it: solstice celebrations, a town Samhain festival, maybe a Yule parade. We could even do Krampus Nacht and a midsummer party. The possibilities are endless. We just need some committees. Well, and for people to start honoring the old ways again. You know that’s become an issue.”

“Those are good ideas,” he says. “I’ll talk to some people. What about treasure hunters? Any thoughts on how to approach that? Do we use the lure of the Lady’s Tear to draw tourists here?”

I shoot him a surprised look. “You know the deal as well as I do: It’s our job to prevent that from happening.”

“I know,” he says with a sigh. He frowns at his sandwich. “It would be good for publicity, though.” He raises a hand before I can interject. “Don’t start. I know the charter as well as you do. We have a deal with the folk not to do that kind of thing. I’m just saying it would make things easier, that’s all.”

“It’s not an option, Griff.”

“Fine. On the flip side, the legend of treasure in the lake is pretty well known. We’ve had plenty of treasure hunters before, despite our efforts. Any ideas on how to shut it down now, especially if we’re going to be inviting people out to the lake? It just grants people easier access.”

It’s my turn to sigh. This is something he should be figuring out. I have enough to deal with. “Nothing beyond what we already do. Obviously keep civilians from using any kind of sophisticated search equipment in the water and play down the rumors as much as possible. Put up more security cams? Add a clause to the rental agreements at the lake? We certainly don’t want a horde of people looking for the Lady’s Tear. If it’s even real.”

Rumors of a giant freshwater pearl in the lake have circulated since the town’s founding, but no one has ever spotted it. Or if they have, they managed to keep their mouth shut about it.

“You don’t think it is?”

I shrug. “Griffin, I believe in the magic of Haven’s Hollow as much as anyone. Probably even more so. But if the Tear were real, wouldn’t someone have found it by now?”

“Not necessarily,” he says. “It’s a big lake, and maybe the Tear is waiting for the right person before it reveals itself. For all we know, it’s invisible.”

“Maybe,” I say. “I’ll think about ways to discourage treasure hunters. Maybe we can play up the monster and haunting lore a little more? The haunted thing? Put up some signs or something, like on the hiking trails.”

“If you want to, I’m on board. I’ll see about setting up some festival committees.”

“Good,” I say. “You know I’ll want in on those. Now, what’s the latest on Evan Adler?”

He narrows his blue eyes at me. “You know I’m not supposed to talk about things like that. Wait for the official report.”

“Griffin, he died twenty yards from where I’m working. I need to know if the resort is safe for tourists. Do I need to have some sort of inspection done on the lake? Are there wild animals out there that we don’t know about? I don’t know what Libra and Callister told the cops, but if you want me to make this resort a success, I need as much information as possible.”

“Look, as far as I know, it was a simple drowning. I don’t know what made him go into the lake in the first place, but it seems straightforward. Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Then why did it take so long for his body to be found?”

Griffin chews his lip. “Apparently it got snagged on some vegetation at the bottom.”

I frown. “Off the beach? It’s all sand, and not very deep at that. How is that even possible?”

“Look, keep this between us, okay? His body wasn’t found in the swimming area. The reason it took a few days is twofold. Not only was it snagged on vegetation, but the cops also had to widen their search. He was found farther out, where the water is much deeper.”

“What the hell, Griffin? Libra said he went down inside the swimming area, and the cameras confirmed that.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know what to tell you. Either Libra is lying or she’s just wrong.”

“That’s impossible. It was literally recorded. I’ve seen the footage.”

“Then I guess Evan managed to swim a lot farther than anyone realized before he died.”

“Or,” I say.

“Or?”

“Or something in the water dragged him out there.”



## HAVEN

I'M ARMED TO THE TEETH WHEN I MOVE TO THE RESORT. Mops, brooms, the fanciest vacuum money can buy—I have it all, along with every possible cleaning solution known to man. Bleach, vinegar, and everything in between. I also packed my own linens and my coffee maker, obviously. I may have to live out here for the next several weeks, but I won't be doing it in squalor.

The most secluded of the cabins has a broken window, thanks to Libra, so I pick the one next to it, which has the second-best level of privacy. I get to work scrubbing the place down, and fortunately, it's not as horrible as I thought it would be.

There's a lot of sand and dust, and the kitchen and bathroom have their fair share of mold, but it could be so much worse.

If I hire a cleaning crew to help, these cabins could be spotless in a matter of days. That would make the redecorating process

go a lot faster. Of course, all of that will depend on how much structural work is required and the subsequent mess that would make. I'm really hoping it's just a matter of new roofs and windows, along with some updates like outdoor decks and paint.

After several hours, I deem the cabin habitable. If cleaning the other cabins goes as smoothly, and Marlan's crew works fast, whipping this place into shape won't be half as bad as I feared. I stretch my neck, cracking it, and head outside to watch the sunset from the Little Dock.

The lake is quiet and peaceful, with hardly a ripple to disturb its serene surface. The sky has turned peachy with sunset, which is reflected on the lake. I take a deep breath, enjoying the placid moment in nature. If things go to plan, it won't be tranquil like this for much longer.

I love it out here. I love this lake, these mountains, and the town tucked amidst them. I love the history and the magic, and the way my ancestors worked to make a home here, a place where humans and the native folk creatures could coexist. According to family legend, the original Bishops made a deal with the folk: As long as the humans honored tradition and cared for the creatures of the land, they would always be safe and welcome here.

Humans are still here, of course, but most no longer observe the traditions outlined in the agreement. And if there are any folk left, they stay well hidden, which is a shame, but understandable. All the same, I honor them. I go back into my cabin and pour fresh, local honey into a bowl, which I take to the end of the dock. I still feed the water sprites—easily confused with dragonflies—even if no one else does. I still salt my doorways and leave milk at my backdoor.



I will always respect the magic that created Haven's Hollow. And I will always have particular respect for the lake. It's a place of power—maybe *the* place of power—and anything we do out here has to be done correctly and with care.

I can't risk upsetting the Lady who resides somewhere beneath its surface.



## HAVEN

I wake early the next morning, just after sunrise. On a whim, I throw on my bathing suit and head outside. The lake is bound to be cold this time of year, but that has never bothered me. When I step out, I notice the honey bowl sitting at the doorstep, clean and dry.

That's weird. The water sprites are too tiny to have transported the bowl. Curious, I go back inside and pull up the security cam footage on my phone to see who the hell was out here. But there's nothing. One moment, the bowl is on the dock, and in the next frame, it's on my porch.

What in the world? That's weird, not to mention a little creepy.

Puzzled, I go to the end of the Little Dock and inspect it, but it looks exactly the same as yesterday. There's no sign that anyone has been out here besides myself—all the footage I sorted through was quiet and there are no obvious footprints or anything.

I slip into the water, still lost in my thoughts, and swim out to the rope buoy that marks the border of the beach area. Any

swimming beyond this point is, if not forbidden, at least heavily discouraged, even though people do it all the time. The bottom drops off at the buoy, so the water is much deeper, darker, and more dangerous beyond the marker.

I cut a smooth turn and swim back to the Little Dock, just in time to see the work crew pulling in. It can't be later than 7:00, but I respect a team that gets an early start. I pull myself out of the water and hustle into my cabin. I need a shower and some coffee, and then I'm going to find out exactly how much work has to be done out here.

Marlan's not there when I get back outside; in fact, I don't recognize any of the workers. They must be the temp crew he mentioned. One guy is standing on the beach waving his hands, as another backs a truck down toward the cabins. It has some sort of machine on a trailer attached, and the whole situation looks wobbly.

The land out here isn't the sturdiest, thanks to all the sand. Locals would know that, but these guys don't have a clue. I really don't think this is a good idea.

I start to say something, but before I can, the trailer comes loose from the truck, careening straight for the lake. The machine on it—some kind of small backhoe, tractor type of thing—is still attached, and the weight of it is enough that the trailer picks up significant speed. Enough to race across the sand and crash into the water.

I shout, horrified, and race toward the site.

“Get out of here!” the worker who was directing the truck yells.

“This is my site!” I shout back.

“Move the fuck back!” he hollers, but I fully ignore him.

Please, please, don't let oil or fuel be leaking into the lake. Not only would that cause a delay, as it would be a pain to clean, but polluting the lake is strictly forbidden. I mean, in general pollution is forbidden, but keeping the lake pristine is part of the pact that my ancestors made in order to found the town.

It's why Griffin has me out here overseeing everything: Only a Bishop can be trusted to do this right, and make sure we don't violate the agreement. According to legend, the Lady lives somewhere in this lake, and if we fuck up her home, she'll be pissed. She could curse the town.

The man who yelled at me is already in the lake, moving farther out than I'd have thought. The weight of the water should have stopped the trailer almost immediately, but apparently it didn't. It's in deeper water than it should be, which only adds to the problem.

As I run, the man suddenly goes under. One second he's there, head above water, and the next, he's gone. Behind me, I hear someone shout "Len!" and then I crash into the lake as fast as I can and start swimming, glad I used to compete when I was in high school. I was never gonna go to the Olympics or anything, but I'm quick in the water. I still swim every day.

Once I reach the spot where he vanished, I dive down. The water is murky, all roiled up by the activity, but I see him thrashing near the bottom. I swim down and grab his arm, then reverse directions and try to drag him back up.

I can't move him.

Somehow, Len is stuck, like he got tangled in the vegetation or something. But that shouldn't be the case, because this is still technically part of the swimming area. Just barely. It's not supposed to have a ton of plants at the bottom.

I tug again, as hard as I can considering the lack of leverage under the water, but he still doesn't move. Instead, I'm pulled deeper. It's almost as if something is dragging us down, an invisible undertow that wants to keep us below the surface.

Trying not to panic, I let go of Len's arm and try to surface, but he scrambles and grabs my leg. I know he's not trying to harm me; he's probably terrified and hysterical. All the same, pulling me down with him is not the way to do this.

Pressure is building in my lungs and dark spots are starting to pop up in my vision.

I kick harder, trying to shake him loose, but he tightens his grip.

The burning in my lungs increases as my vision goes dark around the edges.

I still can't get free.

I'm drowning.

I can feel the darkness trying to overtake me, and with my last ounce of energy, I give a mighty tug on Len's arm as I push myself upward. Miraculously, he pulls loose of whatever had trapped him, and we both surge to the surface, breaking through and coughing.

Some of the other workers have reached us by this point, and they tow us back to the beach, where we sprawl on the ground, hacking.

"What happened out there?" I finally manage to ask.

Len shakes his head. "No idea. Felt like something had a hold of my legs and was tugging me down. And then all of a sudden, I was free."

What the hell? First there was Evan's death, and then the strange thing with the honey. Now some mysterious force is trying to drown the workmen? Something weird is definitely going on—possibly with the Lady herself—and I need help before this project goes any further. I struggle my way to my feet and trudge to my cabin, determined to find my phone. Griffin needs to get out here ASAP.

I don't know precisely what the Lady is, though I've always envisioned her as some sort of aquatic fairy or nymph. But for all I know, she could be an elf like some of my ancestors or even a goddess. All I'm sure about is that she is extremely powerful, and I don't want to get her mad.

I call Griffin, explain what happened, and demand that he meet me out here. Fortunately, he's as concerned as I am. He arrives in less than thirty minutes.

"Where's the missing equipment?" he asks.

I point vaguely to the area where I nearly drowned. A small part of the machine is sticking out of the lake. "Over there. It's deeper than expected, but not so deep that we totally lost whatever that thing is. Towing it out will be a hassle, though, and I'm worried about oil and gas leaks. Not to mention the Lady's wrath."

He pulls me off to one side, out of sight of the workers, who are all standing around wondering what to do. The one in charge is on the phone, presumably with Marlan, and Griffin and I will have to deal with how to handle this in a moment.

"I stopped by The Silver Serpent on the way over here," Griff says in a low voice. "Sabine hooked me up with a spell that should help clean up the water. You can use it this evening, after the workers are gone."

Thank goodness. Though the population has shifted over time, there are still a handful of us in Haven's Hollow who know that magic—and magical creatures—are real. Sabine Merlot is one of those people. She runs the metaphysical store in town, and while it's mostly tarot cards and fortune telling, she does have real magic on hand for those of us who are in the know. She makes good money with those spells, but they're always worth the high price.

Griffin hands me a piece of paper and a little vial of sparkly pink crystals that look almost like glitter. "She wrote out the instructions," he adds, pointing to the paper.

"Cool, I'll take care of it as soon as I can. In the meantime, we have to get that thing out of the lake and remind these guys to be careful."

"Where's your contractor?"

I throw up my hands. "He's not here today. He sent these guys, but I've never met them before. I think they're a temp crew and I'm not thrilled with them so far."

"Fair enough. Let's go talk to them."

We march out to where they're waiting, relieved to discover that Len seems to be doing fine. I offer to send him to urgent care to get checked out, but he declines, saying that he'll be fine.

"Good," Griff says. "I'm glad to hear that and pleased that nothing worse happened. We need to figure out a way to tow that thing out of the lake, and from here on out, I need you all to act with care. We have to protect and respect the lake to our best ability, understood? No pollution, no harming the wildlife, that kind of thing."

A couple of the workmen roll their eyes.

“We’re serious,” I say. “I know none of you are from here, but the lake is important to Haven’s Hollow in many ways. We have to take care of it, and part of that means not polluting it. No matter what, we can’t have any more accidents like this.”

We’re not about to get into the real reasons we have to protect the lake, but also, those shouldn’t matter. Following our directives and keeping pollution to a minimum should be obvious parts of the job.

Once they know we’re serious, we leave them to figure out how to retrieve the missing machinery.

“Haven, I don’t have to remind you how important it is for this project to go well,” Griffin warns.

“Of course not,” I say, bristling. “I’m well aware of how the tourism boost could help the town, as well as the consequences of failure. Believe me, I’m doing my best. But there’s weird shit happening out here, Griff. We both know it.”



## WICKHAM

THE LAKE IS DISTURBED.

For years, this water has been a place of peace and solitude, a haven for the Lady. And while humans have ventured here many, many times, there has always been an understanding in place that they will not sully this water in any way.

Though there was a resort here decades ago, I saw to it that it closed and the humans left. Now, the ones who venture into the lake are the locals, the ones who are allowed to be here by reasoning of the agreement the humans and the folk made long ago.

But there is change on the wind, and I don't like the scent of it.

First there was the man who came into the water recently. His soul was black, stained with the blood of innocents. He dared



to bring iron into the lake, in the form of filthy human weapons. Humans like that are not to be tolerated.

I had no qualms about dragging him down to my domain, keeping him with me as the air left his lungs and the life left his eyes. When he was long dead, the water salty with his terror and the Lady satisfied with his unwilling gift, I let the body go, allowing it to be retrieved by his own kind. This was the Lady's wish.

Before this incident, it had been years since I took a human life. But I sense that it may become necessary again soon.

There has been increased human activity here in recent weeks, and it's up to me to find out what is happening. I had hoped killing the man would put an end to the situation, scare the humans away, but it did not.

In fact, things have become even worse.

The agreement has been repeatedly violated and the humans have polluted the lake.

As always, it's my job to punish the ones who are responsible.

I tried to drown the one who followed the metal beast into the water, but the hybrid woman—the unusual one—saved him. I cannot find it within myself to harm her, not when she is partly one of us and still honors the old ways. Had she been willing to let him go, I would have taken him as a sacrifice to the Lady. But the woman was determined to save this single, useless human, and to have killed him would have been to kill her as well.

I do not harm innocents, so I let them both go.

But now I must do more; I must find out what is happening and how it will affect the lake and the agreement that the Lady made with the humans all those years ago. Much as I do not

wish to, it is time to don my human form and mingle with them.

Perhaps I can appeal to the hybrid woman, the one who honors us. The one who has intrigued me from afar for years. If I cannot, the humans, even the innocent ones, are doomed.

I will be the last resort before the Lady takes action.



## HAVEN

It took all day, but the workers finally got the little backhoe thing out of the water. Now it's dusk and quiet has resumed at the lake. It's almost an unnatural kind of quiet, lending credence to the name Lake Eerie. The trees are still, no leaves rustle. The insects aren't singing, the wildlife isn't afoot. There aren't even waves on the water.

I prepare tonight's bowl of sprite honey, and take it, along with Sabine's instructions and magic powder, out on the Little Dock. According to the paper she sent, all I have to do is recite a simple spell while sprinkling the sparkly stuff into the water.

It's my understanding that recitation of spells generally only works if someone is already a magic worker, like a witch. But Sabine infuses her spells with her own power, which means anyone can work them if they have the instructions. It's a rare talent, which makes her spells valuable and highly sought after by those in the know. I don't know precisely what she is—some sort of fae, I assume, based on her otherworldly beauty

and magical power—but she’s a good friend and I trust her spells. If she says this will help the lake, I believe her.

*“Let this lake be pristine and pure,  
cleanse all that I can see.*

*Let this magic heal and cure  
as I will, so mote it be.”*

As spells go, it’s simple and straightforward. I open the vial and scatter the glittering powder into the water, per Sabine’s directions. The water glows slightly pink when the substance makes contact, but that’s all. There’s no further indication of success...or failure.

With a sigh, I set the bowl of honey in its place at the end of the dock and then return to my cabin. So far, this has been an inauspicious beginning to the reno.

I pour myself a glass of wine and settle on the couch with my laptop. It takes a few minutes of searching, but I find what I’m looking for: a photo of the town founding agreement. A charter of sorts, for Haven’s Hollow.

This area has always been a kind of nexus. Something about the place draws both humans and magical folk here. When my ancestors first arrived, the folk had already settled the area, but the two parties came to an agreement, largely arbitrated by the Lady, who was, at the time anyway, the most powerful thing residing here.

The folk agreed that humans would be allowed to settle and share the area, so long as they abided by a number of rules: protect the earth, the trees, and the water. Do not pollute. Do not overbuild. Do not overhunt or overfish. Respect the wildlife, both flora and fauna. Respect all those with whom you share this space. Observe the old rituals, such as leaving

honey out for the sprites, salting doorways to prevent uninvited guests, and leaving a candle lit at night to light the path for the midnight creatures. Leave milk for the fairies and a whisk broom for the brownies.

The list goes on and on, and I'm embarrassed by how many of the rituals have fallen by the wayside. We've done okay with the non-polluting stuff, and we have strict hunting and fishing laws when it comes to the mountains and the lake.

But the respect for the magic folk? That seems to have died off with the belief that they exist. Sure, I still put out honey every night, and I'm sure I'm not the only one. But the list of rituals is lengthy, and even I, a true believer, don't observe all of them.

I need to talk to Griff about this again. We have to come up with a way to remind people about this stuff and get them to do it once more. And maybe we can tie it into my idea of pagan-style festivals, like the Krampus Nacht parade or celebrations of the Wiccan holidays. Not only could the festivities themselves draw tourists, but surely people would be fascinated by a whole town seemingly dedicated to honoring fairies and other magical creatures.

I make a note in my phone. I'm going to find a way to make this happen.



HAVEN

The past several weeks have flown by. It's been a whirlwind of cleaning, restoring, and redecorating. But now the cabins have new roofs and decks, fresh paint on the siding, and modernized interiors. Somehow, against all odds, we made the deadline.

After much discussion, Griffin and I decided to open with a soft launch on the Fourth, and opted to keep the name of the old resort: Lake Erie Lodge. At first, I thought we should go with something a little more interesting, something that implied fancier digs. Ultimately, though, we agreed that we liked the down-home vibe of a "lodge," rather than the concept of a resort, which might imply that it's too expensive for the average tourist or offers more than it really does. After all, it's not like there are a ton of amenities or all-inclusive options. It's just nice cabins on a beautiful lake with as many thoughtful touches as I could throw in.

So the website and associated literature say "lodge," but I still think of it as the resort. It's what these cabins have been called since they were built decades ago and that's how I'll continue to refer to it. I'm a traditionalist.

We rented out four of the remaining five cabins: two to related families with kids; one to a group of young, beautiful social media influencers; and one to a group of fratty-looking guys—against my better judgment, I have to say. They gave me a bad vibe. Hopefully they don't get too drunk or too loud.

The guests arrived and checked in yesterday, and I made sure everyone had directions to Pixie's Park in Haven's Hollow for tonight's fireworks show. I'm exhausted, but I also feel victorious. I did this and I'm determined to make it a success.

So I'm celebrating the best way I know how: with pastries. Libra has a bunch of red-white-and-blue-themed desserts

going on, including blueberry and strawberry tarts, as well as the quintessential apple pies, in both mini and full-size versions. But I have my eye on the French pastries—after all, Bastille Day is only a few days away, right? And nothing calls my name more than *pains au chocolat*.

I get half a dozen, as well as the biggest latte Libra sells, and then head back out to my temporary home at the lake. I don't think I need to stay out here much longer—and heavens, do I miss my house on the other side—but I want to stay close for at least a few days, just to make sure everything goes smoothly.

When I pull up at the resort, there's a man hovering around, someone I've never seen before. He's tall, wearing an expensive suit, and has dark hair pulled back in a man-bun. He looks too classy and expensive to be one of the inspectors Griff mentioned sending out, so maybe he's an investor? Although Griffin didn't say anything to me about that. And why would anyone, investor, inspector, or otherwise, show up early in the morning on the Fourth of July?

I get out of the car and march over to him, hand extended. “Hello. I'm Haven Bishop, and I'm the manager of Lake Eerie Lodge. Can I help you with something?”

He grins at me, a truly devastating smile that reveals a dimple in his left cheek. “Wickham. Call me Wick. I was wondering if you had any available rentals.” His voice has a lilting, musical quality to it. Not quite English, not quite Scottish. Welsh, maybe?

“As a matter of fact, there's one cabin available.” It's the one next to mine, which I had purposely left empty so I could have a modicum of privacy. But hey, if he wants to pay to stay out here, I'll take the money.

Everyone in my family is tall; it comes with the elven heritage. I'm close to six feet myself, but Wick is towering over me by at least seven inches. His suit is cut to perfection, which is how I can tell he has one of those long, toned swimmer physiques—not bulky, but not an ounce of fat anywhere either.

I gesture to the cabin next to mine. “Do you want to take a look around? Make sure it suits?”

He shakes his head. “No, I'm certain it will be perfectly fine. Just tell me how to go about securing it.”

I sit on one of the front porch chairs and pull my laptop out of my bag. Within a couple of minutes, I have the resort's site pulled up, and I click on the rental page. I pass him the computer. “Just follow those instructions and it's all yours.”

I glance around while he fills out the online forms. He doesn't seem to have any kind of luggage, and as far as I can tell, there are no additional cars in the parking area. Strange. Where did he come from?

“What brings you to Lake Eerie?” I ask.

Rather than answering, he clicks a few more things on the computer, then closes it and passes it back. “All done,” he says.

I verify everything on my phone; sure enough, he paid for two weeks. Interesting, because he didn't pull out a credit card while he did it. Either he has his number memorized or he did a cash transfer.

“Great,” I tell him. “If you'll just wait here for a second, I'll go get your key.” I hurry back to my own cabin, grab the key, and jog back. “Here you go. Fireworks show is in Pixie's Park tonight at nine. I hope you enjoy your stay. If there's anything you need, I'm right next door.”

Did I need to mention that? Make myself available to any and all problems? No, not really. But hey, I'm a single lady and a smoking hot dude with no apparent partner just landed on my doorstep. If he happened to stop by with a question and I invited him in for a glass of wine? Not the worst thing that could happen. My belly tingles at the thought. It's been a long time since I felt an immediate attraction to someone, but the looks plus the accent are doing something to me.

He smiles at me, acknowledging my offer, and damn, he really does have an excellent face. Perfect teeth; sharp, stubbled jaw, fathomless ocean eyes. And in the sunlight, his hair is so dark it looks almost blue.

"I think I have everything I need, but that's good to know. Lovely to make your acquaintance, Ms. Bishop."

"It was nice meeting you, too. And please, call me Haven."

The rest of the renters are starting to stir; both sets of families are already out on the beach, the little kids decked out in patriotic swimsuits and water wings. The parents are standing around with coffee, chatting, while the little ones run around the sand playing tag. I'm assuming they'll let the kids swim a bit to burn off some energy, then head into town for breakfast, or maybe an early lunch. There's no sign yet of the other guests, but that makes sense. I don't expect the influencers or the dudebros to be up this early. It's not even nine yet.

I wave to the families as I make my way back into my cabin, reminding them that everything in town closes at five this afternoon for the holiday. Once I'm inside, I beeline to the table and dive into my chocolate bread. Libra has outdone herself. These are flaky and rich, almost exactly like the ones I had in Paris. I eat three and sit back with a smile.



I take out my phone and add the new arrival to the note I'm using to keep track of the guests:

*Cabin 1: Eddie and Carla Wilson. Children: Kelsey, Becca, and Steven.*

*Cabin 2: Derek and Crystal Hefferman (Crystal and Carla are sisters). Children: Jenny, Madison, Justin, and Shawn.*

*Cabin 3: Travis Arbon, Mike Holstedt, Bobby Waines. Keep an eye on them.*

*Cabin 4: Izzy Larsen, Nalani Finch, Alexia Day, Keisha Andrews. Total followers just exceed one million. Make sure they post about the resort.*

*Cabin 5: Me.*

*Cabin 6: Wickham Jones. Paid by cash transfer?*

I answer a handful of emails, then put down my phone and stretch. I should probably do more work, but it's a holiday and I feel like I've earned a break, so I go back outside and sit on my porch, just watching the families having fun in the water.

The frat bros are still nowhere to be seen, but the influencers have staked out a little corner of the sand, where they're lying out and baking, phones on hand to capture every possible photo opportunity. Hey, not gonna lie, I'll take the free press. It's why we offered them a discount on the cabin, after all.

Wickham is in the water too, which surprises me for some reason. I don't know why; what would be the point in renting a cabin out here if you weren't going to enjoy the lake? But something about him struck me as too straight-laced to hop in water on a sunny afternoon. Plus, he just arrived a little while ago, and like I said, didn't even seem to have luggage, including a swimsuit. It seems like he'd take some time to settle in, or maybe head to town for supplies or something.

But instead, he's out there, the sun glinting on his hair and bringing out the blue again. He's almost all the way at the buoy that surrounds the swimming area, but he doesn't appear interested in crossing it. He's just floating out there, sunglasses covering his eyes.

I sort of wish he weren't out so deep. I'd like to get a peek of him wearing nothing but some swim trunks. I bet he has nice abs, and one of those sexy V-cuts at the hips. I squint, trying to get a closer look, but he's mostly submerged. I can't even check out his biceps, though I can see that he has nice, broad shoulders.

He's pushing all of my buttons and is completely my type. I smile to myself. One thing about me, I always go for what I want. No point in wishing for something from afar; you have to make things happen. And I would very much like something to happen with Mr. Jones out there.

So. I've got to get to know him better. Find a way to spend some time with him. Shouldn't be a problem. After all, I have two weeks.



## WICKHAM

THE LARGE HUMANS AND THEIR OFFSPRING ARE IN THE WATER, but so far, they are staying within the boundaries that Haven has provided. As part of the agreement with the Lady, this area of the lake is safe for them. But they should not venture beyond the barrier; I'm not the only danger that lives in the lake, and with things as unsettled as they are, it isn't wise to tempt fate.

Normally, I would not concern myself with whether humans encounter the water's other inhabitants, but these small ones are innocents. After observing her for the last few months, I've learned this place is important to Haven, and I continue to be intrigued by her. If something were to happen to these children, she would be upset, I think.

So I'm keeping an eye on things for now. Biding my time while I wait and see how things unfold. How I should handle

this situation. What I will tell the Lady.

The smaller humans are laughing and splashing, being quite noisy. They're throwing some sort of ball around, making their way deeper and deeper into the water. They all seem to know how to swim, but I am uneasy by their proximity to the barrier.

I continue to watch, keeping my distance.

Eventually, the adult humans exit the water, settling on the loungers along the beach. They don't seem to be paying much attention to their offspring; they are all engaged in conversation with one another, and one of the males is starting a fire, which is odd. Today is exceptionally sunny and warm; why would they need fire? Humans are strange creatures, it is true, but surely they can't need a warmer environment than a day like this.

I watch as he gets flames going on the round device, which appears to have some sort of grate on it. He tosses food on the grate and I realize that this is some sort of primitive cooking method. The cabin Haven rented to me has a full kitchen, complete with cooking devices, but perhaps these humans do not know how to use them. That seems unlikely, though. Even I, a creature of the water, know how to use a stove and an oven. I learned to cook many, many years ago, even though I generally dislike cooked food.

It seems quite early to be cooking meat, but from the smell of things, that's what the male is doing. I wrinkle my nose. Why do humans insist on cooking their meat? It's so much better when it's fresh on the bone. I regret that I was not able to feast on the human I killed recently, but the Lady forbade it. She said to let the body go so the humans could find it. I did not question her; she always has reasons for her actions.

Eventually they will become clear.

But still. He would have made an excellent meal.

I shift my attention back to the young ones in the water. They have made it all the way to the barrier, and sure enough, the ball they are playing with goes over the buoy. Why aren't their parents out here watching them? Keeping them safe? I sigh.

As I watch, one of the children starts to go after the ball.

Bollocks. This is not technically part of my job. I am not a... lifeguard. A babysitter. Whatever humans call those who mind their young.

But I can't very well let them go into the deeper water. Something could happen and then Haven would be upset. As would the Lady.

Hurrumph.

"Wait!" I call. "It's very deep on that side. Stay where you are. I'll retrieve your toy."

The young ones hesitate, perhaps because they don't know me well, but finally the largest of them nods. With a sigh, I remove my sunglasses and slip under the buoy, loving the feel of the water against my skin. I rarely swim in human form, but I find it quite pleasant. Perhaps I should make a habit of it.

Thanks to the strong breeze, the ball has floated quite some distance, but I catch it quickly. I heave it back to the children and take my time returning to the designated swimming area.

I resume my post near the barrier, floating contentedly. The small humans move closer to shore, apparently lured by the smell of food. I notice that Haven is sitting on the porch of her cabin, watching the activity. I wish she would join me in the water.

Then again, the water is my natural habitat, and I'm supposed to be investigating the humans. Perhaps the thing to do is join her on the land.

Yes. I could spend time with her, while also acquiring the information I need.

With a sly smile, I dive into the water and swim toward shore.



## HAVEN

At 5:00, I'm pacing in my tiny kitchen, trying to decide what to eat. I have to get to town around 8:00 to prep for the fireworks show, so I should eat before I go. But I'm not used to eating this early, and frankly, I've never cared much for cooking.

The state of my fridge is kind of sad. Some lettuce and carrots, a pitcher of sweet tea, some premade smoothie pouches. There are french fries in the freezer, along with some mixed veggies and a few other random things. Instant rice, canned beans, and a mini watermelon sit on the counter.

That's about it.

What can I do with that mishmash of stuff?

I suppose I could have the fries. Or maybe mix the rice and beans together with melon on the side? That seems simple enough.

I still have *pains au chocolat* left, but even I can't eat more than three pastries in a day. Besides, I'm saving those for

tomorrow's breakfast. With a sigh, I reach for the rice, but before I can pick it up, there's a knock at my cabin.

I open the door to find Wick on my porch, dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt, his hair up in a man-bun again. He smells recently showered; the cedar scent of bodywash is wafting off of him. I'm not mad about it.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," he says.

I laugh. "Not even remotely. I was just trying to figure out what to make for dinner."

He grins, revealing his dimple. "What a coincidence. I came to see if you wanted to join me for a meal."

Well. This has the potential to be interesting. "I'd love to, but nothing in town is open, thanks to the holiday. And I don't have much in the kitchen at the moment."

"Not a problem," he says. "I have plenty of food. Why don't you come over in, say, half an hour?"

"That sounds perfect."

"Is there anything you don't eat?"

"I'm a vegetarian," I say, "but other than that, I'm not overly picky."

He nods. "Is dairy okay?"

"Sure. Who could live without cheese?"

"Perfect. See you soon." He shoots me another grin and strolls off my porch, leaving me more curious than ever about him.

When I knock on his door a little while later, he opens it with a glass of wine in his hand, which he promptly hands to me. His hand brushes mine and zaps me with a little electrical spark.

The kind kids like to do to each other by dragging their feet on the carpet.

“Come in,” he says silkily. “I hope you like pinot noir.”

“It’s actually my favorite.” I grin at him and sip the wine, which is excellent. “This is quite the welcome.”

None of the cabins have formal dining rooms, of course; each has a kitchenette with a breakfast table, and there are larger picnic tables on all the decks. He has the sliding door to the back deck open, and the bistro lights I installed are on and twinkling, mingling with the fireflies in the woods that surround the back of our two cabins. Lazy instrumental jazz is playing on a Bluetooth speaker.

“Wow, it looks great out there. And something smells delicious,” I say.

“Thanks. It’s simple, but I hope you enjoy it.”

“What are we having?”

“Cheese pizza, garlic bread, and salad. With a chocolate almond torte for dessert.”

“Ooh, sounds delicious. And very Italian.”

“I appreciate a theme,” he says with a smile. “Please, have a seat.” He gestures to the table on the deck. “I’ll join you in just a moment.”

The table is already set with plates, bowls, silverware, and napkins. A fat white candle flickers between the two place settings. Not a bad spread for a dude who seems to be a bachelor. There’s nothing I appreciate more than a guy who’s a legit *man*. A man who can cook, do his own laundry, work a nice suit, take care of himself, etc. That kind of independence



and maturity is fucking sexy. Toss in that musical accent of his? Hoo boy. I fan myself off with my hand.

Down, girl.

True to his word, he comes out a moment later, carrying a salad bowl and a plate of bread.

“Can I help?” I ask.

“I’ve got it. Just have to grab the pizza.”

Once he’s settled, we serve ourselves. I start with the salad, just so I’ll feel less guilty when I eat all the bread, cheese, and torte that are waiting for me. I need *some* nutrition in my meals, after all. I’d be perfectly happy living on donuts, and thanks to my metabolism, I probably wouldn’t even gain that much weight. But because I care about being healthy, ugh, I do try to eat something green every day. And work out when I can find the time.

“Are you going to see the fireworks tonight?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I don’t think so. I’ll probably head to bed early.”

Disappointment tugs at my belly. That’s not very festive of him. Then again, based on the accent, he’s not American. Maybe he doesn’t care about the holiday.

“Well, I’m heading into town at a little before 8:00 if you change your mind and want a ride. I have to be there. My cousin is the mayor, and all the Bishops are expected to attend,” I explain. “I have it on good authority that tonight’s show is going to be spectacular. Griffin apparently allocated a big budget for fireworks this year. I’ll even share my blanket with you.”

“Thanks,” he says. “I appreciate the offer, truly, but I’m feeling a little tired.”

“Of course,” I say. He probably traveled yesterday and then he spent today in the sun and the water. Naturally, he’s feeling a little worn out. And not everyone is into the Fourth of July pyrotechnics thing. I like it, but it’s hard to get excited when you’re forced to attend year after year.

At this very moment, I wish I weren’t obligated to go. Fireworks are great and all, but I’d rather linger here over Italian food and wine and see where the evening takes me. Like maybe to Wick’s bedroom. Something in my gut tells me the fireworks there would be even more dazzling.

And my gut is never wrong.



## WICKHAM

Though I learned to use a stove and oven decades ago, it has been many years since I’ve prepared food, much less cooked food. Fortunately, this fare is simple and came with clear instructions, and what I couldn’t figure out, I used magic to create.

Dining with Haven is my chance to understand what has been happening: Why the humans have abandoned the old ways, and with them their agreement with the Lady. Why Haven has decided to draw more humans than ever to the lake. How it was polluted and how she managed to clean it up. What the man I killed a few weeks ago was doing out here.

However, I do not think I can ask her these questions directly. Although I sense that she is trustworthy, I cannot risk her

becoming defensive, or worse, lying to me. I must coax the information from her. Though I dislike deception, I have learned that it is a necessary tool when dealing with her kind. Humans have words for what I must do, ones the Lady reminded me of before I came: flirt. And if necessary, seduce.

I have never mated with a human before. It might be an interesting experience, especially with one as interesting and physically appealing as Haven, but I cannot be distracted by lust. As much as I might like to be.

“Tell me about this resort,” I encourage, pouring more wine into her glass.

“What do you want to know?”

I shrug. “What you’ve done here. What you hope to achieve. That sort of thing.”

She takes a bite of salad and chews thoughtfully. “Well, the lodge was originally built in the 1980s, but it wasn’t very successful. Haven’s Hollow was smaller back then, of course, and we didn’t have as much tourism. Six cabins on one side of an unknown lake wasn’t much of a draw. The lodge closed a few years later, and it’s been empty ever since. Just collecting dust and mold. When Griffin decided to revive it, he tasked me with the job.”

Naturally, I don’t mention I had a hand in its failure. “And why did he choose to revive it? Since it didn’t do well the first time?”

“It all goes back to tourism,” she says. “Griffin is concerned with keeping this town alive and thriving, which is one of his jobs as mayor. He sees tourism as the way to do that. We had a local developer who wanted to create some truly heinous businesses on my friend’s property, which Griff thought might

be a draw. Something happened—I don't even know what—and the developer left town. Griffin decided to get creative, although this particular reno was on the docket before Chad left town. Griff has his own tourism projects in the works, but he figured a nice lakeside resort—well, lodge—could be a great draw during the summer months. My friend Annie just opened a B&B that's very successful, so it seems like Griff was right. People do want to come here. We just have to offer them places to stay and things to do.“

Haven sips her wine. “What brought you here this summer? I take it you're not from around here, so the tourism plan must be working a little bit. It's kind of amazing, considering we haven't even started advertising. How did you find out about the lodge?”

I pick up my pizza and take a large bite, debating what I can tell her. For human food, it is quite palatable. Thus far, spending time in my non-native form has not been as unpleasant as I anticipated it would be when the Lady sent me on this mission.

“I'm not originally from here, no. But I have spent time in this area before. I have...friends who live nearby.” Referring to the Lady as a friend feels wrong on every level, but the detail makes the story more plausible. “I was in town at a place called Queen of Tarts. Someone mentioned this lodge, so I came here the following day to see if there was an available cabin. Luckily for me, there was. With the bonus of a most fetching neighbor.” I send a slow grin her way, pleased when she returns it.

Haven's face lights up. “Queen of Tarts is the best! My friend Libra owns it, and she is an incredible baker. You have to try her almond butter brownies while you're here.”

“I would enjoy that. Chocolate is one of my favorite foods.” I do have to give humans credit for one thing: They are experts at preparing foods with sugar.

She laughs. “Isn’t it everyone’s?”

“Speaking of almonds and chocolate, are you ready for dessert?”

She nods. “If I eat another bite of pizza, I might explode. But I can’t leave without at least trying that torte.”

I return to the kitchen and cut two slices: A smaller one for her, and a large slab for me. I can’t help myself. I thrive on sweets. All of the folk do.

“That looks amazing,” she gushes when I set it down.

I grin at her and we each grab a fork and take a bite in unison, jointly reveling in the rich, creamy chocolate. The almonds on top add depth to the flavor and just the right amount of crunch.

Haven is still reveling in the dessert when something in her bag beeps. She sighs.

“That’s my alarm, letting me know I need to start getting ready to go to town. You sure you won’t join me?” There’s a hopeful note in her voice, and I hate to let her down. I’m enjoying getting to know her—much more than I thought I would. But I have a job to do here.

“Thank you, but no. I need to clean all this up and take care of a few things. But have a good time.”

She nods and stands, collecting her bag. “I hope I see you tomorrow.” She leans over and brushes her lips against my cheek, then sweeps away.

Thirty minutes later, my skin is still hot where she kissed it.



## WICKHAM

With the sun set and almost everyone in town at the fireworks show, things at Haven's little resort are dark and quiet. I'm sitting in the shadows of my porch, watching the lake. One wouldn't be able to see me, even if one were looking, which is why the males from what Haven refers to as Cabin 3 don't notice me when they step outside.

All three are wearing black, fitted clothing, and are carrying masks and flippers. I recognize the items: diving gear. They drag a canoe from behind some bushes, and moving quietly, begin to paddle out toward the middle of the lake. Curious, I slip into the water behind them and follow. There's something about them I don't like, and the fact that they're out here when no one else is around is suspicious.

The other strange thing is that they returned to the lodge not long ago. Just like everyone else, they disappeared earlier, and I presumed they went into Haven's Hollow to enjoy the festivities. But they came back not half an hour ago, evidently changed clothes, and are now out on the water.

I may not know a lot about humans, but I know troubling behavior when I see it. It's my duty, after all.

While my current form might not be as sleek and fast as my natural one, I can still swim better than any human. It takes only minutes to catch up to the boat, and I remain just under the surface, trailing along silently.

They travel far into the lake, well beyond the area that the lodge encompasses. When they finally stop, they are in the middle of open water.

“Let’s start here,” one says.

“Why?”

“It’s as good a place as any. Without more sophisticated gear, we can’t exactly make a search grid. So we might as well just start somewhere.”

“Do you know how big this lake is?” says another. “It could take years to find the pearl.”

“And it would be worth it. That pearl is supposed to be worth a fortune.”

His words set my teeth on edge. As I suspected, these humans are here to steal from the Lady. It won’t work, of course. The Tear is not a treasure to be found. It’s a prize to be won. Only someone worthy would be able to collect it, and nothing about this trio suggests that they are honorable or good.

“How do we know it’s real?”

“How do we know it’s not? What’s the harm in looking?”

Oh, there’s harm. I’ll show them that and then some.

I dive deep and wait for the splashes to indicate that they’ve entered the water. Every part of me longs to snap their necks, to hold them down until their lungs fill with water, to feast on their flesh. To show them the wrath of the lake and what happens to those who would insult the Lady by stealing her treasure.

But the Lady cautioned me about taking lives, and I know Haven would be distraught if three of her renters turned up dead.

As much as I long to kill them, I should not.

But still, they must pay for their actions, for their *intentions*.

Satisfied with my plan, I dive deeper and wait.





## HAVEN

MAYHEM.

That's the only word I can think of to describe what's happening. I woke to shouts from the renters early this morning, and when I ran out on my porch, it was chaos. The dudebros from Cabin 3 were all tied up on the Big Dock, naked as jaybirds. The influencers were having a field day, posting pictures and comments left and right. And the families were horrified that three naked penises were on display for their children, even though the dock is pretty far out and none of the guys are packing anything worth mentioning.

The guys themselves have apparently been attempting to shout for help since daylight, unable to untie themselves. Unfortunately, the gags in their mouths seem to be making that difficult.

I absently grab the clean honey bowl off the porch—how does it keep getting back here?—and run back inside. My phone rings before I can even change out of my pajamas. Of course, it's Griffin.

“Haven, what the hell is going on out there? I'm seeing posts about naked men tied to the dock!”

I sigh. “That appears to be exactly what's happening. I'm looking into it. You might wanna come on out here.”

“I'll be there as soon as I can,” he says.

“Great. And, Griff? Bring breakfast, would you?”

He laughs and disconnects, and I throw on a t-shirt and denim shorts and head to the beach.

Immediately, I'm swarmed by both the Wilson and Hefferman families.

“How did this happen?”

“What are you going to do about this?”

“Is it even safe to swim here?”

“Who would do this?”

“We need a refund!”

The questions are coming so fast, I can barely make out who's speaking. I hold up a hand, pleading for silence.

“Please. Give me a few minutes to find out what's happening. I don't know any more than you do right now.”

I make my way over to the influencers. “Do me a favor, please? Stop posting about this. It's not the kind of publicity I need right now.”

One of them—Alexia, I think—shrugs. “Sorry, but we’re getting tons of hits.”

I rub my temples. This is not exactly the best way to promote my new resort as a safe, family friendly locale.

“Really? People care about some random guys on a dock?”

Izzy snorts. “Random *naked* guys who are *tied up* on a dock! They couldn’t have done this to themselves, so it’s gotta be a crime or a prank. Or a publicity stunt! Whatever’s happening, people want to know the story! We’re obligated to keep our followers in the loop.”

“Besides,” Keisha says. “Those guys are pretty hot.”

I frown. That is so far from the word I would have used for them. They’re average guys who wear flip flops and obviously shop at Abercrombie. Which is fine, live your life, but that would *never* be my type. Besides, I’ve seen what they have to offer, so to speak, and I’m not impressed. There’s no junk in their trunks, and worse, they all seem to be sporting a runt in the front, if you get my drift.

To each their own, I guess.

I shake my head and go back to my cabin, pulling up the security feeds on my laptop. The nighttime footage is grainy, but I can see Travis, Mike, and Bobby row out in their diving gear.

They go far enough that they disappear from sight. I scrub through the recordings until they reappear. When they come back, it’s a whole different scenario. The boat is gone, for one thing. They’re being dragged through the water by an invisible force, mouths open in terror, which is a bad move when you’re in the water.

They appear to be yanked bodily out of the water, one by one, shrieking, and deposited onto the Big Dock. But there's no sign of who or what seems to be attacking them. Sure, the cameras are pretty far from the dock, but if there were a fourth person there, I'd be able to see them. But no. I watch the whole thing: they get stripped and tied up, not to mention gagged, with no further sign of their canoe or dive equipment. It looks like the whole thing is done by midnight, which means they were out on that dock when I got home last night. But I didn't see anything, and they didn't make any noise.

What the fuck is going on?

There's a knock on my door, and Griff comes plowing in before I can even stand. He shoves a muffin and a coffee at me.

"Why are they still out there?"

Okay, that's a good point. I should probably have rescued the guys before looking at the feed. I chug the coffee to get my brain firing.

"I don't have a boat, Griffin." This is true. Well, I do have a boat, but it's at my house, halfway around the lake. "Besides, I was looking at security footage to try to figure out what happened. To make sure it was safe to go out there."

"And?"

"Look for yourself." I slide the laptop to him and hurry into the bedroom to change again. This time, I put on my swimsuit. "I'm gonna swim to the dock and untie those idiots. You try to track down a rescue boat."

"Sure, but I also have to talk to the police."

"About this? Isn't that a tad premature?"

He shakes his head. “In addition to this, someone broke into The Silver Serpent last night when everyone was distracted by fireworks. Sabine is livid, of course. But she can’t tell the cops about what was stolen, because apparently it was real magic. It’s been a shitty morning.”

“Well, hell. Poor Sabine. And poor us. A rogue spell on the loose is a bad thing, especially if whoever stole it isn’t an experienced magic worker.”

“Tell me about it.” Griff is frowning as he looks at the footage, apparently just as puzzled as I am about the invisible assailant. “What the hell is this?”

I shrug. “You got me. All I can tell you is what I’ve said before: Some weird shit is afoot. Meet me at the Big Dock when you find a boat.”

When I get back outside, things are slightly calmer. The families have gone into town for breakfast, apparently to eat their trauma, and the social media girls are back in their cabin. So far, there’s been no sign of Wick, but I suppose that’s a good thing. I can’t afford to be distracted by him right now.

I jump off the Little Dock and swim out to the buoy, then duck under it and make my way to the floating dock.

I pull myself onto it and try to manage a cheerful grin. “You guys look like you could use some help.”

Mike glares and makes a muffled noise. I get to work removing the gags and untying the ropes that are binding them. The knots are complex, the kind of thing a sailor would do.

“My cousin is working on getting a boat out here to retrieve you. Along with some clothes. While we wait, you mind telling me what happened?”

Travis folds his arms across his chest and frowns. It's Bobby who finally speaks up. "We went out for a late-night canoe ride. We got jumped, robbed, and left here. We need the cops."

I shoot him a look. "We both know that's not entirely true. There are security cams at the lodge. You guys went out in diving gear and something that didn't get recorded brought you back to this dock. Boating at night is dangerous, and night diving is even worse. It's forbidden, which you know. It's in the contract."

"Which is why we did it when no one was around," Mike grumbles.

"Why are you interrogating us?" Travis finally speaks up. "We're the victims."

I roll my eyes. Who are these guys? "Asking what happened is not an interrogation. And if you want justice, we need to know who did this. Like I said, the camera footage is no help."

"I never saw his face," Travis says.

"Really?" I frown. "That seems pretty unlikely."

"It was dark."

"Uh-huh. Mike? Bobby? Did you see anything?"

They shake their heads sullenly and I sigh. That's impossible. They have to be lying, but why? Before I can suss it out, a noise catches my attention; it's Griffin, his friend Scott, and the boat.

"Thank goodness," I say.

We hand the guys towels to cover up, I pull on a pair of shorts that Griff brought, and then we all head back to the lodge.

“If you want to file a police report, you can do that in town,” Griffin tells the trio as they head back into their cabin. Scott takes off on the boat, leaving Griffin and me to sort out the whole mess.

“What are you thinking?” he asks me.

“I have no idea what happened to them, and they aren’t talking. Maybe the police will get more if they decide to file a report. As for the other guests, I don’t think Cabin 4 cares about what happened. Neither does 6. The families in Cabins 1 and 2 were annoyed, though. They were making noises about a refund.”

“Nonsense,” Griffin says. “I’ll put together some vouchers for them this afternoon. Free meals, free tickets to the observatory, that kind of thing.”

“Okay,” I say with a nod. “That might mollify them. I’m thinking we play this off as some kind of publicity stunt, though I’m not sure exactly how to spin it. And we may need to rethink our whole ‘family friendly’ approach.”

“How?”

“I’ve actually been thinking about this a lot, and it goes back to some of our previous discussions. I’m thinking we play up the spooky angle hard. Men are jumped by an invisible force, maybe there’s a Nessie kind of thing happening in the lake. There are already rumors of hauntings out here, so why not embrace them? Maybe they got tied up by a ghost. There are funny cryptid signs in the mountains, so let’s lean into it even more. Like town-wide. Rebrand Haven’s Hollow as a place for monster tours, spooky events, and pagan parades. Like the festivals I mentioned at the diner the other day. We could really run with it.”

Griffin rubs his chin thoughtfully. “That might be genius. Really give our town a niche vibe. A brand, so to speak. Something no other place offers.”

“Exactly.”

“All right. I’m gonna tell Jed over at the paper that this was all a publicity stunt, and then try to guide him into the cryptid angle. Maybe you can convince your influencers that this was just something silly and nothing to be worried about.”

“Of course, if the guys in Cabin 3 get wind of this story, they’ll be pissed.”

“They were diving at night, which is expressly forbidden in the rental contract,” Griffin says darkly. “They’re lucky not to be in trouble for that. Make sure they know it.”

I nod and Griff heads to his car, off to deal with the next crisis, which is probably Sabine’s break-in. I make a mental note to check on her and see how she’s doing, then turn to go inside and try to salvage the rest of my day.

When I turn, I see our last renter has finally emerged.

Wick is standing in front of his cabin, staring at the water. He has a giant bear claw donut in one hand, and a bottle of soda in the other. As much as I love pastries, I can’t fathom pairing them with cola. Not only is the combination disgusting, but how can he handle that much sugar all at once?

The brilliant sunlight slants down on him at just the right angle, highlighting his incredible blue eyes and the glints in his hair, coloring that almost seems unreal. Despite his height, the shadow he casts seems too long, and not the right shape.

That’s when it hits me.



Came out of nowhere. Unnatural coloring. Massive sweet tooth. Never seems to appear on the security cameras. The honey bowls that always return to my doorstep. It all points to one thing.

Wick is not human.

Wick...*isn't human*. Holy hell.

Wickham is one of the folk.

And that means he's very likely involved in all the crazy things that have been happening out here. And if he isn't, he's gonna help me get to the bottom of it all.

I step closer, eyes narrowed as I inspect him, searching for signs of what kind of creature he might be. "What are you?" I hiss.

He looks startled. "What?"

"What. Are. You? What kind of creature?"

"What do you mean?"

I shoot him a look and tuck my hair back, revealing the pointed tips of my ears, the most visible part of my elf heritage, and the hallmark of all the Bishops. It's why we all stick close to Haven's Hollow, where we're known and accepted and nobody asks questions.

"Takes one to know one. Except I'm mostly human, and you aren't. So what are you and what are you doing here?"

He sends me an assessing glance, and then nods as if some suspicion has been confirmed. "You are perpetually intriguing, Haven Bishop. And correct. I'm not human."

"And that means you're?" I trail off, waiting for him to fill in the blank.

“A kelpie.”

“A kelpie?” I repeat, surprised. I’ve heard the myths and legends of these dangerous water creatures that can take the form of men, but they’re mostly found in Gaelic regions—I think. They’re deadly folk who live in lakes and generally take the form of a horse, of all things. “I thought your kind only lived in like, Scotland. And that you were horses.”

“It’s where we originated. But like many species, we explored and expanded. I was born in Wales, but I settled here long ago. And yes, my natural form is equine, but my people have the ability to take human form when it suits.”

Ha. I *knew* his accent was Welsh.

“Okay, I can understand why Lake Erie would draw a kelpie to it—this area has always called to magic folk. But what are you doing here, now? In your human form?”

“What I have always done: protecting the lake.”

I take a deep breath. This is just what I need. Some kind of mythical monster breathing down my neck while I try to make a success out of this resort and help revitalize the town.

“Protecting it from what, exactly? Me?”

He crosses his arms and leans against the cabin. “Does it need protecting from you?”

“Of course not! I’m doing everything I can to keep everyone happy out here. Feeding the water sprites and catering to the humans and cleaning up the spills so the Lady doesn’t get pissed.” I blink as a thought occurs to me. “Oh, no. Did she send you?”

“I work on the Lady’s behalf,” he says.

Which is kind of cryptic, if you ask me. What, precisely, does that mean? Is that a yes?

“Inside,” I order, pointing at his cabin door.

Once we’re out of view, I cross my arms over my chest. “Are you the one who pulled that stunt last night? With the guys from Cabin 3?” He has to be. Anyone human would have shown up in the footage.

“Yes,” he says calmly, still eating his donut. “I did it for you.”

“For me?” I squawk. “You created a PR nightmare and upset all the other guests! In what possible way is that ‘for me?’”

“Under normal circumstances, I would have simply killed them. But I knew that would bother you, and I didn’t want that. So I came up with a different punishment. One that wouldn’t upset you.”

I’m sorry. WHAT?

“You would have killed them?!” I’m trying hard not to screech like a harpy. I want nothing more than to yell at him, but I can’t. He’s a member of the folk, and I have to tread with care. “For diving?”

“You and I both know it’s not permitted. And they weren’t just diving. They were after the Lady’s Tear. I stopped them.”

“I mean, sure, we discourage night diving because it’s dangerous. And we try to keep the pearl rumors to a minimum so we aren’t flooded with treasure hunters. But we do not murder people!”

“Humans don’t,” he says, licking icing off his thumb. “I’m different.”

“Let me get this straight,” I say, taking a deep breath. “You’re here on the Lady’s behalf, meaning she sent you, yes? You

stopped potential treasure hunters last night, but didn't kill them. Instead, so as not to upset *me*, you sank their boat and equipment, and then stripped them naked, gagged them, and tied them to the dock?"

"Yes." He shrugs. "It seemed like an adequate compromise."

Thank goodness for that. But I need to nip this whole murderous tendency in the bud. "Wick, you cannot go around killing people, no matter what they do."

He straightens, suddenly seeming to loom over me. "I can, I will, and I do. I protect the lake and the Lady at all costs. Like that distasteful one a few months ago. He not only polluted the lake, but his soul was stained. Drowning him was a necessity."

Oh my gods. "Are you talking about Evan Adler? *You* killed him?"

"I don't know who Evan Adler is."

I wave a hand absently in the air. It doesn't matter. Evan is the only person to have drowned in Lake Erie in years. He has to be the one Wick is referring to. I suddenly have a flashback to my near-drowning when I tried to rescue Len the workman at the beginning of the reno. Was that Wick's doing as well?

"When the machine went into the lake in April, and I rescued a man—were you the one pulling him under?"

"Of course. He polluted the lake. I would have preferred to let him die, but that would have meant killing you as well, and I could not do that. So I let him go."

"I need to sit down." I collapse into one of the living room chairs, stunned by his revelations. "Wait, why couldn't you kill me?"

He frowns, as though my question is ridiculous. “You have done nothing wrong. As you said, you do your best to safeguard the lake and you honor the old ways. I have no quarrel with you, Haven Bishop. I protect you as I do the Lady. And I thank you for your daily offering of honey.”

Hmm. Well. That’s kind of sweet.

But still. ACK.

I run my hands through my hair and try to reconcile the fact that this creature who has no qualms about murder is the same hot guy who made me pizza yesterday.

What does it say about me that I’m still attracted to him?

“Have I upset you?” he asks.

I choke out a laugh. “I don’t know. All of this is...a lot. Why exactly are you here, Wick? Why now? Spell it out for me.”

“As you said, the Lady sent me. There has been an increase in human activity at the lake recently, and she wanted to know why. Why this lodge is reopening. She also wants to know why the old ways are no longer being observed. Why the humans have broken their agreement.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” I say. “I told Griff we need to do something about that. In fact, we’re working on a plan to reinstate some traditions.”

Wick kneels in front of me and smiles. Who knew kelpies could be so gorgeous?

“This is why I could never harm you,” he says, taking my hands in his. “You respect our ways. You may be human, but you are a trustworthy one. I am sorry if I have caused you distress.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, thinking things through. “No, it’s okay. All you did was give those dudebros a good scare. They’re fine, and there’s no evidence to trace anything back to you, I don’t think. They don’t seem interested in implicating you. Griff will placate the Wilsons and Heffermans with coupons and I’ll do some damage control with a cryptid spin. Everything will be all right.”

As for Evan Adler, he *did* try to kill Libra. I suppose he got what he deserved.

“They will not implicate me,” he says.

“How can you be sure?”

“I may have used a little magic to make sure no one found them before morning. And to make sure they could not identify me.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you could do that. I guess I don’t really know much about kelpies.”

“The Lady has bestowed gifts upon me to aid me in my task. I can perform some basic spells.”

“I see. That’s generous of her. But how exactly are you supposed to accomplish your task without me failing at mine? My job is to bring more people to the lake. If you’re supposed to prevent that, we have a problem.”

“Not at all,” he says. “Humans are welcome at the lake, so long as they respect the agreement that was made when Haven’s Hollow was founded. They can swim in the designated area and enjoy recreation on the beach. Even certain water sports have been allowed. I simply want to keep them from swimming beyond the barrier, polluting the lake or harming its residents, or attempting to steal from the Lady.”

I nod. That seems fair enough, and in line with what I was already trying to do. “Okay, then. I think I might need to add a ‘no treasure hunting’ clause to the rental agreement. Griff and I initially opted not to, because we didn’t want to draw any more attention than necessary to rumors of treasure in the lake. I thought the ‘no night diving’ thing would cover it. Which reminds me, Travis, Mike, and Bobby violated that. I guess I have to decide whether to kick them out, or whether they’ve been punished enough.” I shoot Wick a pointed look.

He responds with a boyish grin, one meant to charm and gives my hands a squeeze. “How can I make it up to you? Would you like more of the torte? Another pizza?”

I think for a moment. I always want food, but there’s something else I want even more. “Will you show me your true form?”

He pauses, as if uncertain. “I have never intentionally revealed myself to a human.”

“Oh. If you’re uncomfortable, never mind. I’ll take the torte.”

“No. I would like to show you. I wish for you to know the real me.” He releases my hands and stands, and without shame or embarrassment, shucks all his clothes. He’s tall, he’s muscled, he’s glorious.

And he is, quite literally, hung like a horse.

My tongue wants to unroll from my mouth like in an old cartoon, the kind where steam would come out of my ears and my eyes would turn to hearts. But I restrain myself and wait as he transforms.

Before my eyes, his skin turns as blue as water, with intricate swirls and whorls dotting it, like some sort of natural camouflage or tattoos. He shakes loose his man bun, which

shifts into a thick mane, while his ears elongate. Fins appear on his arms and legs, his hands and feet become hooves, and before I know it, there's a huge blue horse standing in front of me.

Not a normal one, of course. The coloring and various fins make it clear that this is a creature made for the water. He is huge and powerful, utterly magnificent.

This is one horse I'd like to ride, if you know what I mean. I smile at him, impressed by his stature and beauty.

After a moment, he begins to shift back, but only partway. He has hands, but his feet remain hooves. He's still blue, but man-shaped now, with his cobalt hair loose and flowing. He has a human torso and legs, but also the horse cock, which is an interesting choice. No runt in the front for him.

"You're beautiful," I say.

"You think so? You might have strange tastes for a human."

I shrug. "Maybe. I've always been confident in my choices. I like what I like and I make no apologies for it."

"It seems we have that in common. I find you beautiful as well."

I smirk. "Well, doesn't that work out nicely?" I flutter my lashes at him in an exaggerated motion. "Have you ever slept with a human before?"

"Do you mean in the sexual sense?"

I nod.

"No. I have only ever mated with other kelpies and folk creatures."



“Have you ever wanted to be with a human? Wondered what it might be like?”

“Not until I met you.” His pupils dilate.

My heart thuds against my chest. He feels the chemistry between us too.

I stand up, and without breaking eye contact, strip off my shorts and swimsuit. “Now’s your chance.”



## HAVEN

HE EYES ME UP AND DOWN, TAKING IN MY NAKED APPEARANCE. “You are even more beautiful than I thought you were. You have given me a new appreciation for humanity and the human form.”

I take a step forward, tip my head up, and kiss him. Hard. His mouth opens almost immediately, his tongue licking at the seam of my lips. I part them and tangle my tongue with his, reveling in his dark, salty flavor. I thought he would taste like the sugar he loves so much, but he tastes wild, like midnights and ancient forests.

His hands are big, sure and steady. He slides them down my back, along my waist, over my buttocks. Back up my stomach to my breasts, which he cups, thumbs working at my nipples.

I tip my head back on a moan. “For someone who’s never been with a human before, you sure know what you’re doing.”

“Your physiology is not so different from others I have encountered. And I am open to directions.” He drops his mouth to my nipple, sucking hard, before looking up at me.

Something dark flashes in his eyes, as though a storm is whipping through him, and I feel an answering wildness rush through me.

His mouth moves to the other nipple, pulling it into a tight, aching peak, before working its way back up, nipping and sucking at my neck. I shudder, and grab his waist to brace myself. Everywhere his lips touch me is like a brand, turning my skin tingly and fiery hot.

Normally, I enjoy a lot of foreplay. I like to come a few times before a man enters me. But at the moment, I’m so turned on, I can feel my own wetness slipping down my thighs. I think he could drive into me right now without a lick of resistance.

Maybe he’s reading my mind, because at that very instant, I feel his fingers slide inside me. “I have to make sure you’re ready,” he says, his voice husky. “You won’t be used to my size. It will overwhelm you.”

I doubt that. I like ‘em large and in charge.

My eyes glaze over as he strokes deep, again and again. “Just how big are you?” I ask on a panting breath. My skin is slick with sweat, and my heart is hammering with anticipation. I’ve never felt this much *want* before.

“At the moment? Probably about fourteen inches.”

The thought makes my mouth water. I long for him to stretch me as far as I can go, to bend me until I nearly break. “You’re right. That’s bigger than I’m accustomed to.” I tingle with anticipation at the thought of a cock that big.

His fingers slip out of me and glide across my clit, making my whole body jerk. He makes an appreciative noise and repeats the action. I mewl in response and he chuckles, doing it again. He quickly finds a rhythm and my hips follow it, almost hypnotically. He's taken full control of my body, the pleasure like a drug.

"Mmm, you like when I touch you there," he whispers.

I nod. "It feels so good. You're making my clit so slippery and swollen. It makes me want to come."

I let my head fall back and my eyes close, lost in the rocking sensation as he strokes me. Back and forth, over and over, his roughened fingertips tweaking my sensitive flesh in every possible way. Pressing it. Pinching it. Plucking it.

I press my hands to my breasts, squeezing my nipples. I think I might die from the sensations racing through me, and my knees start to shake. A flood of wetness gushes out of me, a telltale sign that an orgasm is imminent.

A million sparks zap through my belly and my muscles start to tighten, preparing for the ecstasy that's about to be unleashed.

Little moans start spilling out of me, sounds I have no control over. It's always like this when I'm about to come. I lose all control as my body takes over. My legs are shaking, my nipples are straining, and every part of my body is zeroed in on my clit, the source of all pleasure.

"Oh, fuck," I moan. "Wick, you're going to make me come."

"Do you want me to stop?"

I can't even open my eyes to glare at him. "Don't you dare." Even if he did, I think it's too late to stop the train rumbling through me, but for the love of everything holy, he better keep his hands right where they are.

I rock my hips faster, faster, feeling my clit start to pulse. My internal muscles are squeezing, searching for the cock that isn't there, and then, out of nowhere, Wick pinches the very top of my clit.

A sound I didn't know I was capable of making screeches out of me as my knees buckle. The orgasm thunders through me, an endless, intense throbbing that I feel everywhere. More wetness leaks out of me, my clit throbs harder and faster, and I can feel my nipples somehow get even tighter.

"Yes," I breathe. "Yes, like that. Oh, fuck, I'm coming so hard. Keep pinching me."

I'm holding onto his waist for dear life as he follows my instructions, squeezing the most sensitive part of my body. It's almost like we're working in concert; every time my clit throbs and enlarges, he pinches it back down, creating a kind of pleasure I've never even dreamed about.

A second orgasm rushes after the first, shorter but sharper.

"Holy shit," I pant. I'm barely still on my feet, but Wick is nowhere near done.

He spins me around and pushes on my back, forcing my hands on to the chair and my ass into the air. Making a V with two fingers, he nestles my swollen clit in between them and squeezes, creating a new, intense sensation.

My legs tremble and I grip the chair harder as I feel him nudging my entrance from behind. I push back against him, restless and lost in pleasure.

"Relax," he says. "You can take me."

"I'm not worried about that," I mumble. "Just impatient. I need to feel you inside me. Ride me, stallion."

He snorts and flexes his hips, pushing into me. I can feel all my internal tissues stretching to the max, but it doesn't burn. There's just a pleasurable sense of fullness, and a sort of tingling sensation, as though we were made to be compatible.

Keeping his fingers in the V shape, he slowly strokes my clit up and down, completely distracting me as he pushes deeper. I can actually feel my clit swelling even more as he strokes it, using my own moisture to keep everything slick.

His enormous cock hits my G-spot, and I gasp. I can come over and over from clit stimulation, but I almost never come from penetration. There have been times I've doubted I even have a G-spot. But he's found it easily, and he's rubbing it with the tip of his cock, which has stimulatory ridges on it.

"Oh my gods," I moan. "This is better than anything ever."

He grunts and pushes a little deeper, stretching me even more. I tip forward slightly, and he grabs my hip with his free hand to keep me where he wants me.

"Fuck yes," I grit out. "Manhandle me."

I'm still trembling with orgasmic aftershocks, and I can sense another one just around the bend. It won't take much to send me over, but I want to hold out as long as I can. I want to feel Wick's cock dragging over my G-spot again and again and again.

He pumps into me, hard enough that I have to hold on to the chair to keep my balance. His fingers never leave my clit, tweaking and toying with it, even as he begins to grunt and groan. I can feel him swelling inside me as his own climax builds, and my muscles grip him tighter.

"Fuck, I can feel that," he says. "Do it again."

I flex against him and he shudders. Loving the power I have to make him feel good, I squeeze harder. Squeeze, release. Squeeze release.

He's chanting behind me, a string of curses that indicate exactly how much he's enjoying this. His hands get rougher; the grip on my hip tightens and his fingers squeeze my clit even harder. What with that, the constant G-spot stimulation, and the way I'm squeezing against him, I don't have a chance.

I scream as the next orgasm crashes over me. My body goes limp and my vision turns dark; there is nothing but endless swirls of ecstasy spinning through me. Dimly, I hear him shout and feel his liquid heat pour into me, but all it does is spur my body on, wracking waves of pleasure making me shake and shiver.

At long last, he drapes over my back, pushing up both into the chair. He's still hard inside me, and doesn't seem to be moving.

"Give it a minute," he says, his voice gritty. "My cock has a tie. It has to release before I can pull out."

I manage to nod, happy to remain a puddle on the chair.

Finally, after several minutes, he manages to extract himself. I hear his footsteps, and when he returns, he picks me up and sets me in the chair properly. "Water," he says, handing me a glass.

I chug it down, feeling drier than the Sahara.

As the afterglow begins to fade and my brain comes back online, a chill settles over my skin. I grab the throw blanket from the back of the chair and wrap myself in it, thoughts already returning to the problems at the lodge.

He gives me a look from the couch where he flopped in exhaustion. “You look like you’re planning something.”

“Maybe.”

“Gonna tell me?”

I pull the blanket tighter. “Something just occurred to me. Something that’s important to both of us,” I say.

“What’s that?” he asks.

“I’ve thought about it, and there’s only one way to put a stop to the treasure hunting for good. To keep us both happy. I have to find the Lady’s Tear myself. And you’re going to help me.”

THE END

(for now)



# About the Author

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Greetings! I'm Vivienne, and I write all things magical and mysterious, from fairy tales to alien romance to futuristic whodunits.

I've been writing fantastic tales since I could hold a pencil. Captivated by fanciful stories from a young age, I gradually began to create my own worlds filled with fantastic creatures and monstrous beasts. Now a USA Today bestselling author, I'm still sending my characters on as many wild journeys and dark adventures as I can.

In addition to spinning a good story, my loves include chocolate, reading good books, traveling, and taking as many bubble baths as possible. When I'm not writing, you can find me roaming around the southern U.S. with my husband and two very fluffy cats. I'm the redhead in pajamas.

For a list of my books, [click here](#). To find out more about me, and to subscribe to my mailing list, please visit my [website](#).



# Also By Vivienne Hart

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[Emilia and the Eldritch Earl](#)

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[Aura Awakened](#)

[Lustre](#)

[Forest of Frost: Sugared Plums and Poisoned Apples](#)

[Queens of Thorns and Stars](#) (with Elle Cross)

# THE MERMAN'S LURE

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S.J. SANDERS

A DURMONT WITCHES ROMANCE



Author's Note

Keri is a witch trying to figure out her powers and where her gifts may lead her. The last thing she needs is the distraction of a seductive merman-like Aquana tempting her when she has no desire to be carried off under the sea. Even if he intrigues her and stirs her mind and heart as well as her body.

But with this incredible pull, what is a witch to do?



## KERI

I GLOWER AT THE BOWL IN FRONT OF ME. THIS IS THE WORST time for intuition block. It is even worse when you come from a family who excels at divination. Me, the best I can do is a bit of water scrying when the gods deign to show something to me. Even still, it is not as strong. I get the barest glimpse of things. I am just not a diviner. I am the family disappointment. Generations of diviners and I, the eldest daughter, am a rotten diviner.

I blow a strand of hair out of my face with a weary sigh. The pale strands, undeterred, just settle back in front of my eyes, mocking my inability to focus. I can try to blame my lack of concentration on the diabolical strands, but even I don't buy that. I stare down into the dark water of the bowl, watching the play of light from the seven candles lit around it. Images tease

the corners of my vision, but nothing is coming in clearly and gone just as quickly.

“Come on, Keri, you aren’t focusing,” Adiele sighs.

I am starting to regret asking my friend to help me try to get a handle on my lackluster skills a few weeks ago. Adiele is probably the best diviner I know. She learned many of her skills at the knee of her great-grandmother before she passed on. My family, in contrast, is... complicated. The Durmont family is a coven of powerful witches, but our offshoot line is particularly gifted with divination, and as such it is simply expected that you find your gift. There is no training—you are thrust out into the magical world and expected to find what works with you, armed with little more than a pared-down copy of the Durmont family grimoire.

Everyone was certain that I would eventually find my gift in time, and there had been little pressure to do so until our world changed a couple of years ago as non-human beings decided to rejoin our world. Witches were gob smacked by the change. Werewolves and vampires were the most interested in mingling with humans, but rumor spread quickly of other species.

And now my parents are very concerned that I haven’t come fully into my power yet for the safety and prosperity of the coven. Gone are the days of exploration and experimentation, and the pressure is on. *Oh, goody.*

So, naturally, when Adiele offered to take me under her wing and provide more training, I eagerly took her up on it. That was months ago, however, and despite our weekly sessions, I haven’t seen any noticeable improvement in my lackluster divination skills.

“I *am* trying, Adiele. This just isn’t working. I think we just need to face it—I am *not* a diviner.”

“Nonsense,” she says, lifting her narrow face proudly in a rather impressive imitation of my mother, especially seeing as how she never met her. “There has never been a Thane-Durmont born who is not a diviner. It’s in your blood. It’s who you are.”

I sigh and prop my chin on my hand. “Sure, that is what they say.”

Adiele bites her bottom lip as she regards me. “You do seem to struggle a bit more than any diviner I’ve trained—and it’s not due to any lack of power. Anyone can sense you have plenty. You just aren’t... getting it.” She looks over at me helplessly, like she thinks she has failed me. I’m not disappointed though. Just the opposite, I’m relieved. Now I know for certainty that it is not a personal failing. I am just not a diviner and I’ve been wasting a lot of time trying to discover an ability that just isn’t mine.

I throw my hands out in triumph. “See! That is what I have been trying to tell everyone. It is not that I am unfocused, or not trying, like everyone likes to say. It just doesn’t work well for me.”

Adiele sighs and sinks down into her chair in defeat. “I’m sorry, Keri. I feel like I failed you. I was so sure that, with your family history, I could help you.”

I brush my hand back through my hair and grin. “It’s okay, Adiele. I appreciate that you gave up your entire morning and afternoon to help me out for this long.”

She gives me a lopsided smile. “Anything for you, babe. So how about we clean up this mess and move onto something



more interesting?”

I nod and proceed to help Adiele clean up the worktable. I take the scrying bowl out to the garden and pour the water over the flower bed. As I do so, I whisper thanks to its spirits while Adiele snuffs and clears away the candles and herbs burned for incense. She takes the bowl from me when I come back in, and we sit together at the table. For the first time in memory, I sit entirely relaxed in the company of another witch. No pressure whatsoever to try to be something I’m not.

It may horrify my entire family, but over the last several weeks I’ve come to the realization that I’m not interested in being any kind of professional diviner. I want to discover my magic and find my true calling. I do feel called to the sea. Perhaps I will see where studying water witchery may take me. My position as librarian at the Occult Library certainly puts me in the perfect position to research.

When not helping the random witch or sorcerer who comes through or shelving books, I have ample downtime for my own studies. Sometimes I get a shapeshifter. Occasionally one of the more human-friendly fae—some of which we would more properly call monsters given their appearance—pop in. It’s usually with a tome or magical item to sell. Some fae are marvelously adept at finding rare spell-books and charms, while others tend to hoard them and pick a random treasure to relinquish in the spirit of “charitable cooperation.”

By that I mean they sell them to the High Council of Seattle—and the outlying cities, which includes our small town—at outrageous prices, using the Occult Library as an intermediary. Our isolated location outside the city makes it more convenient point for those who feel uncomfortable venturing

into the large human cities. We somehow manage to do quite a bit of business.

“How is work?” Adiele asks, sipping a cup of coffee as she hands me a similar cup with a bold logo that proclaims “Have Coffee, Will Witchcraft” in bright red letters.

“It’s been quiet lately. I had a few werewolves in the other day. One of the younger members of their pack got stuck partially shifted, and they needed access to the restricted shapeshifter section to look up how to resolve it.”

The restricted sections are a pain in the ass. Unless you work for the library or have Council clearance, the donated texts by various species to help their larger communities are off limits. That is part of the agreement that came with acquiring the texts, since no one wants anyone from another species having knowledge that could potentially be used to harm them.

As an employee I get to sate my curiosity because I’m bound magically by a number of extremely specific oaths to not use any of it to cause harm, but I’m also stuck with the miserable job of policing access to it. Which is normally not a problem until a witch gets a hair up their ass because they can’t read up on magic that doesn’t belong to them. Thankfully each of these sections are key-code locked.

Adiele’s eyebrows climbed. “Were they able to fix it?”

“I suspect so since they left in high spirits and didn’t return. I have my fingers crossed for that kid. It was his first shift, and I have heard that’s particularly hard. ”

My friend shakes her head and takes another sip.

“What about you?” I ask. “Anything new going on down at the shop? Haven’t been by in a few days.”

Adiele snickers into her cup. “Just the usual entertainment that comes when you have giggly girls with teenage hormones for customers. I had a couple of girls looking over some of the charms when a merman came in. And you know how that species is,” she says, giving me a meaningful look.

“By reputation only, but I can certainly imagine,” I reply.

There are several fae species out there that are panty-melting hot and that have an instant effect on the female libido. I have seen a seventy-year-old grandmother get worked up over a merman before. They’re sizzling hot and know how to work it. However, with merfolk you must be extra careful because you never know how much of your attraction is you and how much is from their glamour and siren’s song. Sirens are a different beast, but they share that devastating ability to influence with their voice. Merfolk and sirens also both have the disturbing tendency of choosing to eat people they don’t like.

Yeah, not my idea of an ideal bedmate.

Still, imagining the girls’ reaction brings a smile to my face. “I’m sure that gave them something to talk about all the way home.”

Adiele bursts out laughing. “Are you kidding? They were still in my shop when they started talking. And within earshot of the merman. I swear he was practically preening as the girls giggled over him. I finally had to shoo them out just so I could get him taken care of before closing time.”

“I bet you did,” I grin wickedly.

Adiele chokes on her coffee and glares at me. “Not that way, you weirdo.”

I chuckle unrepentantly and take another long sip, hiding my intrigue behind the rim of my mug. I’m almost envious of my

friend with the way she so easily meets the most interesting beings while I'm practically hidden and locked away from the world much of the day unless someone has a problem or needs to locate a piece of information.

A librarian is not the object of anyone's lusts, it seems, despite the old stereotype. I love my job, but I can't help but wish for a little something more.



## KERI

THOUGHTS OF MERMEN FOLLOW ME INTO MY SLEEP, FILLING MY head with erotic dreams. My current dry spell is obviously messing with my head if just the casual mention of a merman brings that on. Enough so that I'm still thinking about it while I go through my morning routine to get ready for work, an unanticipated needy tingle rushing beneath my skin. I scrub my face with one hand in frustration as I head out.

This is ridiculous. *Gods, I need to get laid.*

As I key myself in to unlock the library, I mull it over. I can't even say what the source of my sudden fascination is. I don't really know much about merfolk. They're said to be legendary seducers and that mating is often a brutal affair. But with this sudden and peculiar arousal that seems intent on to plague me, my curiosity is likewise roused enough that I suddenly I'm inspired to do a little research on merfolk.

Facts—which are usually far less pleasant than the fantasy surrounding a species—should effectively cool my desire. It usually does the job whenever I’ve been tempted to experiment. Still, I can’t seem to control the reflexive little shiver that runs through me as I hang up my things in the staff room and head into the main building. It takes me little time to light the windowless building and unlock the doors before I can set about reshelving the carts of returns that are waiting for me. A couple of hours later, I finally allow myself into the restricted aquatic species section. There is as little there as I recalled, but I’m surprised to find a narrow volume that I have never seen before. A new acquisition perhaps?

I pull it from the shelf and run my fingers along the old binding. Wherever it’s from, it’s well made. The brown cover doesn’t have a title, just a simple gold mermaid pressed into it. Tucking my prize against my chest, I return to my desk at the front of the library. I’m allowed to have material there as long as I lock up any books or scrolls in the small safe built behind the desk whenever I step away.

Settling in my chair, I don’t immediately open the book but tap a finger on its cover as I look expectantly toward the door just in case someone plans to come barreling through the moment I’ve sat down. When no one does, I finally open it and begin to read.

It opens with a lot of information that I already know regarding the “song” of merfolk and how it’s used to captivate and lure in humans. No mystery there. They’ve often been pointed to as the cause for shipwrecks and human deaths at sea just as often as miraculous rescues. I am surprised, however, to learn that we are one of the few species compatible for merfolk to mate and breed with. This, of course, explains why we are so particularly susceptible to their charms. Not very

awesome for humans, I note, considering that they are also predators who historically don't have a problem with eating us. I suppose that makes us their natural targets in more than one way.

The fact that a merman has been wandering around the city makes me a little more nervous. Not because I'm afraid of people being eaten—that seems like a little too much effort when there's plenty of food available right there in the sea—but if they are coming on land looking to breed there's reason to be wary. According to this book, though mermen are susceptible to the song of the females of their species, mermaids in turn are immune to the song of the males. Not very fair, but I guess that means no mermaid risks being assaulted by a male of her own species. That makes humans an easier target than mermaids for mermen.

I'm wondering where the violence comes into mating, and if that's something I need to warn Adiele about, when I turn the page and feel the blood drain out of my face as I begin to read. The book describes the mating process in detail, but thankfully nothing that I can see being risky to humans when it comes to mermen. While mermaids have been known to steal sailors from capsized ships, mermaids who wish to mate among their own species sing so that they draw large numbers of nearby males to them with their magic—and into direct competition with each other. A very dangerous sort of competition too. Not only are mermen pretty, but they are also highly aggressive. Interested mermen partners engage in combat that fills the water with their drawn blood—all for a chance to be chosen by her.

My brows creep up as I continue reading. It seems almost indecent, like I'm reading something forbidden, as the book explains how, once she chooses her preferred male, he pins her

to him—literally. He wraps his arms around her torso, and barbs protract from his arms into her skin so that he injects her body with a chemical that makes her receptive to his seed. Without it, even a female of their own species can go into shock when exposed to his semen. He also pins her in place with his teeth so that she doesn't move and cause herself pain or injury from his barbs. The penis extrudes, and he wraps his tail around her to tie her to him as they copulate. As potentially uncomfortable as it sounds, I can't help but feel more than a little fascinated by it as the tingle in my clit gets stronger and my panties grow wet.

I'm flushed by the time I finish reading the chapter, and my entire body is pulsing with need. Better to stop now if this book is having the opposite effect than what I intended. It's not entirely appropriate for work either. I think I've learned enough to decide that there probably isn't any immediate danger since it seems that the initial mating needs to be in water. Hopefully any sane woman will work out what she's getting into before actually getting into the water with him. I can mention it to Adiele just in case, but nothing to panic about, thank goodness. It's only with a small pang of regret that I stow it away to return to the restricted section later.

I don't exactly need to read more when I have no intention of getting into the water with a merman. I mentally tell my clenching sex to behave and proceed to find another task. Perhaps the alchemy section. The nature and property of plants and implementing their use is a large part of it. I know my cousin Fran has a particular interest in magical and medicinal plants and sells them to other witches and in little remedies, but I'm more fascinated with the way the different properties can be purified and combined to create powerful potions of a strictly occult nature. My thoughts drift pleasantly along this



subject matter, glad to be distracted from the subject of mermaids and their mating. There is little traffic today, so I'm able to pull a few books on the subject and peruse them to my pleasure during my break. Afterward, I decide to occupy myself by putting in orders for some book loan requests that have come in to their respective occult libraries. By the time I'm done there is a large stack of returns that need to be scanned back into the system, and I'm grateful for the busywork.

I'm about three-quarters of the way through the pile when the bell over the door clangs, and I look up from my work to peer at the couple stepping through the door. My eyebrows fly up in surprise when I see that it is Adiele. Not because she's with a mind-numbingly beautiful stranger—though I am a little horrified and intrigued by the hot rush of desire I feel when he steps in after her—but because with a business to run, she rarely comes by.

Unfortunately, I'm far too distracted by Adiele's new friend to be too curious as to why she's there. I gasp as his magic rolls over me, threading around mine. It is just shy of invasive with how its impact ripples through me, and I can't pull my eyes off him. Six and a half feet tall, or a little more, and built with miles of beautiful lean, athletic muscle, on the surface he's every grown woman's wet dream. My breath stutters out of my lungs as my eyes run over his sculpted abs and chest, wishing that I could use my tongue to follow those perfect lines. Every inch of him is built for lethal power and speed.

And definitely not human.

It's not because his complexion is the color of flawless marble that gives him away. It's in the tiny details. It's the faint iridescent scaled pattern to his skin that catches tiny rainbows

of light, the thick mass of iridescent pearl white hair that no dye job can even get close to faking. And the way the bones of his hands are long and strong, each finger is slightly webbed and tipped with a small black claw honed to a razor-sharp edge. For all that his build doesn't appear bulky, he is easily twice my size. His neck is thickly corded with muscle, the veins drawing the path of my vision up to beautifully ridged webbed ears. His lips are beautifully sculpted, his cheekbones are high and prominent. Without a doubt, he's a beautiful male. Especially his eyes, which are such an unworldly shade of aquamarine that they are like two chips of stone glowing with the vibrant force of his life.

Eyes that suddenly pin me. I stare back at him, and something pricks at my mind, warning me to look away but I can't. Awareness slams through with the knowledge of exactly what I'm looking at when his throat pulses and a sound rolls over me as he begins to "sing."

"Oh, damn!" Adiele immediately sidles away from her companion, casting a wary look between the two of us.

Oh, damn indeed.



Ro

I STIFLE A RESIGNED SIGH AT ADIELE'S APOLOGETIC FACE. SHE still hasn't received the shipment of the supplements my kind needs to spend any length of time on land. Although there is no resisting the pull of the sea for a full day when the moon is full, the supplement helps us with the inconvenience of having to return to the sea after every sundown. Acquiring human legs is the easy part, just a simple enchantment every child learns, but spending time on land is highly stressful to the bodies of Aquanas, or merfolk as humans like to call us.

We can't spend more than a week out of the water. If we don't spend a day in the sea for every seven on land, my kind will weaken and die. It is only recently that I've discovered that there is a way by means of a supplement witches make.

And not all of them have a pleasant reaction to our presence, such as this coven with which Adiele is trying to make a deal.

She is too nice to say that it is because of what I am; I know the reason since my sharp hearing picked up her hushed argument on the phone with the coven when she made the order. The reaction of witches to Aquana males still takes me by surprise.

Granted I didn't exactly go straight to the witches to begin with, so perhaps there is some reason for them to be suspicious, but Aquanas tend to live very far from places where humans dwell. It is only by chance that I came across a newly mated Selkie a year and a half ago and learned of the new supplements. Fortunately he was happy to trade his supply to me.

But soon after acquiring it I discovered that, despite humanity's fascination with the females of my species, a male Aquana on land is treated with far more suspicion without knowing anything about us. The idea that we are seducers who prey on women is a double-edged sword. On one hand it seems to make many witches wary, and covens disinclined to help us. On the other, much to my frustration, it tends to attract the more adventurous among witches and seers who are eager to bed one of my kind. Something that has happened in more than one instance since I've arrived in the area. Adiele doesn't seem inclined to do either, which makes me grateful for her friendship.

A shame that the supplement is not something commonly known among all witches. Here I thought it would be easy just to go into any occult shop and purchase more when I ran out. I had foolishly miscalculated that end. So I keep coming back to this shop, hoping for some word about my order while I take time to enjoy the atmosphere.

As with most of my species, I am completely charmed by humans and their magic—and the Emporium reeks of both. It makes me yearn to stay on land even more as I search, even if I have to tolerate the lust that emanates off many females, and some males, when I near them. Even those who cannot penetrate the glamour are afflicted, much to my frustration, and I can't get away from their little gasps or the poignant scent of their desire. Their unfulfilled fantasies prick at me like the stinging, grasping arms of a jellyfish that I am constantly brushing aside. None of them are the one person who I crave: a female whose magic aligns perfectly with mine and draws me to her.

Despite what human lore says, Aquanas love deeply, though perhaps a little too quickly for humans, and mate for life. In many cases when a sailor is said to have gone missing, a lovestruck Aquana is the root cause. We breed effortlessly with humans, so it is natural that we find mates among them to bring new blood into our lines, and non-breeding pairings are treasured as well. All it takes is the smallest amount of magic in the blood to call to us, but it's even better when it is a witch ripe with magic. But that is rare for Aquanas to find.

The Emporium is rich with layered, textured scents of their magic and the overwhelming smells of powders and herbs. Entering requires a moment or two to breathe deep and appreciate as this is something I've never had the chance to experience while fishing for my pod around our hidden cove. Not that the cove is all that interesting. It is mostly used by the paired Aquanas to rear their families in secluded areas and offers little of interest for adult males and females of breeding age. I was pleased when I finally became of age to leave the pod territory and search for a mate, but after years of searching

I'm starting to doubt that I will find one, or that it may be a great many years yet still.

Which is something I know that I should expect, but I am more impatient than most males. I know it is normal for many males to spend their first two centuries traveling the seas, scenting for a female. So I try to remind myself that there is no hurry. That no one expects a young Aquana to mate early. Especially not males, as we are slower to find mates.

There should be no urgency, but I can still feel it like a current running beneath my scales demanding that I hurry. Perhaps this is normal for one who is a quick and decisive hunter. My nets are always full because I know where to go to get what I want. And I know exactly what I want and what I don't want. I have no interest in fighting in bloody contests with other males, risking injury just for the hope of attracting a female Aquana's attention.

I avoid the flirting grounds of the female Aquanas and have been slowly making my way up the coast for the last few decades, hunting for an area that possessed energies that appeal to me. Not just because it is the most likely place to find my mate but because it is likely to become where my mate and I will nest. I have anticipated this from the moment I left my pod. I knew I wouldn't return. While those who mate with female Aquanas usually join the pod of their mate, those who choose to seek out human mates often prefer to stay in secluded places close to land where their mate can live comfortably near other humans. Males are notorious for becoming obsessively protective and indulgent of their mate's needs, so I've anticipated this eventuality and eagerly await it.

I haven't been here for more than a few weeks, but already I know that this is the place. I can feel it in my blood.

Unfortunately, I'm no closer to finding a female to whom I feel the pull, and my time is almost up before I must return to the water. Worse, I am no closer to getting my supplement, and every night I must abandon my search until the sun rises again.

"I'm sorry, Ro," Adiele says, wincing in sympathy. "Still nothing from Underidge coven. I check on it every day and it hasn't been mailed yet. My order keeps coming back as 'processing' whenever I pull it up."

"The fault is not yours, Adiele," I try to reassure her. "Is there no one else you might ask? Perhaps someone who might be able to tell you how to make it?"

I am startled when she laughs, but I know it is not from cruelty. "Covens sharing their secrets—that would be the day," she chortles. "I'm afraid this recipe is the new family secret of the Underidge coven. The only time magical knowledge willingly gets shared these days is if a coven's family line dies out and their grimoire gets donated to the library. So, unless that happens, we are likely shit out of luck. I even put in a call to my family, but we're a newer line and there wasn't anyone who is advanced enough with sea magic to be of much help." Her expression suddenly clears a little. "But I do know of a family that has been in the area for several generations now, and a good friend of mine is a Durmont. Well, Keri is a Thane-Durmont, but practically the same thing—it's all the same family coven. The Durmonts might have a few ideas we can try."

I am not optimistic, but I know she is trying to help me and showing me far more kindness than most others since I have come to shore. Aside from the response I get from witches, many people seem to subconsciously react to my presence with either fear, hostility—mostly from males—or desire.

Avoiding contact with strange females who don't know proper decorum has been a nuisance at best.

Case in point, I can't miss the sudden teasing brush of a stranger's fingers across my ass. I smother the instant desire to extend the lethal spine fins of my true form. Having such dorsal fins running down my back and from my shoulder to elbow is not a good idea. It is far too lethal for close quarters with humans, but like most Aquana, I do not like being physically touched by anyone but my mate. I turn my head and look down at a lithe little brunette smiling up at me, and I scowl my displeasure fiercely at her.

I am about to open my mouth to chastise her when Adiele intercedes and, with a few terse words exchanged with the female, hustles the woman out the door. She returns with a shaky smile, one that tells me that she is not entirely unaware of how dangerous my species can be.

“So sorry about that,” she says. “I swear some of the women around here must have a death wish or something to even risk putting their hands on a fae without invitation.” She gives me a concerned look. “Are you okay?”

I draw in a deep breath and slowly allow myself to relax by small measures until I am once again calm. Having regained my control, I give her a grateful smile. “Yes. My thanks.”

She returns the smile, relieved, and then turns thoughtful. “You know, despite being a coastal city, we don't get too many aquatic species in Washington. In this part of the country, your kind are more common along the coasts of Oregon and California as far as I can tell. I blame it on our weather. The Pacific Northwest tends toward cool and dreary more often than not,” she observes. “I can imagine that it can be a bit



nasty compared to the warm waters farther south. We've never even had the occasion to need aquatic supplements before."

She doesn't realize it, but everything that she says is part of the reason to come here rather than hunting for a mate among the warmer waters to the south. Not only do I like the raw energy of the place, but I like the fact that I will not be potentially competing with others of my kind. It gives me hope that I will be successful in finding a mate here.

"I like it."

Her eyebrows climb. "You do?"

I take a breath, holding it deep in my lungs, enjoying the various flavors of the energies. There is a sweet note that I've caught here in passing that I particularly relish. "Oh yes, very much so. I plan on being here for some time."

"Well then, that settles it. We need to get you the recipe for that supplement if you want to stick around. How long do you have until you must return to the water?"

"I must return every night, but every full moon I am bound to the sea from sunrise to sunrise. I will not be able to leave the sea with the sunrise tomorrow morning. I will be bound there until the next before the magic will allow me to return."

"Hmm. I would have thought that merfolk would be entirely lunar-oriented."

I give her a curious look. "Whatever for? The moon pulls our tides, and thus once a month the magic of the moon and the sea captures us completely. Although we reckon many things by its pull and understand that it influences our magic, it is the sun that merfolk love. It measures the passage of time and rules our glamour. We cannot see the moon unless we rise from the waters, but the sun penetrates the upper depths. It

gave us our first magic.” My lips curl wryly, and I add, “Not to mention that none of my kin would pass up a chance to sun themselves on the rocky islands.”

Adiele’s eyes sparkle as she laughs. “Well, I just learned a new thing then. Let’s hurry and get down to the Occult Library. That’s where Keri works. I’ve never known her to not be happy to lend a helping hand.”

She waves a hand to a bearded young man walking through the door sipping on a steaming drink. “Teddy, right on time. Go ahead and bring your coffee back here. I’m going to take my lunch now that you’re here and take a quick jaunt down to the Occult Library.”

He grins as he slides behind the counter and kisses her on the cheek. “Sure thing, sweetie. Take as long as you need. We’re not usually hopping during midday, so I don’t think it will be a problem.”

“Thanks, babe!” she says as she grabs a small bag and swings it over her shoulder. “Come on, Ro.”

Dutifully, I follow Adiele out the door and down a long narrow back alley between various shops until she arrives at a heavily glamoured building. To those without magic, it would look like nothing more than a long wall extending from the neighboring building. But I can see beneath it to the high arched doorway and the bold script above it proclaiming it as the entrance of the Occult Library.

As we draw near, I taste the energy of the place. Unlike the Emporium, it lacks the chaotic feel of numerous overlapping unharnessed and undirected energies. Instead, it smells of power, carefully woven spells, ancient knowledge, and the musk of old books. There is another scent underneath that is

cloying. The sweet smell of pond lilies and rain. The smell of the sweet musk of a female's magic that simply tastes "right."

It's exotic to my senses and pulls me with such a strength that my cock jumps beneath the tight confines of human clothing. Her energy is like the kiss of summer waves, drawing me to her as if she were an Aquana calling forth males. In a daze, I drag in that sweet perfume and take a deeper breath as we approach the door, my every instinct screaming to lure her in before any other males dare approach.

*My female.*

Adiele steps inside the front door, but I don't give her a chance to linger before I gently move her to the side so I can fully enter the library behind her. My eyes are drawn instantly to the source of my desire. She is nearly as pale as one of my kind, but with a deep flush of pink and a hint of gold to her complexion that my kind lacks. I am fascinated with the long, silky length of her pale-yellow hair. It is exotic to me compared to the white, blues, and greens common among merfolk. It makes me think of the beautiful rays of sunlight piercing through the water. Her eyes are the same piercing blue as the waters where I was reared, and her lips the pink color of a water lily I gave to my mother in my youth.

She is glorious, and everything within me yearns to wrap around her—most especially my tail. When she meets my eyes, I feel my magic pulse through me in answer and don't have a hope for stopping the lure as my song ripples through me. She shivers in reaction, but we both startle when a book is slammed on the counter beside her. She jumps as she spins toward Adiele. I likewise give the female I thought was my friend an affronted glare, but she pins me with a hard look before turning toward my mate.

“Keri, this is Ro. He’s the merman I was telling you about.”

My female, Keri, looks at me thoughtfully, her eyes skimming over me, taking me in. Her subtle energy spins out from her and caresses me. She is unaware of what she is doing but I relish the touch as it draws the response of the lure within my own magic. I feel my body respond in kind to a compatible mate, the flesh heating and my spine fins expanding even as my cock swells further to painful levels in its confinement. This is the dance of the song and lure, her magic and mine beginning to move together and learn of each other. Mating will only intensify it and solidify the link between our power.

Some species jealously guard their personal power, but not Aquana. We value this dance and the joining of powers. Though it increases our dependence on each other, it makes our magic stronger as it harmonizes. It’s something I want desperately, especially now that I’ve found her.

I allow small tendrils of my own energy to caress hers and watch her shift as her arousal blooms slightly in response. The effect is beautiful. She does not begin to unfurl her mating petals as a mermaid would to entice her potential mate to draw closer, but the sweet, wet scent of her cunt does increase, making me salivate.

Her magic and my lure are all it takes. Once we mate, we will hook and be one. Fate, the gods, and the source of all magic has decided. Keri will be mine.



## KERI

I THINK I'M ABOUT TO PASS OUT. ALTHOUGH I'M WORKING hard to control my breathing and every other reaction to the merman, I feel a fuzziness around the edges of my mind that suggests that I'm not doing as good of a job as I believe I am.

“An actual merman,” I murmur, fascinated despite the horror curling in my belly. I cut a sharp look at Adiele and summon my best “*what the fuck?*” look. Just because we were talking mermen yesterday didn't mean I wanted to meet him. She gives me an apologetic look, and I clear my throat and look back at the male looming over me. “What brings you two here? Unless you were coming by to volunteer your time for an interspecies research assignment.”

“Actually...” Adiele begins, but Ro cuts her off and steps closer to my desk, drawing every single one of my brain cells to him.

My friend looks completely baffled, but I don't blame her. Right now, I would list that as one of my forerunning emotions. It's like my ability to reason took a hike the moment he entered the library.

"That is exactly why I have come," he says, and by the gods his deep speaking voice is almost as beautiful as his singing. I have heard voices described as melodic, but I swear he was just shy of singing those words to me. "This interspecies research—it is so humans become more familiar with the other species sharing their world, correct?"

I quickly bob my head, relieved that there is an actual reason for his presence and that my overactive imagination that insists that he was hunting me—and sending little happy curls of lust through me in response—isn't right. I clear my throat yet again as I start hunting for the paperwork. I'm not nervous. Not at all.

"That's excellent!" I reply in my most upbeat voice that I usually reserve for children and the more difficult patrons. "I will have you fill out these papers, and the regional Master of the Arts, Thomas Clarence, will get ahold of you to assign you to a member of the Arcane Society of Magicians and Witches to begin the study."

His eyes narrow slightly, and I blush at the intense focus of his attention. "I will not be paired with you?"

My panties die a fiery death from the look he gives me. Probably a good thing that there isn't a snowball's chance in hell of that happening. The honorary status given to me because I work here won't put me anywhere in the running to work with him. Not when there are more highly qualified and experienced people waiting for the opportunity. Thank the

gods. I don't know if I would survive spending hours with him every day.

"I have no idea," I say instead, giving him a bright smile. Regardless of the strange sexual tension I'm experiencing, I don't want to mess this up. If that one little book is all we have regarding his species, then this is too good of an opportunity for us. "Just be prepared for a lot of strange questions. And personal ones," I add. "I know for sure that they're going to want to ask you about your species' magic in the way you attract humans as well as your reproduction and anatomy."

My mouth goes dry when he arches a brow, and a look of interest crosses his face as his lips curve in an alluring smile. "It depends on how this study is engaged—and with whom. If I am paired with you, I might offer a more tactile observation and exploration."

My pussy screams yes, but the rest of me is staring like a deer in headlights. "I'm not sure if that's going to be required, actually."

His smile widens and he seems even more devastatingly attractive, sharp fangs and all. "I will be happy to do anything that is required—only if it is with you."

I am not sure if I am blushing again or simply never stopped. My face is really warm, and my heart feels like it's hammering away.

"Unless you are afraid," he murmurs, and his expression loses its intensity to regard me in a way that is considerably softer—sweeter even.

I chuckle weakly and casually push the paperwork to him along with a pen. "I'm afraid that decision isn't up to me, but

there is a section at the end for anything you wish to add. I suppose that they would take it into consideration.”

Unlikely, but no reason to tell him that.

He peers down at it. “I do not know how to read or write your human characters.”

I should have realized. Most fae species have adapted quickly and have learned to read and write if they didn’t already know how. Why did I think he would magically know how to if he was coming from the freaking sea?

“Oh! I suppose that merfolk live so far out that you really don’t have any reason to learn,” I say quickly.

“Aquanas,” he interrupts, and I blink across the desk at him in confusion.

“Excuse me?”

Another smile stretches across his face, but this one far less heated as his eyes brighten and dance with amusement.

“We are Aquanas. Humans say merfolk, but this is our word for our kind,” he corrects gently and taps his chest with his first two fingers. “I am Ro.” He pauses for a second. “That is not entirely accurate. I am Ro’karek, hunter.”

I nod in greeting. “Keri, uh, Keriwyn, librarian,” I reply and immediately feel like an idiot.

Of course he knows who I am. Adiele said my name the moment they came inside. And then I just had to give him my real name? I never tell anyone my name because it’s embarrassing. Mostly because my parents haven’t a drop of Irish heritage or culture in them but got “creative” because it sounded Irish and magical to them. It was simply wishful thinking on their part, thinking that perhaps that a “magical”



sounding name would give them an exceptionally magically gifted daughter.

Clearly not.

That doesn't stop Ro from looking like it's the best thing since sliced bread. His lips move quietly over the letters as he repeats my name to himself, and I imagine that he's caressing each sound with his mouth every time he says it.

I look over at Adiele, silently begging her for help. My friend sucks in her cheeks and shrugs apologetically, clearly leaving me up to take care of the situation myself. I bite back a disappointed groan and smile patiently at Ro.

"Here, I'll help you fill these in, and then you can just put whatever mark represents your signature at the bottom."

He nods slowly as he considers. "That is acceptable. Please print my request at the bottom to be paired with you. I want my request on this matter to be clear."

I bite my cheek but agree as I begin the process of walking him through the paperwork and filling out each question one by one, sometimes having to stop and correct a response when he realizes afterwards that he didn't quite understand the question right. It takes time, but the few people who come in are the usual stragglers who just like to browse and take some notes. They wave to me as they pass, and I make a mental note that they are here so that I can write it down in the log while I continue to fill in every response on Ro's behalf.

"It usually takes three or four days for someone from the Arcane Society to get back to applicants, but you're such a rare case that you may hear back from them first thing," I point out as I work on finalizing the papers in front of me.

A look of regret passes over the male's face, and he shakes his head. "I cannot tomorrow. It is the full moon, and those who are called to the sea are bidden to return if they do not have the necessary supplement—and I do not."

"Thanks to the Underidge coven and all their sneaky bullshit," my friend mutters.

I grimace sympathetically and note that too. It's finally done, and I sigh with relief as I slip it into a large envelope that will be set aside for Mr. Clarence to collect this evening. I'm both relieved and a little sad when Adiele practically hauls him out the door so that I can return to work.

It makes me wonder about her silence followed by that sudden pushiness. I didn't think she was into him last night when she spoke of him—and I have no doubt that he's the male she meant—and gods, let's hope not! But now I'm not so sure. Although Ro is obviously flirty, is it possible that there is something going on between the two of them? And why does that depress me?

I sigh as I return to work. It's not my business anyway, so there is no use torturing myself over it. In all likelihood, I won't see him again unless I run into him when he's with Adiele. There's no reason to give it another thought.

But I do. And I continue thinking of him well into the night. And this time when I sleep, the merman has a face when he makes me his.



Ro

THE PHONE CALL FROM THE MALE WHO INTRODUCES HIMSELF as Thomas Clarence comes at an obscenely early hour in the morning. Especially since I just returned from the sea as the sun rose over the water and stretched out on my bed. The motel I stay at is not entirely necessary, but I enjoy resting in it as humans do and having one place to keep my belongings while I am on land. I was unable to rest yesterday or much at all the last two nights, too eager to see Keri again.

I squint at the clock on the nightstand after I hang up with him and scowl. Barely past seven in the morning. That may be normal for many humans—I protest it with everything that I am. It's simply not natural to be up so early, when the sun is low in the sky. I can't remain irritated, however, not when Mr. Clarence gave me exactly what I asked for. Or rather, in his

eagerness to begin the study, he gave me *who* I asked for. My Keri.

I smile at that as I slip from the bed. I will be meeting my female at the Occult Library and proceeding with her from there to a building established for arcane work. It is there that I will have Keri all to myself for hours, not just today but every day. We may have to work around it when I am forced to return to the water, but now that eventuality is not my most immediate concern, not when I've found my song.

It's a marvel that it could be this easy. It is all too tempting to lure Keri into a mating embrace immediately. My lure is potent and ready to burrow into her power and ensnare her to me. It may not be playing fair by human standards, but I don't feel guilty about considering it either. After all, there are many females of my species who prefer to entice human men into her carefully selected and prepared flirting ground—and occasionally wrecking ships in the process. And still humans love their “mermaids,” so I see nothing wrong with my plan.

As I get ready, I entertain myself with thoughts of how it might go. I wonder if she will yield and come into my embrace on her own or if she will require cajoling with little tugs of the lure upon her magic. The small barbs under my skin itch to come out and secure her to my body once I am close enough, but I immediately dismiss that as foolish. Even with humans, the mating embrace needs to be done in water. In the air and dry it is too easy to damage the delicate skin of the female... and there are other risks.

And despite the insidious temptation that coils through me, my heart is not into it. While I know that there are Aquanas who have bonded with their human mates by keeping them secluded with them on some tiny, far-flung island, it's not what

I truly want. I want Keri's smiles and laughter, as well as her tenderness and affection. But more than anything, I want her to run eagerly to me because she wishes to. While I'm not above playing this game of studies to bring us together so that I have an opportunity to win her, everything else I want to be real.

With the way she reacts to me, I am also confident it will happen. I just need to be a patient hunter, which is unfortunately easier said than done.

My optimism puts me in good spirits as I leave the small motel by the harbor and make my way into the small seaside town. Although I know that this little town is near a larger city, I'm glad that I found my female here. It certainly makes the walk to the library a pleasant one, if a little crisp. It is the human month of September, and so the summer warmth is waning. I can scent the change of the season in the air as autumn settles in further. It will begin to get cooler soon, but the seas will remain pleasant for a while longer yet. It won't last long, however, and I don't risk being swept far away by a storm if I'm forced to return to the sea every month on the full moon.

Perhaps I need to start scouting for a protected spot to make my nest. I consider this as I walk, turning over some of the possibilities I saw yesterday since I had nothing better to do with my time than swim around the area. By habit I stayed far from the human boats, which took me farther from the human harbors, but there were some good options and I still have quite a bit of the human wealth I brought with me. The heavy belt hung with its full pouches of gold is hidden away. All I have is the watertight sealskin pouch filled with many papers that serve as human currency from the last time I sold some of my coins.

I rub my jaw and ruminates. I will need to locate a buyer for the gold so that I have enough to buy land and to build a comfortable home for the two of us—preferably one that opens directly into the water from inside so that we will both be comfortable. I can get things started and then give Keri free rein to make the space suitable to her needs once she decides that she also cannot live without me.

This is a good plan, I decide, and I am smiling as I hurry to the entrance of the library. Pleasure stirs within my chest when I open the door and am immediately greeted with the scent and sight of my female behind her desk. She looks up at me and her eyebrows shoot up.

“You’re here!”

I don’t know what to think of how surprised she sounds, and I give her a puzzled look as I attempt to work through it. Her cheeks turn red, and she gives an embarrassed chuckle that worms into my heart and fills it with warmth.

“Sorry, that probably sounded strange. Last I heard, Mr. Clarence was complaining about his difficulty in getting ahold of you.”

My brows knit together, not liking the idea of the male complaining to my female but also confused as to why. “It was the full moon,” I explain. “I had to return to the sea for a day.”

Her cheeks turn a brighter red at the reminder, and she glances away from me. I am surprised with how annoyed I am with this gesture. It is likely a wholly human one born of her embarrassment, but I don’t like that my female turns from me, regardless.

“I completely forgot about that,” she groans. “I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine why he was complaining. I’m sure that I would

have written it on your paperwork.” I nod to affirm that I saw her writing, and she sighs heavily. “Figures. When did you get back?”

“At sunrise I was allowed to leave the sea again.”

She looks over at the clock on the wall and her mouth twists with sympathy. “Damn, did you have a chance to get any sleep?”

I shrug because sleep is inconsequential compared to having the opportunity to be near my female. “Enough.”

Keri gives me a disbelieving look. “You must require a lot less sleep than me.” Her eyes skim over me and she grimaces.

“And obviously less outerwear.”

“I require but a few hours,” I admit as I glance down at my bare chest and arms and then back up at her. “Am I not dressed appropriately? My sheath and rear orifice are covered as I gather is socially expected among your people.”

“Aren’t you the least bit cold?” She blinks. “Wait. Sheath?”

My lips curve. “No, I’m not cold. I’m acclimated to much cool temperatures and find this much more pleasant than the heat of the summer. And yes, my sheath. It contains my phallus. There is not much to see, but I would be happy to show you how it works.”

“Nice try. Sorry to say I’m not quite *that* easy. Save it for the lab techs,” she replies with another blush.

“I find that to be a profound relief,” I state truthfully. I want a female I can win and keep with me for the rest of my long life, not one easily swayed from one nest to another.

Now she looks surprised for a moment before burying it beneath a polite façade. She tilts her head to the side and

regards me like I am an intriguing thing that has suddenly caught her attention. I just barely resist the urge to preen for her.

“Adiele probably wouldn’t appreciate the fact that you’re offering for me to touch your dick,” she says slowly, “but I was under the impression that merfolk, I mean, Aquana, are all about frolicking in waves, singing enchantments, sex with random humans, and drowning humans. And you should know that Adiele will seriously object to two out of those four.”

I stare at her, appalled. This is what humans think of us? I knew that there were some who were suspicious of us for our ability to draw humans to us, but I never thought it was this... this... ghastly. According to her description we might as well be seagulls fluttering around the rocks, but with a taste for destroying ships, indulging in our pleasures, and eating humans. The comparison, although unintentional from my female, is insulting and stings. But even more so that she would think that I would attempt to lure a female if I were mated to another.

“That is absurd,” I reply in a tight voice. “It is clear that humans know nothing about Aquana culture.” Such as the fact that we aren’t even homogenous. There are at least twenty subgroupings of Aquanas that I am aware of, but that is not the subject of discussion at present. “I would never betray a female I have claimed as my mate, much less try to entice another.”

Her brow furrows. “Are you trying to tell me that Adiele—”

“Will make a wonderful mate for some other male. For me, she is a friend,” I growl.

She clears her throat and nods uncomfortably, and immediately I feel guilty for snapping at her. It’s not her fault



that humans are ignorant of my kind. Even when we have the rare instances of contact with humans, we do not overshare, as humans call it.

“Well, that’s why you’re here and what we’ll both be working toward trying to correct, isn’t it?” she replies quickly as she pulls on a loose garment around her already clothed upper torso. She digs out a set of keys that she immediately puts in her pocket before looking at me with another of her frustratingly polite smiles. “Let me just call Lynn from the back to cover me and we can get going.”

I nod in acknowledgment, even more ashamed of myself since I clearly destroyed the fragile comradery that I felt between us for a moment there. Uncertain how to repair the damage, I wait as the other human, Lynn, comes up to the front. The two females talk together in a low voice for a couple of minutes and then we leave. I remain silent as I follow behind Keri. Somehow I must fix this.



## KERI

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF RO. AT THE MOMENT HE'S obviously an easygoing male, and flirtatious to the point that I'm feeling a little playful, too. He may not mean anything by it. Flirting likely comes second nature to his kind.

It's also a good reminder that my flirting skills suck. All I managed to do was insult him, and now he's retreated into himself and follows behind me as if he is a condemned man walking to his execution. He isn't even speaking to me. I had hoped he would have forgiven my ignorance in that incredibly embarrassing moment.

I'm not even entirely sure why I care so much. I can't readily dismiss what I learned from the merfolk book. After meeting Ro, I read the rest of the book, wanting to know exactly what I'm dealing with. There wasn't a lot left to it beyond basic anatomy, and it went directly into what looked like a collection

of lore from across the world, which was neutral to ambivalent at best.

Even if it's missing information, it's still informative in a way that lets me know whoever wrote knew something of what they were talking about, and everything printed within its pages makes my stomach turn. I should be glad of Ro's sudden distance because that means I'm safe from succumbing to him and being dragged beneath the waves as his mate. Really, I should be ecstatic.

Instead, I feel something hard and heavy settle deep within my chest like an unappealing, miserable lump of cold, wet noodles.

I bite my lip as I glance over at him, and his pale blue eyes turn toward me. Their color is so icy that that a shiver runs through me. With his flat expression, his gaze feels cold and predatory. I'm starting to rethink our agreement. Not that Mr. Clarence gave me room to decline. I understand why too. This is a rare opportunity to collect a thorough database on Aquanas.

And we aren't going to get anywhere at all if we aren't talking to each other.

I lick my lips and give him a timid smile. "They've set up the lab to accommodate working with an aquatic person." I almost said "being," and I'm glad I corrected myself—I don't want him to think even for a moment as we go into this that I don't consider him a person. "We might start with some basics. I understand that they have a tank that should be more than long enough to accommodate you, but if it's cramped at all or you don't like it, we can see about changing stuff around. I want you to be comfortable while we do this."

He gives me a quiet look, but then the corners of his mouth curve and I feel a wave of relief rush through me.

“Thank you, Keri. I am sure it will be fine, but I appreciate that you are so kind and considerate of my needs.”

I can feel my cheeks getting warm, but I nod quickly and pretend to focus on the large building at the end of the road as we get closer.

There is no one there when we arrive, and I’m pleased that The Society has given us free rein of the space and our privacy as we work. Silence greets us as I unlock and open the door, and the motion sensor lights come on the moment we step through the door. If nothing else, that breath of darkness before the lights were triggered would have been enough to tell me just how empty the building is. The lights flick on one by one as we make our way down the hall, our footsteps echoing.

I clear my throat, feeling a strong need to fill the silence so it feels less like the backdrop of a horror movie. “Mr. Clarence said that the third lab on the right has been set up and reserved for us.”

Ro makes a noncommittal sound in his throat in response but doesn’t say anything else as he follows me. There is a sterile, chemical smell from cleansers that I expected, but I wonder if he finds it unpleasant. A lot of fae have a sharp sense of smell and find a lot of things humans enjoy from perfume to cleaning chemicals to be unpleasant. He doesn’t comment on it, but I’m relieved when we come to our lab and open the door to the sharp, bitter scent of seawater. There’s still an underlying smell of disinfectant and whatever was used to clean the lab, but the strong scent of saltwater seems to make Ro relax as he regards the room with open curiosity.

The first thing my gaze lands on is a giant metal hook suspended over a large tank big enough to comfortably hold a dolphin set up against one wall. It dominates the room to such a degree that I barely even look at the padded examination table or the small conference table set up in one corner with a pair of chairs set around it. That damn hook fills my vision entirely like something waiting to be baited to drag a shark from the depths. I swallow uncomfortably as Ro tilts his head and studies it.

“Clever,” he murmurs. “That will be very helpful for getting in and out of the water.”

I blink and look at it again. I suppose so.

He glances over at me and raises his eyebrows. “Shall I get in then? I believe that you wish to start here, I assume to record the way everything looks and works beneath the water.”

I give him a pleased look, happy at his initiative. The less awkwardness, the better.

“Yes, please. I’ll set up the video equipment and get the camera.”

He nods and his fingers skim his waistband—and then he completely drops his pants.

My eyes catch at the bulge of flesh between his thighs, and I turn bright red with embarrassment as I quickly realize that I’m staring. Yet I’m so fascinated that I can’t seem to look away. Nor does he move.

This is very awkward.

Ro chuckles softly, filling me with a fresh flood of embarrassment. “I assume that you wish to take pictures of my anatomical difference in my landwalker form before I get into the water.”

My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, but I nod before hurrying over to fetch the camera from where it's charging on the conference table. He waits patiently for me to return and then stands still, with his hands out from his sides as I proceed to take photos of his genital sheath and then every part of his body from his curiously unwebbed toes to his smooth, unmarred neck that shows no hint of gills and the surprisingly coarse fall of his hair. The last truly surprises me when I reach forward and touch it after getting a good picture of the thick strands. It looks shimmery and silky, but its texture reminds me of a heavy pelt, like fur from a polar bear or something.

And Ro watches me expressionlessly the entire time so I can't even begin to guess what he's thinking. I feel like a creeper invading his privacy, but he signed up for this and in fact made the suggestion to start with the photographs, so I don't feel too bad for it.

The moment he feels that I'm done, he turns from me and leaps for the hook with a powerful flex of his muscles. The moment his hands curl around it, his body swings with its momentum so that he arcs over the tank and then drops with a splash when he lets go. My awe at his athletic ability takes a prompt backseat when his chest begins to glow and flex and gills push up from his skin, drawing in his first breath of oxygenated water. That glow from his chest brightens and runs down his legs and throughout the rest of his body. It's blindingly bright, and I shield my eyes and squint against it but am unable to see anything more until it finally settles into a soft illumination. He banks it, seemingly at will and turns toward me with a flick of his fins.

I stare at him for a long moment and his lips quirk as he gives a pointed look to the remote in my hand. Oh, yes! The video recorder. I turn just enough to point the remote at the system

and turn it on before I'm spinning back toward him again and moving closer to the tank.

“Ro... can you hear me when you're in there?”

His head bobs and he speaks, but from my position it sounds completely distorted. My voice is clear to him, but hearing underwater is obviously quite different from speaking underwater. I wonder if it would sound clearer to me if I were in the water with him, but I table that idea for now. Instead, I allow my gaze to trail over him in admiration. If possible, he's even more beautiful in his true form.

His tail is just as pearlescent as the rest of him, but the scales are a little more obvious there and the spiny fin that trails down his back—his dorsal fin—has several long barbs as does another larger fin that goes down his back. These are milky white. The large pelvic fins just below his hips are as big as platters and tipped with pink, but it's his fins at the end of his tail that are breathtaking. Just between them I can see the rounded bulge of his sheath but quickly drop my eyes lower along his incredibly long tail to its tip. There are four fins there that extend in a way that remind me a goldfish, giving him greater control of his mobility by the way they spread to stabilize him in place as he desires, and each are pearl pink and brighten to crimson.

I clear my throat as he watches me intently from the other side of the glass. I smile shyly and begin to speak as I record everything that I see in detail both in the tank and then afterward on the examination table when he leaps from the water with an incredibly powerful push from his tail and swings over to it with the help of the hook. My entire body feels flushed with excitement as I watch him move, but I can only hope that I keep it under control as we work together.

If it doesn't get any better, the next several weeks are going to be absolute torture.





## KERI

EVERY DAY IN THE LAB FEELS LIKE A BRUTAL TEST OF MY self-control. Ro is not only sexy but he's also appealing in small ways that have nothing to do with his appearance or any sort of "song." That said, today we are recording samples of his singing below and above the surface of the water, and I feel an itch of anticipation that doesn't bode well for my resolve to not succumb to the flirty male.

And he has resumed full flirting. Especially when I'm in a position where I'm about to touch him, which happens to be the case whenever I take his vitals, as I'm instructed to every day. Like many non-humans he won't give his blood, but as his scaled flesh seems to be thicker and tougher despite being so supple to the touch, it's probably a good thing. The last thing I need to do is break needles off in his skin. Just thinking of it makes me wince in sympathy. I think Mr. Clarence has

stopped huffing over it now once I showed him the data regarding Aquana skin and scales from the sample that Ro permitted me to take.

Or rather, the sample that he gave me, cut off by his own claws since nothing I have in the lab is hard or sharp enough to successfully scrape it off his inner arm.

This is a lot more technical work than I expected. I figured that most of it would be more like an interview. There is that component too, which occupies a lot of our time together, but the first hour is very much hands on. And I'm still not able to control my blush every time I must touch him.

Ro watches me with the same curious gaze as he always does from the examination bed, his tail slick still from emerging from the tank where I observed his motor patterns as he swam. The way his fins open and close to varying degrees as he moves through the water is interesting. Sadly, the tank is too small to observe him swimming more naturally. I wonder if I can get permission to observe him in one of the large dolphin pools. It would require special permission from the local aquarium and sea-life rehabilitation center, but Mr. Clarence has enough pull within the community to get it done, I think. Especially in the name of research.

I make a small note on the margin of the sheet clipped to the board I'm holding and follow it with a large question mark. From there my eyes rake over what I'm supposed to be doing today. More measurements it seems... and photographs. My cheeks suddenly burn when it sinks in exactly what they wish for me to examine.

All parts of the Aquana's reproductive physiology means one thing. *Oh, fuck.*

“Is everything well?” Ro asks, his neck craning as he peers down at my hastily written note.

I slap my hand over the sheet, my cheeks growing hotter. I know for a fact that he can't read, but I can't help but be embarrassed about what I've been instructed to observe. I don't know why I'm surprised either. Yesterday, I spent a good half-hour photographing in detail how his fins various splay and their specific positions on his tail due to the fact that they are curious if Aquanas can be identified by fin patterns rather like how individual whales and orcas are recognized by their dorsal fins. That wasn't shocking, but this... telling Ro that I need him to bring out the babymaker as we go into detail over how his kind reproduces makes me wish I could just be struck dead right on the spot.

A concerned look flickers over Ro's face, and he reaches forward to pry my hand away from the words that he still wouldn't be able to read. “Keri, what is it?”

It's the note of genuine worry in his voice, however, that makes me feel terrible for my overreaction. He can't help the fact that this is embarrassing for me. And frankly it's embarrassing only because of the reaction I have to him. I'm quite certain that if it were the gnome who took up residence in the small hill at the end of the street in my neighborhood, I wouldn't be quite as embarrassed. It would have been uncomfortable, but I would have been able to approach it in a detached manner. With Ro, however, the charge of desire between us is as unfortunate for what we need to do as it is uncontrollable. But that still doesn't give me a right to make him worry needlessly.

“It's nothing. Nothing at all,” I quickly assure him. “I just wasn't expecting that we would be going over this today.”

A little fib considering I hadn't expected it to come up at all, but I sell it like crazy because there's no need for him to know just how shocked it made me. And how it stirred the lust within me so effortlessly. He absolutely doesn't need to know that I'm experiencing creeper feelings while ogling his dick.

Instead, I tap at the page and give him a confident smile that I don't feel. "We will be doing some more measurements and photographs, but this time we will be going over how Aquanas reproduce. It's unfortunate that we don't have a female in for comparative differences, but perhaps we will be lucky enough to wrangle a volunteer."

I'm shocked when he shrugs as if it's nothing. Here I'm about to have heart failure and he's acting as if I just told him that his tuna sandwich comes with pickles.

"You would have to find another Gurekna Aquana," he says, and I nearly drop my clipboard at just how in stride he is taking this examination.

"Wh... what?"

His lips tip provocatively. "There are several subgroupings of Aquana, as well as closely related species such as the tentacled Voridon. The Gurekna are known for our distinct tailfin and tail sails," he says, gesturing to his fins and then back where the dorsal fin unfolds in resemblance to the dorsal of a sailfish. "As for my reproductive anatomy, I do believe most males of my species are similar. What would you like to see first?"

"Mating barbs," I squeak, needing the reminder of just why it's not a good idea to become entangled with the male.

"I wasn't aware that humans knew of those," he replies, curious but otherwise unruffled.

I blush a little, not wanting to reveal just how much I know and my sick desire to see it all in the flesh now that I've been given the all-clear for it.

“There's a book on merfolk in the library that mentioned them. It sounds like a good place to start. I know from what this book says that they're vital to your procreation, even if it doesn't go into particular detail.”

Which really it doesn't. Other than saying generally what they are used for, I realize that the author left it to the imagination of the reader. Whether that was because they expected their audience to assume the worst, and intentionally planned for that, I couldn't say.

Ro nods as if my request is entirely sensible and lifts his arms. The fins there are currently flat, and I watch him extend them to their full length like he does when he's swimming. Unlike the beautiful fan of his tailfin, this is a sharp cut webbing like that of his sail and the secondary dorsal fin that runs down the back of his tail. Each thin bone of the fin seems tipped with a spike. I watch as he turns his arm so that I'm looking at the inside of his arm. Gradually the texture seems to rise, and I gasp in surprise when I notice three small spines push up from beneath the skin about halfway down his forearm.

Though I'm startled a little with how it works, I'm actually glad that they look the way that they do. I've had nightmares about them. Long, sharp needles sinking in and impaling me, or hooks tearing at my flesh. These wouldn't exactly be pleasant if used without any caution whatsoever, but they remind me of very small sea urchin spines and that sets me a little more at ease. The barbs are only roughly about an inch long, which definitely helps make them less scary. They would prick and scratch, but they otherwise appear safe. Which is a

load off my mind—for other ladies who might be seduced by an Aquana's charm, that is. Not me.

“Do you mind if I touch them?” I ask with a forced nonchalance as if part of me isn't dying to explore them just a little.

He grows hesitant and looks down at them uncertainly. “Don't press down on them,” he finally says with a yielding look on his face. “The venom would be painful out of the water.”

I blink at him with surprise and swallow as I make a quick note on my clipboard. “Right. Venom produced by mating barbs is painful out of the water.” I glance up at him curiously. “Would you say just painful, or is there a chance of it being fatal?”

His brows knit in a frown, and I'm a little alarmed with the fact that he doesn't seem to know.

“I am not sure,” he admits as I reach forward and very carefully squeeze a barb between my finger and thumb, and gradually increase the pressure to see how hard, or flexible, they are. There is some give to it to keep the barb from snapping, but it otherwise feels like I would expect hard bone to feel like. “We do not mate above the water as it's not considered to be safe.”

I nod in acknowledgment, glad that the recorder is catching what he says even as I jot down my observations and then proceed to photograph them.

“Aside from the barbs, is there any other part of your anatomy which plays a part?” I ask distractedly.

Ro goes quiet, and I look up at him. His tail flicks lazily, the fins slightly less elegant than they appear doing the same gesture in water. His lips curl in a devious smile when he

catches my eye, and then he looks pointedly down at his sheath, directly my full attention to the bulge at his pelvis.

“Oh... right. Aside from that,” I mumble, my face growing hot again.

He chuckles in response but shakes his head. “If we mate with another Aquana, our tails may entwine but it’s not necessary, and many are not comfortable with the sudden loss of movement. Other than our barbs, we are only joined by the sex. But as I understand that this is the way for humans as well, I’m sure that you understand that this is perfectly satisfactory copulation.”

My throat feels tight as I find myself likewise staring at the rounded bulge that rises up from his tail, forming a sort of genital pouch. I can feel his eyes on me—watching me—and I’m certain he’s still wearing that smoldering look on his face as he does so as if tempting me to ask for more. A trace of heat licks through my belly, but I ignore it.

“I will need to record data on that as well,” I point out, trying to keep my voice brisk and unaffected, and failing miserably to my ears.

“Of course,” he rasps, and I watch in fascination as the bulge rounds out further until it appears to be straining the seam along its top parts just enough to allow his cock to slide out.

And fuck, it’s glorious.

There is a shape to it not unlike marine mammals, designed for compatibility with an aquatic environment. It’s long, slick, and tapered, and while it seems to be growing thicker by the moment, it appears to have a thick natural lubrication. I regard it curiously and walk away for just a moment to grab a small beaker and fill it with some of the oceanwater. I carry this back

to the examination table and, with a large dropper, allow the water to dribble in thick streams over his cock. The water flows over it without cutting through the lubrication and my eyebrows shoot up in surprise as I make a note of this as well.

The possibility of pleasurable, lubricated sex... check.

In fact, it could be very pleasurable. I consider what the thick lubrication might feel like as his cock shuttles in and out of my pussy and only just barely keep myself from panting in reaction.

“Are you required to touch this as well?” Ro purrs.

The sound shoots straight down through me, making my belly quiver with desire. I nod wordlessly. Of course I am. Even on the clipboard, there are questions about its size, shape, length, and texture.

I bite back a groan because it's quite the big boy. Thick, long, and pink, it rises up from his groin with a flexible motion as it briefly lashes the air. And it's girthy! While I doubt I could close my hand around the thick shaft and base, even the tip of the tapered dick is at very least the size of a couple of fingers wedged close together. About three inches from the tip, however, I see bands of tiny nub-like spines, each about six centimeters long. While the bands are no thicker than a couple of inches, they extend down most of the remaining length, only terminating close to the sheath.

“I'm sorry, what did you say?” I mumble, and he laughs, the husky sound making my desire curl deeper through me.

“I asked if you needed to touch this as well for your records.”

“Do you mind?” I ask as I stare at those bands and two large knot-like bumps that run down to the top of the flexible shaft.

“Not at all. Explore me,” he rasps.



I'm sure that I'm blushing as I curl my hand around his cock. Although I'm wearing a glove, I can feel the intense heat of him through it. He has a firmness to him but a flexibility along the entire length of him that allows me to shift his sex in a fluid motion without any sign of discomfort from him. The tip curls as if seeking my hand, and I give a single stroke to explore the texture of spiny nubs and bumps. Ro makes a choking sound, and from the corner of my eye I see that he's holding firmly to the examination table, his muscles straining as I examine his length.

I peek down at my clipboard and bite back a moan. Describe viscosity and color of semen. Of course they would want to know that. As if describing his cock in detail isn't enough. Keeping one hand firmly wrapped around his length, I set the clipboard down and make several notes as to its appearance and snap a few photos while I continue to drag my hand up and down its length. The entire time Ro's tail twitches and trembles against the table, sending his fins slapping against its sides. His eyes are blazing when I meet them again, and I suck in a nervous breath at the desire pooling within them.

"Just hold tight and this will be over soon," I mumble, and I'm not entirely sure which of us I'm talking to as my other hand joins in and I begin to pump his cock.

His eyes widen before his head falls back as an inhuman moan rattles from deep within him. I keep stroking, however, even as his pelvis thrusts up into my hands and he snarls and hisses his pleasure between more of his lengthy groans pouring from him. His tail thrashes, the fins flicking and slapping against the table as he claws at it, ruining the padded surface. I'm quite sure my panties are also ruined as soaked as they are, but I continue to tug his length, marveling at the texture of his highly flexible cock and how all of that would feel inside me.

The length twitches erratically and then the length suddenly strains for the ceiling for a moment before lavender semen sprays in thick streams, splattering over his belly and tail and my hands. I stare at it for a long moment and then take a shaky breath before stripping off a glove and grabbing the camera again. I give him an apologetic look.

“I’m afraid I’ll need to photograph this as well.”

He grins flirtatiously, surprising me and captivating me all at once. “Only if you print me copies.”

I nod mutely to his request and get to work—because what else am I going to do?



Ro

I TUCK THE PHOTO INTO THE BACK POCKET OF MY JEANS AND smile as I hurry eagerly toward the library. The photograph will be the first memento of our courtship. Although I wasn't expecting to have it waiting for me in a discreet little envelope at the hotel's front desk this morning, it was a pleasant surprise. So pleasant that I nearly extruded in my pants in the middle of the sidewalk. I chuckle, imagining my mate's face if she were at my side to witness it—or perhaps seeing the wet smear on my clothing when I meet her. She would doubtlessly turn delightfully red, and if I were lucky I would catch the flavorful notes of her arousal on the air.

Lust fills me with every step. It had been that same lust which had provoked me into demanding a copy of the picture, and it burns through me anew.

I hunger for it... for Keri.

She would probably not be pleased to know how much I intentionally bait her. I don't think she yet suspects, which just makes me wish to tease her more and draw her deeper with the lure so that our magic continues to meld together. I am teasing her with her own need, forcing her to confront her true desires. And I am content with this plan.

Humans, after all, are strange creatures. They try to ignore what they want and pretend that what boils through the blood does not exist. They are slower to act than fae in this way. All of the fae are quick to embrace the exquisite pull of love and desire. Aquana are even quicker to heed the call than most. Like most fae, I treasure these days of courtship as much as I look forward to binding our lives together and the long life we shall share. A few hundred years does not feel like enough.

My pace quickens with my eagerness to see her again, but when I enter the library, I am disturbed that Keri is not waiting for me at the front like she usually is. Instead, Lynn glances up at me from behind her desk, and I am greeted by the hiss of conversation somewhere nearby between my mate and another male. It is unpleasantly loud in my ears despite its low volume, and it makes my fins twitch and flare at the aggression in the male's voice. I have no doubt that Lynn cannot hear it for she shows no sign as she watches me storm past the desk. I track the voices back between rows of books to the nearest corner of the building. There is a room there with glass walls facing me.

A growl rises in my throat as I see the male standing far too close my mate, gesturing wildly as his voice drifts clearly to me through the glass and open door.

“Really, Keri, what were you thinking? If it weren't for the fact that he asked specifically for you, I would pull you out, effective immediately. Not only do you lack the experience or

knowledge necessary for this sort of study, but this shows a remarkable lack of judgment. What made you think the instructions to ‘collect a specimen from the subject’ meant giving a hand job to the merman?”

“Aquana,” she corrected softly, making my lips twitch briefly in amusement despite the protective anger rushing through me up as I rapidly close the distance between us. “And I’m sorry, Mr. Clarence. It was a simple misunderstanding. I mean, shit, you had me putting my hand on his dick and checking it out. My hand was already there, and the next instruction was to get his semen, so my mind just followed along to the natural conclusion.”

“You’d better hope that he was infatuated enough by that handy to return. If you’ve fucked this up and he doesn’t, you will not only be out of a job but I will have your name not only delisted from the Arcane Society, but I will personally see to it \_\_\_”

“Enough!” I hiss as I storm through the door.

The male—Mr. Clarence—startles as he whirls toward me, his look of anger melting away to be replaced with a smile. I glower at him because I am no fool and take exception to the way he is looming over Keri. His smile deflates into a look of surprise as I feel my back sail snap up. and as do the sharp fins that run down my arms. My claws begin to lengthen dangerously, and an angry shriek rips from me as the male throws up his arms fearfully.

His magic spills from him without direction or focus, but it still slams into me like shards of glass. It’s not enough to keep me from tearing him apart—but, fortunately for him, my mate is. She grabs my arm and yanks me toward her until I am brought down closer to her height and facing her. Her eyes are

wide with fear, and I wince, certain that I must in part be responsible for putting that there.

“Ro—stop! What the hell are you doing?” Her gaze snaps to the male, and my anger flares anew at the apologetic look she gives him. “I’m sorry, Mr. Clarence. Ro overreacted a little. We still don’t know much about Aquanas and what might set them off, but Ro and I are making progress. He wouldn’t have attacked you if he knew who you are and that you weren’t going to hurt me.”

My eyes narrow at her. “Of course I mean it. No one will threaten you. I will not allow it,” I hiss. “He thinks to make you beg fearfully? Then I shall return the favor.”

“I see,” the mage mumbles and gives a sharp, humorless laugh. His eyes cut between us as he smooths his layers of clothes and smiles far too widely at me. “I’m sure that this must have looked alarming to you since you and Ms. Thane-Durmont have gotten so close these last few days. I find it admirable how protective you are of her. Rest assured, she didn’t have anything to worry about, certainly not from me or anyone else in the Arcane Society,” he adds with another of his false, ingratiating laughs that sends an unpleasant itch beneath my scales.

“Mr. Clarence is my employer, Ro. He was just chiding me for a mistake I made. It’s fine.”

Keri may be fine with it because she sees it as normal, but I am not. I do not understand “employer” except that he presumes a certain amount of control over her, and this I dislike even more. I growl softly as I watch him, but Keri is squeezing my arm tightly between her small hands, so I snap my teeth shut and give him a begrudging nod. His smile widens as his entire bearing relaxes.

“I actually came by because I was hoping to meet you, Ro’karek,” he says jovially with a terrible accent that places the emphasis and clicks in all the wrong places. “I wanted to make sure that you weren’t offended by Ms. Thane-Durmont’s, ah, actions. She was a little confused as to what I requested, and we all are aware that fae do not like to be touched without permission.”

I grunt, amused in spite of myself. “She was invited... repeatedly,” I point out, and the male blushes briefly with embarrassment.

“Oh... well, I suppose that changes the entire matter,” he replies hurriedly, and behind me Keri coughs to hide her quiet laughter. “I’m thrilled that you two are building such a comfortable rapport.”

“I’ll say,” Keri mutters behind me, but I don’t quite understand her quip and I choose to ignore it.

“With the purpose of furthering relations, I have approved Keri’s request to give you access to the dolphin pool for carrying out further observations beyond the constraints of our tanks... and hopefully acquire some more *explorative* information that may come up in a slightly more *natural* setting.”

I find his words strange, but Keri stiffens by my side and threads her fingers with mine as much as she can, and I feel a pleasant pressure on my webbing. As pleasurable as it is for me, I sense that she’s finding some strength in my touch, as she almost seems to anchor herself to me by our joined hands. She is nervous though. I can feel the tremble through her, and I wonder if she is thinking of what could so easily happen between us in the water.

I know I am thinking of it and my cock presses against my sheath in response as I imagine myself circling her in the water and the brush of my fins against her supple body. A pool big enough for a dolphin to swim comfortably would be more than enough room for me to flirt with my female and lure her in.

“That’s wonderful,” my mate replies with a sweet voice, and my gaze snaps over to her in surprise.

That is until I realize that she is not responding to my fantasy but to the words of the male who preens happily over what he has offered us. Part of me wants to refuse it so that my female has no reason to thank him in such a way. It is unseemly to thank him as if she owes some debt to him. If he attempts to call on a debt, I will slaughter him. I bite back my unhappy hiss because my mate seems to genuinely be pleased. Her excitement sends an electric current through her energy that infuses through the lure that connects us.

I rumble softly as I look down at her. Her excitement is catching because my anger fades and now I’m once more eager to get to this pool.

Mr. Clarence doesn’t take much more of our time. He dismisses us with a polite murmur when his phone rings. Another member of his Society, and one of some value to him, I suspect from the way he happily addresses the person on the other end of the phone. We are forgotten and have been dismissed. My mate gives my hand a tug, and I am happy to follow her out the door as she makes a quick phone call.

We do not go immediately to the front but to a small room nearby. It smells unpleasantly of human bodies and stale food, but I wait patiently for her while she collects her belongings. By the time we have stepped out onto the street, I’m pleased to see that there is a taxi waiting for us. I climb into it after her



and find that I thoroughly enjoy being enclosed in the small space with my mate as it ferries us along the roads. I want to wrap myself around her but even though she has not invited me to yet, I'm thoroughly enjoying the proximity to her and sweet musk of her.

I am not entirely sure where this aquarium is, but it must not be too far away because we arrive there far too soon for my pleasure. I'm torn between my excitement of enjoying the pool with my mate and the incredible pleasure of being confined in a close press with my mate. The latter has me in such a grip that I struggle to find the desire to leave, but thankfully Keri decided for both of us when she opens the door and steps outside.

“The dolphin pools are in the larger rear structure of the building. Do you see it?” she asks, pointing to the blockish end that seems more set apart from the rest of the building.

I nod and she smiles, taking my hand in hers once more, and my lure tightens deliciously between us further.

I do not say a word as I follow her inside. The staff give us curious looks when we enter but we are alone before long with the doors leading to the aquarium locked between them and us. The large pools that stretch across this part of the building smell just like the ocean just outside the doors, and I don't waste time stripping off my clothes as my mate's eyes silently devour me.

The water splashes around me when I dive, its cool embrace sweeping over me with a comforting touch as it slicks over my skin. My legs draw together as my tail reforms and fins unfurl with the bloom of my magic. As always, the return to my natural form is one that brings me incredible physical pleasure,

and every part of me feels as if it is sparking with magic and life as I propel myself through the water.

I twist within it flirtatiously because I know my mate is watching, and when I roll up, I capture a glimpse of her sweet face through my tailfins. She smiles at me on the other side of the aquarium glass and there is longing there in her eyes. My instinct demands a response. It demands that I give her what she needs.

It is time to begin seducing my mate.



## KERI

IN RETROSPECT, I'M NOT SO SURE THIS WHOLE POOL THING WAS a good idea. With so much water available to Ro, his fins flutter and dance through the water in ways that feel a lot more seductive than the simple flirtation we had in the lab. I record him with my phone from the observation area as he moves gracefully through the water. His body curls sinuously as he rolls through the water slowly to reverse his direction and head back toward me. Although I'm certain that he could move much faster if he wants to—and I'll have to eventually get him to quit playing around and show me how he really swims in the sea—I recognize the flirtation for what it is as he swims.

He's trying to tempt me into joining him in the water.

I see it in the soft glow of his eyes as he watches me through the glass, the heat in his gaze unmistakable. The playful, graceful movement of his tail and fins a carefully orchestrated

seduction. I don't have to know anything about his species to know this. I know it simply by the effect it has on me and by the focused way in which he watches me as he swims as if he is calculating every reaction I have.

And I have plenty. My belly churns with a longing that I can press up throughout my chest like I'm caught on a hook but neither able nor eager to escape. I want to tumble through the water with him and that is a dangerous desire.

But fuck, he's beautiful.

He's also a huge distraction. I don't mind the time away from the library doing something productive but I'm enjoying this time with him so much that I'm not focusing at all on my magical studies and trying to locate that one thing at which I excel. Instead of going through our collections of grimoires, I spend the rest of my day at the library replaying the day through my mind like a lovesick idiot.

Over a merman of all things. Aquana, I mean.

It doesn't matter what he's called, the fact remains the same: I can't get swept up in his magic. I know that's what it is, even if I don't know how it is affecting me. Maybe that's something I need to research. Perhaps there is a potion that can make this a little easier by creating a barrier between me and whatever magic he exudes. It might not even be intentional on his part but something instinctual to his species for all I know.

Oh, I'm sure some parts are intentional. The fact that he's trying to seduce me is entirely intentional. But the way his magic is affecting me, it could just be because of what he is, and it wouldn't be fair to judge him for it. It makes me feel guilty that I was ever so wary of him. Ro is extremely flirtatious, but he has never tried to harm me in any way. Nor has he used his song on me except for that first brief moment,

and even then it seemed as if he couldn't help himself anymore than I could help my reflexive gasp when I felt his magic collide with mine.

But he's still a threat because merfolk steal people and I don't think I will get as lucky as Aunt Katherine. He's on land now but he's still a creature of the sea, and once he's done here he will eventually have to go back. To keep him out of the sea would be cruel, and I couldn't survive there, even if his magic made it possible. I couldn't be cut off from everything I know to live in a terrifying unknown place under the water.

Just imagining the dark depths filled with predators makes me shiver and momentarily dulls my enjoyment while I watch him. I'm certainly nowhere near equipped to survive in the depths like he is. Despite how leisurely he moves through the water, Ro is powerful. I can see it in the muscles of his arms, back, and torso. His tail alone could be considered a weapon with the way he flicks it and the long stinger just above his tailfins.

The white stinger catches the light as he turns nimbly in the water. He continues to roll... and the alarm on my phone jangles cheerfully in my hand, startling me. I stop the video and look at the time.

One o'clock. Time to get back to my real job. I'm grateful that Lynn covers the first half of my shift, but she has other things she must do as well so I can't be late. I'm disappointed that I didn't get a chance to bounce questions off of Ro today. I usually take at least a half-hour, if not a full hour, of our time together to talk to him about his species, but that will have to wait until tomorrow. I have no regrets for becoming so enthralled with watching him. His enjoyment of swimming

freely in the pool is pure poetry in motion. He captures in movement alone everything I've ever felt magic to be.

Which is why I also hate that we have to part now.

Leaning forward, I tap on the glass. Ro immediately turns toward me and with a flick of his fins propels himself toward me with a speed that makes me stumble back. I feel kind of stupid that I do since obviously there's a thick glass barrier right there and I'm in no danger. It just caught me by surprise. I feel a little better when Ro pulls up short just before reaching the glass and gives me an apologetic smile. I smile in turn and tap my wrist. Although I don't wear a watch, the gesture is one that he's become familiar with over the days that we've worked together.

Ro nods and shoots up to the surface while I make my way up the stairs from the observation area. By the time I step out onto the main floor, he's climbing out of the pool and shaking the water from his tail. His fins spread wide with his magic and appear to unravel in a bright glow that rapidly slides through his body, leaving behind his muscular legs and a smooth chest uninterrupted by gills when it departs. Ro never looks unhappy to lose his tail as he stands and scoops his jeans off the floor. Then again, he never looks unhappy to lose his legs either when he submerges in the water. Whatever form he is in, he embraces it fully and it makes me wish that I were selfish enough to keep him on land always so I can enjoy more of this than just the few weeks we have together.

He beams at me as he brushes a wet lock of hair behind his ear and then steps into his jeans. The muscles in his ass and thighs flex enticingly but then disappear from sight as he slides his jeans over his hips and fastens them over his sheath.

Ro grins and pushes his feet into his boots. “This was highly enjoyable, Keri. I appreciate you for bringing this idea to that insufferable male.”

I stifle a laugh behind my hand at his description of Mr. Clarence, but I can’t say that he’s wrong. “That insufferable male is providing all the funding for this to happen, so be nice,” I chide.

He grunts but gives me a crooked smile filled with amusement. “We shall return here tomorrow, correct?”

I nod. I skimmed the message from the Arcane Society while we were in the cab on our way here. The schedule that they worked out with the aquarium is clear.

“We have the next three days with full use of the dolphin pools. That should be enough time to get the necessary observations done.”

And conclude our first week together. It is a little distressing how fast time is going. Then we will have only a couple more weeks left.

Ro nods, oblivious to my internal distress. “It will be enough time, though I know that there is not much time for us to speak when I’m underwater. But there is plenty of time for us to talk.”

He looks so hopeful that I want to agree, but Lynn is waiting for me.

“I can’t. Lynn is waiting for me to take over at the library for the rest of my shift. I’ll be there until five before my replacement comes in.”

“Then afterward,” he agrees easily with a wide smile. “We can walk along the docks and eat. There is a lot of good food offered there.”

I give him a skeptical look. I know nothing of the diet of Aquanas except watching *The Little Mermaid* when I was a kid, and that wasn't exactly seafood friendly. "Most of it is restaurants and little stands that cook up whatever is caught from the sea. Are you okay with eating fish and things like that?"

Ro gives me an incredulous look and bursts out laughing. It startles with its vibrance and volume. He's laughed in quiet chuckles often, but this is the first time I've heard him truly and fully laugh and it touches something within my heart. There isn't a trace of mockery in it, just pure delight. I give him a wry smile as he scoops my hand up and presses a kiss to my palm. His breath is exquisitely warm, but it is nothing compared to the heat that lingers beneath the amusement within his gaze as he looks up at me.

I know I'm blushing when he finally releases my hand and straightens. "I guess that means you're okay with that diet," I mumble in embarrassment.

His smile widens, and he gives my hand in his possession a quick squeeze. "Do not be embarrassed, Keri. We have not spoken of Aquana diet, and there is no way for you to know. It is a fair question. It just surprised me since there is not much else to eat but the creatures that occupy the water. Call the taxi, and while we wait I shall tell you of the many foods we enjoy."

"You don't have to wait. All I need to do is open the app," I point out as I pull my phone out and locate the app on it.

He watches curiously, and for a moment I can't imagine what his world is like without the sort of technology that I always have at my fingertips to enjoy.



“It is a short telling,” he warns, “but it is sufficient to say that we eat most everything that can be found. We have different ways of preparing it and combining what the seas offer, though we consume our meals in the raw form, which I do not think you would like. Seals are fine eating, and dolphins when we catch one. Finned fish, shelled fish, kelp, seaweed, shark, it is all a part of our diet. It is especially pleasing to wrap cut fish in seaweed with various bits of vegetation and meat mixed together. We keep our food in little pots in cool, dark areas of our home where they will keep for many days, and when we eat, we pull the pots and pinch a bit of everything we desire and eat it with pieces of the seaweed. It is like nothing else.”

“I don’t know. Sounds a little like sushi to me,” I tease.

Ro grins back, but there is such an obvious look of homesickness on his face that an idea occurs to me, and I break out in a smile.

“All right. Meet me after work. I know just where we can go.”



## KERI

I FIDGET IMPATIENTLY, WAITING FOR THE HOURS TO PASS UNTIL I escape. There is not much that requires my attention since Lynn took care of all of the tasks that I normally space throughout the day. At this point I'm nothing more than a glorified babysitter. I tap my foot as I pull out the grimoire I've been studying for the last few days and my notebook. This book has been more difficult for me to get through than most. My trouble with it isn't due to the subject matter. Everything within the pages is not only fascinating but also extremely informative. The mage who wrote this volume was an exceptional magician and an accomplished alchemist. Just reading what little I have has filled pages upon pages of my notebook not only with notes taken directly from the grimoire but also with some of my own thoughts and ideas to try.

My trouble with the text lies in one area alone—one eye-straining and headache-inducing area. As brilliant as the man was, his handwriting is atrocious. I can barely make out some of the faded words, especially now that I have gotten to this section regarding the occult matter of water and the sea, and the denizens within. I smile because not too long ago I would have taken that latter as representing immaterial beings. I never would have believed that Aquanas, or any other species, share our world with us in the most literal sense. Strange that something so well known became lost so easily once. It has given me a new appreciation for the old grimoires and how what might have once been considered figurative may not have been.

This section on water is exceptionally interesting. The *prima materia*, the higher essence of water that shapes the world by its transmutation. Gerald Vancourte continues to speak of how aquatic entities are by nature specialists of transmutation, their primal connection to the element allowing them to break down and reform as they contain within their material form the substance of this power. This is what allows them to venture among men. Although each species appears to have differences, there are things in common—every night the sea reclaims that which belongs to it, and every day when the moon is full, that which is of the sea remains locked within it.

I bite my lip, recalling that Ro will soon have to return to the sea. He will never be able to go far from it no matter how much he wants to because he will always have to return to it at least every twenty-eight days whether he wants to or not. I heard a group of kelpies just yesterday talking about the same supplements that Ro and Adiele mentioned that first day in the library, something about how the psychic block against the sea's pull wouldn't be so bad if not for the pain that they suffer

when they are forced to return to the water. I can't imagine anyone actually wanting that when it's clear that separation from the sea causes such vicious withdrawal.

It makes me wonder what the other side effects are. Are they dangerous? Do they worsen over time from taking it? If so, I'm glad that Ro ran out. Even if our time is limited this evening, I would prefer to spend what little time I can with him rather than know that he would suffer—and in the long term perhaps in ways that no one yet knows.

Why would Ro even want something like that anyway? Sure, it limits his ability to explore if he must return every night, but surely there must be a better way. If it came right down to it, I would much rather find a way to brew a potion that could allow me to be underwater with him for a day rather than harm him.

I think I could deal with my fear of the sea under those terms—as long as we stay safely near the shore. And away from sharks. And if he really wants something to help him stay out of the water for a long period of time, then I can create something better. But it would take time... and a whole lot more research.

I regard the grimoire in front of me again and reach for my phone. I need to know everything that Adiele knows about the supplement. It will at least give me a framework of understanding on how it works. Ro hasn't mentioned it again, but she would also know if he's still determined to get it. If so, I will do everything in my power to provide him with something better.

I gulp quietly as I pull up my friend's number. Even if it means asking for help from the coven—and disappointing my parents that I'm exploring other avenues of magic afield of the family

practice of divination—to keep Ro safe, I will do everything in my power to make him what he needs.



Ro

I STAND AT THE EDGE OF THE CROWD AND LOOK AROUND, hoping to spot my female's pale hair among the humans who are wandering along the docks. Although I am pleased that Keri agreed to this, I'm not so thrilled that she insisted that we meet here rather than walk together. I don't understand why. Although I stay at a motel near here, I would have been happy to meet her at the library and walk back with her. I am anxious waiting here, half-expecting that if I do not move that some male will abscond with my female. It is an instinct bred of generations of males competing on the flirting grounds, but I cannot help the anxious flutter of my fins as I search the crowd for Keri.

But there—I see her, and the tension coiled within my belly relaxes as her eyes find me and she smiles as she lifts her hand in the air as if I have not yet seen her. How can I miss her?

With her hair falling loose around her shoulders and the brilliant coral orange and red dress that hugs her body and flares around her thighs, she is a vision that stands out from the crowd. I cannot help but smile in return as I straighten and stride over to her, carefully avoiding stepping on anyone or accidentally slashing them with the barbed tips of my fins. Keri meets me halfway as she weaves among the milling human families.

“There you are,” she exclaims breathlessly, and for a moment I am anxious and watching for a sign of distress. She waves off my concerned look with a laugh, putting me once more at ease. “I’m all right. A bit of a squeeze this evening, isn’t it?”

I glance around and nod slowly. “I did not expect so many humans to be drawn to the docks,” I admit. “It feels a little strange.”

My female snorts lightly and tips her head to a brightly colored banner drawn up between two poles. “I’m afraid that’s going to happen during the seafood festival. It’s going to be a madhouse all week.”

I frown at the sign. More of the human writing is scrawled across it, but accompanying it is the image of something that looks vaguely like a crab. It boasts a horrifying smile that sends a tremor of unease through my scales. There is something so unnatural about what should have been a familiar creature that I instantly dislike its oversize smiling eyes and the toothy grin it has in a spot where no crab should ever have a mouth—and certainly no one that big. Even the size of the crab is beyond belief! A large slab of wood nearby is carved and painted to resemble the crab at terrifying proportions. The claws alone could behead an Aquana.

Keri glances over at the banner, her brow furrowing. “Is something wrong?”

I blink at her, unable to comprehend how she is not disturbed by it—or how none of the humans seem bothered by it as they take pictures with it. I see several children lean in close to it, and I want to just scoop them up and thrust them at their parents with a few biting words. There are plenty of monsters hidden in the depths of the seas. Humans do not need to create new ones.

A warm hand slips into mine, and my focus narrows entirely on it as I look over at the female twining her fingers with mine. She beams up at me, and suddenly I’m lost. My entire existence and all that I am is hers and captivated in that smile as in her magic as it sweetly caresses mine. If all Aquana males feel this way when meeting a potential mate, I can suddenly understand why they throw themselves into such ruthless contests on the flirting grounds.

“Relax. I know it’s a bit much right now, but I swear it’s not always this busy. I forgot that things were kicking off tonight. There are a lot of food vendors here along the walk that you might enjoy, but I thought maybe we could sit down and enjoy one of my favorite places tonight. I’m not scheduled to work at the library tomorrow, so we can enjoy some of the local flavor in the afternoon if you like.”

I nod in agreement. At this point she could probably ask me to do anything and I would nod haplessly, lost in the brightness of her eyes as she smiles up at me. Therefore, I follow like an obedient hippocampus on a lead when she tugs on my hand and steers us down the crowded dock. There are so many strange smells of hot fish meat, and I am bewildered by the fact that I cannot decide whether I find them appetizing or not.



They remind me of the smell of marine creatures rotting in the sun where they wash up along the rocks and beaches of the cove. That I find this smells intriguing is enough to make my stomach turn until I'm suddenly hit by a waft of sweet, fresh fish as Keri tugs me inside a restaurant.

I cast a curious glance around at the dimly lit interior. Much of the restaurant is done in deep reds and browns with hints of gold that I find to be visually pleasing, as is the tank along one wall filled with several brightly colored fish. The atmosphere is pleasant, and I find myself peering at the sheet of human characters that I cannot read with interest. Keri scoots closer, and I nearly groan as her scent fills my nose.

“From your description of foods your people enjoy, I thought you might enjoy tasting some sushi and sashimi,” she says in a low voice. “How much do you trust me?”

I gaze over at her, entirely fascinated with the pleasure in her gaze and the way the lighting makes her eyes appear darker and more mysterious like the depths hidden from the sun.

“Eternally,” I rasp, and her smile disappears for a second as she blinks in surprise before returning even more brilliantly.

A woman dressed in a very plain but elegant manner stops at our table and waits with a patient smile as my mate asks for a number of things that don't sound familiar to me. As I expect this, I content myself with simply observing my surroundings, but most especially the female sitting across from me until my attention is distracted by several long, narrow plates set in front of us with a pair of thin paper packages set at each of our sides.

I pick mine up and peer at it curiously as I slowly strip the paper from the wood tucked inside. I look over at my mate and see that she already has hers open and is watching me with an

amused expression. Seeing that she's gained my attention, she breaks the wood into two thin sticks and slowly demonstrates how she places them in her hand. I observe the way she maneuvers the sticks with fascination as she carefully plucks up something she calls a Dragon Roll and pops it into her mouth. I do not think it is truly made of dragon—I cannot imagine eating sea dragon as they are tough and surely taste as rancid as their personalities—but there is a spicy scent to it that I enjoy that makes me eager to try.

Cracking my sticks carefully to separate them, I attempt to spear one of the morsels, only to have the stick and the deliciously wrapped bits of fish and vegetation fall back onto the plate. I scowl at it for a long moment and attempt to grab it again, but not only do I drop my bottom stick so that it clatters useless to the table, now the roll has also fallen apart to lay strewn across the table. I gape at the mess and then snarl with determination, but my heart eases at the soft laughter of my mate as she watches. Keri reaches for another with her sticks, keeping her movements slow and exaggerated for my benefit. My eyes track the way she moves her hand as she plucks another disc the way I would pluck something up with my claws. I stare intently at the sushi and then my sticks.

I narrow my eyes at the bits of wood, and I shift them around in my fingers until I get a comfortable grip where they feel like balanced extensions from my hand. The tip of my claw unintentionally pierces the soft wood of the top stick, but as I give a few experimental moves, I decide that this is not as difficult as it looks. I am still a little unsure as I hover with the sticks suspended over the food. Keri gives me an encouraging smile, however, and I abandon the rolls in favor of the lumps of rice with slivers of raw tuna on it.

My mouth salivates with the familiar scent, but I take my time picking it up between the sticks and bringing it to my mouth. The rice is cold and pleasant—and far more agreeable than the bread stuff that humans use on everything that gives me terrible indigestion. So is the small amount of seaweed wrapped around it. But I groan with pleasure when I bite into the tuna and it melts in my mouth. Keri chuckles, and I feel something pressed against my wrist. Curious, I look down at the tiny cup there.

“I thought you might enjoy the sake. I know some people prefer it warm, but I like it chilled, especially when I’m enjoying it with sushi.”

I pick the cup up and give the contents a curious sniff. It smells pleasing. Still, I watch my mate over its rim as she takes a delicate sip, and I follow suit. The spice of the drink washes over my tongue and I freeze thoughtfully, entirely uncertain, as I allow the flavor to settle and swallow.

“You are right!” I am so pleasantly surprised that I immediately snatch up a roll and stuff it in my mouth, eager for another burst of flavor. I only just barely get it swallowed before I take another sip. I settle back into my seat with happy sigh and my eyes closed as I savor. “Ah, delicious.”

A surprised giggle comes from my mate, and I open my eyes to peer over at her. The corners of her mouth curl, and she points her sticks at me.

“I knew that this would be a great idea! And look at you, getting the hang of chopsticks!” A gratified look crosses her face as I quickly eat three more. She then blinks as I dive in and retrieve a fourth, a tasty prawn right from under her nose. “A little too good,” she adds dryly.

I grin but slow down my pace so that I can once again resume savoring the flavors as my female fills me in about the rest of her day. As I did little else but wait for the hour for her to be released while I amused myself with the television in my room—still a wonder to me after all this time flitting along the coastal cities among humans—I have little to offer the conversation. So I eat and listen, and tip back tiny glass after tiny glass of the exceptionally delicious sake that rushes over my tongue and pools with heat in my belly.

I never want the day to end, but I am far too aware of the sun. Even indoors I can feel it sinking lower on the horizon. When our meal concludes, there is no time to walk her home or to enjoy the docks with her. The sky is orange and scarlet with the last fires of the sun, and so I take her hand in mine and let her walk with me to a private little alcove where I found a secure dry spot to store my clothes during the night.

Keri's eyes follow me as I slip down into the cool water, and my heart clenches painfully in my chest. I feel an echo of sadness from her, and it is all I can do not to claw at my forming tail with frustration. My fins flick, propelling me further from the shore, and we watch each other for a moment until I cannot stand it any longer and dive down into the darkness.

Only when I am certain that she has left the embankment do I break the surface and watch her sorrowfully as she heads down the dock in her little orange dress that reminds me so much of the sun.



KERI

I STAND AT THE EDGE OF THE POOL AND WATCH AS RO STREAKS through the water. I should go below to record him now that he is swimming at his full, natural speed for me, but I'm reluctant to go down just yet. After two days of observing him in the pool, this is our last day here and it makes me a little sad. I know that we truthfully have nothing else that we require the pool for. The only thing I've yet to observe is how Aquana move when they hunt, but I'm not really mentally prepared to put a small animal in with him just so he can show me how he would kill it if he were in the sea. In any case, the aquarium is eager to have their access to it back so tomorrow we will be back at the lab.

I remind myself once more that I should be down in the observatory area taking advantage of this, but I can't seem to make my feet move from this spot. My point of focus leans so

strongly toward him that I don't have the desire to go anywhere. I just want to stay there with him. I have been feeling this since we met, but instead of fading over time, it's become more intense. I'm not sure if I like feeling this way. It's as if every bit of my common sense is taking a back seat to my desire, and it has been this way every day with Ro since I met him.

Ro's head breaks the surface, his white hair plastered against his head and streaming in the water around him as he swims toward me. I can feel the silly smile tugging at my lips, but I simply can't resist as he watches me just above the edge of the water with his large aquamarine eyes. They gleam with a hint of a smile that I can't clearly see beneath the water, and then he dives, his tail flicking as it briefly crests and sinks below the water. He speeds toward me, a blur of white, pink, and red until he comes within just a few feet and his double tailfins spread wide like enormous fluttering fans to slow him to a stop before rising once more to break the water's surface.

I don't move as he draws closer to the edge of the pool, not even when he sprays droplets on my feet when he puts his arm up along its side to rest his head on it to watch me more comfortably. He hums softly, and while I know he isn't intentionally trying to lure me in with his song, that melodic humming sends a shiver through me and makes me want to cast caution to the wind. I swallow hard, my eyes widening as pulse fills my ears and thrums through my entire body with every beat. I stare down at him, and my lips part.

"Ro..." I whisper uncertainly.

He cocks his head and a knowing look crosses his face as he becomes alert and lifts his chin from his folded arms. "I know," he whispers.

My eyes slide shut, and I shiver again. Those two words practically feel sung with the way they vibrate melodically through me, even though I know that they were not.

“I feel it too, Keri,” he rasps, and my eyes snap back open.

I don't want to ask, but I have to. I can't get past everything I've read, no matter how much I want to, or how much I think that it no longer has a hold on me or has any influence on my relationship with him.

“Is this a trap?”

The sad look in his eyes makes me feel terrible for asking, but the smile that follows is full of understanding.

“I would never trap you, and if you are snared at all it is due to nature and you are no more captured than I.” He chuckles in a way that sounds a little self-deprecating. “I would say that given the tendency of my species, I'm even more caught. This feeling is like wrestling in the grasp of a sea snake and being powerless to do anything about it. I cannot escape either.”

Tension that I didn't even know I had eases within me at his words. Knowing that we are both in this same boat together and it's not just him influencing me somehow makes it better. Whatever this is between us, I'm not prey.

“Have you ever felt this before?” I whisper.

The moment the words leave my mouth, I want to take them back. Although part of me wants to know what this is leading to, the larger part of me doesn't want to think that he's felt this incredible pull with anyone else.

I go weak with relief when he solemnly shakes his head.

“Never, though I have spent all of my life waiting for this moment—hoping for it.” His expression softens with a

sweetness that startles me and sends a warm bloom of emotion through my chest.

“But... what does it mean?” I want to know, but I’m afraid that I also already know and just can’t get my mind around the possibility and how much it will change my future.

“It means everything,” he murmurs as he pushes himself up onto his hands and his tail rises out of the water. “It is what every moment until now has carried me to. The current that carries me to where I was always meant to be... with you. You feel the dance of our magic—your power and my lure entwining together, the first pulse of life for our new pod.”

It only put his face level with my belly, but he doesn’t seem to notice with the way he’s staring up at me as if I’m the best thing he’s ever seen. In this moment, I feel as if I can believe that there is this invisible net tightening around us, drawing us closer together as if we are meant to be. But some of what he says doesn’t make sense.

“Pod?” I don’t recall him mentioning that while speaking of his species. “What is that?”

He grins up at me in delight as he always does when I show curiosity about his species. “A pod is a family grouping. Among most Aquanas they are female led, usually by the eldest female. A male upon reaching maturity can join with another female’s pod, enlarging her family by the addition of a hunter and warrior and the young that they may have until the pod grows so large that it divides. Or in cases when a male mates with a lone female who chooses to create her own dynasty, then they become the prime breeding pair of a new pod.”

Ah, that explains why we never got to that. We have been so occupied by discussing his biology in our brief interviews with



the list of questions that The Society prepares for me that we never get around to talking about social things. It's unbelievable that I didn't know anything about Aquana diet until yesterday and now I'm learning that they live in family groups called pods.

And he wants that with me.

I feel faint with shock but hot as I'm certain that I'm blushing from my toes to the top of my head. Ro speaks of our new pod which can only mean that he wants to create a family... with me? It's romantic and overwhelming—and a little upsetting as it feels like once again my future is being decided for me.

Instead of well-meaning parents, it's a male who wishes me to give up my life to create this new "dynasty." It's not a trap laid to satisfy his lust or any other purpose, but nor is this a fleeting thing. He wants to mate me, and like most fae that is not something that can be undone nor broken while we are alive.

I bite my lower lip, uncertainty coiling in my gut. Do I want to throw away the chance of pursuing my own magic to be with him? It is tempting as hell because I can't imagine my magic being more important than what I'm feeling. What if it's just lust and I take this leap and regret it in the morning? Gods, I don't want to do this and have it all end up one huge mistake. That wouldn't be fair to either of us if we are stuck in a mating that loses its bloom before it even begins.

Ro hums softly, his expression understanding, though I don't miss the way he winces briefly as if in pain, and immediately I feel guilty. His hum becomes louder and his eyes widen in alarm as he pushes up high and there is a sudden rushing sound of water that fills my ears. I only barely note it because I'm focused entirely on Ro as he suddenly rises in the air until he towers over me. I blink in surprise as the sudden height

difference. It's as if he is standing right in front of me, but I'm distracted when he wraps his arms around me, pulling me close to his chest. I can't help but notice the water slowly soaking my clothes, though I'm unable to see exactly what's going on as he holds me close to him.

"I can feel the way our bond pulls with your worries. No decisions have to be made now. Do not be concerned. Every moment I have with you is perfect just as it is. It is enough for me."

That's such a lie, even if he doesn't mean it to be.

But I've seen the way that he watches me when he thinks I'm not looking. When we were eating sushi there were times that I looked up and caught him staring at me with such longing that it took my breath away. He is telling me that it's enough because I want him as much as he wants me, and I want a special moment that I can hold close to me—of when I felt truly wanted for me just as I am—even if our paths and currents take us in different directions in the end.

"What if I want more?"

Ro pulls back in surprise, and I'm able to see a font of spinning water lifting him above the pool's surface. The water catches the light and glows with his magic, and for a moment I'm captivated by it before I shake myself free of its allure and meet his eyes. He stares down at me in surprise, his lips parted with wonder.

"You would be mine?" he rasps with so much hope that I feel a pang of guilt.

"I'm not certain I'm ready for that," I admit. "I don't know if it's just because we're different and I find that incredibly attractive, or if all of this is the real and lasting sort of

connection that you make me want. I'm not fae. Humans don't work the way the fae races do."

He grimaces with disappointment, but he nods. "I know what it is. I know that it is real, but I also understand that you cannot know the way I do." He meets my eyes stubbornly. "I would prove it to you. Give me until the moon goes round once more to show you in every way that I am meant to be yours."

"You would do that?" It seems like too much to hope that he would be willing to meet me halfway, but he gives me a sharp nod. I bite my lip anxiously. I don't want to lead him on. "I'll be honest, Ro, aside from the fact there's so much I want to learn about myself and my magic, the idea of being dragged into the sea to live there is terrifying to me."

A relieved grin stretches across his face. "Is that the biggest concern you have?" He chuckles at my wary nod and releases me as he drops back into the pool with a loud spray of water so that I'm once again looking down at him. "Keri, whereas I cannot speak of females and what they do, most males—me included—prefer to establish coves to dwell near our human mates. In fact, most pods prefer to live around island coves where the fish are plentiful. I would not do any less for you. Although you would be given the gift of breathing underwater as well, your comfort will always be my priority. You would dwell within reasonable distance to humans should you wish to. You will still be you and have everything you want open to you."

*Oh.* I begin to smile in relief, but my joy is interrupted by one significant and terrible thought.

"But what about you? Will you be able to live on land with me? I mean really live and not just suffer like The Little

Mermaid—the Hans Christian Anderson one,” I clarify quickly.

Though he is still smiling, Ro gives me a puzzled look, clearly not understanding the reference to the mermaid who felt pain with every step she took. Although I know that he walks easily, the supplement and its agonies seem like a terrible price for him to pay to be with me.

“Will you magically be able to live on land without having any pain?” I clarify further.

His smile falters and fades away. “No,” he admits. “Aquana magic does not work like that. I can come on land when the sun shines all except for the full moon, and I can bring you into the sea with me for a day with a kiss, or for all our lives by mating, but it cannot counter the pull of the sea on my magic or me.” He leans forward and brushes a hand along my ankle. “It is why I want the supplement. Because I don’t want to be separated from you for longer than one day and one night in a month. I want them all with you.”

“You will suffer. Every month you use it, you will be in pain when you’re forced back to the sea again, and most of the aquatic species only use it sparingly. You would have to use it daily for what you’re saying, and I really think that the side effects will only get worse the longer that you take it. Even if you go into the water during the day, you’ll need to take the supplement to not be called back at night. Potions aren’t nuanced like that. They will only do a specific thing, and working from a human perspective, I think it’s made to block out some of your magical connection to the sea rather than utilizing the nature of your magic. For all anyone knows, it could weaken you over time or shorten your lifespan if you use it daily!”

My mind goes back to the grimoire. As an aquatic species, Aquanas magic is not only tied to the sea but transmutative like the power of water which is why they have the ability to so fluidly transform themselves. Given the way that the supplement blocks instead of working with this transmutative nature of their magic, I don't think that the Underidge coven worked with an aquatic fae's magic in creating their potion. And yet Ro wants to take it all the same, even if it harms him by blocking out a part of himself.

His eyes harden stubbornly. "It is my decision, and a sacrifice I am willing to make. It is worth it to be with you."

My bottom lip trembles, but I nod. As much as I want to protect him from himself, I won't disrespect his decision as if he was a child. It's just even more important that I find something better. If he is willing to do all of this for me, then there is no reason I can't meet him halfway and give him the rest of the month as he asks. If I spend every waking moment after sundown and at the library glued to books and working on new concoctions in my kitchen, so be it.

I want more dates along the boardwalk. More Ro. More of everything I've yet to experience with him.

"Convince me," I whisper.

Ro smiles as he reaches for me and gently drags me into the water with a splash. I feel something tickle my belly when his fin flicks between my legs, pushing us away from the wall. It snakes in the water between us and my heart hammers in my chest as it becomes plumper and a darker pink with his arousal. It disappears between us only to press firmer as it twitches and writhes when he drags me close to him until we are plastered chest to chest as my thighs slide along his thick tail.

“I will show you everything I am,” he rasps as he lowers his head before claiming my mouth with his.

The salty-sweet taste of him as he darts his tongue between my lips stirs a desire and need so brilliant within me that it churns and spins through my core. Our magic entwines further until it is a current that rips between us, carrying us on a tide of lust as our mouths mesh over and over again, and still he kisses me, dragging me into the depths of all that he is.



Ro

IN MY ARMS AT LAST! MY KERI, MY LOVE. SHE STRUGGLES for only a moment as we sink into the water, and then she gasps when my pelvic fins slip along her inner thighs and sex and draws air from me. We breathe together as my fins continue to flick over the delicate skin and thin cloth beneath her skirt, capturing her pheromones and dragging into my sexual receptors, priming me for mating as the mating tide swells and rushes between us as we roll languidly in the pool.

The mating tide is as incredible as I imagined it would be, if not more so because it is with her. Never once had my imagination come close to conjuring someone quite like my mate.

Almost my mate—but soon. I am eager to show her that her worries are unfounded. That we are perfect together. The issue of the sea calling me back is an inconvenience, but every

moment of the day from sunrise to sunset, I am hers and she is all that has power over me. And even that can be mitigated with the supplement. I am a hunter—pain means little. It is a fact of life for a male who must often hunt alone with the other predators of the deep as I have done since reaching maturity. Pain is worth it. Worth this.

All that matters to me is having my mate in my arms and the taste of her upon my lips.

And I am ravenous for her! My tongue sweeps repeatedly into her mouth, luring her tongue between my lips with every lick until I can suck it into my mouth to tease it for a moment. My cock aches, and I press her closer against me, squeezing it between us as I restlessly thrash my tail between her thighs and we drop deeper into the pool.

My greedy mate pushes into me as she arches her back and my arms tighten around her instinctively, flattening her breasts upon my chest. I can feel her nipples through the wet fabric against my sensitive scales and I moan into her mouth. Little bubbles escape from between our lips. Keri wiggles, and I drop a hand to support her bottom just as her legs curl up around me, exposing her intoxicating pheromones fully to my pelvic fins. I flutter them quicker, and my tail curls up simultaneously to rub against her heat.

She is still too low for my cock to pierce her. As my tail pumps in frustration and I gradually work up higher, the bottom ridge of my phallus strokes against the top of her slit and the little nub hidden there. Everything within me freezes as Keri jerks within my arms. An excited growl escapes me as I twist my tail against her again, allowing the underside of my cock to tease her sex. My pelvic fins caress the outer petals framing her slit while I work the head of my sex down into



place. It strokes her, and the touch of it paired with my pelvic fins makes my sweet mate's pheromones stronger, and she shivers and moans in her throat.

There is no better sound than her pleasure, no better scent than the water laden with her pheromones, and no better taste than her mouth. I wonder if her slit tastes just as sweet. This is a discovery I wish to make—but later. As much as I want to play with her more and explore her, I also don't want to allow even an inch of distance between us, so I work a hand between us to palm her breast. My claws teasingly stroke over the soft skin as I explore it, seeking the most sensitive spots. She jumps when I nudge her nipple with the side of my claw, and my excitement heightens in response. Using the pad of my thumb, I rub around the perimeter of the stiff bud. It would be so easy to hurt her with my claws where they are, but I am incapable of it, my every touch instinctively turning gentle as I circle it again and again before brushing over the peak and pinching it sharply so that she whimpers and wiggles against me.

My mate is too eagerly riding against my cock to sheathe my length within her. She is impatient as I am, so I vow that after we are done I will stretch her out along the side of the pool and demonstrate my commitment to properly adoring her. I cannot wait to taste her upon my tongue above the water's surface. I would drag her up now if the urgency in the tide between us has not already begun to spin its whirlpool of magic, spurring our mutual fever as our mouths mate with a desperation that is mimicked by the way our sexes bump and grind together in preparation for the first deep slide.

The copious amount of lubrication coating my cock makes the head and shaft of my sex slicker with every brush between her thighs. It pumps out from the small lubrication sacs, and my

pelvic fins work it along my length even as they gather her pheromones and drive her to new heights of pleasure.

My tail pumps faster, and I shiver with the electric pulses from the magic within the current. My cock is painfully hard, and one of Keri's hands finds its way into my hair to tangle in the strands and grip it hard with her own demand. Another excited growl escapes me and my tail rocks hard, and I can feel the tip of my cock's head kiss her heat as I eagerly fan my fins and thrust forward, stretching her tight heat around my length.

Keri's inner muscles tighten around me, and my mate jerks in my arms with the shock of my penetration. Worried, my tailfins spread so that we drift in place while she becomes accustomed to the joining of our bodies. I can accept pain for myself, but never for my mate. It is difficult to restrain myself when I feel her sex pulse around me, tempting me, but I keep us adrift as I twine my tongue with hers in little strokes. She softens in my embrace, melting into my arms once again as she tentatively rocks against my girth, the soft texture of her inner walls stroking over the bulges and veins that line my cock.

I wait until she begins to press eagerly, giving herself over to her pleasure as she begins to rock over me before I begin to move. My spread fins draw together just enough to give me control, and I shuttle my tail back and forth between her thighs so that my cock is dragging in and out of her. I am greedy for her every gasp and the way her hand tightens once more in my mane as she rakes the opposite hand along the thicker scales that edge the sailfin on my back.

I shake with pleasure, my tail thrashing more eagerly, driving my cock in and out of her grasping heat. Her sex convulses around me, her cries muted by our ceaseless kiss as I continue

to rut through her orgasm and bring her to another. The tight drag of her cunt sucking deep upon my length brings up a low growl to vibrate in my chest. Her pheromones and magic, and the mating tide, has drawn up my seed like nothing else ever could. My cock swells with it as my thrashing intensifies, and my hand tightens on her ass to hold her anchored in place so that she may fearlessly ride her mount through the water.

I roll us through the water as she trembles with a silent scream and her channel clamps down viciously around my shaft with exquisite pleasure. Instinct takes over and my sheath grinds against her, my curled pelvic fins vibrating to further stimulate her sex to receive more of me as my seed pouches fill within my shaft. They swell with far more pronounced bulges along its length, spurring yet another orgasm so that she is clutching around me while I drive into her repeatedly. The electric jolts of my release fire through me as my cock jerks within her clutch as my seed sprays in thick streams within her.

I growl against her mouth as I cling to her, trying desperately to not finalize our bond without her permission. I will prove myself no matter how long it takes. Even if I must haunt this harbor for years on end and take to the sea every night, mourning in loss of her during the night until she is satisfied and agrees to be mine.

We drift together in the water, my tailfins spread once more just enough so that we do no more than slowly spin in place. My mouth caresses hers lovingly, and when my cock finally slips free and disappears once more into my sheath, I take us to the surface. Her fast gasp when her mouth parts from mine tears at my heart. That small sound is a reminder that until she joins with me, this is only a brief moment interrupting her very human life that is sustained by the surface air.

Keri is limp with pleasure in my arms, brushing tiny kisses along my jaw as I swim back to the edge of the pool. My lips tease the corner of my mouth, and it hitches in a smile in response as contentment spreads languidly through me. As painful as it is to leave the bond incomplete, I am happy all the same for this moment with her as her body drifts against mine with every stroke of my tail through the cool glide of the water over us.

Upon arriving at the pool's wall, I lift Keri easily onto the ledge though I groan weakly when she chooses at that moment to capture my mouth with hers and draws me into a kiss. I shiver against her, and heat flushes through my body as the mating tide calls again. This time, I have control. I break our kiss and regard her from beneath lowered eyes as I drop back into the water. My mate watches with me with wide, curious, lustful eyes as I slowly spread her thighs in front of me.

“Ro, you don't have to—” she begins nervously.

I growl deeply, desiring to possess every inch of my mate and experience every flavor she offers. I drag her bottom to the very edge, making my mate stutter on her words as she gasps with surprise at the very moment that I surge forward, fastening my mouth over her sex. I suck upon her little bud there until she tilts her hips toward me, inviting me within as I release that tender flesh and drive my tongue deep.

Ah, yes. This is my favorite flavor indeed.



## KERI

I STRAIGHTEN THE HEM OF MY DRESS AS I PEER DOWN AT MY experiment. Distorted through the glass, Adiele frowns as she eyes it from the other side of the table.

“So what exactly are we doing?” she asks as she cranes her head to look into another beaker.

“Testing the nature of these different waters that I’ve gathered through distillation with various substances,” I explain. “Each has an energetic signature, but I’m trying to narrow it down to its various properties. Whatever I make for Ro is going to have to start from a similar base that will undergo more complex processes with other substances to finally get a reliable potion for Ro. I’m just not certain which to start with.”

Adiele shrugs. “They all look like tinted water to me. I mean, I can feel the energy, but nothing at all like what you said.

Perhaps your aunt should be the one to help you with this. Katherine Durmont is the strongest energy mage I know.”

Like I didn’t try?

“She’s busy this weekend,” I admit. “Something about witnessing the formal construction of a fairy grove in some far-off mountain community. Fulfilling a promise, she said.”

“Oh.” Adiele tilts her head as she observes another beaker. “Well, which one feels most like Ro’s magic? Anything give a seafood special vibe?”

I chuckle at her wisecrack and shake my head. “I honestly don’t know. All of these are made with plants that have occult association with water properties. I have a distilled water base from a blue lotus. Then there’s this one from seaweed. Hell, I’ve even got one made from ground up shell material.” I scrub the back of my neck with one hand. “Maybe I just need to have Ro test them and get his opinion. He’s the aquatic, right?”

Adiele grins over at me. “Somehow I don’t think it will be quite that easy, but sure, why not? I take it that you’re seeing him again tonight.”

I blush at the knowing way she wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. She just can’t help herself. That’s the last time I tell her anything about my love life. But then again, keeping secrets from diviners is nearly impossible. She somehow knew that Ro and I have spent the last few days intimately entangled without me having to say a word. All she needed was confirmation, and I haven’t been able to escape it since.

A sharp knock at the door saves me, and I rush over to let Ro in. I’m glad to see him, not only because I’ve been looking forward to today all week—and there’s no one else I would

rather spend my day off with—but also because he can now share in his part of Adiele’s teasing while I finish getting ready. I’m trying not to appear too eager as I throw the door open, but I can’t keep the ecstatic smile off my face. His slow, answering smile is absolutely worth the kissy noises that my friend makes behind my back, even more so when he sweeps me into a hug like he hasn’t seen me in forever and I’m the best thing since shrimp was pulled out of the water.

Shrimp. Mmmmm. I can’t wait to introduce my “merman” to the way shrimp is prepared. Whether deep fried or boiled and smothered in cocktail sauce, it is all tasty and is my favorite thing to come out of the sea. Well, second favorite thing now, I suppose. Even shrimp have a hard time competing against the magnificence that is Ro.

It certainly can’t curl my toes the way he does. And that is my last clear thought as he turns his head and swoops in to slant his mouth over mine, stealing my breath, my every thought, and my heart with his kiss. A leisurely kiss of the sweetest sort of exploration is enough to distract me to where I completely forget we have an audience. It isn’t until Adiele clears her throat when his playful fingers skim just under the hem of my skirt that brings me crashing back to reality.

My friend exaggerates, fanning her face as we break apart and untangle from each other. “Wow. You’re so welcome.”

I drag my attention from Ro’s impressive chest to give my friend a puzzled look. “Huh?”

“You know... for getting you two together,” she explains, wiggling her fingers in our direction. “I wish I could claim it’s because I saw it but that would be a brazen lie and would tempt my great-grandmother to make the trip beyond the grave to smack me upside the head. But I’m still claiming all the

credit because obviously there was some serious magic at work the moment you met—which, naturally, wouldn't have happened without me.”

“Yes, because this tiny town is so enormous that there was no chance of Ro and I running into each other,” I reply dryly.

Adiele snorts in amusement. “You mean if you didn't practically live at the library or in your apartment when not dragged over to my place for divination lessons?” She rolls her eyes and scoffs. “Like I said, you're welcome.”

Ro's nose brushes my cheek, making me aware of the fact that he has bent down to engulf me once more within his embrace. “Let her have her accolades, my sweet Keri. Even a hunter is quick to boast about his hunt regardless of how lamed a beast may be. Let her enjoy her moment,” he murmurs, his breath teasing my ear.

“Oh, fine,” I mumble, only because I'm far too distracted to argue with him or Adiele right now. We need to just get this date on the road, or we will never leave my apartment. Slipping my hand into the crook of Ro's elbow, I tug Ro toward the door as I attempt and fail to get a comparable read on the energy signature of the magic woven through Ro's being. “If you decide to poke around with any of experiments, feel free—just lock up on your way out.”

“Sure thing! And allow me the opportunity to point out how stinking cute you two are together. I can hold down the fort and keep an eye on this remaining work you have going. Go on and have a good time!” she shouts as we disappear back out the door with a small wave.



THE DOCKS ARE AS CROWDED AS I ANTICIPATED BY THE TIME we arrive. There's no helping it because the locals all get an early start and everything is pretty much cranked up by noon. Ro gives them an uncomfortable look, and it occurs to me that he's more accustomed to interacting in a small family group or being solitary than any sort of chaos such as this. I do find it strange the way he is looking at some of the decorations and mascots wandering around the festival. I'm more than a little concerned, however, when I see him give a particularly murderous glare to Mr. Landry who volunteers every year to wear the heavy costume of Seaside Sam the Crab and wave one overstuffed claw at guests. The elderly clerk freezes at Ro's aggressive growl that could do a Pitbull proud and looks around warily in an attempt to locate the threat through the narrow eye window in the costume. Tightening my hold on my Aquana, I drag him in the opposite direction, tugging him down so that I can hiss furiously in his ear.

"Ro, what's going on with you?"

"Do you not see that creature? Your entire festival is inhabited with monsters that stink of human flesh as if they've consumed your people for years, and yet you do nothing and stroll about them and approach them without concern for your own safety. For the safety of your young!" he adds in horror. "It would serve everyone's best interests if you allow me to slay them now and mount their heads over the cooking fires."

Mr. Landry's head positively turns in our direction now, and I'm pretty sure he is staring at us. Ro certainly has his attention now.

"What? Oh, shit. Ro, no. There are no monsters here. And don't go around saying stuff like that! You're going to make

Mr. Landry wet himself in that suit and we will never hear the end of it!”

The adorably befuddled male on my arm blinks in confusion, and all hostility flees his face as it’s replaced by this new emotion. “Suit?”

“Yes. Suit.” I sigh and rub my eyes. “I suppose Aquanas don’t have fun, festive mascots.”

Ro’s brow lowers thoughtfully. “We have the agswal dance for the children, in which we perform under the massive skins for them during our festivals while recounting ancient stories. Is this something like that?” He peers behind him at Mr. Landry’s costume with interest. “Is this some great beast that was vanquished and there are recitations here at this festival celebrating its death?”

I laugh softly. “Not exactly. It’s a seafood festival, and so Seaside Sam here is to celebrate that our harbor is known for its good crabbing. We have other characters as well but Sam over there is our most popular character with the kids. And yeah, each of them kind of have a made-up story that goes with them, but I’m afraid nothing quite as awe inspiring as yours,” I admit.

“Hmm... But it is entertainment for the young ones? That is the main purpose? And your people are beneath all of that to entertain?” His tone is speculative, but if I’m not mistaken there is a gleam of appreciation in his eyes.

“Well, I think there are plenty of adults who appreciate it too,” I say as I gesture to a couple getting their photo taken with Sandy Shrimp George.

Ro gives another obvious shudder, but this time there is a hint of a smile on his face as he does so. It clearly still creeps him

out, but the new perspective on the matter makes it far easier to haul him past the mascots and various decorations boasting our cheerful seafood family that provides so well for our community.

He's positively precious. I find myself enjoying the seafood festival more than I have in years just by experiencing it through his eyes. He gags on the fried foods until we move onto the grilled and steamed offerings. His comments on the human tendency to cook things beyond death raises a few eyebrows, but he does everything with such enthusiasm that it's hard for anyone to be insulted. Especially when he still asks for second helpings. I've had plenty of dates on the docks during one festival or another, but I can't say I've ever enjoyed one so thoroughly, or have been the clear center of my date's attention.

Even when Ro is eager to try something new, he never lets go of me, and he never forgets about me in the midst of all the fun. He is always aware of my presence at his side and all too pleased to share his discoveries and moments with me. He makes me feel as if my company there is a large part of the experience for him. It makes me feel cherished, treasured, and wanted without Ro obviously trying. Even when he drags me out onto the open dancing spaces of the dock to twirl me around in a somewhat clumsy fashion, it is full of such life and gaiety that it makes me laugh with joy.

I can't possibly be already falling in love with him, and yet how can I not? I could have fooled myself into believing I was equipped for any kind of seductive assault, but nothing could have prepared me for this. I have no defenses against Ro. Nothing but the reminder that the sun and sea steals time away from us—those jealous bitches.

I lean into his side, hating the fact that the sun is starting to sink lower into the sky, wanting to get every minute out of our dwindling day. It is because of this that I don't protest when he drags me over to another grill laden with fish and instead giggle like a schoolgirl when he offers a bite to me with his claws. It is so gallant and sweet the way he always offers me the first morsel. At first I teased him that he was just using me to determine whether or not it was safe to eat, but his response tugged at my heart and stole my teasing laughter to make me yearn for all that he promised.

“It is only right for a hunter to first feed his mate. A mate is everything. The pearl of magic within his heart. Life. Purpose. You are the pinnacle of everything, and so I will always give you first of all that I have and all that I am so that we are sustained together for of our time.”

Warmth fills my heart in memory of his words as I open my mouth to receive the offering. The fish is juicy and flavorful on my tongue with a hint of lemon, pepper and rich butter. I sigh at the taste as I chew and swallow, but it quickly turns into a gasp of pleasure and surprise at the touch of his tongue as he licks the remaining flecks of fish from my lips. Then that marvelous tongue plunges between my lips to savor the mingled flavor of the fish and woman together.

Ro growls low, his entire body shivering with pleasure and I lean into him, savoring the connection and flavor of him.

I can't be in love already, but I fear that I'm well on my way.



KERI

ONE WEEK LATER

I FROWN DOWN AT THE NOTEBOOK IN FRONT OF ME. I CAN FEEL the weight of Ro's presence as he leans over me. Though his body doesn't brush mine, his powerful hand is planted on one side of me from which his arm stretches up like a column of heat and strength. The definition of his muscles is distracting. That may have something to do with my hyperawareness of him. Or it could be all the sex.

I struggle not to blush at the thought.

Of course, that's not all we've been doing. Ro has been practically attached to me from the time I get off work at the library until just minutes before sunset. All the while I've also been trying to work out a solution to the supplements he wants and not getting any closer.

Which is why we're spending a portion of our day together, now that my day off has come again, a little over an hour inland to meet with my aunt Katherine here at the coven house. Her hair elegantly coifed, Katherine is both intimidating as the head of the coven and a comfortable, familiar presence as she frowns down at her copy of my notes while her dragon hovers anxiously behind her. At her elbow is a copy of the recipe from the Underidge coven. I don't know how she acquired it, only that she made an oath that she would not share it or permit the recipe to be replicated in any fashion.

Not a difficult promise to keep considering that I have no intention of using it. Even if Ro eyes it with avid interest. Gah, I hate the rejected flounder look he's been giving me since Katherine produced the recipe and then said she wasn't handing it over to us. Suits me just fine, but I keep that to myself. I'm not going to drive the screw deeper even if I'm privately relieved.

Katherine sighs deeply and rubs her eyes. "Good gods, Keri. This is a mess. I see exactly what your concerns are. Even without seeing the recipe, you've underscored nearly everything problematic with the supplement the coven provides. On paper, what they are doing makes sense. Negate the regular tidal pull by dampening the connection. Separation from the source of the problem is often used to treat a problem. And if it was used only rarely then it probably doesn't cause much harm, but our coastal communities are seeing a larger influx of aquatic species. Of course they aren't going to want to have to go to the sea every evening. But the coven hasn't considered the long-term effects that usage would have on an aquatic person using it on a daily basis."

I nod and lean forward. "I figure that Ro's people and other species like his must have some sort of inner biorhythm

connected to the sea. Even though technically the tide goes in and out several times a day, we must consider it similar to their magic—at a certain point they are pulled back out to rejoin their source. And this may also be why the pull during the full moon, which has the strongest effect on the tides, is one that they cannot resist.”

I lick my lips nervously, uncertain if I’m correct with the direction my research and experiments have been directing me. My eyes drop to the cup of tea by my right hand. “So what if instead of blocking that connection, we work with it? We don’t try to separate their land-dwelling form from the sea. That would be like trying to separate the steeped essence of the leaves from the hot water. It is one. Instead, what if we try to change the pattern?”

I lift my hand over it, palm down, my first two fingertips pointing to the liquid and slowly work my fingers in a clockwise motion as I tap into the energy of the water and merge it with my own aura, calling on the nature of the substance as I’ve been slowly learning to do with my potion making. “The alchemical nature of water is transmutable, so it makes sense to work within their biorhythm to sustain their natural ability to form themselves... but what if we utilized something that works with the natural tide within his magic instead? We could simply convince his body that that it’s ‘high tide,’ so to speak.”

Katherine sits back in her chair and purses her lips thoughtfully. “You mean something that is the magical equivalent of a hormone-based birth control pill?”

I nod cautiously because it is, but it also isn’t. “Essentially yes—hopefully without the side effects that occur with hormonal treatments. But something that he could take daily but then

once a month, or three days, if necessary, go off to keep in time with his natural tide.”

“I would assume that includes reproductive tides as well,” Asterion interrupts as he stares at the Aquana sitting beside me. “If I’m not mistaken, a lot of sea peoples have a fertile cycle highly in tune with the magical tides of the sea. If you are making him feel at his peak all month—” His voice drops as he chuckles as Katherine muffles a laugh behind her hand.

I give them both a quizzical look and turn to Ro. “What am I missing?”

Ro clears his throat awkwardly and lets out a small, embarrassed hiss from between his teeth. “My people get very... amorous when the ocean’s magic heightens. As you know, we breed in the sea, and the full moon has often been used by our females to be the most desirous time to set out their flirting grounds.”

My mouth drops open. “Are you saying that you will literally be very fertile all the time? If that is the case, when the full moon comes, and you have to go to the sea—”

He nods quickly. “I will be in a very heightened state wishing to mate.”

We both startle and look over at the loud cackle from the other side of the table. Aunt Katherine waves a hand rapidly in front of her as her eyes stream with mirth, and she desperately tries to smother another laugh while Adeon grins down at her. She makes a small, choked sound and swipes at her eyes.

“I’m sorry, dear. I don’t mean to laugh,” she gasps around a chuckle. “It’s just that you are going to have a very interesting full moon. I do hope you’re prepared to stay in the sea with your mate during those days,” she teases.



I turn pink at the assumption and glance over at Ro. “Oh. Umm, we haven’t yet decided—”

“I am still working to prove myself as a mate,” Ro interrupts as he gathers my hand in his. “My Keri should take all the time she needs to be certain of her decision and allow me to do this for her. I have no one to battle for her, only my own eagerness and desire.”

I peer over at him from beneath my lashes, warmth curling within me at how quickly he rose to defend me and this dance between us. I’m also surprised though. I figured that this was simply something he felt obligated to deal with and was doing to humor me because he wants to win me. That he genuinely sees it as something so honorable seems almost beyond belief, and yet the way he has always been so attentive for no other reason than he wanted to be makes this so real that I could cry with the guilt of keeping him waiting on me—and now half-afraid that he will swim off on a full moon to find a more “cooperative” female to mate when his instincts can’t be ignored anymore.

Katherine smiles at him with genuine pleasure before giving us both a sympathetic look. “I’m sure that having a potion to help him be less sea-bound would help. It’s hard to pin your future on someone if you aren’t certain of whether they are staying or going. I should know,” she adds with a fond look to Adeon.

“I will never leave,” Ro replies solemnly, his big, warm hand squeezing mine gently. “I do not care if I have to build our home at the edge of the water so that I can spend every minute with her that I’m able before the sea calls me home. Keri will *always* have me. My lure has merged so much with her magic, there is no separating me from her unless she casts me aside.”

I give him a look of horror. “And what the fuck would that do?”

An uncomfortable look crosses Ro’s face. “It does not need to be spoken of,” he assures me quietly, but Adeon snorts loudly and shakes his head as he outright ignores the sharp look Ro gives him.

“If they are anything like some of the aquatic species I know of, it means that once they’ve bonded with you to that degree, they will die without their mates,” he says bluntly.

Ro’s upper lip pulls back from his teeth, and he hisses at the dragon before turning a sweet look to me as he smooths my hair back with one hand. “As I said, it is nothing that needs to be spoken of. Aquanas give their hearts, but we cannot survive without them. But this has no bearing on your decision.”

“How can it possibly not if you’re going to die without me? I kind of think that needs to be a part of the conversation. At least a little.”

He chuckles softly, the side of his hand skimming my cheek. “I would not drop dead the minute you were gone. It takes years for the sickness to overtake us and our magic returns to the sea. My lifespan will simply be much shorter—perhaps comparable to a human lifespan—and I would roam the waters restlessly to not be drawn back by my lure. That is all.”

“That’s all, he says,” I mutter, but I give him a worried look. I’m terrified of moving forward, but I don’t want to lose him!

Katherine coughs behind her hand, breaking the tension.

“Well, it sounds like you have your work cut out for you then, Ro, if you’re going to convince my stubborn niece. My resources are at your disposal. My talent is more for energy manipulation, but I think I can give you a few tips on how to

get the most out of your potion on that end, as well as some ideas of what we can do.” She looks over at me curiously. “Have you spoken with your parents to see if they have any suggestions their art may reveal?”

I blanch at the question and quickly shake my head. “My mom and dad? Oh no, Katherine. I couldn’t possibly. I still haven’t told them that I’ve given up divination!”

My aunt gives a characteristic roll of her eyes in response to my objection. “Oh, please, they surely couldn’t be surprised. I told them since you were five years old and playing little witch games with me that your energy isn’t aligned to divination work. If they’re shocked, they have no one to blame but themselves.”

I stare at her in shock, unable to quite believe what she’s just said. “How did I not know this?”

“Your parents live in a state of denial, of course,” Katherine explains and gives me a cheeky smile. “But be assured that it is not a condition limited to just them. We all must come around sometime and see that our dreams and expectations for our children have to change as they grow and discover their own way. This,” she says, tapping on the printed copy of my notes, “is good. You are already working this out. You may be the first potions mistress in our coven yet, and *that* is something to be proud of.”

“I am proud,” Ro purrs, and my pulse leaps in response as a pleased flush sweeps over my body.

I guess I’m calling my parents after all.



Ro

MY KERI HAS A STRENGTH TO HER THAT I ADMIRE. SHE doesn't have the natural physical protections of female Aquanas, nor the magic that summons terrible currents and wicked storms, but she has the willpower to take control and manifest change in ways that my people cannot conceive. We are a people whose lives and magic are part of the tides and currents of the sea. We live from moment to moment, loving fiercely and enjoying the beauty of our moments in all their variety and magnitude, seldom with regret or looking back—unless one has been rejected by their mate. Keri is so different from everything I have ever known, and she has expanded my awareness of a world beyond our seas that is full of magic in a multitude of forms.

More than anything, I love the way her mind works. It is an endless source of fascination, the way she uses it to manipulate

her magical workings with new ideas and experiments. It gives depths to my feelings for her beyond the entanglement of her magic and my lure. It makes me adore her in ways that I don't think many males have the advantage to experience until after they are mated. This is not just the rush of magic binding us closer, bolstered by the pleasure of mating. This is something deeper, and I am so incredibly grateful that I've needed to spend so many days convincing my mate by proving myself and getting to know her better in the process.

My gaze fastens on her as I lean forward on the other side of the table separating us. She has something called a hot plate between us and several glass containers. Magic swirls within the essence captured in each of them, brightening in response with her as Keri lifts and examines them one by one. She gives me a focused look over the top of the container and hands it to me.

“So I take it that the phone call with your mom went well?” Adiele asks as she watches us, her elbows propped on the end of the table and her chin resting between her hands.

Keri's lips twitch faintly and she shrugs, making me bristle with irritation that anyone would dare harm my mate's tender emotions.

“About as well as can be expected. There was some frustrated weeping and denial, but she eventually came around after about an hour or so and strong armed my dad into looking into the matter. Mom is better at foresight, but dad is where the money is at if you need to solve immediate problems. Let's just say he needed the convincing since he was pretty determined to hold out hope and resistant to me, uh, throwing my gifts away to pursue this.”

I scowl in response. Due to her family living much further inland from the coast than her aunt Katherine, I haven't yet had the opportunity to meet them and reassure them that I do not seek to steal their daughter away. It is just one more reason that I need for this to work. I do not wish to cause a rift between my mate and her family or her coven any more than she wishes to cause me the anguish of being forcibly parted from the sea. We both need these things that make up who we are.

“And your sire—he was helpful?” I posit hopefully.

A real smile curls her lips, and she nods. “That he was! We brought in Katherine on a three-way conference call and hammered out the details. I have everything I need except where to start. And that's where you come in. I need to know which of these—or which combination—feels like the energy of the sea.”

I look at the glass container in my hand and the others lined up across the table in front of us and suddenly feel very uneasy. What if I select wrong? I know nothing about this sort of magic.

“I do not know if I am the best one to make this decision, Keri,” I murmur. “I know nothing about this.”

Adiele gives Keri a confused look. “Why can't we just grab saltwater and make a potion from it?”

Keri shakes her head. “The mineral composition of the sea is incredible, and its balance supports the lifeforms within it, but it doesn't necessarily compose the magical elements of the sea. That involves a combination of the plants that grow within it, the influence of the lunar tides, its relationship with the shores and the rivers that empty sediment into it. The water carries an imprint of all these things that makes up its magical nature.”

“Fuck,” Adiele breathes, and I can’t agree more with the sentiment.

My mate’s expression softens, and she reaches over to place her hand on mine. “Just relax, Ro. You can do this. This should feel as natural to you as breathing. All you need to do is tell me what feels like home to you.”

I look at her skeptically. “Keri, *you* are home to me. Wherever you are, it is my home.”

Her smile grows at my words, warmth filling her eyes as she squeezes my hand. “Okay. We’ll be each other’s home from here on out. But you’ve spent all your life in the sea, Ro. You can do this. Just reach out and feel the magic like you felt mine.”

I huff softly and shake my head. “That was merely my lure responding to a compatible mate. I can taste and feel the magic of these, but it is all foreign to me. They don’t taste of the sea.”

She gives me a wry look and nods. “Exactly. And that is what we need to remedy. Water holds the memory of everything, and the sea above all is the most complex. I have everything I could think of, and everything my father and aunt could think of that could hold traces of elements connected to the sea. We don’t need to get it perfect, just to emulate it enough to trick your magic.”

I sigh and twirl the contents in the container in my hand as I observe its soft glow spinning within it. It’s not right. I catch the glimmer of something in the corner of my eye, and my gaze drifts to another glass farther down the table. I set the container in my hand down and reach for it. It brightens in response to my touch, and my fins flare with excitement.

“This.” I hand her the container.

Turning it in her hand so that she can read the characters printed on the label, she looks at it and nods before setting it back down and turning to a large cabinet lining the wall to her right. She pulls out a container filled with familiar plant material. Keri removes several dry ribbons of kelp as I turn and grab another jar with a familiar glow. Another container soon joins it, and then another. Familiar traces weave through my mind as I pluck them from the tables. With each one I give her, I mumble to my mate all the while of just how strong that element needs to be as she measures the portions into a bowl for Adiele to grind. To this a pure alcohol is added and sealed, and then we move onto the next sample. We work together through the day, creating many small batches, each with different amounts until I feel the sun begin to make its final descent and I am forced to leave. I have never hated the condition of my kind more than this moment.

And within my mate’s home are numerous seeds of what could be our salvation. What she calls samples to begin to alchemical mercury are there, and I patiently wait as the days bleed together. I am forced to endure another full moon which tears me away back to the ocean, but by now we are finished with our studies for The Society and there is the small comfort that when I return that our time together will be ours alone completely.

Waiting in the depths of the sea is the hardest part. It eats at me, and I console myself by spending every available moment with my mate once I’m able to climb back out again. I cannot join her when she must complete her duties, but I am there waiting for her and passing every minute with her that she allows me until the sun, moon, and sea steal me away again. By the time the moon begins to wane, I am relieved that it is



finally time to begin the next process: the calcination. It is for this purpose that I find myself sitting in front of her flat burner once again as my mate carefully strains the mixture that I selected amongst all of those that we started. This is the right one—I know it.

“Adiele, open the window please,” she instructs.

Adiele gets up and pauses. “Which one?”

Keri’s nose wrinkles thoughtfully as she deposits the strained material in the mortar and pestle. “All of them. Trust me, igniting the dead earth portion is not going to be pleasant.”

I nearly gag on the fumes, my eyes watering despite the ventilation, but when it’s done we have the salt by way of the ash and mercury in the tincture, and then it is all shaken together—and still we must wait. Every day as we shake it, we sing to it the notes of the sea. Keri is not perfect at capturing the right tones, but she understands the movement of magic within the breath and voice and so picks up on it quickly. We sing songs of magic and life as the mixture coagulates, and we inscribe certain sigils upon it and incorporate her human chanting and intonations that differ from day to day.

And on the final day, just minutes before sunset, Keri lifts the container in which our elixir has grown. The magic within it swirls with life and power, and my fins naturally flutter in response to it. I look from it to my mate. Adiele watches us with a hopeful light in her eyes, but it is my mate’s cautious excitement that makes my heart leap as I watch her take a filter and a clean bottle to carefully strain it.

The magic of the elixir brightens and dances as its purest form is revealed, and my breath catches. Yes. This is it.

Keri siphons a small amount into a vial and hands it to me.

“This is it. Moment of truth.”

I nod and spare a glance to the setting sun outside the window. My eyes eagerly return to my mate, though as I lift the vial to my lips, she is the only vision that I want to have or need to have in this moment. She is the entirety of my purpose now—Keri and the life that we will live together.

I am about to tip it back but startle when I feel her hand clasp over mine, halting me.

“You don’t have to do this.”

I do not understand and peer down at her in confusion. “Yes, I do. This represents the future I want and need, but also a future for everyone out there who rises from the sea.”

She bites her lip, a worried look crossing her face. “If something goes wrong...”

“Then I have risked nothing. I would rather take this risk than slowly die alone in the seas,” I assure her.

“But I don’t want to take the risk,” she chokes, and a tear slips down her cheek. “I would rather live at the very edge of the sea and kiss you goodbye every night and have you for the rest of my life than potentially risk your life.”

She looks up with pools of tears in her eyes, and I marvel at the wonders of humanity. An Aquana cannot cry and to me it is a sacred substance, and so I bend down and gently trail the tip of my tongue over the tracks from her tears, drawing them into me.

“I love you, Ro,” she whispers.

Those four words are like a hunter’s spear in my chest, and I close my eyes as joy blooms and overwhelms me. When I

open my eyes again and look down at my mate I see my future laid out for me within her eyes—and it is glorious.

“But I want the days and the nights with you,” I whisper as I lean down to press a loving kiss to her lips. “I cannot stop the moon from stealing me, but the moon, sun, and sea will only have me for one day. I am yours, and only yours, for all the others for the rest of my life. I promise you this on the River Styx that dwells deep below the seas.” I press another kiss at the corner of her mouth. “Do not cry for me. This is it—I know it is. Trust me. And if it is not perfect then we will try again, but I can’t wait any longer. Already the sea calls. But I swear to you, we will have our happy beginning.”

“Don’t you mean happy ending?” she jokes, her voice tremulous with tears.

I smile down at her and shake my head. “No. Because this is our beginning, and once I have claimed you, which I shall do once we have succeeded and I can fulfill my promise to you, we shall truly begin our long life together.”

She gives another watery laugh and pulls out of my arms. “I have so many questions about that, but okay, Ro, I trust you in this.”

I grin, and the contents of the bottle swirl in brilliant bursts of blue and green with flecks of gold as I bring it to my lips and swallow the contents just as the sun sinks below the horizon. It fills my belly with the brimming current of its wash, and suddenly I am free.

With a shout of glee, I scoop my mate into my arms and kiss her. It is our time—finally!



KERI

I'M WEARING THE ORANGE AND PINK SUNDRESS I WORE ON OUR first date. It seems appropriate somehow that this is what I wear, although I've dressed it up considerably with the flowers woven into the complicated twist of my coifed hair. At Adiele's insistence that I come to him, and he does not see me before I arrive at the docks—and because he is willing to humor my human customs, he's waiting there for me. My entire family, my coven, have gathered along the docks, and flowers are strewn everywhere. The temperature is cooling off and I know that water is going to be bitterly cold, but Ro assures me that I won't feel it once his venom fills me.

How romantic.

Okay, that little detail does still creep me out just a little, but if it gives me forever with Ro then I'm all in.

The car pulls up to the docks, and my dad climbs out of the driver's seat. He hurries back to help me out and tucks my hand into his arm as he blinks his eyes rapidly. I was surprised when my parents made an appearance during the last couple of weeks while we waited for the elixir's coagulation. I had thought it would be an incredibly stressful experience, but I was surprised at how readily my parents took to Ro. Dad wears a proud smile on his face now as he escorts me from the parking lot to the dock, our steps echoing as the music begins. It's not the traditional bridal march, but one that Ro and I sat down and selected ourselves as the song of our joining as is the custom in the Durmont family.

The coven lines the dock, leaving a passageway, and I can't help the giddy smile that tugs at my lips as I make my way past cousins, aunts, uncles. Everyone is here. Although heavily pregnant, even my cousin Fran is present with her vampire husband, and she blows me a kiss as I pass. But my heart stops at the vision at the end of the dock waiting for me. Ro stands tall and proud, his pale hair and delicate scales catching the light in a rainbow of hues. His lips part when he sees me, and I see the love shining in his eyes. It's all for me.

He wears little more than an ornate wrap around his hips. His feet are bare and planted steadily on the dock. It doesn't take a genius to know why he's dressed so sparsely—though no less beautifully. Once we are in the water, human clothing will be nothing but an obstacle for him as his body works to regain its true form.

Ro holds his hand out for me, and I just barely remember to pause and kiss Daddy on the cheek before I surrender myself completely to him. My mate's smile is brilliant as he pulls me in against his side. I only half-hear Aunt Katherine's solemn words of joining, just enough to respond appropriately and

take pleasure in Ro's confident replies. I have little room for anything else at this moment. My entire world has narrowed to Ro as the ritual joins us. Although it is more of a formality preceding the mating to come, it means everything to be standing here with him and declaring ourselves before the coven and all the gods who preside over the family. It's the soothing rumble of Ro's vows, however, that weigh my heart with emotion and make me blink back tears of joy.

Some slip out when the red cords—red of the joining bloodlines—are wrapped around our joined hands, and I swear I can feel it soul deep. I'm certain Ro feels it too because he sighs with wonder and his hand tightens around mine as a dazzling smile lights his face. And then it's suddenly over and the legal paperwork is signed. Now is the moment. While everyone goes back to the booked reception room to begin celebrating our joining, Ro and I will be mating in truth. Everyone knows it too. There are a few happy and teasing smiles as I kick off my shoes. Ro's smile only grows wider as he leads me back closer to the edge, and I realize that everyone is waiting for the moment of the plunge.

Ro doesn't disappoint. He lifts me up high in his arms, pressing me against his chest as he seals his mouth over mine, his tongue claiming my mouth in the sweetest of kisses. The air shifts and tugs at my hair and dress as we drop, and he swallows my startled shout as we slide beneath the waters to the jubilant shouts of my family above now muffled by the sea. Ro's fins flick and sends us out away from the docks so that we may continue our descent in what he considers to be safer waters farther from human traffic.

His tail pumps languidly. He is in no hurry, each movement brushing his various fins against my calves and thighs. His tongue slides against my own as it penetrates my mouth,

making love with slow, slick glides. My body falls into a natural rhythm with his so that it almost feels like we are dancing intimately together as he swims. His palm strokes my cheek delicately, lovingly. I am cherished and one with him, and I revel in it as I slide my hands over him and return his kisses with just as much love and devotion. Drawing my legs together, I slide my inner calves along the upper length of his tail, and I feel my sweet mate shudder in response. His kisses turn bolder and more heated, drawing me into a feverish dance.

His mouth breaks away from mine to trace nibbling kisses. I'm momentarily shocked by the feeling of air pressing unnaturally in and out of my lungs but I relax into it as I recall that this is another of the gifts of his kind. Something about the magic in his saliva creating a filter barrier deep in the back of my throat that will last until I consume something solid or until it naturally dissipates. It gives me the chance to admire the beauty all around me—especially the vision of my mate sliding his tongue along my collarbone and the tops of my breasts. His teeth snip at the straps holding my dress in place and the fabric tears so easily as he tugs it away that my belly jumps in reaction.

Ro's grip tightens on me and slides me up higher against his body so that he can peel the cups back with his teeth, exposing one breast and then the other to the questing length of his tongue. One of the arms banded around me slides down, relaxing just enough to let him explore. His claws trail a light path down before they encounter the band of material. He ignores it for the time being and slides his hand over it to descend and cup my ass cheek firmly as he plucks my nipple with his hot lips and rubs the textured surface of his tongue against it before turning his attention to the other one. All the

while he continues to swim, and as we descend into the cold depths, I feel my hair spooling out around me to tease silken paths along my skin.

I'm quite certain that I've lost every flower and pin that held my hair in place. Sure enough, when I look up at the surface above us and the sunlight shimmering through the water, I can see the floating flowers rising to the surface. I watch them twist away on the currents and my fingers dig into Ro's arms with excitement as I feel him slow and the whisper-soft touch of his flaring tailfins brushing the soles of my feet.

There is a sudden, sharp pressure, and then the water ripples as the fabric of my dress is parted and slides off my back. Ro pulls it free from between our bodies and releases the tattered remains of the dress so that it floats away in a slow descent. Freed of the barrier, his hand comes up between my bared legs to slice through my underwear and cup my bare pussy within his palm. He works the pads of his fingers, and the webbing between them, against my sex in a contrast of textures and sensations.

I arch into him, my pleasure rising quickly at the soft and firm touches around my clit and my labia. The fluttery touch of his pelvic fins slides into place, and I jackknife against him, earning a growl from my mate. His free arm lashes back around my waist tightly and dragging me down his body further so that now not just the tip of his fins touch me, but the length of them brush and tease my entrance from the hood of my clit down to the bottom of my slit. I quiver against him, suddenly feeling boneless as I writhe in his hold with the hope that the bulge barely brushing my center will part and give me what I need. His cock doesn't extrude no matter how I wriggle on it. He nips my skin gently, giving me nothing more than a



brief sting that makes my sex tighten with need at his silent warning.

His mouth moves over me as his fins gather lubrication from his slit's sheath and spread it over my sex until even in the water I'm slippery with it. My hips arch, begging for more, aware of his tongue sliding up my neck and jaw to capture more of the pheromones I have no doubt that I'm pumping out of the most sensitive zones of my skin. He begins to press sweet kisses to my mouth, and he adjusts his hold on me, his pelvis canting forward with a violent flutter of his pelvic fins that makes me orgasm on the spot. My channel convulses on nothing one moment, and the next his mouth plunders mine as his cock fills and stretches me by the sheer size of him as he extrudes in one deep motion into me.

Speared on his cock, his arms slide into position. His forearms are pressed along my sides and back as he curls his fingers around my shoulders, anchoring me to him as I clench and quiver along his length that is rocked into me, riding me through one orgasm and pushing me directly into another. The sting of his barbs piercing my sides and back are barely a footnote, adding a hint of pain to the pleasure rolling and cresting through me in waves. That sting grows hot, and I'm flooded with a surge of intense pleasure that I scream into Ro's mouth with sensation exploding all at once through me.

His pelvis begins to move then, in desperate rolling motions that drag his twisting cock out of me before driving it back in. Each forward press brings the top of his sheath against my clit, and his pelvic fins continue to flutter there in tiny erotic caresses. With the storm flowing through me, it is not enough. It merely stirs my appetite more as I rock against him, rubbing as my legs clamp around the back of his tail in search of purchase. I lift my hips eagerly, meeting him with every thrust,

driving him deeper and harder into my aching depths. Ro growls against my mouth as his pelvic fins curl inward and begin to vibrate.

I am awash in pleasure. It spears from my core shooting through me in a relentless crash that sends me arching sharply in his grip. His growl deepens in response, his rut becoming more frenzied as his cock thickens and begins to vibrate within me as it releases spray upon spray of hot seed. He croons as he spills into me, and I tremble with each hot stream. My body greedily draws it in with every convulsion around his length as another climax sweeps over me, a bubble of magic expanding and growing around us, created by our interweaving magic with our release.

It vibrates around us with the culmination of our pleasure, the magic swirling around and through us, penetrating us as his venom continues to pump into me, drawing out my ecstasy and attuning my magic to his inexplicably.

We are forged together by water and magic, refashioned within the transmutable power of the sea.

I feel empty when his cock withdraws from me though it sends a shiver through me when it slips free. I'm tempted to see if I can coax him into a second round when there is an ache that lances my chest, and I feel my skin tearing in a way that is painful one moment and then gone the next. Water no longer rushes into my mouth and yet I'm breathing. Glancing down, I follow Ro's gaze to my chest to see three thin lines rimmed in red, pulsing and fluttering as they pump oxygen-rich water in and out of my body, filtering the air I need to survive.

I meet Ro's eyes and he smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling with absolute delight. He winds his fingers with mine—as much as he can with the flexible webbing that spans

his fingers and now mine as well—and draws me with him as he turns us through the water, and I see all the beauty of the coastal waters stretched out before me. The water suddenly appears even clearer and everything within the sea richer in color now. It's an entirely new world of magic opening up for me. I'm naked as the day I was born, and yet I don't mind as I return his smile and kick my feet, feeling the water catching along the webbing of my toes, propelling me forward with him into this great new unknown.

The party is carrying on without us, but it can wait for a moment longer while I surrender myself to the possibilities of this new life with Ro between the land and the depths.



For more Durmont Witches and see where it all began, pick your copy of [Toadstools and Vampires Kisses!](#)

## About the Author

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S.J. Sanders is a mom of two toddlers and one adult living in Anchorage, Alaska. She has a BA degree in History, but spends most of her free time painting, sculpting, doing odd bits of historical research, and writing.

While she has more research orientated writing under another pen name, her passion is sci-fi and paranormal romance of which she is an avid reader.

After years of tinkering with the idea, and making her own stories up in her head, S.J has begun to seriously pursue writing as an author of Sci-fi Romance utilizing her interests in how cultures diversify and what they would look like on an extra-terrestrial platform with humans interacting with them and finding love.



# SURFING HER SEA MONSTER

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EVANGELINE PRIEST

AN OBSIDIAN RIFT UNIVERSE SHORT STORY

# Author's Note

Minato, a shengard and Master of the Deeps, has lost his connection to his land-bound soulmate, Kaia.

With only a few days in human form, Minato needs to somehow find her and reconnect their bond.

Unfortunately, there are shadowy forces at work trying to keep the two fated mates apart...



Please note: Although there will be tentacles, extra appendages, and graphic sex between consenting adults, this is overall a sweet abridged story with generally cozy vibes.

The story will be expanded and published on its own in early 2024.

Featured tropes include: fated mates; instalove; cinnamon roll hero; size difference; shared dreaming; mind-linking.





## MINATO

THE SUN DIPS BELOW THE HORIZON.

I wait until the sky matches the indigo water I'm accustomed to. With the moon hidden over the next few days, the inky darkness of night camouflages me quickly.

Perfect.

I break the surface of the water, emerging from the far side of the pier. My eight arms merge to create two legs upon which I trudge up the shoreline. My tentacles settle against my body, merging with my skin to create artful whorls that could be tattoos. A bluish glow emanates from my body, but that, too, will recede.

At least, that is my hope. The tidal magic granted to elite shengard guarantees a complete human transformation during a new moon. It's just so rare for any of us to take advantage of

it, since very few have a reason to be near the surface, let alone take part in land-based activities.

Especially after the traveling island of Mu vanished, and many potential mates were lost to the rift, there was no reason for my people, the Neres, to care about the surface.

I thank the stars that my mate's explorer family were spared the fate of their people. Maru, my second in command, was not so lucky. His potential mate was on the island when it disappeared beyond the veil.

It's why he is with me now. To ensure that my mate hasn't met the same end.

Maru waits beneath the pier holding a black bundle. He has already taken on his human disguise. "Here. I have heard from agents that this is the best types of coverings for an occasion such as this."

After a few tries, I finally clasp the tiny fastener and open the clothing bag. The garments inside were all black. "Are you sure about this?"

Maru waves his hand over his body in answer. He has already donned the garments. A simple black jacket with a white-collared undershirt. A pair of matching trousers. Exceptionally boring.

His waist-length black hair is tied at the nape of his neck, and slithers along his back like a living thing. "I have spied a few human minds, along with the intel from our scouts. This outfit passes for formal wear in this realm."

I shrug and start with the shirt and jacket, checking the fit against Maru's configuration. Gritting my teeth, I adjust the buttons on the shirt when they were misaligned. Maru helps

with the ludicrous ribbon around my neck that he calls a bowtie.

He secures it, then steps back. “Now the pants.”

There were a few mistakes and a near tragedy with the zipper, but in the end, Maru deems me acceptable. Finally, he hands me a weapon to put inside my jacket pocket.

“That is not a weapon, sir. Well, I suppose anything can be,” he adds, correcting himself. “However, that is a phone, and its main purpose is for communication. Everyone seems to have one, though most use it to watch videos and post pictures.”

“Pictures? As in intel? Research?”

Maru shrugs. “Perhaps they are amassing a digital archive for future generations.”

A few dozen questions pop into my head, but I let them go. Now is not the time to indulge my technological curiosity.

The device is intuitive enough. It’s something the peoples of Mur would have dreamed up had they been allowed to exist.

The thought of Kaia’s people’s demise makes the anxiety well within me once more. “Let’s get on with it.”

Maru leads me to a long metal box on wheels. In my research, I know it is a conveyance, yet I don’t recall one looking so out of proportion. “What is this?”

“It is a car, and will be our transport.” As if in emphasis, he opens the door and waits for me to slip inside of it. He climbs in after me.

“I thought cars were supposed to be smaller?” This one is longer than the ones I remember seeing. It was also black. What is their obsession with this black color?

Maru shrugs. “This type is apparently, for it seems humans think the color goes well with everything.”

I clear my head from nonsense thoughts and shift my inner compass toward her.

*Kaia.*

The bond that ties us together has stretched so thin, to be barely a vibration. But I know she lives. It’s the same way as I would know that my arm had rotted and fallen off my body.

“I have recruited a driver to take us to the venue where your mate is likely to be.”

“Are you sure she is at this venue? She could be anywhere in this large terrain.”

“The magazine clipping that has been scavenged by our scouts shows various important current events. One of which is an auction that is hosted by Friends of the Ocean at the aquarium this evening.”

Maru hands over the glossy pamphlet. The auction itself doesn’t interest me. The feature article does.

In it is the image of a family standing in front of a too-familiar vessel. The Oceana. There are two versions of the image. It is labeled “Then and Now.”

On one side, a young couple with a little girl stands on a dock. On the facing page, the couple is older, and instead of a little girl stands a captivating young woman. One who has lived in my soul for years.

*There you are, my Kaia.*

The little caption beneath it claims this moment with the Solis family was captured over a year ago. That’s when I lost contact with her.

She lives. That's all that matters. When I'm assured of her safety, then I can investigate the reason our bond has been severed.

"I will find you soon," I say to her image.

"Let us hope so, sir. We only have three days in this form. We find your mate. Verify she's safe. Then we can move on."

"We won't need three days. We will find her tonight."



## MINATO

GODS, I HATE BEING DRY.

“Do you see anything, sir?” Maru’s voice sounds from our shared battle comm link planted into our jaws.

I see too much. The gala lights and the reflective sparkles that accompany them are overwhelming. But it is nothing compared to the noise.

I understand now why black could be a desirable color. In a world so loud, understated silence becomes alluring.

“Yes. The problem is what I’m not seeing. Namely, any sign of Kaia and her boat.” I don’t doubt the intel. Not really. I just hate not knowing all the variables. “Gods, these people are insufferable.”

“I wish you had allowed me to be your conduit. At least this way we would have been able to stagger our transformation

times before you could look for her.”

I would have been of the same mind. However, Maru cannot feel the urgency that I do. Kaia is my soulmate. She is connected to me, not him. And even though it has been a long time since I’ve heard her, her life force still thrums within me, no matter how quiet.

It is that same life force that tells me she is anxious.

“She is near,” I tell Maru, “and she is worried about something.”

“Copy that. I’m sending sentinels to create a perimeter.”

I do not acknowledge my second’s plans. He knows his job. I will focus on mine.

“Stuffed crab cake?”

The question startles me. It is yet another one of those servers with a platter full of abominations. I would not make that mistake of eating what they deem food. “I am fine, thank you.”

Though I decline the server’s offer, I pick up a fluted glass full of sweet, bubbly liquid for camouflage as I weave my way through the exhibit. There has to be some place large where they would showcase a boat.

I keep pace with the meandering crowd, careful not to seem out of place as I wind through tunnels that showcased water. Despite myself, the various exhibits draw me in. It is a clever way to show my natural home in a world of land dwellers. Too bad it is wildly inaccurate.

What would they do if they knew there were entire cities in the ocean’s heart? The tapestry and texture of the deeps is beyond

comparison. The landlocked do not even have words to embrace the concept.

Kaia had been enchanted by it. She had only visited once, when we were both children. But I kept the memory of it alive within her when I would visit her in dreams.

We could share our dream space for years. It made the years of training feel less lonely to know that she would wait for me. When her presence disappeared so abruptly, it was as if a cord had been gouged from my soul.

I need to find her.

As if I conjured her from my wildest imaginations, Kaia walks into view. Dressed in a floor-length black dress, her dreamy gaze enraptured as she looks at the animals swimming in the water.

I open my senses, not quite trusting my eyes. But the vision before me isn't a dream. My soul recognizes her. Just like the first time we met, seeing her is like coming home. "I found her Maru."

"Excellent. We will maintain the perimeter, just in case there's any danger."

I tap the communicator so that I can have privacy.

Questions claw up my throat. *Where she had been? Why had she severed our connection?* But she would not recognize this form, and I do not want to cause a scene in my true form here.

Besides, I need to make sure that her worries were not because of an external threat.

"So beautiful," I say.

She lifts those luminous eyes toward me. I could get lost in them. As dark as the polished jewels of Lemuria.



She smiles. “This is one of my favorite exhibits.”

My gaze flicks to the underwater scene behind the glass before meeting hers again. “That’s beautiful, too, I suppose.”

She lifts her eyebrow, her lips twisting into a smirk. “Clever.” She salutes me with her champagne flute and walks away.

I’m left standing there, trying to process what happened. She’s halfway across the exhibit before I hurry after her. “Wait! I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She doesn’t slow her stride. “You all never do.”

Now, what does that mean?

Maru’s voice buzzes into my ear. “She’s safe, sir? Our mission is over, then?”

Ignoring Maru, I follow Kaia’s path, who quickly melts into the crush of people all wearing this damnable formal black attire.



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU LOST HER? IS THERE AN ENEMY assailant?”

I ignore Maru’s disbelieving tone. “It’s not like I can cause a scene and knock down all in my path.” Tempting, though it may be. “Stand down and hold your position. I’ll find her again soon enough.”

I will not lose her this time.

Her appearance was a surprise, that was all. That’s surely why I fumbled my encounter with her so terribly. I’ll do better next

time.

I home in on her, feeling for our connection. The echo of her drifts toward an open gallery where there are several posters on display.

Of course. I've been looking for actual boats on display for this auction. I should have realized that there would be reproductions on display.

Instead of looking for Kaia, I look for the display of the Oceana. Relief floods me once more when I see her speaking to a few people in front of her table.

I remind myself that she does not know this form, and so I must work even harder to win her trust. Undeterred by her previous rebuff, I approach her once more, circling the tables so as not to make her feel uncomfortable.

Kaia speaks to a group that wanders over to the table. She smiles at the gaudily dressed folk, answering their questions, but I can tell that her smiles were disingenuous. That same flutter of anxiety that I felt from her before bubbles within me once more.

When the group drifts away and Kaia is alone once more, her face falls into a scowl. The clipboard seems to be the source of her ire. Whatever she sees, I wish to banish it from her vision.

“Has that clipboard offended you?”

Somehow she looks down upon me, even though I'm fully a head taller than she was.

“In principle, yes.”

“Anything I can do about it?”

She shrugs. A false note rings from her throat. “Oh, I don't know? Maybe you can buy my boat so that I don't have to

endure speaking to vapid, social media influencers who are looking for their next viral video campaign.”

I don't understand half of the terms she uses, but I understand the meaning behind the words. I nod as if giving her request some consideration. “And you don't believe that—” I scan the names on her auction form “—McKinley is open for deep sea exploration?”

Her face brightens in amusement. She had one arm across her middle, her other arm propped up, twirling a full flute of champagne. “I would bet my PhD on it,” she says. “And what about you? What are you interested in exploring?”

*You. Everything about you.* Instead, I say, “I'm always looking for the next adventure. Why not one out on the open seas? It's been a while since I have traveled the oceans and would love to revisit it.”

“A while, huh?” She flicks her gaze up and down my body, assessing something. “Too busy in the boardroom?”

“More like battles.”

Her eyes brighten, a lovely pink hue flushes her cheeks. “Oh, are you a military man?”

“In a manner of speaking.” I do not wish to speak to her about what I've done in service to my people. I like the idea of pretending, though, especially when I'm pretending to be someone who can solve all of her problems. “What's your favorite thing about the ocean?”

“I can't put a finger on it. It's hard to describe something that feels like your home.”

“That's exactly how I feel.”

Over the next few minutes, we trade various tidbits of information. At first, I can tell she's testing my knowledge and sincerity, but our conversation easily gives way to genuine excitement. Especially when I tell her about my own firsthand experiences.

"You have not gone to the Challenger deep!" she exclaims. I love her this way. Her entire being is radiant with joy.

As the area she refers to is part of my normal rotation as a shengard, I shrug. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I absolutely have." There. Playful, innocent, kind. That is the angle I can use to make sure she doesn't withdraw from me.

A hint of mischief dances along her lush lips. "Tell me honestly. Were you trying to see the remains of the Titanic?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask what she means when another group comes up. She seems torn, obviously wishing to continue our conversation, but I allow some space and I tell her I'll be back.

The next few hours feel like a dream as we pull apart and come back together several times throughout the night. Each time we do, our conversations start exactly where we left off, as if there had been no breaks.

This shared intimacy is exactly what I wish for when I finally reveal who I am. I just need her not to reject me until we get to that point.

I check in with Maru, who gives another all clear. "Sir, you might want to move this along. I feel there's something in the air that I cannot put my finger on."

Though I wish to dismiss him, I agree. We've been through too much not to trust his instincts implicitly.

“This event is nearly over. I believe I know a way to end it once and for all. What kind of currency do I have, and how much am I able to spend?”

“The details are on your phone. As far as I understand it, and how much our allies wish to recruit the shengard, and you specifically, to their cause, your spending cap is limitless.”

That is exactly what I need to hear. I put my untouched champagne onto a random tray and head straight over to Kaia’s auction table. There have been several other bids on this auction. It seems like poor McKinley is way under budget.

Good. The idea of exploiting the seas does not sit well with me, let alone the thought of Kaia enduring such a vapid company.

In the end, I calculate the waiting minutes of the auction with the cadence of bids. I decide to double the last bid on the form.

A gong reverberates into the room, signaling the end of the auction.

Several staff members collect the clipboards, and I was alone with Kaia once more.

“What’s the matter?” I ask. “I would think you would be happy now that the auction is over.”

She grimaces, nodding toward a group of men. “I think that random dude won. I think he was more interested in talking to me than the ocean.”

I lift my gaze in time to see the man wink at my Kaia. A shuddering revulsion churns in my gut. She understated her dislike.

I mentally skin him alive, fantasizing feeding chunks of him to my pet sharks. The thought makes me smile. He catches me

looking at him. Whatever he sees in my face makes him blanch and walk swiftly away.

Good.

The servers signal that the dinner buffet is open. The crowd of people shifts with the rest of the pack toward their seats.

“Come on, you probably haven’t eaten this entire time with these people talking to you.” I nod my head toward the food.

Kaia bites her bottom lip, and for a moment, I fear she will turn me down. “You know what? You’re right.” She follows me, her brow furrowed as she mindlessly plucks items from random food trays.

When she doesn’t respond to my banter, I know she’s distracted. At least she doesn’t argue when I lead her to a table.

“You don’t have to worry so much,” I say, pushing a glass of wine her way. “Everything will work out.”

She downs the wine in a single swig. “When you’ve lived the year I have, you wouldn’t believe that.” She returns to pushing her salad limply around her plate.

A year. When I stopped hearing her. I want to ask what she means, but then the emcee takes the stage. After a polite round of applause and other crowd-endearing chatter, he gets down to business.

“Now, the moment we have all been waiting for. Here are the results, ladies and gentlemen.”

Wide screen monitors displayed throughout the event hall showcases the winning bids for all the auctions.

Kaia focuses on the one for Oceana Adventures where it shows that I’m the winner of the auction.

The flash of relief on her face is short-lived before her brow crinkles again. “Minato enterprises? Who’s that?” She looks around the sea of people.

“Oh, that’s right, I don’t think I formally introduced myself. I am Minato Osharu, of Minato Enterprises.” I grin, extending my hand to her. Instead of taking it, she doubles over in a fit of laughter. “Glad to see you still find me amusing.”

She dabs at the corner of her eyes, then finally slips her hand in mine. Her skin is as soft as I remember. “Kaia Solis. Well played, Minato Osharus.”

“Just Minato, please. Let’s just say I don’t quite identify with my surname.” Especially since it belongs to the king of the deeps.

Her smile dims too swiftly, and a sweeping sadness wells from within her. It does not show on her face, though, which is still beaming in laughter at my game. “I hope you treat that ship well,” she says. “I have many fond memories of it.”

I tilt my head to the side. “And why do you think you cannot continue having those memories?”

Kaia’s regal eyebrow arches up. “Because the ship is yours now. You won the auction.” She says it slowly, as if she’s explaining something to a child.

“I won the auction, yes, but I don’t want the ship. It’s yours. It should remain with you and your family.”

I feel the whisper of hope and delirious wonder that surges within her. Yet, she still holds herself back. “I can’t possibly take it. If I had enough capital, I would’ve bought it myself, but—”

I gently take her hand in mine. “You should have it. It’s been in your family and you have a passion for it. Of all the people

who deserve it, it is you.”

“I don’t know what to say.” She says at a loss.

“You can tell me when we set sail tomorrow.” At her puzzled expression, I smile. “Remember, I still won that auction, and so you still owe me.”

A guarded expression shuttered her eyes. “And what’s that?”

I point to the marquee that features her entry into the auction, the same image featured in the glossy magazine. “See there? A three-day excursion hosted by an expert hospitality crew. That was what I was bidding for, not your ship.”

“You bid just for the three-day trip? I don’t know what your bid was, but considering the other interested parties, I’m sure you could have gotten an all-inclusive luxury trip for a fraction of what you paid.”

“But where’s the adventure in that? And I don’t want a luxury cruise. I want what you were talking about earlier. Discover uncharted islands and new species. Get out of the boardroom and onto a deck with sun on my face.”

I can’t quite figure out all the emotions that flicker over her face, but I will learn them soon enough. That I can feel her desire to say yes pushes me further.

“Hell, maybe even catch some fish and eat it for dinner. Come on, you know you like the idea of facing the open seas once more. You admitted you miss it. That you can keep your vessel it’s a win-win.”

I know I have her on the hook when she bites her lip and gives in to a broad smile. Gods, I can kill for her. “So what do you say, doctor? Are you ready to host a three-day oceanic adventure?”





KAIA

*WHAT DO YOU SAY DOCTOR?*

When a tall dark and handsome stranger gives you exactly what you want, of course the answer is yes.

Even when your finely-honed, creep-radar of a gut tells you to pause and think *this is too good to be true*, your double-digit bank account punches said gut and screams at you to take the money guilt-free. Sort it out later.

It's embarrassing how quickly I cave, even when I had an inkling to hesitate. *Don't seem so desperate.*

But that's the thing. I *am* desperate. Or *was* as of three hours ago.

And now, I'm prepping my own damn ship after wrestling with banks, lawyers, and whoever else to get it back into my name.

My inheritance is still tangled up in some trust loophole, but that I can live without.

The Oceana? I need her more than life. I lost more than just my parents during a freak accident. Without my memories, I don't know who I'm supposed to be. The closest thing to home and peace I've felt recently has been on this boat.

I go room by room, straightening and cleaning. Everything is neat and organized as usual, but I need to get rid of this extra energy somehow. There is no way I could stay put in my hotel room.

Knowing I don't have to stay at questionable Airbnb's or couch surf with some of my friends has made me feel hopeful for the first time in a long time.

When my room is as clean as it can be, and I tackle the shared spaces until they sparkle as well.

I go out to the deck to pick up stray cups and towels I left on the chairs. Rolling the towels, I tuck it under my arm while I gather up the trash. They usually aren't so messy, but tonight called for a little bit of celebration. Some Chinese takeout. A lot of cheap booze. Even so, they all went below decks and turned in early.

A whisper catches my attention. I swivel my head to see if anyone else came up, but I'm very much alone. With the moon hidden, the deck is full of shadows.

A strange chittering like the clacking of shells rises from the far side of the boat. I've never felt fear on the Oceana. Yet, I'm struck by the creepy feeling that someone is watching me.

"Jailah? Are you out here?" There's no reason for my captain to be out here, but maybe she came up for some fresh air?

The sudden silence is almost as nerve-wracking as the inhuman noises. I open my mouth to call out once more, but before I do, an eerie voice echoes my words right back to me.

“Jailah? Are you out here?”

I freeze. I don't even breathe. As I scan the deck, something pulls at the shadows as if it hides behind a curtain.

Darkness ripples in the air before bubbling over with a hiss. Whatever it is drips and forms amorphous shapes until the bulbous oil slick becomes a distinct figure with a lollipop head, taffy body, and too many flailing limbs to count.

A sharp line of a mouth splits open in its head. “Jailah? Are you there?”

Its vocal mimicry gets better each time.

So far, it hasn't moved closer. Nor does it seem to see me. Yet.

With my luck, I don't bank on positive outcomes.

I hear movement below. My crew. Their laughter pierces the air, and the black thing swivels its head like a wild animal toward the source of the sound.

A dead calm steels my nerves. I refuse to let this thing get anywhere near my crew.

It takes one step forward. I snap the towel that I tucked under my arm toward its head. It cracked through the air like a whip.

It doesn't hit the thing, but that wasn't my goal. I just wanted to gain its attention, and I did exactly that.

The thing pivots toward me now. Its mouth splits open again, hinging its head back. It unleashes an unholy roar that sounds like a thunderous freight train.

I don't wait to see what it does next. I take a running leap and launch myself over the ship's railing into the water below. The darkness follows me overboard, splashing a few hundred feet away.

I didn't prepare myself enough. Already my lungs burn with need. I inhaled some water into my nose when I dived in, and the sting of the salt makes my eyes tear. I fight the urge to kick up to the surface, but I refuse to give away my location.

Of course, this would happen. A new outlook on life with my boat, and here I am dying next to it. The oil slick that followed me creates ripples in the water as it searches for me.

Just a little farther away, and I can fight my way back to the surface.

Spots enter my vision, and everything around me was a blurry haze. It's so cold. I need to breathe; I need to get to the surface, but I can't. Not yet.

My vision narrows into pinpoints of light, and in one moment, I remember my parents. A true memory, not something I imagine while looking at old photo albums. They were scared.

I reach for them, but the darkness takes them. It will take me, too, I'm convinced of it, when a warm touch envelopes me. I gasp in shock before realizing I shouldn't be able to breathe underwater. Blue tendrils surround me until I'm cocooned in an iridescent glow.

I wonder if the oil slick creature can see me now.



BETWEEN THE SPACE OF BREATHS, I FIND MYSELF IN A DARK room.

Lips as light as rose petals graze against my eyelids and then my cheeks.

Not dark. My eyes are closed, and I'm dreaming. It usually takes a moment before my mind settles into my link with Minato.

My lips stretch into a smile as sweet kisses land on the corners of my mouth. "Your aim can improve."

The answering chuckle makes my pulse race. "Oh look who knows so much. Perhaps my *aim* landed exactly where I wanted it to." To make his point, he nuzzles just under my chin, blowing raspberries where my neck meets my shoulder.

I shriek with laughter. "Not fair when I can't fight back!"

"I thought we agreed last time that all is fair in love and war. Wasn't that your argument when you were the one winning our last game?"

My eyes finally flutter open. I drink in the sight of my adoring Neresian mate. His blue eyes glow like his bioluminescent tentacles. I can get lost in them. "I don't think I should be held accountable for what I say in times of torture."

He throws his head back and laughs. The cords of his muscular neck and chest ripple beneath his skin. From the waist up, he can pass for a man—albeit, a really tall and muscular one who has trained his life in warfare.

From the waist down, however...instead of two human legs, Minato has eight muscular limbs each nearly as long as me. They are similar to tentacles except they have suckers along they're length.

And, he has a *special* appendage that I cannot wait to experience in the flesh. For now, we need to satisfy ourselves in our shared bond space.

“Torture? You don’t know the meaning of the word.” He scoops me up and rolls me in his arms. We swirl together in cocoon of bubbles until I laugh so hard my stomach aches.

He settles me across his body, a heavy hand resting on my back while I lay across his torso. I reach out to stroke his smaller tentacles that grow from his head. They’re so fine, they’re like hair. They tease my fingers, curling around my wrists.

“How long are you staying this time?” I know my question breaks the spell of peace and light between us, but I have to ask it nonetheless. I hate having something lingering in the back of my mind.

He takes his time answering me, but the way he holds me tighter against his body, the way his lower limbs curl around my legs possessively tells me that the answer is not long.

“Soon, we will be together,” he says. “When it’s safe—”

I place gentle fingers over his lips. “Remember our deal? No shop talk. You don’t need to talk about the war, and I won’t talk about my family’s crazy schemes. Just us when we’re here.”

“As you wish.” He grasps my hand and kisses each fingertip, sucking a little when he does. The pressure pulls on all my nerve endings, sending direct lightning bolts between my legs.

I squirm against him just from the little bit of playfulness. That was likely his goal all along. Two can play this game.

I unfurl a little tentacle around my wrist, and suck the little tip into my mouth. I trace each of the little suckers on the end

with my tongue.

A building purr builds up in his chest, rumbling louder as I move on to another tentacle. Then another.

I lock gazes with him as I place one on my nipple. It feels like tiny little mouths suck on me at the same time. I gasp at the sensations.

Minato growls at my play and seizes my hips in both of his powerful hands. “You win,” he says, and grinds me against his body, his lips crushing against mine in a claiming kiss.

Yes, this was what I want. What I need. Him claiming and possessing me. Needing me.

Here, I’m important to him.

“You are important. Let me show you.”

The intensity of his gaze makes me melt inside. He pulls my body close against his, and I feel the weight of his desire for me as he cups my face in his hands. I arch into him as his lips crash against mine.

My senses are overloaded with sensation as his tongue explores my mouth hungrily, completely giving over to me. His hands roam my body, and it feels like he’s claiming me with each touch.

As we finally break apart, I lean against him, my forehead coming to rest on his chest, as I catch my breath.

“I love you,” he murmurs into my hair.

My heart races, and I can feel the heat rising up from my cheeks. “I love you too,” I whisper, my voice shaking. With him, I don’t have to pretend to be strong. I can be vulnerable and soft.

He would never hurt me.

He kisses his way down my body, a trail of tentacles marking his passage. When he reaches the apex of my thighs and licks between them, I arch back into a swoon.

His lower limbs curl over me possessively, propping me as he needs to gain better access. He slides his fingers inside me as he teases my clit with his torturous lips. “That’s it my sweet mate. Open for me, now. I don’t want to hurt you when I take you.”

The thrill of taking his cock pushes me over the edge. I shatter over him even as he continues to sweet talk my pussy. “There you go, my darling. One more finger, you can do it.”

I’m stuffed full with his fingers. I grind my hips, looking for my relief. Every part of my being pleads to be filled by him, and he finally answers me.

He pulls his hands away and pulls back just enough for me to see his special appendage emerge from a hidden seam just below his waist. The turgid tentacle is narrow at the tip and flares wider at the base.

“Slowly, my love. There’s no rush. Just nice and slow.” He coaxes me with gentle words as he slides his hard length between my wet folds, slowly pushing himself in me. He closes his eyes, his mouth open in pure ecstasy as he fills me inch by inch.

The ridges along each suction cup lights up my nerve endings.

He moves his hips in a slow and steady rhythm. I can feel every stroke, deeper and harder, sending me higher and higher until I’m screaming out his name.

His thrusts become faster and more urgent as he reaches his own climax.



We stay there together, a tangled mass of limbs, breathing heavily. My heart is pounding, and I still feel the euphoria of our shared pleasure.

“Don’t leave me, Minato. Please don’t leave me.”

“Never.”



## KAIA

BEFORE I CAN THINK SOME MORE ABOUT IT, I'M HAULED upward. I break the surface of the water, gulping in air.

I realize two things. I'm not as oxygen starved as I should have been. And I'm not alone.

Minato stares at me, studying my face as if in concern. Why would he care so much?

For a moment, a different face that glowed blue with bioluminescent tendrils transposes with his. I shake my head clear.

I try to recall that memory, but it slips away like water through my fist.

I put it away. He probably just thinks I'm the strange girl he has to rescue from the water.

“There’s something in the water. Be careful—” my words are cut off when huge spotlights blind me. My crew turned on the lights off the side of the boat, and I could see that nothing else is around.

Minato continues to stare at me. “Are you okay?”

I nod, confused. I didn’t trust my voice to speak.

By unspoken agreement, we both swim to the side of the vessel. He let me go up first, and I climb the ladder as shaky as I was my grip for sure.

Jailah and her first mate, Diego, pull me up. “What happened?” she says, as she’s assessing me for injuries.

What would I tell my team? I heard random whispers and noises? There was some kind of shadow monster stalking the deck, mimicking my voice? That an oil slick blob thing was intent on finding me and doing God knows what to me? That launching myself overboard was the only thing I could think of to make sure that everyone else was safe?

Before I can come up with an excuse, Minato offers his perspective. “We were thinking of having a moonlight swim.”

Jailah folds her arms across her chest. “It’s a new moon. There’s no moonlight to speak of.”

“Well, some things are better in the dark.”

The way he says that makes it seem like our actions were more than it should’ve been. It has a desired effect, though. They stop asking more questions.

“Well, since we are awake already, might as well use this adrenaline that’s racing in my veins. Otherwise we’re going to waste.”

Jailah narrows her eyes at me as if I lost my mind. “Do you want us to push off now in the pitch dark?”

I try to capture nonchalant, but fail. “By the time we get everything ready, it’ll be late enough.”

I turn to Minato. I feel like I owe him something, but I don’t know why. “You saved me twice today. Once at the auction, and now this. I guess this is as good a time as any to show you around.”



## MINATO

I FOLLOW HER BELOWDECKS AS SHE GIVES CURSORY information about the direction of the sleeping quarters and main common areas. Once we are out of earshot of her crew, she motions to me to come closer. “I know you must have lots of questions. As do I. But I really don’t want to get into what happened right now, okay?”

“Sure. No need to talk about your fully clothed swan dive into the ocean on a moonless night. That’s a perfectly normal, everyday decision.”

She clenches her hands into little fists at her side. “Look, I don’t know or understand what happened, okay? That’s why I don’t want to talk about it.”

I work to keep the exasperation from my voice. “Just answer me this—are you okay?” Her heart-pounding terror called to me. I was afraid I would be too late to help her. As it was, I

had planned on sweet talking my way on board, and so was nearby.

I saw her leap over the rail into the water, with two hunter-seekers behind her. Creatures from the other side of the rift, they would have dragged her to the abyss.

Her face relaxes into a smooth mask. “I am now, and that’s all that matters. If you go here, you’ll see the map room.”

I humor her, and let the topic go for now. But, I will be damned if I ever let Kaia feel that level of terror again.

While she changes into clean dry clothes, I look around the map room. It’s a catchall room that contains various mementos. And though it was a tribute to her parents in the family and different versions of them posing in front of the boat, or on it, what caught my attention was the necklace and the shell that hung from it.

No wonder I’ve stopped hearing her. She stopped wearing it. But why? She promised never to take it off.

And yet she did not know me. And I am wrestling with myself to figure out if I should be the one to tell her or let fate grant her some mercy.

She came up to me answered they’ve been out in the water for a while.

“Where are your parents? If you don’t mind me asking?”

A practiced calm settles over her features. I recognize myself in it.

She crosses her arms across her chest. “Everyone says they’re dead. I know better.”

“Oh?”

Her fist trembles at her side. “After so long, they’ve been declared dead.”

“But you don’t believe that, do you?”

She shakes her head, her lips in a firm line. “It doesn’t matter what I believe.”

“It matters to me. If you say they’re alive, then I believe they are as well. I have considerable resources at my disposal and would love nothing more than to help you search for them.”

“Is that part of your three-day ocean excursion?” she says with a wry laugh. “Comb the entire ocean, find lost expeditions. And what shall we do on the third day?”

I pretend to think about it. “I don’t know. I hear playing on a beach is a popular choice.”

She laughs with tears shimmer in her eyes. “Well, I’ll at least be able to promise you one of those three things. One cove that I often track for the sea turtle migration is along the way and that might be a good place to stop in the morning or by the end of tomorrow.”

I quickly calculate. That would just leave one extra day as a buffer before my borrowed magic runs out. “I am at the mercy of your itinerary.”



MINATO

NEXT DAY

“ARE YOU DONE PLAYING TOUR GUIDE, SIR?”

“May I remind you that the only reason you’re alive is because of me?”

“Psh. Needing to listen to your clumsy advances to your already fated soul mate, I would say our balance is even. By the way, have you discovered why exactly your soul mate lacks all memory of you?”

The concern in Maru’s tone is not lost on me. If this has happened to Kaia, would this happen to others who have been fated? Is this the reason some have yet to find their mates through these long lonely years?

Unfortunately, I have little in the way of good news for him.

“No, and that troubles me. She should have full knowledge of

me, of us, and she does not.” Even more troubling is the fact that I can’t even connect with her at all, even in dreams.

I scanned a few of her journals, hoping she would reveal an event, but she hadn’t documented our relationship together. The only thing was her travels with her parents.

I relay that information to Maru. “Even if you do not uncover the cause, at least you know she is well.”

“Yes, but I fear that without a connection, I would lose contact with her once more. With the threat around her and her lost memory, I refuse to part with her.”

“And what will you do when you can no longer maintain this ridiculous human form? Take her in your tentacles and go overboard with her? I can hear the conversation now, ‘Let’s go under the sea, it will be a great splash.’”

I don’t dignify that comment with a remark. “Just get us to that damned island. Maybe since it was the last place, she remembered her parents discovering, it might unlock something inside her mind.”

“That won’t be a problem. It’s a straight shot. I’m surprised it had been left uncharted?”

“Perhaps it was on purpose. It could be the reason her parents are missing, and the source of her amnesia?”

“Or it could simply be a stop not worth noting.”

“Highly unlikely,” I add.

“Agreed, but we need to be prepared for all angles. “

“Am I interrupting a conversation?”

Kaia’s luxe voice cut through despite the roaring seas and engine noise. Maru’s image has disappeared in the waves. I



make a show of tapping my phone as if to end a conversation.  
“Nothing important. How are you feeling?”

The answering smile washes away all my pent up frustration.  
“Better now that I can see with my own eyes that we are headed toward a land mass. I was thinking I was going crazy when our own equipment couldn’t seem to pick it up.”

“Is that normal, Ms. Solis? Shall I contribute even more funds to upgrade some of your equipment?” I add, to lighten the mood. Though she smiles, it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. I want to smooth the worry from her brow.

“Honestly, it’s not normal, and I know that the equipment onboard is state-of-the art. Some things are custom, to be honest. Jailah and the others...they’re not just expert oceanographers and navigators. They’re also some of the most advanced engineers that my parents could recruit. Many of the modifications to this vessel they created under my father’s supervision.”

Before I can continue this line of questioning, Jailah waves at Kaia for attention. “Speaking of which, gotta see what’s up.”

I watch as she retreats for yet another emergency. Thinking back, Jailah had been the main voice of dissent throughout this excursion. Doubting the mechanics, the sensors, the maps...it was as if she was trying all she could to avoid this adventure.

I reach out to Maru. “I think there could be another reason this has turned into the voyage of the damned.” I share with him my suspicions that Kaia may have a traitor among her own crew. With a little bit of back and forth, we come up with a plan for me to have a little bit of alone time with Kaia.



## KAIJA

“I DIDN’T THINK YOU WOULD BE SUCH A MORNING PERSON?”

It’s barely dawn. The crew lowers the speedboat into the water. The plan is to hop aboard and do some preliminary exploring as the Oceana gets closer to dock.

The only reason I’m upright is the strength of the coffee that I’m flooding into my veins as fast as I possibly can.

Minato on the other hand looks fresh and energized, raring to go. The bastard.

It’s so unfair that men don’t have to fuss about skincare or serums.

I’d kill for his eyelashes...

“Considering the sun has yet to rise, I’d say that being a night person is more accurate.”

“Ah, insomniac. That I can get onboard with.” I nod toward the horizon where our beacons spot the land mass. “Ready for today’s adventure?”

He looks at me with an intensity that makes me pulse race. I know for a fact we’ve never met, and yet...there’s something about him that’s achingly familiar.

Perhaps he’s another one of the things I’ve forgotten from before last year. If that’s so, then he would have told me that we’ve met before.

I eyeball the seemingly hapless entrepreneur wrestling to put his life vest on. It barely fits across his chest. He's so tall with an athletic build that rivals a jacked up bear. I have a funny image in my mind that clinging to him would be safer than reaching for a life vest.

I swallow down the bitter thought as I do my last dregs of coffee.

If there's an upside to this year from hell, it's that I still have my boat and my crew. And, if I keep entertaining Minato, perhaps I'll be well-funded for a very long time.

Speaking of entertainment...

I climb into the speedboat. "We'll have a few hours to explore the island. The reef looks protected. Have you body surfed before?"

A mischievous glint flares in his eyes. "As a matter of fact, I love surfing. I can do it all day."

My cheeks heat up and cough to cover how flustered he's just made me. Thankfully, the speedboat motor starts on the first try. "Perfect. Let's head out and see about some surf time."

"I'm game for whatever you have planned."



Thank you for reading *Surfing Her Sea Monster*. Bonus scenes and epilogues will be available on my website at:

[evangelinepriest.com](http://evangelinepriest.com)

If you want to read more monster romances, check out *A Cherry on Top* (<https://books2read.com/monstrousappetites1>) which is part of the Monstrous Appetites, a slice of life, date night with bite series.

“Prey For Them” is featured in the charity anthology, [Monsters in Love: Aloha Nui Loa](#).

Click [HERE](#) for a preview.

## About the Author

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Evangeline Priest writes love at first bite paranormal romance featuring growly alpha heroes and women strong enough to tame them. She writes “monsters in space” science fiction romance as Eva Priest. Try out The Legion universe, starting with *Hunted*:

<https://evangelinepriest.com/book/hunted-the-legion-savage-lands-sector-1/>

She is usually within reach of coffee, chocolate, or a bowl of noodles.

Join her VIP community on Patreon where she shares NSFW art, excerpts, cover reveals, and featured stories each month.

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## Also by Evangeline Priest

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### *Obsidian City: Love and Monsters*

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Keeping Her Minotaur

*Monstrous Appetites*

[A Cherry on Top](#)

### *Obsidian City: The Vampire Accords*

[Blood Tithes](#)

SUCKERS

YD LA MAR





## Author's Note

In the depths of our shared past, Derrick and I fought our way out of the shadows. The beach became our refuge, our escape from the pain that haunted us. But my own demons led me astray, seeking solace in a sinister cult desperate for belonging.

That fateful night, when I convinced Derrick to join me, I was unaware of the horrors awaiting us. Together, we were driven to the brink of horror as we stumbled upon the cult's sinister intentions. Delizah, a pregnant woman, on the brink of sacrifice.

Igniting a daring rescue mission, Derrick and I set out to defy the darkness. Yet, our actions unknowingly summoned an ancient and malevolent force. It consumed him, leaving me desperate.

Now, the world teeters on the edge of oblivion. Delizah and I must uncover the cult's secrets, battling a monstrous deity hungry for dominion.

In a race against time, we must rescue Derrick and protect the world from impending doom. Can we overcome the encroaching darkness, or will we be consumed by the very evil we face?

Prepare for a dance with the occult, where loyalty and sacrifice collide, and the line between savior and monster becomes blurred.



This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to human sacrifice, violence, possession, cults, foul language, depressive memories, themes that may be disturbing to some readers.



## DERRICK

“COME ON, JUST TRUST ME,” HE BEGS.

He’s been at this for a while and I’m losing my patience.

“Why should I? It sounds like a bunch of cult shit.”

“It’s not,” he protests in earnest. “Trust me! Just go and see what they have to say.”

“I don’t believe you. What are you doing with these psychos, anyway? I’m not going to be worshipping some stupid octoface god. You’re nuts.”

James has been trying to get me to attend this strange priest robed cult gathering that worships a squid god from the tales of old. Nothing he says makes any damn sense, but he’s my best friend and I feel kind of bad for not believing in him—but who would? This is all crazy.

“Derrick. Do this for me,” he pleads. “Just go and you don’t even have to participate in anything.”

Doesn’t going constitute as participation? This fool is out of his mind. But damned if my guilt doesn’t eat at me when I reminisce about the time my dad beat me up and he was the only friend that would take me in when I needed help.

“Fuck!” I exclaim, throwing my hands up in defeat. “Fine. Any fishy shit, and I’m out.”

James laughs at the pun, but I’m too weirded out to join him. “Fuck yeah! I gotchu bruh. Just go with me. I swear they’re talking some sense. You just gotta give it a chance.”

James has always been into folklore and weird legends. His mind is always in the clouds and different worlds as he tries to escape his own reality with his mom strung out on who knows what. Mrs. Johnson means well and tries her best as a mother when she’s sober... but when she’s high as a fucking kite, nothing can help her.

She started getting worse when her husband left her for another woman, subsequently leaving her and James to fend for themselves when we were in high school. Sixteen is a horrible time for major life changes to happen because you’ve already become accustomed to routine and invested in the life you’ve built. James and his mother had to move into a trailer home shortly after when the bills started racking up, but they made that place as welcoming as they could—at least that’s what my memories told me.

James and I continue on to lunch on foot. The local sandwich shop, being so popular, has a line out the damn door all the way to the street. Good thing they’re known to be pretty quick with fulfilling orders. When it’s finally our turn at the register, the cashier smiles and asks, “The usual?”

“Yeah,” I tell her. “Thanks Jacqueline.”

The young college aged girl at the register puts our order in and the boys in the back are already starting the sandwich assembly line. We pay her and by the time we walk to the end, our lunch is already done and packaged. This is why I love this place.

Choosing one of the metal tables outside, James and I plop our asses down and rustle the wrapping open.

“Okay, so here’s the thing,” he starts before I can take my first bite. “They meet once every quarter.”

“This is already starting to sound like the meetings at work. I barely want to attend *those*,” I groan, trying to eat in peace without these revolving conversations.

“Nah, just hear me out!” he says, leaning in conspiratorially. “It’s hard to get in. You have to be personally invited by someone who has been with them for at least three years and vetted.”

Taking another bite out of my sandwich, I soak in everything he’s telling me and everything unsaid between the lines. This fucker has been in a damn cult for three years of our friendship and never breathed a word about it. I’m amazed and am now much more skeptical. What’s happening in these meetings? What was the reason for him to keep it to himself when we’ve always told each other everything—from when we take a shit to who we’ve finger fucked in the janitor’s closet at work?

*I guess there’s only one way to find out.*

“Is there a dress code I need to be aware of?” I prod.

James scoffs as he swallows the food in his mouth. “Come on man, be real.”

What the hell? And how am I supposed to do that with the squidface-worshiping cult? I still think all this crap is a hoax and James is a fool, but I keep it to myself for the time being. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. Finishing off my sandwich in silence, we end all conversation about his little dark club and head back to work.

Getting into the car, I drive us back onto the main road of the city, hoping to put this nonsense behind us, but of course, I wouldn't be so lucky. Seems the floodgates are now opened and James is rambling on and on about how he ended up in the cult and the crazy alters they worship.

I find myself running my hand down my face with some of the shit he's telling me. I thought this stuff only happened on television. This can't be real life.

"Dude. You're going to have to cut back on the crazy talk when we get back to the office," I mumble. James is already seen as one of the weird guys in the department. This wouldn't help his reputation at all.

"Oh, right. Right," he replies, nodding with seriousness. "It's supposed to be kept on the down-low."

Does he not see himself clearly? After a couple of decades since leaving high school, James' quirks have followed him into his adulthood.

We pull off the road and head to an underground garage. I give thanks for small blessings during the hot summers. Having shaded coverage reduces the heat in the car by significant degrees by the time it's time to leave work. Our company is located a short distance away from the beach, which helps tremendously—the ocean air cools things down as well.

“Alright, let’s head back to the good ‘ol ball and chain we call work,” I tell him, exiting the driver’s side.

James snickers as we leisurely walk through the garage and take the elevator up to our floor. The soft ping of the elevator reaching its destination makes us straighten as the doors slowly slide open to reveal a scowling face.

“You guys took a long lunch,” she states coldly.

“It’s only been thirty-five minutes,” I calmly reply.

“That’s five minutes beyond the allotted time.” Rebecca pushes her glasses up her nose as she stares at both of us. Some days I swear she times us going to the restroom. With her librarian clothes and her tight hair always pulled back into a perfect bun, it’s no wonder James secretly has a thing for her.

Who wouldn’t want to break down those walls to see exactly how kinky she really is underneath her hard exterior?

Rebecca is head assistant to Nicholas “Nick” Giordano, the owner of this grand building. No one really knows what the guy looks like or has ever gotten a glimpse of him, but his name is whispered among the workers that have been here the longest. James and I have been employed in this place for at least five years and I still haven’t seen the guy’s face. It’s a bit weird and a bit shady in my opinion, but who am I to question the guy who pays my bills?

“Well, don’t just stand there!” she huffs. “Clock in, please!”

“Yes ma’am,” James immediately replies as if she physically took a whip to him, making me lift my eyebrow in curiosity.

“Yes’m,” I join in a few minutes later.

She continues to glare at us, but one can easily tell how she preens when she gets her way. *I see you, Rebecca. I see you.*

After getting her way, she turns on her heels and heads back to wherever she crawled from. James' eyes are glued to her tight ass beneath the pencil skirt.

“One day, I'mma hit that so I can take that stick out of her ass for the betterment of the company,” he mumbles.

Stifling a laugh, I hold myself back from slapping him upside the head as we both head back to our respective cubicles. I log into the Kronos system on the computer to clock back in. *Five minutes over and her panties are in a twist.* All I have to do is stay five minutes longer and everything's fixed. Geez.

I can hear James' keyboard clicking loudly as he gets back into the groove of taking customer orders where he left off before lunch. We share a cubicle wall that goes up to the height of our eyes when we're seated in our respective chairs.

“You sure you want to taint your dick with that?” I ask him.

“Might end up with the stick up *your* butt.”

James chuckles over the clicking of his keyboard. “Dude, that is not how it works.”

A feminine voice clears near us. We both snap our heads to find Rebecca staring daggers in our direction from eight feet away. Quickly putting our heads down, we pretend to be busy with work until we hear the click of her heels walk away.

How does she move so fast? Wasn't she just in the other room a few minutes ago?

“You think the boss is hitting that?” James whispers. “Is that why she acts so high and mighty?” James' logic sometimes baffles me.

We both scoot our office chairs back until our heads peek out beyond the end of the dividing wall. “There ain't nothing



hitting that with a ten-foot pole and that's exactly why she's the way she is," I answer him.

"Ooh. Harsh, bruh," he says as he leans back in his chair and clasps his hands behind his head in contemplation.

"I just tell it like it is. Look, keep your dick away from that hole. There is nothing good that will come from touching that. Trust me."

"Shit, you're probably right—"

"Gentlemen!" Rebecca cuts him off and he almost falls off his chair from startlement. "I do not hear any of your keyboards clicking. You're not getting paid to sit there with your heads up your ass. Get back to work!"

Giving James a pointed look, I shut my mouth and do as the queen bee tells us. A few moments in and I'm lost in calculating numbers and making sure the measurements of our product are correct before we send it to the design and mold team to fulfill our next batch of orders.

Manufacturing dildos really has started booming lately, but it seems—my eyes follow Rebecca as she metaphorically bites the head off another coworker—that it can't help everybody.



## DERRICK

THIS CAN'T BE REAL. THIS LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A corny old horror movie.

“Dude, are you getting excited?” James chatters excitedly as he bounces on his feet. “I’m stoked you’re here with me.”

I’m not sure if excited is a word I’d use to describe what I’m feeling. I’m getting skeeved out over these guys in black robes and weird tentacle masks. For all I know, this might be a bad porno flick about to be taped. The only thing I can see are their eyes, and they all look glazed over. Is everyone here high on something? What am I missing?

I must be high by proxy because I can’t believe I agreed to be in a robe too. The only difference is, we’re not given masks. I’m still wondering about that. Maybe it signifies some sort of ranking system I’m unaware of.

“Alright, so what they usually do is hold this vigil, right?”

James starts.

*Right...*

“They all gather at this location until all the main members are present. Then, after some sharing of wine and chants, we split and meet up again in an hour at our second location.”

These guys actually go out in public like this?

“What’s the purpose of all this migration?” I couldn’t be the only one who had this question. “Why not have everything happen in one place if we’re all already here?”

“Look, it’s not in my interest to question how they do things.” I slowly turn to face him, astonished. “This is just how it’s always been. You gotta just go with the flow. So, we usually meet up by the ocean side...”

This is really starting to sound like a horror movie gone wrong. He can’t be serious. Hopefully, they don’t have any plans to baptize us in the ocean and then ‘accidentally’ drown us as an offering to the sea. I don’t want my buddy to be that *one* white person who dies first. I have to say something.

“James, have you ever—” I try to interrupt, but my own sentence gets cut short.

He grabs my arm and starts pulling me. “Come on, they’ve already signaled for us to leave.”

What the heck? I didn’t hear a peep or see anyone lift an arm. The crowd moves en masse, and it’s an eerie feeling that goes straight down my spine like a physical chill. There’s a shifting of air and my gut tells me this isn’t a good idea. Everyone seems to be moving mindlessly, and these masks aren’t helping me feel any better about it all.

Looking over at James, he has his head tilted down and is going with the crowd. I'm starting to feel like that token black guy who is going to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Keeping my mouth shut, I stay by James's side and let out a breath of relief when we make it outside of the building. The cool air is freeing, the darkness from the disappearance of the sun is already upon us, adding to the creepy vibe we got going.

The sound of shuffling and swishes of fabric become a soft buzz beneath the sound of insects in the night.

"Come on," James whispers. "Everyone goes their own way, but meet up at the beach."

Looking left and right, my body is tense and ready for whatever is going to happen. Whispering back, I start to again wonder if this is a big mistake. "Why the beach, though?"

"Dude, I don't know. I just do what everyone else does. No one really asks questions."

This. This is exactly why people like James would be the first to die in a horror flick. I need to talk some sense into my idiot friend. My whispers become more frantic. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why would you join shit you know nothing about?"

"I don't fucking know. I was in a weird place at the time. And now that I'm out of that funk, I just kept on going to the meetings."

What in the ever-loving hell is wrong with this fool? Keeping my thoughts to myself for the time being so we don't draw attention to ourselves, we get back to the car and start the engine, our headlights cutting through the darkness like a knife. Driving the short distance to the ocean-side, we follow

the other tail lights heading in the same direction. The moisture in the air changes and I know we're close.

"Pull over right there," James points to the right shoulder.

"Right where?"

"There," he points again.

It's an obscure parking space by the beach. You'd think there would be a million cars from the amount of people we saw back at the warehouse, but no, the parking lot is empty. Goosebumps pebble on my skin, but I pull in, anyway, trusting James.

*This ain't right. This just ain't right.* "Bruh," I try, about to voice my thoughts. "This—"

"Come on, we don't want to be late!"

Cursing under my breath, I put the vehicle in park and both of us exit the car quickly. Our robes flap with the breeze as we begin to notice dark figures emerging from random directions the closer we get to our destination. Where the hell did these guys park? Looking up and down the windy streets around the beach, all I see are the sporadic vehicles lined up along the curb.

*Turn around now, Der.* I'm caught between my fight-or-flight instincts and sticking by my friend James in case I need to drag his ass out.

"James, you sure about this shit?" I whisper under my breath as our feet hit the sand. We continue to walk in silence. The additional people around us never come close enough for us to look like a crowd.

Finally, the asshole opens his mouth. "Yeah. We don't gather at this location too frequently, but nothing bad ever happened,"

he reassures. It doesn't work. "We just stand around, do the chanting thing, talk for a few and reconvene once more at the next meeting."

*What the hell is the purpose of all this?*

James leads us further onto the beach and around some rocky formations that jut out of the ground. The air is thick with moisture tonight; the mist hitting our faces the closer we walk towards the ocean.

"No one ever questioned a bunch of guys in robes out on the sand?" I throw the question out again.

James chuckles. "Nah, it's not like that. We don't just stand out in the open. Come on, we're almost there."

When we reach the rocky formation, I'm surprised to find it revealing a well-concealed entrance. There's a flickering glow coming out from the crevice, letting us know that others have already made it inside the bowels of this place. Not sure I like the idea of walking into the center of the earth for a damn cult meeting.

I think it's time I get out of this joint.

James sees it in my face. "Nah, man. Don't." He grabs my shoulder and shakes me a little. "I see it in your eyes. We're already here!"

This fucker's guilt trip is going to get me killed one day. I stand there glaring at him, then at the entrance. He gives me his 'after all we went through together' look and I growl under my breath. I continue to follow him down the jagged steps toward the bowels of hell.

The dance of flickering illumination in this place adds to the hellscape I'm bracing myself for. Masculine murmurs in the cave bounce off the walls, making you unsure of where the

actual source is coming from. But it's the lone feminine voice muffled in the mix that catches my attention the most.

She doesn't sound like she wants to be here. *What the hell is going on?*

When our feet reach the bottom of the cavern, my eyes lock onto a figure strapped on a table. *No. What in the horror movie sequel is this?*

My hand grabs James' arm, but he's already frozen in place just like me. In my periphery, I can see that my buddy didn't expect this either and now I'm caught between a rock and a hard place—literally. Do we hightail it out of here? We can't leave that poor girl on the table. Why is her mouth gagged? The moment these questions cross my mind is the moment she struggles against her restraints, as if to emphasize that she's not a willing participant. But it doesn't end there. To make matters worse, my gaze zooms in on the very soft roundness of her extended stomach.

This is not happening right now. This shit just goes from bad to worse.

The men around her have candelabras lit and ingredients in bowls I cannot identify from here—most of them liquid. They're murmuring, chanting something low, and the pit of my stomach drops out from under me with revelation.

James and I both inch closer and closer in silence, despite wanting to get the fuck out of here as fast as we can.

“What the fuck is happening right now?” The question bubbles out of me under my breath.

“Dude, I don't know, man. I've never seen them do this before.” He sounds sincere and I want to believe him but—

“What the hell do you mean, you’ve never seen them do this before? You’ve been with them for years!” Our whispers are kept low, but frustration leaks out of my every pore as I wait for James’ reply. I’m just rambling at this point to try to steel my nerves over the situation.

“I mean, yeah. We’ve sacrificed pigs and creatures... but never this.”

“Fucker!” I snap. “You didn’t think to tell me your little band of merry men were playing with the blood of living things?”

My head feels tight. I should have trusted my gut.

James’s voice is panicked and I try to tamp down my anger and disappointment. “I fucking don’t know! I didn’t know...”

A moment of silence passes between us as we continue to watch the men in masks drink something out of a jewel encrusted chalice. *Please don’t tell me it’s pig’s blood.*

The girl struggles again against her restraints, whimpering, and the candle flames highlight the glistening of her tears streaking down her face.

I’m involved in this. Shit, I’m now part of this. I feel like I just got punched in the gut.

James’ voice stutters. “Maybe we can just sneak out—”

Another glint catches my eye and I no longer hear what James is saying. Growing up the way I did, I know better than to doubt my instincts when weapons are involved as I lunge for the robed guy lifting a wicked-looking knife directly above the pregnant woman.

“What are you doing?” someone screams in protest.

“Stop him!” Another voice rings out.



“He’s ruining the ritual!”

“Tonight is supposed to be the night!”

“No!”

The voices around me become indecipherable as I continue to struggle to get the knife out of this fucker’s hands. He’s got some weight behind him as we both wrestle to the ground. Elbowing him in the face, the point of impact throbs from hitting his stupid mask but stuns him enough for me to dislodge the knife out of his hands. The blade clatters on the rocky floor and stops a few of the men around us as I land another punch to this guy’s face. My heart is racing and my adrenaline makes all my senses become hyper focused.

Leaving him moaning on the ground, I nearly don’t turn around fast enough to catch another robed guy lifting the same knife.

Growling, I quickly leap and tackle him with my shoulder, taking him to the ground too, but not before a few of the other robed guys forcefully try to pull me off him.

“What the hell is wrong with you people?” James’ voice cuts through the air, voicing out the exact thought in my mind as I give a swift kick to the guy on the ground, right in the ribs. But it’s not enough to knock the knife from his hand. He grips it tighter as he rolls and moans.

Two men behind me pull my arms back in restraint but James takes over where I left off, landing punches into the guy with the knife, dislodging the weapon. Our upbringing landed us in many scraps on the streets in the past and it’s times like this that remind me why James has been beside me in life.

Through thick and thin, we’ve always survived.

“How dare you interrupt the sacred ritual!” a voice booms out, making everyone stop and silence descend upon us. “It is the night of the calling! The call must be made!”

Slamming my head back, I hit the guy behind me with a crunch, leaving my own skull throbbing but my body free to jump into the fray.

James and I are throwing fists, knees, and kicks until I hear the feminine muffled screams of the girl on the table. Snapping my head in her direction, the knife is already halfway down in the air toward her stomach when I disengage from the limbs that try to hold me back. A few elbows and back kicks and I lunge for the fucker who’s about to become a murderer.

“Get him!” one of them yells.

“Stop all this nonsense! The moon is already moving!”  
Another one throws out.

“We need to do this tonight!”

They all must be anticipating my next moves because instead of gaining any sort of advantage of surprise, the guy changes direction of his blade and swipes the knife right at my arm, cutting through fabric and flesh, making me hiss in pain.

“How dare you enter our domain and bring your taint here!”  
He points the crimson coated tip of the blade at my face.

Swiping the blood away from my lips with the back of my hand, I look at all these men with intensified suspicion and paranoia.

The guy with the knife rips off his mask and his eyes are bloodshot, a bruise forming beneath one of them. *Good.*

Someone gets pushed against me and I’m about to throw another fist until I see that it’s James. The cult encircles us

with their black cloaks and masked faces, forcing us into a smaller position. The girl cries behind them, her voice echoing softly into the heart of the cavern.

There is no way in hell I can leave here knowing my hands will be stained in *her* blood if she's left on the table for them to do as they will. Mama didn't raise no coward. Someone has to stand up for what's right.

"I didn't sign up for this," James mutters. *And he says this now?*

"You idiots!" the leader roars. "You dare to interrupt the sacred calling of the gods! It needs to be tonight!"

James steps forward without fear, pointing a finger in his direction. "I don't care what the fuck you think you're doing. I don't want any part of it."

James is forgetting the most important thing here.

"And we're taking the girl with us," I finish with determination.

The stranger's maniacal laugh bounces off the cavern walls and sends chills down my spine like a foreshadowing of what's to come. The adrenaline still pumping through my veins makes my body tense up, ready for whatever is going to happen—because something is. These guys are not giving up what they came to do.

"It's much too late for any changes now. Things have already started," the leader says calmly, almost a little too happily.

He circles around the sacrificial table as the other strangers block our access to the exit and to him. James and I are back to back, trying to cover all bases in case we get a surprise attack from our blind spots.

The girl screams and struggles once more, reminding me of the neighbor I had before her husband got locked up for good. The old memories make my fists itch to take this guy down. The world could lose another asshole.

“The time of the calling cannot be stopped. Not now. Not when we’re this close.” He continues to walk at a leisurely pace until he’s back at his original position behind the table, as if nothing amiss has happened in the past few minutes. “She signed up for this,” he says with his arms raised to his sides, as if he’s about to raise Frankenstein himself. “There is no backing out of a contract. The gods are going to look down upon us with this offering and bless us with their power and wisdom. It is time for the Dathrokei to rise and take our true position in this world!”

I’m still trying to catch up with all the nonsense he’s spewing out when he quickly brings the bloodstained blade up again.  
*Fuck!*

“James! Bouncing Betty,” I call out.

He looks at me in surprise and then with determination.  
“Fuck.”

James lunges for the guy in front of me, swinging a fist, jumps back and kicks the next guy, creating an opening. With a burst of speed, I leap over the sacrificial table and the girl and try to block the leader with my injured forearm. The point of the blade cuts my bicep and, with a roar, I use my body weight to push him away from the table with the blade still penetrated into my flesh. He topples against the wall of the cave, dislodging the weapon still in his grip, and falls to the side.

I don’t know this woman, but I know damn well her life shouldn’t end like this.

“You idiots!” he roars and comes at me again with his blade, but I’m ready for him. Kicking him in the gut, my leg’s reach gives us a few more minutes of time before he comes again.

“Stay away from me!” James’s voice rises above the murmurs around us.

“Get her off this table!” I command. The moment it leaves my lips, the leader jumps at me, but I’m ready.

Moving into a defensive position, I hiss from the pain in my bicep and forearm when my muscles tense. The wound distracts me enough to miss my mark and another sharp pain hits me in the lower abdomen. Backhanding him with a closed fist, I knock him off me far enough so I can elbow him in the eye socket, knocking him into the crowd that’s accumulated behind him.

It seems the cult is tired of waiting for this to play out in their favor, each person moving toward me with caution.

I look over my shoulder to see that James has taken down at least five guys, their fallen bodies blocking the others from getting to us as they trip on the hems of their long robes. I rip mine off, grasping onto the sleeve, then wrap it around the leader’s neck and twist the fabric until it becomes a noose.

Pulling him away from the crowd, I call for James and he slowly comes to my side with his fists up before his face in case anyone tries to get him by surprise.

The rest of the cult members stand there in fury when they realize what I’ve done and the tension in the room becomes thick and oppressing.

“You fuckers are going to unstrap this woman right fucking now!” I bellow.

No one moves. I twist the fabric tighter around the leader's neck and he begins to gurgle. One of the robed idiots finally jolts into action and quickly comes over to the woman, doing as I say. James grabs him by the scruff of his neck before he can touch her. "Unstrap her and get the fuck back," he snarls.

Good. He finally found his balls. It took him long enough.

He watches intently as the robed man does what he is told, while I keep my eyes on the angry faces before us. Loosening my hold a bit, I let the leader cough and take in air, keeping him alive for the time being.

The moment the cult guy is done, James grabs the back of his robe and throws him off, then helps the pregnant woman up. Her gag comes off last and when it's finally free of her, she coughs and sobs out loud, ripping my heart out.

"James," I call out, tipping my head toward the blade on the ground. He nods and grabs it before returning to the girl's side protectively.

I move through the crowd, dragging the leader by the neck with my makeshift noose, his feet kicking behind us. James has taken off his own robe and wrapped it around the woman, covering her up and making his way with her swiftly before us.

"You can't take the high priest," one of the members exclaims.

"Just need a little insurance," I throw back at him as he begins to ascend the steps toward the entrance behind James.

When the ocean breeze hits us, my heart starts to calm. We might make it out. Dragging the leader's feet across the sand, I survey our surroundings and see that it's still empty in the darkness of the night.

“James, take her to the police station,” I instruct, trying to figure out how we were going to get out of this alive.

“What about him?” he asks.

“I’ll handle it.”



## DERRICK

I JUT MY HIP OUT AND JAMES QUICKLY RETRIEVES THE KEYS and leads the woman toward our parking spot. The sound of the waves behind us gets louder as the winds pick up with the darkness of night.

I unwind the cloak from around his neck, but don't let him escape. He coughs and I grab the scruff of his shirt, bringing him to his feet and shoving him in the direction of a large rock that juts toward the ocean. I toss the robe aside to keep my hands free in case he tries anything.

“Get your ass in that direction,” I command my friend.

James and I have had our disagreements, but when it came to survival, we wouldn't trust anyone else. He scowls but does as I say and quickly leaves. The other cult members slowly come out of the entrance of the sacrificial chamber, as I've come to



call it now. I watch as they look around and point in our direction.

I honestly had no plan other than to save the woman. And now that James has taken her to safety, I'm all out of plans.

Forcing the leader up the dark, jagged rock formation, I figured I can see a better exit strategy from higher ground.

"You got the woman. Let him go," one of the members shouts out with a look of rage.

I can't. He's my only leverage at the moment. I open my mouth with some sort of retort, but it disappears when the roaring, crashing waves drown out everything else around us. Mists and droplets of water spray us all as the waves come crashing again and again with the rising of the tides.

"We're going to ask you one more time—" another cult member starts before they all take a step back with wide eyes.

Making sure to keep a secure grip on my hostage, I turn to look over my shoulder and almost drop him over the edge of the rocks.

What looks to be the rising of tides keeps growing into a head, shoulders, and finally tentacles beneath the eyes of a great titan. It emerges from the waters like a beast from the depths of the deepest part of the ocean, with a large cranium that juts out to the back. The glowing red eyes cut through the darkness like a demon emerging from hell.

The air intensifies with something I cannot name. It's thick and suffocating, as if the mere presence of the thing sucks everything into an invisible vacuum. My skin prickles and my soul shrinks inside of my body, trying to escape whatever is happening.

I step back, dragging the cult leader with me, but my eyes refuse to look away from the monstrosity that continues to straighten itself on bipedal legs. A large broad shoulder doesn't hide the inhuman wings that extrude from its back like a fleshly cape. The tentacles writhe and move as forearms wrapped in seaweed and other unknown plants reach out right in our direction.

“He comes for us!”

“He has heard our calls!”

“Our God has arrived to bless us with his power!”

I listen to the insanity of the cult as my mind races through how I could possibly outrun this creature that looks to stand at ten feet tall. The sound of creaks and water splashing off his body distracts me when his claws come within a few feet. I let the cult leader go, and leap back, slipping on the boulder and landing on my ass.

“Yes, I am the chosen one!” the leader calls out with his arms in the air as if asking for an embrace. “Please bless me with your power, oh great—”

His sentence is cut off as we all watch in horror as the creature brings his torso toward its face tentacles. It wraps around him and his praises fall from his lips, morphing into screams of pain and agony as the appendages twist his body with a loud crunch before tucking him under and shoving his body into the mouth of the God he worshiped.

I'm not staying here for another moment. I quickly scramble off the jagged rocks and toward the sands. Everyone else is still standing in place, their eyes focused on the sight before them. Do they not have any survival instincts?

The sand slows me down but it doesn't stop me from moving around the cult and finding another hiding spot, away from the titan emerging out of the sea. Exclaims and cries of terror echo behind me as I continue to find the direction of the parking lot.

Bones crunching can be heard filling in the air, battling the screams of agony. One by one, the octofaced God devours his living sacrifices. He has to be stopped, but I wasn't the one with any of the answers on how to achieve that.

Was he risen to destroy the world as we know it? All that I love is here and if this creature gets past us, he would bring everything we know to its knees.

I stop running. The stupid part of me believes that if I get as far away as I can, I will be safe. How the hell can one be safe from a titan? I make the only decision I can. I turn around slowly and tell myself I have to try to stop the creature alone.

The octopus creature fully exits the ocean, his giant clawed feet dig into the sand with every step. A low, rumbled croak emerges from its gut like laughter, shaking the earth and sky as he destroys everything in its path.

I quickly look around the beach and make my way around him, doubling back to the original rock formation I stood upon when I held the cult leader. What did the robed crazies call it? It had a name. It was...

"Dathrokei!" I cry out, unsure if this will work at all. "Your sacrifice is standing in front of you. Over here!" I wave my hand, telling myself how stupid I am to think this will work. "I offer you my body as a vessel!"

Because in the grand scheme of things, my body, in comparison to his, will do less damage. It makes sense. At the

moment, it is the only thing that makes sense and I have to do something before he destroys the world.

The titan turns and looks at me with gleaming, red eyes that pierce the essence of my very soul as it lets out a deep throated voice.

“No mortal body can contain my power.”

My eyes want to bulge out of their sockets. It speaks and it's male. Of course, it is.

“Well, I'm all you got since you apparently killed everyone else,” I deadpan loudly.

“Derrick! Are you out of your mind? What the fuck are you doing?” James' voice cuts through the sound of the ocean from behind me. I startle and turn to find him and the girl standing there with a look of shock and horror.

Why are they here? He was supposed to take her away from here!

“Get the fuck outta here!” I scream at him, but the ground begins to shake as the monster makes its way toward us with long strides.

“You wish to house my being and become a living sacrifice to my will. Mortal, prepare to become a God,” the creature says, sending a chill down my spine. What have I done?

His laughter booms like thunder as his entire being begins to emit a bioluminescent glow right before he beats his wings and flies high into the air. I run like a coward, going back on my offer and trying to reach James to move him away from the area.

“Get her out of here, James! Now!”

James looks at the sky with fear and quickly grabs the girl's hand and pulls her behind him. I let out a sigh of relief, following in their footsteps, when suddenly, an electrical energy enters through my mouth and makes me cry out in agony, taking me to my knees on the sand.

I fight whatever is happening in my body, but the power continues to infuse itself with my very being, suddenly lifting me into the air.



## JAMES

“No! DERRICK!” I SCREAM, FORCED TO WATCH IN HORROR AS my best friend’s body is lifted into the air while the aqua colored essence surrounds him, engulfing him.

The woman behind me says nothing as I stand there, paralyzed, watching Derrick’s body convulse and finally fall to the sand.

My heart stops in my chest for a few seconds before it beats again. I immediately turn to the girl. “Listen to me, you stay here. I’ll be back. I need to check and see if he’s still alive.”

I don’t wait for her answer as my eyes burn with unshed tears. I leave her standing there as I run as fast as my legs can carry me over to Derrick’s side.

His body is lifeless, unmoving, face first in the sand. I slide to a stop and drop to my knees with a deep ache in my chest.

James and I have been through a lot together and always came out in the end—always. This can't be how it ends between us. I pull his head onto my lap and gently brush away the sand. His eyes are closed and I want nothing more than to force them open, force him to curse me over convincing him to go to the stupid cult meeting to begin with. Why didn't I leave him out of it?

I just wanted my best friend, the person I cared most about, to share another part of me. This is where my selfish desires led us. Guilt eats away at me like a living thing and I grimace as the pain in my chest deepens.

I see the pregnant woman's legs in my periphery and slowly lift my head toward her; the tears tracking down my cheeks. Her face is contorted in horror as she backs away.

She lifts her hand to her mouth, then moves it to her stomach and whispers, "Our world is over. Your friend is dead."

"No. It's not possible," I say in convicted denial, my voice cracking. "Listen, there's a chance he's still alive. He's not dead. He can't be dead!"

I know the chances are grim, but I can't see myself living a life without Derrick. He is all I have left in this world after my mother abandoned me.

"We have to get out of here," she states with a strange inflection to her voice. I turn to look at her, confused, and watch as she shakes her head, lips trembling. "We have to get out of here, now! Please, trust me. This world is damned and only one thing can save us... if we can find it."

Focused on her, I jerk in surprise when Derrick's body vibrates and twitches.

My fear turns into elation. “He’s still alive! Derrick! Can you hear me, man? Say something to me!”

As if by an invisible force, his body is brought to his feet, and he stands there, expressionless as he brings his hands to his face and examines it front and back. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. This isn’t right. This isn’t Derrick. Everything is all wrong.

Derrick’s head snaps to the remnants of the dead bodies on the beach. A smile cracks across his face before he lets out a booming laugh reminiscent of the monster. I quickly scramble backward away from him, chastising myself that I shouldn’t be running away from Derrick, who is still in there somewhere. I need to save him!

I get to my feet and run over to the pregnant woman who stands there, staring at Derrick’s back.

“What just happened? What’s inside of Derrick? That’s not him!” She knows something, doesn’t she? Didn’t the cult leader say she volunteered herself? She knows something I don’t!

Her voice wavers, but the next words out of her mouth make my heart drop to the pit of my stomach.

“H-he took my place in the sacrifice to the Dathrokei. It’s inside of him now and our world is doomed.”

She can’t be serious. I grab her shoulders and turn her to face me. “Tell me how to save Derrick! I know you know something! Tell me, now!”

*I should probably kill her and call the police. There must be a reason why she was on that table. Or maybe I need to find a priest and live at a church after what I just saw. There is no way the authorities can do a fucking thing.*



That is when her brown eyes turn a glowing shade of blue and an aura manifests around her. Though it isn't as powerful as the monster inhabiting Derrick, it is all too familiar.

I take a few steps back, the emotion of betrayal lancing me as badly as Derrick's inhabitation. "What the actual fuck? Are you like him? The monster?"

Shame crosses her features as her tears track down her cheeks. "He's my father."



## JAMES

I SHAKE MY HEAD IN ASTONISHMENT. WHAT IN THE WORLD IS going on? Is everything I know in this life a lie?

My eyes cut to Derrick's back and I feel my resolve. It doesn't matter. Nothing does but getting Derrick back. I ignore the pregnant woman who keeps calling for me and wrap my arms around Derrick from behind.

"Come back to me, man. I know you're in there. Fight it!"

His body vibrates in response and he groans, slapping his hand on his temples as if he is trying to physically dislodge something from his mind. He tries to jerk my hand away, but I hold on tighter.

"Derrick!"

"You won't be able to reach him. Not now, not while he's still gaining control of him from within."

I growl over my shoulder at her, pissed that my selfish actions have hurt Derrick like this. “So, tell me what I need to do!” I bellow, desperation lacing my voice.

She takes a hesitant step forward, and I glare daggers at her. She is part of the problem!

She closes her eyes and hangs her head for a moment, wrapping her arms around herself. “I bore a mark on my body upon my birth into this world. It signifies that my body is to be the vessel so that when the time came and he arose from his slumber, he would retake this world through me. The moment I found out about this prophecy, I hid it as best as I could. I kept it a secret. My mother escaped the cult with me in her arms and tried her best to make me live the life of a normal human, but she couldn’t stop me from falling in love,” she hiccups.

Derrick’s body falls to his knees and I fall with him, my arms still wrapped around his shoulder, pulling him close to my body as I listen to her tale.

“I thought he was a good man. And he was, in the beginning. Chase was everything you could ever want in a husband. Tall, caring, loving. Everything was perfect until I got pregnant...”

“I need to get Derrick to the car,” I blurt out, tired of this story already. She needed to tell me how to fix Derrick, not some long ass life story. My anger simmers beneath the surface. *Of all the women we decide to save, it had to be the daughter of the water devil that wants to take over.* I lean over and force Derrick onto my shoulder as his body goes limp. The dead weight makes my feet sink into the sand and my steps slower, but I grit my teeth and keep going until the car appears in the abandoned parking lot. I wasn’t sure if she was following me and at this point I was on the brink of no longer caring.

I squat and gently place him on the ground beside the vehicle as I shove my hand in my pocket, looking for the key. It jingles loudly as my hands shakily unlock the car.

“Are you listening to me?” she asks from behind.

“I’m trying to save my friend!” I growl, aggravated. “You either need to get to the point or go to the cops yourself because right now, you are not helping!”



## JAMES

I GRUNT, TRYING TO PICK UP DERRICK'S UNCONSCIOUS BODY again. The pregnant woman helps to open the back passenger seat door and I mumble a thanks before sliding him in. When I get on the driver side, she gets in on the front passenger side.

I look at her but don't say a thing as I put the vehicle in reverse and head back onto the road the way we came in.

After a few moments of awkward silence, she continues her tale as if we were never interrupted.

“The moment he found out about my past, he became distant. His behaviors changed to something I didn't recognize. He was mean. The complete opposite of the man I married. My initial assumption was that he was having an affair and in hindsight, I would have easily accepted that over what the truth was.” She turns to me with haunted eyes and I can't help but take an audible gulp. “He was a member of the cult we just

escaped. They tracked me down and followed me. They knew everything about my past! I didn't realize they sent him to make me fall in love, to impregnate me for their own nefarious means!" she sobs.

My throat gets tight but I keep driving the best I can in the dark. How did my simple life turn into this? *This is all surreal. There is something she isn't telling me.*

"Everything I knew has been a lie. Even—," she hiccups. "Even my mother knew, but no one told me anything. I learned this while a knife was sticking out of my mother's back in my own home, where she tried to warn me. They threatened to kill me then and there if I didn't agree to go with them."

I grind my teeth together hard, trying to bite back my thoughts. It isn't her fault. It isn't Derrick's fault. The world is a shit place, full of assholes and now we all find ourselves here.

I have to concentrate on what needs to be done and not what I should have changed. If I were to lose Derrick now, I never got a chance to tell him how much he meant to me, how much his presence in my life kept me going despite the stupid decisions I made—despite the stupid circumstances I found myself in.

Derrick was always there for me and I'm going to be there for him till the end. I'm going to find a way to bring him back.

"So you're telling me we don't know how much longer we have until this world ends? What's going to happen? Are we going to get flooded by sea monsters until nothing survives? A sea apocalypse?"

I shake my head in disbelief and remember I never even asked her for her name. I practically know her whole life story from

this drive. The least I can do is not call her pregnant-woman in my mind.

“What’s your name?”

She’s been staring out the passenger side window and startles when I ask her. She blinks a few times before clearing her throat. “Delizah.”

I nod in acknowledgement. “What else is there? Is there anything else I need to know?”

Internally, I’m trying to decide if going back to my apartment is a good idea. I was part of the cult for years. If what she’s telling me is true, they probably have back information on everything in my life as well. I quickly look over my shoulder at Derrick, whose eyes are fluttering and glowing every so often. He’s always been a recluse in most ways. I need to take us to his place. It might be our safest bet for now.

We quietly make it to the garage floor of his apartment complex. No one is outside, which gives us the advantage of moving him discreetly. “Help me get the door,” I instruct as I throw Derrick over my shoulder once again and walk up two flights of stairs.

I jut my hip out to her and she quickly grabs the key from my belt loop, shaking as she tries to figure out which key goes to the front door. I look around us, making sure no one is eavesdropping or peeking around the corners. The lock finally clicks and we both quickly take a step over the threshold.

Derrick’s home is meticulously organized without a speck of dirt in sight. I grunt and struggle into his open concept living room, dropping him onto the couch without jostling him too hard. My legs almost give way as I fall back beside him, massaging my quad muscles.

Delizah paces back and forth with nervous energy. “T-there’s one more thing I need to tell you.”

I groan and throw my head back, running a hand down my face. How much worse can it get?

I quietly watch with a scowl as she closes her eyes and her body vibrates. My own body tenses up as my arm covers Derrick protectively when the woman before me glows blue and her body begins to morph into something inhuman. Tentacles emerge from the back of her shirt around fleshy wings that sprout out and stretch to her sides. Her shirt rips further as she flaps them and hovers a foot above the floor.

My scowl deepens because at this point, I shouldn’t be surprised anymore. I gently massage Derrick’s shoulder, trying to reassure him in his unconscious state that I’m still beside him while I stare at Delizah contemplatively.

Delizah lands on her feet and wrings her hands nervously. “N-Now that my father has returned, my own true form has emerged. I felt it the moment we left the cave like an unscratchable itch beneath my skin. I-I can feel my power, but I don’t want to hurt anyone. I just want my baby to live a safe life. Please, help me. Help me stop him.”

I lean forward and look at her as if she lost her mind. “You want me to kill my friend? Hell no. I’m saving him. That’s what’s going to happen. We’re going to get your father out of his damn body and things will go back to normal. They have to...” I whisper the last sentence with a spark of doubtful fear.

“Okay, what do we need to do?” I ask again. I’m completely lost, scared and just done with it all.

She slowly changes form back into a human woman, giving me eyes full of pity. It pisses me off. I don’t need pity. I need



answers!

“My mother used to tell me about a hidden monastery in the mountains that carried a sacred dagger that could kill him, but I thought they were all part of her fairytales of old. It might not even truly exist.”

The room is thick with unsaid things. After everything we saw, nothing was off the table.

“Give me a minute please,” I say as I hang my head in my hands with my elbows on my thighs. “I need time to think about this.”

She quietly leaves her position and makes her way into the connecting kitchen, pulling out a chair and sitting down.

I run my hand through my hair and turn to look at Derrick. He is breathing slowly and I can't take my eyes off the way his face looks in such a relaxed state. Derrick was always my voice of reason. I clung to him when life threw crap at me and when I was at my wits' end when it came to my family.

Memories of our past float through my mind and I let myself become consumed by it instead of pushing it away like I always do.

*“What are you doing?” Derrick growls.*

*“Running away. What the fuck does it look like? I can't take it anymore, Derrick. I can't watch her do this to herself, to us.” I admit to him, showing him all my vulnerabilities and how raw she left me. Derrick is the only person who has seen me this way. The only person I trusted with my emotions and right now, my emotions were threatening to drown me.*

*I crouched down and grabbed my head. I didn't deserve to live. I didn't see a purpose of why I was in this world and every day was too hard to bear, too hard to survive.*

*Derrick quickly ran to my side and wrapped his arms around me, holding together the shattered pieces of me. Tears ran down my face as I turned away from him, ashamed he had to see me this way. Wasn't I the one who was supposed to help him?*

*"James. Stop. Don't do that. It's me. You know I'm here for you. Don't retreat within yourself and leave me here alone. I can't do this life without you, man. Sometimes you're the only thing that keeps me going, that keeps me believing in hope."*

*My heart cracked. We were both broken, with a past that could never be mended. Was this why we were thrown together? I slowly turned to look at him and suddenly, Derrick wasn't just my best friend... he was my everything. My glue.*

*His eyes shifted to my lips and mine shifted to his. Lost in the moment, we found ourselves entwined in a kiss neither of us could foresee. I hesitantly reached out and touched his face, unsure if it was a figment of my imagination and if it would disappear the moment I began to hope for something more in this life.*



JAMES

DERRICK JERKS AWAKE AND I ALMOST JUMP OUT OF MY SKIN but quickly compose myself. “Derrick!”

He groans and slowly sits himself up, rubbing the side of his head as if he is nursing the world’s worst hangover.

“Bruh, what happened?” his voice croaks.

I put my hand on his shoulder, needing to touch him, needing the contact. “Something happened at the beach and now there’s a monster inside of you. The girl you decided to save happens to be the monster’s daughter.”

He pulls his head back and looks at me incredulously. “What?”

I scoot closer to him and stare at him seriously, making sure I am truly speaking with Derrick and not some monster pretending to be him to trick me.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks, his voice lowering.

“I—”

Delizah interrupts us and my face flushes and turns away. “It was my fault. He’s here because of me. My f-father, he, he’s inside of you. You’ve become his vessel.”

“Shit, I remember now,” he tells her.

A new emotion cuts through me as he gives her attention. He doesn’t understand that things aren’t fixed yet.

“Derrick, bruh, listen to me.” He turns to me with full trust in his eyes and mine well up with tears again. I can’t lose him.

“We still need to get you help.”

He looks at me seriously and it’s as if both of our lives flash before his eyes. “Tell me what we need to do.”

Delizah relays to him the same information she told me and he continues to stare at me with a faraway look.

“We need to leave this apartment now.” Derrick stands up and looks around, then looks back at me. “How did you bring me here?”

I slowly stand up, not taking my eyes off him, trying to soak in everything that is Derrick in case this plan doesn’t go through and this becomes the last time I see him.

“He carried you,” Delizah pipes in again and I jerk my face to her, my eyes steely. He doesn’t need to know the details.

“You carried me up two fucking flights of stairs, James?”

I audibly swallow. “I wasn’t going to leave you behind.”

“We need to act quickly. If my father resurfaces in your mind, who knows what he’ll do?”

Derrick takes his attention off me and casts his gaze to her, letting me breathe a sigh of relief. Why do I feel embarrassed about what she admitted? Anyone else in my position would have done the same.

“You said you all drove in my car?” Derrick asks with his eyes fixed on me.

“Yeah. I still had your keys.”

“We need to take another one. Was everyone in the cult there tonight, James?”

I think back and am honestly unsure. He sees it in my eyes and nods. “We need to take another car.”

My lip quirks at the corner. We haven’t hot-wired a car since our youth. Derrick feels the same as he gives me a smile and begins moving toward the front door.

Down in the apartment’s parking garage, we all look around for something suitable and discreet.

“That one, right there,” Derrick points. It’s a black, nondescript sedan.

“You sure your neighbors aren’t going to come after you?” I tease him, feeling a lot lighter than where we started, even though my mind continuously questions if this mission will be successful.

All three of us quickly move and duck between cars until we reach our destination.

“I’m barely home enough for them to know what kind of guy I am,” he admits as he uses a tool to slip between the glass and the door frame. The driver’s side door unlocks with a loud click and we all duck our bodies behind the car for a few seconds.

“Have you guys done this before?” Delizah screeches under her breath.

“Maybe,” I answer her before looking over the hood of the car to see if anyone heard us. No one is around and the night is still young. I nod to Derrick, who opens the door, hits the unlock button and quickly climbs into the driver side.

I shouldn't feel turned on by the way Derrick ducks down, pulls the wires from beneath the steering column and hot-wires the vehicle, but my dick twitches at the sight. I readjust myself and climb from the back to the front passenger seat. The car roars to life and we quickly pull it out of the garage.

“Which way?” I ask Delizah.

She sighs and closes her eyes for a second, trying to go back into her memories. “My mom said in her stories that the place in the mountains looks like the tip of a dagger and the monastery was located on the sheath?”

At that very moment, I'm glad for my nerd tendencies because this girl looks like she doesn't even know what a sheath is.

“Do you know the direction we need to drive toward?”

Derrick throws out once we make it onto the main road.

I quickly open the glove compartment and rummage around.

“Yass!” I exclaim when I discover an old-fashioned folded map. “Good thing you live around a bunch of old people, Derrick. They have a laminated pocket map of the state.”

“Good, give it to Delizah. Delizah, tell us which way to go.

I'm about to come up on a highway entrance,” Derrick instructs without taking his eyes off the road. A few headlights come toward us, but not enough to make us suspicious.

“I don't know how to use one of these!” she exclaims, and I look at her in a different light. She is younger than we are. I

shouldn't have expected it to be this easy. I pull out my phone and hand it to her. "Show me."

She types in something and tells us that the mountain we're looking for is about a three-hour drive away. The GPS starts speaking and I take my phone back, placing it in the cup holder between me and Derrick to help amplify the volume.

The trip is quiet, the hum of the road beneath our tires the only thing to be heard. When I look back, Delizah has already dozed off against the side of her seat.

"You feel alright, Derrick?" I ask as I turn back to face forward.

"Yeah."

"I mean, for real, bruh. Tell me. I want to help. Look, I'm sorry I brought you there. I'm sorry for buggin—"

"Stop, James. Bruh, don't do that to yourself, okay? You didn't know that crazy hocus pocus shit was real. I know you. You wouldn't put us in danger like that. We've come too far together."

"Derrick," I sigh with guilt, hanging my head in my hands, unable to look at him. "I-I'm sorry, man. When I saw—When that thing—"

I can hear Derrick grip the steering wheel harder. The crackling of the material makes me look up in his direction.

"I heard your voice the whole time. I couldn't answer, man. I wanted to. I screamed, hollered. I got on my knees inside my mind and prayed to a God I didn't think was listening. I tried to come back, man. I was clawing to come back to you."

My heart stutters and I hit my chest with my fist. Guilt as black as my youth's depression comes at me at full force,

threatening to take me back down a road I told myself I wouldn't go anymore.

Derrick's hand reaches out and grabs mine tightly. My heart races. "I'm here. I'm back. Stop. I'm right here, man."

My head feels tight. The emotions of worthlessness and pity swirl inside of me. Flashbacks of my neighbor's pitiful looks to my mother's look of disappointment at both our lives cuts me like a physical blade.

I shake my head, astonished that Derrick is still grounding me when I have no idea what kind of destruction the creature is wrecking inside of him right now. I wonder if he is currently in pain and my heart lurches at the constant fear of not knowing.

We change freeways and he shifts the car into a higher gear, increasing our speed. The fate of the world rests on our shoulders, but all I can think about is what the future holds for both me and Derrick after this is all over.

*I need to know if he's okay. I need to know if we're okay and if he forgives me for pulling him into this mess to begin with.*

I distract myself by pulling my hand out of his and checking the GPS on my phone. "We're ten minutes out."

Derrick nods and follows the phone's voice until we pull the car into a flat dirt area close to the bottom of the mountainside.

The gearshift loudly grinds when he puts it into park, waking up Delizah in the back.

"Are we here?" she asks groggily.

"Yeah," I tell her. "The GPS ended here."

We all exit the vehicle and look up. "How the hell are we going to get up there?" Derrick asks.



The gears in my mind quickly move and I come up with a plan. The only plan we have. “Lucky for our asses, we got something with us that has wings.”

Derrick looks at me skeptically and I point my thumb behind us at Delizah, who looks at him sheepishly. Derrick was out when she showed me her form, but he was about to be in for a vision he’ll never forget.



## DERRICK

MY MIND FEELS FRAGMENTED, MY VISION IS NOT WHAT IT should be. I'm surprised I got us here safely because there's a sharp pain behind my eyes that threatens to debilitate me but I fight in for the sake of James. I can't let the monster win and leave him behind. He needs me.

If what they told me back at my apartment was true, this Delizah girl is the monster's blood relation. I'm not surprised that James points out the fact that she has wings. The monster did.

I shiver when something runs through me like a dark caress. My skin itches as if something is about to burst through my skin any minute. I feel hot, my skin perspiring as we stand here waiting for Delizah to figure out how to get us both up this mountainside.

“Come on, Delizah. Change into your other form. You said you had control over your powers. You’re not doing this for evil, you’re doing this to save the damn world because of your father,” James snaps. He’s been pushed to the edge and his patience is fraying. I need to figure this out quickly before he loses himself to his own personal demons.

Flashes of our past run through my mind. Of our kiss, of our skin to skin embrace in an abandoned treehouse. James had run away and wanted to end his life. I did whatever I needed to do to bring him back to reality, to pull him out of his spiraling mind.

One caress led to another and we found ourselves entangled in limbs and his crying on my shoulder. I still don’t fully understand what happened that night, but things changed between us. We mutually never brought it up, but the light came back to James’ eyes. His zest for a future snuck back and things were going smooth.

Until his involvement with this cult. Maybe it was his way of trying to figure things out, of trying to see if he had a higher purpose in this life. No matter his reason, I’m going to stand by his side because I need him as much as he needs me. He became my purpose and hope that night. I never stopped fighting for him.

Delizah glows and steals my attention as her body begins to change shape. Tentacles and wings burst out of her back as she turns to look at both of us with doubt. Her face morphs into an inhuman shape as more tentacles burst from the bottom half.

“You need to fly us up this damn mountain. Just try not to touch me with those tentacle mouth things, please,” James tells her, shuddering in disgust. She rolls her eyes in response.

Will he look at me the same way if the monster takes over me? Pain lances my chest at the thought. I don't want him to see me any differently. I don't want to lose the way he always looks at me with admiration when he thinks I'm not looking.

"Grab onto me," she instructs. James looks to me to go first but I need a moment to calm the roars inside of my mind.

"You go first. I'll meet you there," I tell him as the monster inside of me claws at my mind.

"What? No! You're the one who needs help. You need to go first!"

Irrational anger courses through my veins as the monster and I battle for control of my body. My hands shoot out and I grab him by the shoulder, shaking sense into him. "You need to go first, James! If this thing tries to take over me again, I need to make sure you're out of its way."

My eyes burn with unshed tears. My vulnerability out in the open for all to see.

*"Derrick, why do you stick by me? I'm a mess. I'm nothing but problems and chaos," he sobs against my shoulder and I pull him close to my chest.*

*"Because, you asshole, we're both a mess. How am I supposed to make it in this world without you, James? You're all I fucking have. You need to hold yourself together or else I'll lose me too. Don't do this, James. Be strong. For me."*

James looks at me with part heartbreak and part determination. "Take me up first, Delizah," he deadpans, and she quietly turns around so he can wrap his arms around her neck. With one last look, they both shoot to the sky and disappear from sight.

I finally let the calm facade go and fall to my knees, wanting to hurl onto the ground from what is happening inside of me.

I bring my hands in front of me and it looks like my skin is thinning, the glow of bioluminescence threatening to peek through the pads of my finger. Delizah quickly shoots back down and grabs me around the waist, leaping back into the sky. I cry out in agony and fear as my ears pop upon our quick ascent.

When my body reaches solid ground, I crawl away from her, not wanting her touch on me any longer than necessary. It didn't matter if we saved her. I don't know her anymore than those robed bastards back at the cult.

When I finally lift my head up, we are surrounded by people of all shades and color in white robes. I groan and bring myself to my feet slowly, not wanting my nausea to overtake me. Why did it always have to be robed people? I'm starting to get PTSD from everything that's happened.

But none of them look at me or James. All of their eyes are on Delizah, widened in fear.

James backs up and covers me, not that it makes any difference as I stand half a head taller than him. But the sentiment makes my chest ache more than it already is.

An older gentleman with long gray hair is the first to break away from the group of strangers in this sanctuary we just crashed into.

“The prophecy is true. The return of the ocean child will be the beginning of the end. I prayed my eyes would permanently be closed before his return but it seems we must stand against him once again.”

“Wait. One damn second,” James spits out, holding his hand up. “Again? You mean you made the monster go away the first time? When the hell was the first time?”

At that moment, I realize there is so much to this life I don't understand. I need to protect James and his rash decisions. If that means I have to be banished with the beast... then I'll let myself suffer with the loss of my best friend.

A selfish part of me rallies against my skull but I can't voice my feelings. Not now. Not when the fate of the world rests on this.

"No," James says firmly, with his hands in closed fists at his side. He takes a step forward and I grab him by the shoulder to stop him. He turns to look at me, betrayed. "No, Derrick! I'm not letting them banish you with that thing!"

He is hyperventilating and my heart is racing.



## JAMES

THE OLD MAN NODS AS IF HE DIDN'T EXPECT ANYTHING LESS.

“The child of legend is here with you, which means another has become his vessel.” He shifts his gaze to her extended stomach and Delizah stands there quietly behind us both.

“Hey!” I call out, stealing all of their attention. “Someone needs to tell me where the hell the dagger is so we can kill this monster and free my friend.”

Derrick pulls back and looks at me with confusion. “What? You’re about to stab me, bruh, and say it in front of my face?”

“What? That’s not what I said!”

Derrick leans in and growls in my face. “You asked them for a damn blade, James!”

“Guys!” Delizah tries to interrupt, but the tension in the room had already grown to infernal heights.

All of our emotions are storming in this small cavern at the side of the mountain. Derrick's eyes glow and my dick twitches. I'm scared and willing to sacrifice myself if it means I free him.

"A dagger?" The older man asks, confused by my question. "I am Jawung of the leaders of Light, and it would seem you have been lied to, my friend. No mere dagger could ever kill Dathrokei."

His words resonate with us all while an awkward silence covers us. I pull my attention away from a furious Derrick and stare at Delizah. She has the audacity to hang her head in shame.

"Why did you lie to me?" I bark out, both embarrassed and pissed off beyond reason at this goose chase. She filled me with false hope and now everything I thought I was going to be able to do to save Derrick has shattered in front of me.

"You knew this was a wild goose chase and you had us steal a car and drive all the way here for nothing?"

I explode and lunge at her but multiple hands hold me back. My rage vibrates and I'm about to start throwing elbows and fists into the faces of these strangers until Derrick yells out my name.

"Calm yourself. This is a place of peace and light. We must stay calm if we are to defeat him again. Dathrokei is a creature of power and evil and there is but one way to stop him. It would seem your friend has failed to tell you the truth about what that is." I refuse to take my eyes off the traitor, standing there as if she is the only innocent one here.

The old man walks around us, corralling us inward toward the heart of the mountain, then takes a seat on the ground, crossing his legs. We all watch him in confusion as he closes his eyes



and stretches out his arms, taking a deep inhale and exhale. Suddenly, he begins to levitate and a white glow emits from behind his closed eyelids. I step back and Derrick puts his hand on my shoulder.

The other robed people don't say a word as they all stand there and stare at him as if he does this every other day. Who are these people?

When his body comes back down to the ground, he snaps his eyes open and expressionlessly gets to his feet and walks over to Delizah, who stands stock still. He hovers his hand over her round belly, then looks at me straight in the eye.

“Only purity can defeat the monster. Lies have no place here with the Warriors of Light.” He turns to look at Delizah. “Tell him the truth, child,” he says calmly.

Delizah immediately turns back into her human form, wringing her hands. She slowly turns to face me and I itch to tell her exactly what's on my mind.

“I couldn't tell you. I didn't know how. I mean, you don't understand how hard it is—”

“Stop rambling!” I spit out. “Tell me the truth!” I'm vibrating with hate and remorse as Derrick puts another hand on my shoulder, pulling my back into his chest to calm my nerves.

“You saved me from becoming his vessel. That's what I was born for, and now the only way to stop him is to sacrifice my unborn child!” She breaks down in front of us all and falls to her knees. Some of the robed figures hurry to help her back up, but I'm staring at her as if she's been the monster this whole time.

“Calm yourself!” the old man commands, but I can't hear him above the rushing heart beats behind my ears as my blood

continues to pump rapidly from what I just learned.

“In order to stop him, a sacrifice must be made—one of purity,” the old man reiterates.

“And the vessel? What about the vessel he inhabits? What about my friend?” I grit out.

The old man looks at me seriously, running a hand over his robe to smooth it out. “In twenty-four hours, his soul will be completely overtaken by the beast and he will be lost forever. It’s up to the daughter to defeat the father. Now, go. We’ve given you the tools to defeat the beast.”

I sputter and jerk my shoulders away from Derrick, taking a threatening step toward the old man. “Tools? What tools? You just said a bunch of bullshit and then nothing!”

As if by magic, I blink and we are all back at the car we stole, both Delizah and I wearing white robes with two golden swords in our hand. What the hell? Were we drugged?

In my anger and confusion, I can hear Delizah throw her sword into the backseat and get into the car, slamming the door angrily.

What the hell is happening right now?

I stare at her as she sits there with her features set, her eyes focused and her decision unwavering—whatever that decision is.

I step forward and point the sword at her face. “You knew all of this! Why didn’t you tell me? Are you telling me we have to battle it out like old school dungeons and dragons or else the world is doomed for the end of time?”

She scoffs and I want to slap her upside the head with the flat end of the blade. Derrick uses his own sword to push mine

down. I look at him incredulously. He couldn't possibly be taking her side!

"Fight?" she starts. "There's no fighting him. He's going to kill us all with a simple flick of his finger." She turns to look at me with a grim expression. "We have only one choice: I give up my baby or this world will end in a great flood."

Derrick groans and falls to one knee. I bend to help him up, but in the blink of an eye, he disappears into thin air. I cry out into the air and roar his name to no avail as the sky gets covered in dark clouds and thunder booms overhead.

We are going to die in some Noah shit if I don't do something. "Fine! Let's find your bastard of a father and get this shit over with!" I quickly make my way to the driver's seat and crank up the car, throwing the shift into gear. We quickly leave the area, kicking dirt behind us as we get back onto the road.

I am focused on one thing and one thing only. Getting Derrick back no matter the cost.

"Where the hell am I going? Tell me!" I scream at her.

She screams right back. "Go back to where they summoned him, you jackass! Stop yelling at me!"

"It's your fault we're in this mess! If you would have just told me the truth from the beginning, it could have saved us a damn trip!"

My foot slams on the pedal and I shift to the next gear, taking the turns faster than I should as we get back on the highway.

"Right, I'm supposed to just tell a complete stranger that they need to kill my unborn child," she sneers. Who is this woman? Was that sniveling little hand wringer all an act? Was any of her story true at all?

I replay everything the old man said back at the mountain.  
Only the light and truth could reside here. Here in this battle?  
Where was here? Was it the ocean? The beach? In this stupid  
car we stole?

What's my truth?

As if crumbling the invisible walls I always have up, my  
subconscious throws memory after memory at me.

*"What the fuck is wrong with you, James? Keep your head  
straight. Stop getting into this kind of shit!"*

*"It's not shit, Derrick! I just needed something. You can't  
understand it. I don't know how to explain it."*

*I turned away from him, ashamed, but he grabbed my shoulder  
and turned me back around to face him.*

*"I'm not trying to make you feel this way. I just care about  
you, James. I worry about you."*

We were always worried about each other because we were all  
we had.

*"Tell me what she did to you? I'm gonna kill her."*

*Derrick was ready to drive into the side of her apartment if I  
asked him to. It wasn't his fault Carrie didn't want to be with  
me anymore. I was a mess. No one wanted to be shackled up  
with a mess.*

*"Don't you fucking do that. Stop those thoughts right now! She  
never deserved you. Good riddance! Let her see what she's  
missing. They never miss the water until the well runs dry and  
when she comes back crawling, you better not take her back,  
bro."*

*I look at him with my heart on my sleeve. Derrick is the only  
one who continues to stand beside me, no matter what. Even*

*when what he's spewing is utter bullshit. I was a shitty boyfriend, an absent-minded one that couldn't find a path in life. That's why she left me. But here Derrick is, standing up for me anyway, as if I was the personification of perfection. He was fooling himself but I couldn't find it in me to tell him that. Not when he was looking at me like he was saving the world by backing me up.*

“Hold on, Derrick. I'm coming for you, brother,” I whisper to myself, reminding me of my purpose.

If Delizah has been lying this whole time from the start, she can't be trusted anymore. But I already have a plan of my own.

When it comes down to choosing to save her or Derrick, I will always choose Derrick.



## JAMES

HE STANDS THERE WITH HIS HAND GRIPPING HIS BLADE, HIS back to us.

My heart wants to beat out of my chest as I exit the car with my own sword in my hand. This is really happening. The battle of the ages. The battle to get Derrick back.

“Cut him from the back while he’s distracted!” Delizah hisses behind me and I look at her with anger.

A groan floats in the air, pulling my attention away as I stare at what’s happening before my eyes. Fleshy wings burst from his back, ripping through his flesh and the white robe, bathing the fabric in crimson blooms. Tentacles emerge from his back and face, his skin turning a sickly shade of seaweed green mixed with moss. The monster is taking over his body completely and it hasn’t been a full day yet.

“Derrick!” I run toward him with my sword, unsure of how to engage the monster without hurting the man I know. But I don’t have to think long when the beast turns and his arm shoots out, sending me flying against the side of the vehicle, denting the door in.

Delizah roars, runs into battle and brings her blade up, only to have the monster parry her hit with his own. He snarls in her face, and she quickly jumps back, slashing her blade from the side.

As much as she makes me hate her, I can’t let a pregnant woman get hurt. Pulling myself up to my feet, I make my way into the battle and slice the beast on his back, making him turn and give me the full force of his fury.

“Derrick! Are you still in there?” I cry out, but the monster roars and backhands me, making me see stars. I hear Delizah’s cry and quickly shake my head, getting it back in the game and bringing my sword down on the arm that’s currently gripping her neck. My aim is true as dark blood spurts out and the beast tosses Delizah onto the sands.

The ocean waves to our left crash like they have a life of their own, feeding off the energy that’s emitted from the battle on the sands. My feet dig into the ground as I leap and parry the blow that comes straight down on top of my head. I get pressed half a foot into the sand from the momentum of his swing, his weight so much more than my own. My arms waver, shaking from the strength it takes for me to hold him back. Falling to my knees, the monster swings the blade back, readying himself for a final blow when I swing the blade sideways at his ankles, taking him down to the ground.

Right at that very moment, as if the moon’s magnetic force pulls the waters, a giant wave crashes on us all and pulls us

into the ocean.

My body turns and tumbles, as I try to catch my breath before the waves pull me down again.

I need to save Derrick by any means necessary. The only problem is, I don't know how to swim.

The ocean is merciless as it continues to pull us all under, threatening to swallow us in her dark embrace. I open my eyes and struggle to move my limbs against the dense weight of the water, trying to paddle, trying to simulate some sort of swimming movement in order to pull myself up and break the surface to get necessary air.

Amidst the waves moving me where it will, I open my eyes again to catch sight of Delizah's shadow in her inhuman form, swimming away quickly. Of course, she would abandon and sacrifice me to the sea. I have always been the fool in many of my decisions and this was no different.

My arms are tired and I don't know where my sword has gone, but it doesn't matter now. The only thing that matters is getting a desperate breath of air as my lungs scream in pain from holding my breath for too long. I move my limbs as fast as I can, my arm outstretched toward the light of the moon on the other side of the water but I don't make it before the darkness that has been encroaching around my vision overtakes everything and I'm lost in the wet void of nothingness.

I awake with a start, my lungs and throat burning as I turn over and cough up water. I feel like I swallowed the whole sea as more keeps spewing out onto solid ground.

Solid ground?

My head pounds as I look around my unfamiliar surroundings. Where am I? How did I get to solid ground without leaving the



water?

My internal questions are answered as my mind finally supplies the fact that the water is hovering around me in what looks like an invisible dome. The ground beneath me is scorched and torn, as if something large had emerged from its heart.

Something... like an octoface God.

A roar rents the air and I quickly get to my feet, looking around me for anything I can use as a weapon. I grab a nearby rock the size of my fist and bring it up in defense.

There, in the farthest corner of this place, the monster is hunched over with his hands covering his head. His tentacles writhe and snap angrily as the beast lifts its head up and roars again.

“D-Derrick?”

The beast turns at the sound of my voice and comes barreling. I automatically go on offense and throw the rock at his face, hitting him on his cheek and spewing blood from the cut. Stepping back in fear, I land on my ass and try to crawl away only for the beast to leap and land on top of me, caging me in with his face tentacles inches away from mine.

I close my eyes but chastise myself, forcing them to open and face the battle that isn't yet won.

“Derrick!”

The monster's eyes blink from bioluminescence to the brown I've come to recognize like the back of my hand.

“Derrick! Come back to me!”

The monster growls, his hand at his temples as he falls over to the side into a fetal position and rocks.

My heart breaks at the sight and I don't know what comes over me or where the courage comes from but I throw myself over his body and sob, calling the name of the one person who has been able to pull me from my own inner battles.

“Derrick, I love you, man. Don't leave me like this. I need you. Come back to me. Fight it. Fight it with everything you have!”

“Get away from me, James!” comes out Derrick's voice, mixed with something else I can't describe, something that isn't him. “I can't control it!” I hear his words through my sobs and I hold him tighter.

The monster, originally the size of what I think King Kong would be, starts to shrink, but not enough. Not enough for me to fully wrap my arms around him.

I pull myself back and take a sharp inhale, trusting my gut on what to do. I lean in and grab his face, the tentacles writhing and wrapping around my wrist. I'm scared shitless, but I can't give up, not when we're this close to winning the battle.

“James, just leave me. I can't have him get you too. Just go!”

“I'M NOT LEAVING YOU!” I scream in his face, closing my eyes and pressing my lips to the wound on his cheek. “I can't live this life without you, Derrick. There's nothing for me out there, not if you're not there to share it with me. Stop pushing me away. I love you, man. I've always loved you. I'll die for you if I have to.”

The body beneath me shudders and lets out a harsh exhale. “I don't want to hurt you, James. Please,” he begs, fully in his voice, no longer mixed with the monster that took hold of him. “Please.”

“Derrick, let him take me. Let him take me in your place!”

He roars and the humidity of the space gets heavier. I look up to see the distance of the water dome coming down, threatening to bury us both here alive.

“Do you hear me? If there is a God up there, let them take me instead! I offer myself as a sacrifice! Save Derrick. Save him, please!”

Monster arms and tentacles wrap around me, pulling me down until I’m buried in its embrace.

“James,” his voice croaks in pain. “If I don’t make it back. I love you. You deserve the world. Make sure you make your life worth it.”

“What the hell are you saying, man? No! I’m not leaving you. You asshole! You promised to be there for me!”

“I can’t. It hurts.”

“Derrick! Don’t you fucking dare!”

In my tumultuous emotions, I find myself lost in a spiral that’s haunted me since my childhood. I can’t let it win. I can’t let the monster know that I am in the midst of two battles simultaneously. My weakness has always been my downfall, has always been the dark taint that pulled Derrick into these situations.

And now, it is time I fix it.



## JAMES

I QUICKLY DIVEST MYSELF OF MY WET CLOTHING WITHIN HIS embrace until I am naked, pulling him against me. He did the same for me when I was dying on the inside, it was the least I could do for him since the universe refused to sacrifice me.

I kiss him again. It doesn't matter if the tentacles make me shudder in disgust or if it makes me want to scratch my own face off. I need Derrick back. I need him to fight the void of death that is threatening him, even if it means I have to finally cross that line we've metaphorically drawn in the sand over the course of our friendship.

When my tongue touches one of the tentacles, the tension in his body slowly eases. His hips—the monster's hips began to undulate against me, making my own dick grow hard with arousal.

This is Derrick. It doesn't matter what he looks like on the outside. This is my Derrick, my life jacket in the midst of life's storms.

He groans as his body continues to shrink down to a normal human size—a large human, but a manageable size, nonetheless.

Tentacles slither between my legs, wrapping around my shaft as I continue to kiss his face the only way I understand how. When one of his face tentacles slithers into my mouth, I let him explore me.

This is new territory for both of us, both of us only having ever been with a human. Well, Derrick only having been with someone in human form.

I shouldn't find this life and death situation as erotic as I do, but I gasp around a mouthful as a tentacle found its way to my back entrance, teasing the tight ring of muscle.

“James, we shouldn't,” he whispers, but I shake my head and lick the tentacle that retreats from my mouth.

“Derrick, it was always going to come to this. You've always been my one and only. I can't live a life out there without you and you know it. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting this and just take me the way you've always wanted to.”

I dare him. I challenge him because that is how we operate as men. That is the communication we understand with one another.

He groans and pushes my legs apart, another tentacle wrapping around my balls, tugging and caressing them as a tentacle begins to stroke my cock. I can feel my pre-cum lubricating the tip of my dick, groaning against his face

tentacles as my own hips begin to involuntarily thrust against his ministrations.

The tentacle that teases my back hole is slick with a substance I can't name, but it makes my mouth dry when it plays with the ring, coercing it to open up.

I relax my body, my hands caressing the hard, textured skin of the beast, thinking about what it would be like if it were Derrick's human body in front of me right now.

"James," he whispers, twisting his body to accommodate mine so that I can fit against him better. "I've dreamed of your cock in my mouth. I've dreamed of fucking your face every time you throw me into your fucking shenanigans to punish you."

I groan and thrust my hips again as a tentacle slips into my ass and undulates inside of me, stretching me out to its limit as it continues to lubricate my insides.

"Now I can fuck all your holes when I'm pissed. I want you to take everything. I want to fill you up until you can't think of anything but me," he whispers, his mouth tentacles writhing, teasing the seam of my lips.

I groan when his tentacles wrap around my body and force it into positions that contort me. One minute, I'm on the ground, savoring the sensation of his tentacle inside my ass, the next I'm pulled up into the air as it turns me until Derrick wraps his tentacle mouth around my throbbing dick. When a sucker pulls at the skin of my balls, I twitch and groan.

Tentacles wrap around my wrist, pulling it back, restraining me as Derrick's mouth sucks my soul out of my cock. When I feel lightning strike down my spine, I cry out in pleasure as I spill into the recesses of his monster mouth, right as a tentacle slips deeper inside of me, pushing against erotic areas I didn't

know existed. Suckers continuously touch every inch of my skin, pulling it, kissing it, until I'm overstimulated with sensation and my mind enters a subspace that's somewhere between dream and reality.

My mind is unable to comprehend the anatomy of the creature as Derrick groans and something wet covers my entire body from the chest down and in my ass. The fluid strings as the tip of a tentacle pulls off my chest and goes down my throat. I willingly take him in, tasting everything he has to offer me the same way he tasted me.

My heart races with our debauched lovemaking, my breaths coming out in pants as he slowly lowers me onto his chest while he lies on his back.

“Fuck...”

I'm speechless as I try to calm my breathing. I can feel my skin stick against him, but neither of us make a move, neither of us comment on it.

“Derrick, I—”

“Don't. Don't say anything. Let's just be in the moment, James.”

“Did he... what's going to happen?” I ask, unable to stop myself. Did we win the battle? It feels like Derrick won whatever happened inside of him. But where does that leave us? He can't go back into the real world like this, in this form. The government would hunt him down to the ends of the earth and keep him for experiments.

I can't lose him again.

“It's like my mind was torn open and the answers of the universe ran in front of my eyes like a slideshow.”

“What does that mean?” I slowly peel my head off his chest and stare into his deep brown eyes.

“We can’t ever go back, James. I fought the monster and was able to regain control over my body again, forcing him out of my mind, but we can’t ever go back.”

“We don’t have to. I’m not leaving you, Derrick. Not now, not ever,” I quickly answer without a second thought.

He lifts his clawed hands and caresses the side of my face. “I know, James. I didn’t want to have to subject you to a life of exile with me.”

“There is no life without you, Derrick. Get it through your thick monster skull.”

He chuckles and rubs my back, looking at the top of the water dome, deep in thought.

“We’ll have to exist below the sea. There’s no other way around it.”

“I can’t swim, Derrick,” I admit sheepishly.

A tentacle slithers across my ass and slaps it. “I know, asshole. I’ve always known.”

I flush bright red and hide my face against his chest so I don’t have to look at him through my embarrassment.

“But you came after me anyway, willing to risk your life for something that had the worst probabilities of going your way.”

“It’s what I do,” I mumble, and he lets out a booming laugh, shaking me with him.

“I’ll take care of you, James. I’ll always take care of you.”

And like that, my world is right again. It doesn’t matter if we have to leave everything we know behind, because everything



that is right in front of us means so much more. It's worth the sacrifice.

"I know, Derrick. You always have."

Does it really matter what that means? If I have to drown in my attempt to be with the man I love, it will still all be worth it in the end because a love like ours transcends understanding and we both know it. We just need to have faith that we will figure it out—together.

The word "Epilogue" is written in a cursive script, centered between two large, ornate, black decorative flourishes that resemble stylized, dripping ink or calligraphic scrolls.

DELIZAH

*I SCREAMED, LETTING OUT AIR BUBBLES WHEN SOMETHING wrapped around my ankle and pulled me deeper into the waters.*

*I kicked and fought, my monster form giving me the strength I needed to put up a good battle. Bubbles surrounded me, clouding my vision when something else hit me in the back of the head.*

I wake up in a sweat, patting my body down to make sure I didn't lose any limbs. The memory plagues me nightly, and I hang my head and cry as my hands slowly go to my flat stomach.

Something happened to me in the water. I woke up on the sands alive, but without a child. How was he able to still take my child from me?

Loud knocks come at the door and I almost jump out of my skin. Slowly, I creep out of my soft bed and grab a bat before going to see who is at the door.

I look out the peephole to see the back of a man standing there. My body relaxes and I place the bat against the wall before unlocking my door and opening it.

The man turns around and I smile, looking at the face of the friend I made a few years back after moving to a different town. I couldn't face everything that happened beachside. I needed to leave. Needed to get myself as far away from the bad memories as possible.

He smiles and waves awkwardly before I invite him inside.

“What are you doing here, Dutton? Is everything okay?”

Dutton is a young man, one that I took under my wing when he showed up to work one day as a new employee. He was clumsy, like a newborn colt when I taught him how to work the assembly line at the factory.

“Yeah, I'm fine. I just needed to talk to you about something.”

He sounds serious and I become concerned.

Ushering him into my kitchen, I quickly make us both a glass of water and sit down across the table from him. “What's wrong? Is it something about work? Is everyone treating you well?”

“Yeah, that's all fine. I just needed to tell you this,” he says as he leans in and looks me in the eye with grim determination.

Something is clawing in my gut but I don't know what it is.

Until the next sentence comes out of his mouth.

“The charade's been going on long enough,” he starts, and I lean back in my chair away from him, my heart racing. “You

lost a child twenty years ago along the beach.”

How does he know that?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I deadpan, without expression.

“Yes, you do.”

I quickly get to my feet, knocking my chair down. “Get out of my house.”

He stands up too, still staring at me. “No.”

“I’m going to call the cops if you don’t leave my house in the next ten minutes.”

“Why would you kick out your only son when all he wanted to do was say hi to his mother? The mother that abandoned him to the sea.”

My hand flies to my mouth and my eyes water. This can’t be true. He’s lying. My nightmares play on a loop and I know damn well my father found another vessel that night in the waters, finally getting the sacrifice he’s always wanted.

“Grandfather told me about you. He also told me it was time to tell you the truth. The time for sacrifice is here once more. Since you gave up your lineage to the sea, he needed another heir... and that heir is me.”



Thank you for reading *Suckers*. If you want to check out some of my other books, then why not check out *Her 13th Hour!*

<https://books2read.com/u/mdX9qX>

Or *The Hunger of Thieves!*

<https://books2read.com/u/mVeNxr>

# About the Author

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If you get your kicks in a magical manner, order toys from websites like bad dragon, and prefer your monsters *in* your bed instead of *under* them, then Y. D. is your girl.

Writing everything from spicy dark fantasy to fluffier-than-a-cool-marshmallow romance, Y.D. La Mar has her fingers in all sorts of man-meat pie, and the sky is the limit. Somehow, this magical mistress manages to balance her spicy author life with her responsibilities as a mom, a wife, and a resident of Sin City—*oh, irony, you've felled me.*

When the world is full of black-and-white, Y.D. plays in the grey zones, spending her time creating new ways to shock and awe her editor, as well as her readers.

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## Also by YD La Mar

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Sinful Attraction

The Sky Below

Maeonia

Between Heaven and Earth

# THE SEA KING AND THE LIBRARIAN

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TRISH HEINRICH

## *Author's Note*

All Tandy wanted was a quiet week at her aunt's beach house. Drink a little wine, do some spell work and forget that her life was in shambles. But no, she just had to go and summon a Sea King.

Now he claims that she's his queen and that she's destined to live with him under the sea and spend her days being pleased by him in every way imaginable.

Taking the plunge maybe an extreme response to a midlife crisis, but Tandy has a feeling this is more than just a fling.

This could be what she's been looking for her whole life.

CW's include: references to abusive relationships in the past.



IT'S A TRUTH UNIVERSAL THAT MERLOT AND SPELL CASTING DO not go well together.

Ask me how I know.

And yet, here I was, laying in my soft bed, mouth dry as cotton, head feeling like the drum set for Animal and my spirit aching from the depletion of energy that casting a major spell produces. I refused to open my eyes because I knew the second I did, I'd throw up. So maybe if I just laid here, the hangover would just dissipate.

Yeah, right but I'm still not moving. I refuse.

Soft air cascaded over me from the open window in the bedroom, bringing a bracing aroma off the ocean. Seagulls cried in the distance, punctuating the crash of waves that was actually the only pleasant thing about this morning.

I'd come out to my aunt's beach cottage straight from the reading of her will two days ago. The knowledge that the one person in my family who had given two shits about me was

now gone caused a burning ache to erupt from my chest, and tears squeezed past my closed lids. She and I had been the only ones gifted with magic, and my mother, sisters and brothers had always been salty about it.

*Like it was something I could help.*

She'd been well off, not rich but comfortable. I think my mom expected to get some of the goods being the older sister but the only things she and my siblings had been left were some albums by bands no one had ever heard of, a set of Hummel figurines, which were likely cursed, and a winery in southern Oregon that had never produced a single bottle of drinkable wine.

*I'd never seen a more interesting 'fuck you' in a will in my life.*

My family flipped out when the lawyer announced what I got, though I'd have given every single item, every red cent, every square footage of property back if it meant I could've kept my aunt. She'd left me this house, her other cottage in Salem (yes, that one), and her Witches' Safe.

I'd been going through the safe when I found a beautiful amulet on a gold chain. It was a huge stone the size of an egg. The blue color had changed and moved like water in the sunlight and draped over the top was the image of a wave and a trident in gorgeous gold filigree. The box it was in contained a note about where in her journal to look for details.

It got fuzzy after that because I'm pretty sure I'd started my second bottle of wine, but I had a memory of finding the spell and casting it for some reason.

*Was I crying? Why do I feel like I did something really dumb?  
Crap, I'm gonna have to get up, aren't I?*

I cracked open an eye and groaned.

“Stupid sunlight...in the stupid sky...with stupid sea breeze...  
from the stupid ocean.”

I tried to move and the nausea hit me like a Mack truck.

“Oh, shit.”

It was only six feet to the en suite, but it was almost too far. I barfed up everything but the kitchen sink, though it felt like that came up too by the time I was done. I slumped against the claw foot tub, the cool porcelain heavenly against my aching head. It wasn't until the world had stopped its incessant spinning that I realized something else ached besides the obvious parts.

It was a place that hadn't had a reason to ache since the douche canoe (may he never get an erection again and die of dysentery) had decided that I was too old for him and served me with divorce papers. He was currently dating someone who wasn't alive until the beginning of this century and lamenting how his hair loss treatments were actually making more hair fall out. I won't say I hexed him technically but....

I looked down and noticed that I wasn't wearing underwear.

And that there was a lot of white stuff dried on my inner thighs and pubic hair.

And were those really, really small eggs?

“What the fuck did I do last night?”

Understandably, the sight of all that sobered me up a bit and I heaved myself up against the sink.

“Oh, Christ on a cracker,” I winced as I looked at myself in the mirror.

My graying dark brown hair was a wild nest on top of my head, my lips were a little swollen, the bags under my eyes

could hold a year's worth of groceries, and was that a hicky on my neck?

“Or three? Seriously, what the fuck, or rather who the fuck did I do last night?”

I splashed some cold water on my face and took a washcloth to my nethers before gingerly walking out into the bedroom. I winced at the still too bright light and made my way over to my suitcase, because I still hadn't unpacked. I was on bereavement leave from the Secret Archive, a cross between the CIA and your grandmother's attic when it came to collecting supernatural artifacts and storing them away. I worked in the Library, which might sound boring, but it was spelled to be damn near infinite and housed every mystical text known to this world. In other words, a Witch's wet dream of knowledge.

I loved it there, but in the last year it had gotten boring and I felt my soul itching for something else. But what? I wasn't exactly qualified to do a whole lot of anything except serve the mystical community, and even that was lackluster at best. I was terrible at casting battle spells, and I was okay at medical enchantments but not good enough to be a doctor. I could whip up a batch of pretty good spelled chocolate chip cookies but nothing fancy and no one wanted to see me scrye, that was just embarrassing for everyone involved.

My small life was no longer comfortable; it was starting to constrict and I was going to use this leave from the Archive to figure out what my next move might be. But I didn't count on the grief hitting me so hard. I couldn't think past the loneliness; someone essential was missing from my life now and she'd left an aching hole in my heart.

I stopped at the dresser and picked up one of my aunt's sea shells. She loved them for no other reason than they were just pretty. Tears clouded my vision as I rubbed the small shell between my fingers, rough on one side, smooth on the other. A memory from last night surfaced as I did.

A blinding light...the smell of brine and...

I dropped the shell and gasped.

“Oh shit!”

I pulled on the first pair of clean undies I could find, which just happened to be the lower part of a one-piece swim suit and didn't bother to pull up the top part since I was still wearing a merlot stained t-shirt from last night. I bolted out of the room and down the stairs. My head was protesting, my stomach roiled but I had bigger fish to fry than a hangover.

Quite. Fucking. Literally.

“Where are you?!” I yelled as I hit the bottom of the stairs.

The lower floor of the cottage was an open concept with the living area bleeding into the kitchen where every single cupboard was opened, containers of food sat half open on the counters. The fridge door was open, a carton of milk was tipped over in the sink and two eggs were shattered on the floor.

“What the...? Hey!” I yelled. “Hello?! Where are you?”

I winced and grabbed my head. I should be sitting with my head in a toilet and nursing a pot of coffee but instead, I was trying to find the damn Fish Man I'd accidentally summoned last night.

My frantic search in the house produced nothing until I happened to look out the windows and onto the beach that

butted up against my aunt's property.

The golden sands were deserted at this time of year, not quite the warm weather that brought the tourists, but also not really winter anymore either. There were a few retired couples that lived along this stretch, but they weren't out at the moment. Or at least I hoped they weren't, because I'd finally found the Fish Man and dear goddess almighty, was he built.

I ran out onto the deck and watched, mouth gaping and heart pounding, as he ascended from the waves like James fucking Bond in Casino Royale; all of his ripped, corded muscles dripping with water, a steely gaze from the golden eyes in his lizard like face. He had a crest at the top of his head, with three sharp points that looked tinged with gold at the tips, which faded to green and then to a dark blue where it met his head, which was glistening in the morning sunlight like a jewel plucked from an underwater cave.

His body was wide with muscle, his skin, or scales, fading from the blue on his shoulders to green at his pecs until that same gold color from his crest hugged the center of his torso. His legs were thick and I didn't see anything between them except a small slit where a cock should be. His feet and hands were webbed and sunlight shone off obsidian claws.

I was frozen solid by the sheer power and otherworldly sensuality of him. The way he moved through the waves, as if they were his to command, a swagger in his step that was unimpeded by the drag of the tides. I should've been running to him, hiding this being from the general population who didn't know that monsters really did exist. The only reason I wasn't falling down in a fit was because I'd known that supernatural beings shared our world for some time now. It was impossible to work at the Archive and not run into at least



a dozen on a daily basis. Our current Arch Librarian was a Gryphon, for crying out loud.

But out in the world, among Mundanes, supernatural beings wore glamours that hid their true appearance. This Fish Man had no such disguise and it was only a matter of minutes before someone saw him and started up the rumor mill. And in this small seaside town, it would become a twelve foot tall Godzilla-like creature by lunch time.

I jumped off the deck and my entire body screamed in protest as I tried to run over the cool sand toward him.

As I got closer, I saw that yes, he was covered in iridescent scales, but his face was less lizard like and more humanoid, with small pronounced lips that peeled back into a wide grin, showing off sharp teeth.

“My love, you are awake,” his voice rumbled like thunder.

“You can’t be out here!” I said. “Someone will see you!”

He looked from one side of the empty beach to the other and shook his head.

“Such a worrier.”

And then he picked me up and took possession of my mouth.

At first all I could think about were those razor sharp looking teeth, but then his tongue plunged into my mouth and I wasn’t thinking about his teeth anymore. It was long and abnormally thick and was it...

*Forked? Is he rolling it in my mouth?*

I pushed hard on his chest, unable to avoid noticing how firm and shockingly soft his body was.

“Stop,” I said, breathless, because in spite of how foreign that tongue felt, Fish Man knew what he was doing with it.

“Would you rather I slipped those strange coverings off your cunt and licked you there again until you come in my mouth? I rather liked that last night.”

My brain completely stopped. Whatever I was about to say, the reasons I’d run out onto the beach, hell even my hangover was a distant memory.

“You...you liked...”

“Making you come with my tongue deep inside your cunt? I did it three times to get you ready for me. But when we descend to my kingdom, you will change to take me easier, I promise.”

I snorted and shook my head.

“Okay, I must still be passed out or that spell really backfired and I’m dead because three oral orgasms? I should remember that!”

His grin turned feral and I swear I felt a purring growl coming from his chest.

“I can refresh your memory, if you’d like.”

I was so close to saying yes when I finally remembered: Fish Man. Public beach. Mass hysteria.

“You have to come inside,” I said, though with much less conviction than previously.

“Mmmm yes, inside I can ravage you again.”

And before I could stop him, Fish Man grabbed my ass and hauled me up onto his body. I hooked my legs around his back out of instinct and my heels brushed against a raised ridge of

more scales. As he carried me, the space between his legs that had been empty was now filled with something that was growing steadily bigger and thicker with each passing second.

*Oh my god, he's got a cock pocket! This can't be happening. I catalogue legends and myths about monsters like this, I don't fuck them!*

But as his very large cock started rubbing against the thin fabric of my bathing suit I was once again dumb struck. It was at just the right angle to hit my clit with each jostle and by the time we walked into the house I was a panting mess.

“You’re aroused.” His voice had gotten even deeper. “I can smell what’s mine. Let me make you come again, my Queen. I need to fill you with my seed, claim you properly so no one can dispute my right.”

He grazed his sharp teeth down my throat to where my shoulders met my neck and suckled there, sending delicious chills down my body. I melted, my resistance futile, and started grinding against him. Distantly, I wondered if he had some kind of aphrodisiac venom or something because this was not me. I did not fuck strange human men, much less strange fish men that I’d accidentally summoned from a cursed amulet.

His hands kneaded the flesh of my ass and hips as he made his way down to my breasts where his mouth took my nipple through the shirt. The friction of the fabric, the tiny bite of his teeth and that damn tongue had me seeing stars.

“Oh my...goddess!”

“Yes,” he purred against me, “I want you wet and wanting. I want you to beg as you did last night before I plunged into you.”

His index finger trailed over the inside of my thigh and hooked into the crotch of the swimsuit. I had a moment of clarity, remembering those shining claws on his hand, and grabbed his wrist.

“No, not with those nails you don’t!”

He chuckled.

“How quickly you have forgotten. I can change any aspect of my appearance to be whatever you prefer.”

He held up the finger and right before my eyes, the claws retracted.

“Oh...okay. I...what the fuck?”

His hand suddenly morphed into a beautiful and shockingly erotic blue and green tentacle.

“I didn’t get to try this shape with you last night,” he nibbled against my neck. “I promise you will like it.”

I couldn’t deny the pure erotic fantasy of being tentacle fucked. I mean, what sex deprived divorcee with chubby thighs didn’t want a fantasy monster that was insatiable for them?

But my headache was starting to cut through the haze of arousal, and my stomach was now properly empty. I needed food, ibuprofen and a bucket of coffee.

“Wait,” I pushed against him, “wait, I...not right now.”

Fish Man cocked his head to the side, the sunlight glinting off the tips of his crest, and frowned at me.

“What is it, my Queen? Are you afraid? I assure you, I only wish to bring you pleasure.”

“Oh, I’m sure, but I need some food and coffee before we commence with the...tentacle...stuff.”

“Of course you should be fed. I tried to find something for you but I am unfamiliar with the sustenance of this era.”

He gestured behind me to the wrecked kitchen and I snorted.

“Yeah, I noticed. Now, put me down so I can clean up and we can get some food. I know a good coffee shop. We probably need to talk too.”

“Ah, that would be good. There are a few things to prepare before our departure.”

I wasn’t at all sure I wanted to know what he meant by that, but I had a feeling I needed to know. So I gave him a wobbly smile as he set me on my feet.

“Okay, yeah, that’s good.”

I started up the stairs and he was right on my heels.

“Um...do you want a shower too?”

“I have bathed in the sea, but will be happy to cleanse you.”

I stared at him as the words sank in. He wanted to wash me? My eyes strayed to his cock pocket and I nearly choked.

It. Was. Huge.

Not just that, there were tiny sucker like shapes all along the sides, top and underside. The tip was narrow like a tentacle while the base had a knot that was pulsing. It had to be as thick as my forearm and probably as long. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from it and I started to wonder how the hell I was walking around this morning if that had been shoved up my va-jay-jay.

As I watched, he took himself in hand and gave his cock a rough stroke that produced a pearl of white at the tip.

“You are hungry,” he said with a dark laugh, “and it is not for food.”

I cleared my throat and crossed my arms.

“It’s not every day you see a cock like that. I’m just curious.”

“I see,” he stepped up onto the step just below mine and still towered over me. “Explore me then. Touch. Taste. Whatever you want.”

I licked my lips and almost reached out.

“I...I need to shower. I stink.”

He inhaled deeply and shook his head.

“You carry my scent. It is divine. But if you must wash, let me do it.”

It was damn tempting and I shook my head.

“You’re just looking for a way to fuck me.”

He laughed again and shook his head, those golden eyes of his on fire as he raked them over me.

“I promise, my love, I won’t fuck you unless you ask me as you did last night.”

I must’ve been too horny to think straight because I gave him a curt nod and turned away from the giant tentacle cock.

I ran up the stairs and to the en suite, Fish Man still hot on my heels, where I turned on the water to warm up, and started to pull my shirt over my head. That’s when the voice my ex had made sure was ingrained in my mind started to speak.

Fat tummy. Saggy boobs. Thick thighs with dimples on them.

I'd worked damn hard to overcome it between therapy and a support group. But sometimes, out of the blue, those voices reared their ugly head.

"Could you...could you turn around?" I asked.

Fish Man frowned at me, tilting his head in that inquisitive way that was almost cute.

"Why have you suddenly become so small? That is what scared fish do when threatened. What have I done to scare you?"

"It's not you, I just...I'm a little self-conscious of this," I gestured to my body.

He took his time letting his gaze run down me and I flushed deeply under his attention. What did he see? What did he feel? I know we fucked last night, but I was still wearing my shirt and it had been dark, that much I did remember. I doubted he saw much but still, I was more aware now and my ex's words were hard to shut down at the moment.

"You are as beautiful as the moonlight on the waves. As tempting as the deepest treasures of my realm. I long to see every curve and dip of your body, to lave it with my tongue and coat it in my spill. You are a goddess of the waves, my Queen and I adore the expanse of your body."

I snorted, even as the temptation to believe him was pulling at my heart.

"I've heard that before, and then the clothes come off and suddenly it's all 'hey let's turn off the lights' and 'do you really need that ice cream?'"

His eyes narrowed at that and his jaw tensed. Suddenly the fire in his gaze turned from lustful to furious and I took a step back.

“Who has lied to you in this way? Who has harmed your soul? I will rip his spine from his body and fashion his rib cage into a crown for you to wear as I string his entrails across the sea!”

His rage was not performative, it was viscerally real and somehow it broke through the fear. I laughed as tears fell hot from my eyes.

“You weep,” he growled and flicked his tongue out to drink my tears. “I will find this male and give you the first flay of his skin for what he’s done to you.”

“Oh believe me, I would like nothing better, but I’m pretty sure he’s suffering plenty right now.”

He nodded.

“If you are satisfied with the vengeance, then so am I. Now, allow me to show you the truth of your beauty and then we shall sate your appetite.”

Before I could say anything, he’d taken the hem of my shirt and began to pull it over my head. I took a deep breath and raised my arms, daring to believe in what he’d just said.

When it was off, I looked him in the eyes and was struck breathless. He was devouring me, his gaze tongues of fire across my breasts and stomach.

“Oh,” he breathed, brushing my hard nipple with one soft knuckle, “in all my lonely years in that amulet, I never dared to dream such beauty could be mine.”

It sounded like a line, like something a fairy tale prince would say to get into a chamber maids pantaloons.

But it wasn’t.

I felt the truth of his words down into my bones, melting me from the inside out.



“Can I touch you, my Queen?”

I swallowed, knowing exactly where that was going to lead us.

“Y-yes.”

He nodded and took the bathing suit bottoms in hand, pulling them slowly down my thighs until he was kneeling in front of me, my sex at eye level to him, untrimmed bush on full display. My stomach was a loaf of dough, soft and full, and I waited for what he might do when he saw it. Big boobs were one thing but a soft tummy was something else.

But he simply grinned up at me and, holding my gaze, his tongue slipped from his mouth and flicked against my belly button.

I gasped at the strange contact but didn't stop him as he laved the skin of my stomach with his tongue. He hadn't moved at all and I started to wonder how long that tongue of his was when it snaked down through my thick curls and between my pussy lips. He found my clit like he had a road map to it and wrapped the end of the forked tongue around it. His eyes burned me up as he stared at me and began to explore me. His licks were firm, rolling and before I could even think about stopping it, he'd coaxed my clit from beneath its hood and was working the tip like a maestro.

My cries echoed in the bathroom, getting louder with each second, as he worked me faster and faster. When the wave he'd been building in me crested, it took me completely by surprise and I screamed as a rush of wet dripped from me. I was on fire, I was flying, I was dying all at once as I rode it out.

I'd barely come back to myself when I realized that his tongue ran up and down my inner thighs and he was groaning.

He'd made me squirt and now he was lapping it up like it was ambrosia.

"So good," he groaned against my cunt, "you're incredible."

But I was too damn sensitive now and just the barest brush of his face against me caused too much friction on my clit. I cried out and pulled back, chest heaving and legs trembling.

"I can't...I need a break."

"Of course," he rose in a fluid motion that was as graceful as it was sensual and scooped me up. "Let me bathe you, my Queen."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" I asked, just for something to distract me from the fact that his cock was out of its hidey hole and I was damn tempted to see just how it fit.

"Because that is what you are."

He set me on my feet, the warm water heavenly against my skin, and looked around the shower at the shampoo bottles and bar of soap. I could tell that he was a bit confused, so I grabbed the shampoo and squeezed some in to my hair. I'd barely gotten it lathered when he gently took my hands down and shook his head.

"It is my honor to bathe you, but I might require some education."

I smirked at how sexy and cute that was all at the same time.

"Okay, well, massage this into my hair."

He turned me around and began to do just that. His claws scrapped against my scalp, but just light enough to be soothing not painful. He took his time, working it through my straight hair with great care.

“Rinse?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Once again, his hands on my shoulders turned me. I closed my eyes as he rinsed the shampoo out.

“Why am I your Queen?” I asked as I started lathering up a washcloth.

“Because you freed me. Only the one meant to rule the Western Regnum Maris by my side could’ve freed me. You were fated to be mine, as I was fated to be yours.”

I almost dropped the damn soap as what he was saying began to sink in. He took the cloth from my hand and began to run it over my shoulders and arms. All I could do was stand there in a daze as his words spun in my head.

Only when he got to my ass was I jolted out of my spinning thoughts. I jumped and tried to take his hands away but he shook his head.

“I adore your fleshy bottom. Please, let me rub it.”

Either I was having a breakdown or the only way my brain could handle all of this as to latch onto the absurdity of what he’d just said because I started to laugh uncontrollably.

“Why do you chortle at my words?” he asked, gazing up at me from the floor of the tub.

“Because, all of this. You, my ass, my aunt’s bait and switch with that damn amulet, your tentacle dick, this is all ridiculous and if I don’t laugh I’ll scream, okay?”

He tilted his head and frowned at me.

“I am worried you were in more dire need of sustenance than we thought.”

I closed my eyes and sighed as he turned off the water and grabbed a towel.

“Okay, sure, let’s start with that.”



I THREW ON A GREEN AND PINK SUN DRESS THAT REACHED MY shins and was loose and flowy before braiding my still wet hair. The whole time Mr. Fish Man sat on the bed and stared at me, cock very much out of his pocket. I was grateful that he gave me a little space after insisting on drying me off. I took my time slathering lotion on my arms and face, and then found my comfy but cute sandals.

I was doing my best not to panic, but it's not every day that you find out that you're suddenly Queen of an underwater kingdom. Or that the king has an insatiable lust for you, which, to be honest, was the one part of this whole thing that I minded least, but I needed to think straight, and letting him keep in an orgasmic fugue state was not going to help.

"You, stay here and maybe get some clothes on? You can't go out like that," I said to him.

"This world still does not know about supernatural beings?" he asked with a slight curl to his lips as if disgusted.

“Some of us do, but the general populace? No.”

He huffed out a breath.

“I suppose I can change my form to something more...  
mundane.”

“Great, now while you slip into something more comfortable, I  
need to go look for something. Don’t go away.”

He tilted his head to the side in that adorable inquisitive look  
of his.

“Comfortable? It’s not painful but shape changing into a  
mundane is not what I could call comfortable.”

I chuckled at that.

How is a guy who looks like the creature from the black  
lagoon so damn cute?

“It’s an expression, I don’t mean literally.”

“Ah, I see. Very well. I will not go anywhere but I will clean  
my mess downstairs. You should not have to do it.”

His words brought me up short for a moment. Had he really  
just offered to clean?

*Damn. That’s almost sexier than his obsession with eating me  
out.*

To avoid the growing pull to just spend all day in bed with this  
sexy as fuck Fish Man, I gave him a shaky smile and ran into  
my aunt’s spell casting room. It was consecrated, and had her  
alter and Witches Safe. It was obviously where I’d cast the  
spell last night; there’s no way in hell, even drunk, that I’d  
attempt a spell like this without a sacred circle and  
consecration.

The moment I hit the threshold, the scent of sea water and incense hit me full in the face.

“Well, okay then,” I sneezed as it became more potent the closer I got to the circle.

My aunt had a permanent circle on the floor with a pentagram in the center. One of her artisan friends had made her special candle holders that were bolted to the floor at the four corners. The candles in them were burned down to nubs and out, thank goodness. I was here to find out what I’d done and what clues the spell might give me as to breaking whatever connection the Sea King thought we had. But as I looked around at this beautiful room full of memories and the glimmer of my aunt’s presence, I broke down in tears.

I fell to my knees just outside the circle and hugged myself as I let out my grief. It always took me a while to really cry when people died, or when drastic changes happened in my life. I’d cried a bit at her funeral, and a little on the drive here. But this gut wrenching feeling like I’m crying up my heart type of weeping? I hadn’t gotten around to it yet so it was no surprise that it hit me now.

I don’t know how long I knelt there, sobbing so hard that my stomach ached and my chest felt hollow.

“I wish you were here,” I whispered when I could get a breath. “I wish you could just hug me. I need you to help me find my way because nothing feels like it fits. But you’re not here and now I have this Sea King who thinks I’m his queen.”

I laughed through the tears and snot on my face, and shook my head.

“Have you ever known anyone who was less like a queen? I’m a mess.”

“No, you’re not.”

I screamed and spun around at the sound of my aunt’s voice.

There she stood, wreathed in blue light and smiling at me. She was dressed in her usual ‘hippie dippie’ clothes, as my mother would say, and I loved it. Her gray hair fell in a cascade of waves over her shoulders and chest, and she wore the smile I remembered. The one that was infinitely patient and loving. The one that comforted my broken heart, and patiently taught me how to use my gifts.

“Why haven’t you moved on?” I asked. “Not that I’m not tickled to see you but you shouldn’t be here.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that,” she waved my worry away and sat down next to me on the floor. “I’ll move on in a few, but first I needed to talk to you about that spell.”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands.

“I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Well, you weren’t. Not after that much wine.”

“I’m sorry, that was irresponsible of me.”

She snorted and shook her head.

“You wouldn’t have tried it if you weren’t drunk so it’s fine. I’m glad you did that one, it’s about time he was freed by one of us.”

I frowned at her, sure it was my grief that muddled my ability to comprehend her. She glanced over and heaved a sigh.

“It’s time I told you about where we get our magic.”

“Okay...” I said slowly.

“Our great ancestor, three hundred years ago, was a Siren. But not just any Siren. She was a princess and she fell in love with



a poor fisherman. For months they met in secret, until her father found out about them.”

“Lemme guess, he wasn’t thrilled.”

“Well, not at first, no. But then he saw how much his daughter loved the man and after she begged and pleaded with him, he granted her the form of a Mundane. But the one thing he couldn’t take from her was her magic.”

“Aren’t Sirens destructive though? They lure sailors to their death?”

Aunty waved her hand and grunted.

“Don’t believe everything you read, honey. Sometimes yes they do. But they also possess deep, wild magic. As the years have passed, our blood line has become weaker, which is why only you and I possessed the gift.”

“Where does the amulet come in to play?”

Her eyes twinkled.

“Well, you see, the princess was promised to a prince from a neighboring kingdom.”

“There are multiple sea kingdoms?”

“Of course. The ocean is vast! What, do you seriously think one king could rule all that?” She blew out her lips and shook her head. “Absolutely not. Now as I was saying, the prince from that kingdom was very angry and very hurt. You see, he loved the princess very much and had decided to pursue to try and win her back. And at first, our ancestress was furious that he’d dared come after her. But when she looked closer, she saw how sad he was, how lonely. His father was a brutal king, and the prince had been bereft of love all his life. He’d hoped the princess would change that. So she offered him a trade,

one of her descendants as his queen if he left them alone. He agreed, but begged her not to send him go back to his father. He said he'd rather live in exile than face one more day in that place."

"So, she imprisoned him in the amulet? That doesn't seem very nice."

"He slept the whole time, unaware of the passage of time. Not only that, she fashioned the spell so that everyone else in the kingdom would sleep as well. But the one person who would be left utterly alone in his kingdom was the king, punishment for his treatment of the prince and his people. From what her journal says, he was awful."

I folded my arms across my chest and arched an eyebrow.

"You do realize you just combined the 'Little Mermaid' and 'Sleeping Beauty' and called it family lore, right?"

She gave me one of her mischievous smiles.

"Doesn't make it untrue. You don't believe me, then go pick up her journal. You read out of it when you freed him."

I glanced over at the book in the middle of the circle, along with the cracked open amulet. I could've pushed back more, scoffed at the tale, and refused to believe it. But my aunt never lied about this kind of thing. And I had the evidence in my room upstairs.

"He thinks I'm his queen," I murmured.

"You are a descendant of royalty, my darling," Auntie said.

I snorted and wiped the tears that had started up again.

"I'm overweight, still dealing with the emotional abuse of that asshole I married and I'm pretty sure I'm having an early midlife crisis. How the hell is that royal?"

“Oh, my little anemone, I wish you could see what I do.”

I giggled at the nickname, and nodded.

“Me too. What am I supposed to do now though? Send him home?”

“Unless you go with him, he can’t go home.”

I jumped to my feet and stared at her, heart in my throat.

“What?” I screamed.

But my aunt just sat there like a fucking Force Ghost and smiled up at me.

“Give it a day, open yourself up. Not all men are like that mule you divorced, may he never again know the touch of a woman.”

“But...but going to a sea kingdom?” I sputtered. “Like, under the water, rule the fish people kind of sea kingdom? That’s what this is! That’s my future or deal with him on land? That’s no place for him, obviously! And all those beings, they’re waiting for him.”

“They’re still asleep, at least until he comes home.”

“Oh my fucking Christ!”

I pulled at my braid and started to pace. This just got worse and worse. If I kept him here, then a whole kingdom was trapped in a magical sleep. If I went with him...

What? What would happen? I’d live with a gorgeous Sea King the rest of my life, rule as Queen and get my fill of orgasms. But I’d miss things here too...but how much? NO! No, this is fucking crazy! I’m not fucking Ariel.

“Think about it,” Aunty said as she got to her feet. “Give him a chance but don’t take too long. The spell will return him to

the amulet by the full moon.”

“So I have...” I ran to her moon calendar and my stomach dropped. “I have until the day after tomorrow to decide if I’m leaving my life behind and doing this.”

“My dear, what exactly do you have holding you here?” she asked, and I didn’t have answer for her. “You were always meant for more. I saw it the moment you were born. Your magic never became exceptional because you were born to be a queen of the sea, not a witch on land. If you think about it, really think, you’ll see that’s why you never felt like you fit here. I love you, little anemone. I will see you again one day, though not soon.”

“Aunty—” I reached for her, tears in my eyes as she faded away.

The last thing I saw was her smile and then I was alone again.

I stood there, absorbing everything she’d said. I could never hide anything from her, no matter how much I tried. She’d been right, I never felt like I fit. I was always too loud, too outspoken for my genteel mother. Not smart enough for my father. Not cool enough for my sister. And not enough of anything for that dog’s asshole I’d married, may wine taste like vinegar to him for all eternity.

The few close friends I’d had in my life were all connected to the craft or were supernatural beings. But even those relationships had lacked something I could never put my finger on, and I was always left being an outsider.

Now I knew why. I was a descendant of a fucking Siren Princess!

“Well, this is some kind of fucking day and it’s not even noon yet.”



MY HEART WAS RAW WHEN I HAD FINALLY CALMED MYSELF down enough to leave the room. Everything was topsy turvy in my head. I'd never been the kind of person to dive into something without sitting with it for a while, examining every angle, asking every question. I needed to know the cost of a risk before I took it and that always took time.

But I didn't have time now and I needed it. In all my life I'd never had something in front of me that was so terrifying because it felt so right.

I leaned against the wall and wiped more tears away. Some of them were because I missed Aunty with a bone deep ache. But some of them were because this choice was pulling on my soul in way nothing ever had.

"My Queen?" said a deep voice in front of me. "Who has caused you grief? They will pay for such a transgression."

I chuckled through the tears and shook my head.

"No, that's...wow!"

Gone were the gorgeous scales, the golden tipped crest on the top of his head, the otherworldly eyes. In their place stood a bona fide silver fox.

He was still very tall, over six feet, broad shoulders clothed in a suit jacket and white dress shirt that was open enough to expose the hollow at the base of his thick neck. He was sporting a salt and pepper goatee that was closely trimmed, and short salt and pepper hair. His eyes were such a light brown that they bordered on gold and his skin was sun kissed.

“Do you approve?” he asked with a smirk.

“Now you’re just fishing for compliments.”

“Interesting phrasing. Now, what does my Queen require?”

He reached for me and I let him. His huge hands rested on my hips and then circled around to grab handfuls of my ample butt.

“I love this,” he growled, kneading the flesh. “You’re so soft, so ripe. I want to spend eternity touching you, licking you, making you cry out in pleasure.”

I held onto his firm biceps and shook my head.

“You say all the right things.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“Because I once knew someone that did that. And when enough time had passed, he got tired of me. For him, they were just words and I bought it all because I wanted to believe it so badly. It ended up costing me.”

He frowned, fire burned in his gaze but something else too. Compassion, pain.

“I also knew someone like this,” he whispered, “and he harmed many with his lies. I swore to your ancestress that I would never be like him. And now, sweet Queen, I promise you. I will never lie to you, never wear a mask to hide my true intentions. With you, my heart is bare. All of me is yours to know, yours to command. I am King to everyone, but to you, I am a servant.”

I stared at him, utterly stunned, completely turned on and overwhelmed by fear that I was going to wake up any minute now. My heart lurched with longing and everything in me wanted to throw my arms around him and accept what he offered.

But when you’ve been caught in something that systematically crushed your spirit little by little, until it was nearly gone, no matter how long ago it was, no matter how much of yourself you’ve rebuilt, it’s hard to grab a hold of such hope without hesitation.

“You do not believe me?” he asked.

“I...it’s hard to explain,” I admitted, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I want to. I feel that you’re truthful. But I... I’ve been hurt and I need time.”

I internally cringed at those words. They sounded so weak, so pathetic.

But instead of complaining, instead of pushing me to just trust him, the Sea King cupped my cheek and planted a gentle kiss on my lips.

“Of course, my love,” he whispered against my mouth. “I have waited this long, I can wait a little longer.”

*Even though we don’t have a whole lotta time to wait.*

My stomach chose that time to let out a long, loud growl and I tried pull out of his arms in utter embarrassment.

“You are starving,” he said with wide eyes. “We must procure you sustenance.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. Yes, food first, life changing decisions second.

“Do you have a name?” I asked as we started to walk down the stairs.

“I do, but it is in the language of the sea. On land I suppose you may call me...Garrick.”

My tummy flipped. It was a perfect name for the walking sin behind me.

“And you, my Queen? What is your name?”

“Tabitha, but I prefer Tandy.”

“Tandy,” he tried it out very slowly, and smiled at me. “It is a delightful name.”

I laughed, a tight sensation loosening in my chest. My ex (may he never own his dream car) hated my preferred name and always called me by my given name, as did my mother. The fact that Garrick seemed to genuinely like ‘Tandy’ was a relief that started to chip away at the ever shrinking list of reasons why I shouldn’t go with him.

*Food...food and coffee and then I can think about this.*

It was a short walk to my favorite coffee shop and the moment we hit the boardwalk, Garrick’s hand slipped into mine, possessive and firm but not cloying. I was actually quite surprised at how safe it felt to have him acting this way. His eyes darted all around as we walked further into the small sea side town. The tourists hadn’t hit the place yet but the surf



shop, food trucks and other store fronts were prepping for the influx that would come in a few weeks. They all nodded and smiled at us as we passed by. The lady at the metaphysical shop stepped out in a midriff baring tank and flowy skirt, her arms covered in tats and waved at me before her eyes widened as she took in Garrick walking next to me. Something fell behind me at the surf shop and I looked back to see the older surfer that ran it staring at Garrick too. I examined him to make sure his form was solidly human and realized it was just his natural charisma. He drew the eyes of people with his sex appeal, but he also radiated power. It was likely not intentional and just a byproduct of being a mythical Sea King.

But after a few minutes, it wasn't just the shop owners and people out walking their dogs that were mesmerized by Garrick. He was dumb struck by the buildings around him, the mopeds zooming by and every other sight and sound. I imagined it was quite different than three hundred or so years ago.

"This is...how long have I slumbered?" he asked with a hoarse voice.

My heart gave a sharp pang at the question, filled with awe and yet also sadness.

"Hundreds of years I'm afraid."

He swallowed, feet stalling just outside the coffee shop.

"So long...my people, my kingdom still slumbers?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"Thank the tides. I should not have left them as I did but neither could I remain. I hope the spell has kept them safe."

His concern for his people tore down my walls further, proof that he was a selfless male. But it also made guilt spike hot

inside my chest. If I didn't go with him, I was condemning him and his kingdom to sleep longer under this spell.

*Food...just get some food.*

It was a distraction at this point, I knew that but I also needed it. Everything was happening too fast. I needed something to slow it all down. And while espresso might not be known for slowing anything down, it would give me some space at least to let all of this percolate inside of me.

I led him into the Jitterbug, and couldn't help smiling as he stared with awe at the space. The scent of coffee and sugar hit me full on and I took a deep inhale. There was a line about six deep, not uncommon so I got in the back when Garrick began to march to the front. I barely managed to grab his arm and pull him back.

"What are you doing?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"You are hungry, and as a Queen, you do not wait in line."

His deep voice was not quiet, and his manner was not at all subtle. The person in front of us glanced up from her phone and turned away.

I gave her small chuckle.

"Isn't he sweet? I'm his Queen," I yanked him down to me and whispered in his ear. "That's not how things work here. I'm just plain old Tandy and I'm happy to wait in line."

His face was slashed with a deep frown, the first one I'd seen that was directed at something I'd said.

"There is nothing plain or old about you, my love," he said.

"You must stop saying such things about yourself. You are more beautiful than a pearl, more desirable than anyone I have

ever beheld. So if the only reason you wish to wait is that you think so lowly of yourself, I will not permit it.”

I stared at him, mouth gaping for about the hundredth time this morning.

“Damn, girl,” the woman in front of us said. “You’re one lucky lady.”

“Uh...yeah, thanks,” I said, not able to tear my eyes from him. “It’s not...it’s not that, Garrick. It’s just that this is how things work here. We wait our turn.”

Garrick let out a long breath through his nose.

“Very well, but this is not dignified. The King sacrifices much for his people and their obligation is to serve him first. Though I suppose I have not been a king in some time.”

“And you’re not one here,” I whispered gently. “That’s not how our world works.”

“You have no kings here?”

“We do, just not in this country.”

“You have no leaders?”

I let out a long breath.

“We do but...look, politics these days is just a shit show and I’d rather not ruin my morning coffee discussing the broken state of our Democratic system, okay?”

“You do not agree with your government?” he asked.

“I don’t agree with the selfishness of it. Leaders should put the good of those they are serving ahead of their own gain, they should listen to them and not those with the largest bank accounts.”

“This is how you would lead?”

“I hadn’t ever really thought of it but...yeah, I guess I would. It’s not a job anyone should take lightly. I mean, these men and women hold the well-being of the vulnerable, the weak, those who need an advocate in their hands and they’d rather step on them than help.”

I suddenly realized what I’d said and held my breath. My ex (may his dick shrivel up like a slug in the sun) hated when I talked about politics. He belittled every opinion I ever had, and made me feel intensely stupid and idealistic. I learned to bottle up everything and not tell anyone what I thought about such things. Even after all this time, I still couldn’t voice my opinion without intense fear and anxiety. But just now, the words had flowed from my mouth. There was no tightening of the chest or nervous excuse about how I probably wasn’t seeing it all clearly. I just spoke my feelings with clarity and confidence.

I glanced up at him and was further shocked when I saw his expression. The smile Garrick lavished on me warmed my belly in a way I’d never felt. It was a smile full of admiration and lust. He was attracted to my outspokenness? He liked it?

“What, why are you looking at me like that?” I asked, flushing deeply.

“You would make an amazing queen. You are fierce and kind, compassionate. You would challenge me to see the needs of my people before my own, always. I cannot believe the fates have gifted me such a warrior to stand by my side.”

I snorted and shook my head.

“I’m not a warrior. I took one kickboxing class and broke my hand.”

“There are many kinds of warriors my love. Those that fight with their hands and those that fight with their words. You are the latter, though you can be taught to be the former if you wish. I would give you anything you desired once we were in my kingdom. You have but to ask.”

Guilt soured the warm feeling and I turned away as we reached the front of the line. He expected me to go with him, wanted me to. He believed I was already the queen he and his kingdom needed, even though we'd only known each other less than a day.

*So why do I feel so at ease around him? Why is the thought of him going back into that amulet and me never seeing him again like a knife to the chest?*

I placed my order, getting Garrick an iced tea and my favorite pastry, but the joy I usually felt at my first cup of coffee was severely diminished in the midst of this turmoil inside of me.

Was this conflict a sign that I should go with him? That I was really destined for this? I needed advice from someone who wasn't in the middle of the whole thing, who had nothing to gain.

*Daphne. She can lend me some perspective. She's on maternity leave so hopefully she'll be able to chat. I'll call her when we get back to the house.*

Daphne was head of the Sexual Artifacts Department at the Archive and one of my few Mundane friends. She had mated a hot Werewolf last year and was now expecting twins. The last time I saw her she was only six months along but she looked like she could pop any moment. She was all over the place sometimes, and if there was a research project she was working on, you could just forget having a conversation with her. But I hoped she really was taking a break from all that

while she awaited the birth of her twins so I could get a few minutes of tough talk from her. For all her romantic ideas, Daphne could be very level headed and that was what I needed right now.

Our order came up and I led Garrick to one of the outside tables. By now the town was picking up. A group of surfers ran past us, the tops of their wet suits hanging down around their waists, a few dogs ran past, their owners hot on their heels. A couple of early tourists rode a tandem bike down the sidewalk. The air was starting to warm, the salty tang of the ocean light and not as thick as it could be.

“It is a beautiful world,” Garrick said as he looked around. Then he took a bite of the cinnamon coffee cake and his eyes widened. “This is delicious! What is it?”

“Heaven,” I said and took a bite of my own.

A big, uninhibited bite that left crumbs on my mouth. I went to wipe them off but Garrick stopped me and brought my lips to his. He licked the crumbs off my mouth and then kissed me slow, savoring, as if I were the coffee cake.

When he was done, my eyes were heavy and I felt a little drunk.

“I could not resist,” his voice rumbled, eyes hot as he stared at my lips. “I can’t wait to get you back to the house and devour you.”

I was speechless.

Not only had he gotten hot listening to my opinions on government but seeing me take a huge, messy bite out of a coffee cake had also aroused him?

“I-I need...I need some space when we get back. Not a lot,” I said, as his expression fell, “but just...I need to breathe a little,

think about all of this. Do you understand?”

“Of course, this is a very big change for you. How could I be so callous? Take all the time you need. I shall catch us some dinner in the meantime.”

“Um, you’ll what now?”

“Catch us some dinner. I assume you like fish?”

“Yes, but I didn’t expect a Sea King to eat fish.”

He gave me a confused frown.

“What did you think we ate under the ocean?”

I opened my mouth and came up completely blank. He had a point.

“Okay, there’s a tackle shop down the way, we can stop in and get you some gear. I don’t think my aunt has any that isn’t rusted.”

His laugh was deep and joyous.

“I will not need fishing implements, my love.”

“How will you catch...you know what, never mind. You do you and I’ll do me.”

Garrick leaned toward me with a wicked grin and my breath caught in the back of my throat.

“I will not be ‘doing me’ unless you want to watch.”

I damn near spat my coffee out all over him. As it was, I just coughed and turned beet red.

“I’m okay,” I coughed out. “I’m...yep, just fine.”

*I’m in so much trouble.*



“YOU DID WHAT NOW?” DAPHNE ASKED ON THE OTHER END OF the phone.

“I know you heard me.”

Daphne giggled and I couldn't help joining her. The whole situation really was ridiculous.

I was sitting on my bed, looking out at the ocean from the huge window in front of me. We'd taken our time with breakfast and took a slow stroll down the main street so Garrick could see how things had changed since the last time he was on land; which, as it turned out, was when my ancestor had cursed him. He was fascinated, finding utter joy in the smallest of things. It made me see this place with new eyes and before I knew it, I was marveling at things I often took for granted. When we got back to the house he'd kissed me softly and walked out to the ocean. His form shimmered and changed into the otherworldly creature from before, the sunlight casting his scales in gold iridescent glory just before he dove under the



waves. I worried when he didn't come right back up and then laughed at myself because, duh, Sea King.

Now I was on the phone with Daphne, having spilled not only the spell but what my aunt had said too.

"This isn't funny," I said, though I couldn't stop smiling about it all.

"Do you like him?" she asked.

"Yeah, actually I do. He's a little sex obsessed but he's also sweet and acts like I'm the lost love of his life."

"Maybe you are."

"Come on now, I called you so you could talk me out of this, not add to my confusion."

"Talk you out of what exactly? Having a good time? Getting laid?"

"It's more serious than a fling. I have to commit, or condemn him to going back into that amulet."

"I don't think that's the choice here."

"You don't? Were you not listening when I told that part of the story?"

"Well," she took a bite of something and talked around it, "I was kinda distracted by the thought of you waking up without underwear on but no, I did hear you. And here's the thing, dear friend of mine. I haven't heard you this happy, this cheerful in maybe ever."

"Cheerful? I'm not cheerful, I'm panicked, confused and maybe a little horny for what's in his cock pocket."

"Oh my god, I have to say, the cock pocket is such an amazing detail. If we had time I would beg you to just send me a

picture of it so I could compare it to some images I found on a vase recently. Did you know that there's a temple of Poseidon that the Archive has been excavating for like fifty years now? That's where I found what I think are images of the cock pocket."

"Daphne, focus. Ticking clock, horny Sea King, life altering decision."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. But seriously, if you could ask him if it would be okay, that would be a huge help."

"Yeah sure, I'll see what I can do."

There was no way in hell I was going to ask Garrick if I could take a quick picture of his cock pocket. There were limits to what I was willing to do in the name of research.

"Where were we?" Daphne took another bite of something.

"Oh yeah, you're cheerful."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Tell me honestly, when you were relaying that story, how much of it were you smiling through?"

I started to say none but that was a big fat lie.

"Most of it," I whispered.

"Your aunt was right. I've watched you try so hard all these years to fit in, to find your way. And with every promotion, you were happy but you weren't happy, not like you should've been. Watching you was like seeing someone who was living with one foot here and one somewhere else but I don't think you ever knew where that was."

Tears burned my eyes as the sea air brushed against my hair and cooled my face. The scent was so comforting, the sound of the waves not just familiar, but soothing. I had always thought

my affinity for the seaside town was because there were such good memories here. But now I wondered if it was because a part of me was at home near the ocean.

“What if this is it?” Daphne asked, her voice soft. “What if this is the thing you’ve been chasing to fill whatever hole has been inside of you?”

“And what if I’m wrong?” I sniffled. “I was wrong about asshole.”

“Let me ask you this, did you ever feel at ease with him, as safe as you did today with Garrick?”

I knew the answer deep down but I still gave it thought.

Drunken spell casting aside, I’d been myself right from the start, embarrassing clothing choices and all. I’d gotten a little shy in the bathroom, but he’d helped me get past that right quick with that wicked tongue of his. And obviously my body turned him on because the guy had a hard-on all morning. I hadn’t put on a mask or censored myself at all. In fact, the thought to do so really didn’t occur to me until I realized that I hadn’t watched what I said.

And all that time, the only thing that had ever bothered Garrick was any sign of pain, or my words of self-recrimination.

“I guess,” I said slowly, “the answer would be no. I’ve been more myself with Garrick today than I ever was with him.”

“I know this is fast, and that you’re grieving so it’s understandable that you’re not wanting to trust your gut right now. But I’ve never known you to be reckless, and every time you followed your instincts, I’ve seen you shine.”

“This isn’t volunteering for a research mission or trying a new mixed drink during happy hour. This is completely life

altering.”

“And what about your life would you want to hang onto? Your job? You’re bored and you know it. Your love life?”

I snorted.

“What love life?”

“Exactly. Your aunt is gone, your other family members are... well, I don’t want to speak ill but—”

“They’re assholes who are pissed at me and think I’m crazier than my aunt.”

“Well, there you go then. Don’t let fear keep you from something that could be your happy ending. Trust me, I almost missed it with Fraser. It takes courage to grab hold of this kind of thing, but it’s worth it.”

I scrubbed my hand over my eyes and sniffled.

“You were supposed to talk me out of this,” I said with tearful laugh.

She chuckled.

“Sorry sweetie, but that would make me a bad friend,” she chomped down on something else, then said around her chewing, “Why don’t you take the night, see how things go? You’ve got a little bit of time.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Thanks, Daph.”

“Of course! Now I gotta go pee, one of the twins is using my bladder for a soccer ball.”

I laughed and hung up. For a long while, I sat on the bed, my mind spinning out all kinds of logical, very down to earth reasons why this as crazy, why I should simply say ‘no’.

And every one of them was refuted by the sensation in my gut that screamed at me “Go! Run toward this!”

Daphne was right; every risk I ever took had paid off in my life, even if not in the way I had expected. Still, I hesitated, and let fear hold me in place about this.

I laid down and cried quiet tears as my soul was torn in two by the war waged inside of me. Though I hadn't planned on it, I dozed off and woke to the room bathed in twilight, with the scent of wood smoke punctuating the brine of the sea. A light blanket was tossed over me with a glass of water on the night stand. I hadn't done either, so it had to have been Garrick.

Such simple, small gestures but they spoke volumes. He cared about me. Not just getting in my pants, not just getting me to go with him for his sake and the sake of his kingdom. He cared about me.

My throat clogged and tears choked me as I clutched the blanket. Every hour that passed was making it impossible to tell him no and that also scared me.

I took a few gulps of the cool water and saw the note next to it, written in gorgeous, curving letters.

*“When you awaken from your slumber, please join me for a feast near the water, your servant Garrick.”*

It was so flowery, and so sweet.

My stomach growled and I realized all I'd eaten today was one pastry and some coffee. No wonder I had drained the water glass. Tossing the throw blanket around my shoulders, I went downstairs to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water and guzzled some of that too. The wood smoke was more pungent down here and I looked out the large bay windows toward the ocean to see a quaint fire on the beach, and Garrick standing

there in his human form. A sliver of light remained on the horizon from the sunset, casting his back in a red hue, while the fire set his skin aflame with gold. He was mystical, beautiful and I was tempted to give into thoughts of how there was no way a being like this could love me.

But his actions proved otherwise.

I was drawn to him in a way I couldn't explain and was starting to wonder if I could defy him. I drifted onto the back deck and stared at his broad back. He wasn't looking at me, but I knew he was waiting for me.

What if I just let go, just for tonight? Let myself indulge in being with him, not censoring myself or guarding my heart, what would I discover?

It was risky. Perhaps the riskiest thing I'd ever done.

And if experience was any indication, it would have the most reward.

I left my sandals in the house and stepped off onto the cool, soft bed of sand. The closer I got to him, the more my heart sped up with anticipation. He didn't turn around, but continued staring out at the quickly dwindling bright pink light just beyond the sea. I stepped up beside him and slipped my hand onto his arm. It was natural, wonderful. His huge hand eclipsed mine and he tugged me closer until I was standing in front of him, his arms around me as I leaned against his solid frame.

"When I was younger," his deep, purring whisper sent shivers down my spine, "I would breach the surface of the water at sunset and find a place to sit and watch as the sky was set on fire. I'd drink in the changing colors, so bright, so violent as they faded to bruising purples. And when there was no more

light to behold, I would wait to find the moon, and wish for someone that I could share it all with.”

I hugged his arms tight to me. His loneliness called to mine, deep and painful. But now, we weren't alone, and the two wounds kissed as if to heal one another. I didn't need to tell him that I felt the same, that the yawning emptiness I'd learned to live with and accept was shrinking the longer I was with him. I could feel that he understood. It was wonderful and terrifying all at once.

“Are you hungry?” his lips brushed my ear with a wicked implication his words.

I turned to look up at him, my lips curled into a smirk.

“Yes.”

He planted a tender kiss on the tip of my nose.

“First, I will fill your stomach, and then your sweet cunt.”

My breath hitched as a wave crashed particularly loud in the distance. A thought occurred to me, a crazy, deliciously wicked idea.

“In the water,” I breathed, our mouths inches apart. “I want you to take me in the water.”

His eyes flared hot and he let loose a growl from low in his chest.

“If I do, it will be in a different form so that I might pleasure both of your wonderful holes at once.”

I swallowed, and my clit gave a sharp spasm at what he was saying.

“O-okay.”

His devilish grin was nearly my undoing.

“Come, my love, I have a feast for you.”

I didn't know how the hell I was supposed to eat food after that promise of his, but I let him lead me to the blanket by the fire anyway. I'd missed it, and the extravagant picnic he'd spread out, when I'd walked up and I realized it was because he was the only thing I could see.

I'm falling too fast, this can't be anything but horny.

But I knew that wasn't true. Being horny didn't affect my heart like this, didn't make feel like I could fly. The pure joy in his grin as he started to show me what he'd done, the way his eyes lit up when he saw me...I'd never had that before. Was this what all the fuss was about when it came to finding your person? Was this why some of my friends had risked so much just to spend their lives with someone?

“Sit, sit,” he guided me down and poured a glass of chilled wine for me. “I went to the corner market and asked them what you liked.”

It was, once again, intensely thoughtful of him not to assume or guess, but actually go the extra effort to ask someone. Before me was the crusty sourdough I adored, herbed goat cheese, grapes, bright green olives and a large covered dish that had steam curling out of the top.

“What's that?” I asked as I popped a grape into my mouth.

He grinned like an excited child on Christmas and tore the lid off. Inside were steamed clams and crab.

My favorite.

“You caught these?”

“Indeed, they sacrificed themselves willingly to celebrate my Queen.”



I would've rather not thought of them as being sentient, but it was also pretty damn humbling to hear it.

"I can separate the crab shells. No need for you to waste your efforts there. I require your hands to be strong later tonight."

I flushed deeply at the implication and downed my wine, then poured more before I realized that I didn't want to miss out on the sex this time. I'm sure it was wonderful last night but I only remembered bits and pieces of it. Tonight, I wanted to be as sober as possible, to remember it all.

Garrick started to separate the crab meat from the shell while I piled my plate with the rest of the food. Soon we were devouring the seafood and talking as if we were old friends. He told me of some of his happier childhood memories and I did the same. It struck me that mine were all having something to do with the ocean.

By the time we were done with the food and wine I was more relaxed than I could remember in a very long time.

"You are stunning," he said, brushing some strands of hair from my face. "I love hearing you laugh. I would make you laugh every day for the rest of your life."

"That would be nice."

"You don't believe I can?"

I didn't even have to stop and think.

"I do actually."

He leaned toward me and captured my lips with his, tasting of crab and butter, but also something that was distinctly him. Powerful and heady, and I couldn't get enough of it. I let him lay me back on the blanket and from one moment to the next,

he'd changed back into the beautiful being I'd first seen this morning.

Only this morning...that feels completely impossible.

I didn't let myself think of that though, because if I did then my responsible side would come in and ruin this. And I wanted to be free tonight, to let this Sea King do whatever he wanted, to feel beautiful and precious.

I parted my legs for him and reveled in the heavy feel of his body against mine. His sharp teeth nipped at my skin as he made his way down my throat and to my chest. He sat up, kneeling between my spread thighs as his hand coasted up my calves and thighs, then back down, his mouth trailing in the wake. He was taking his time, savoring me like I was his last meal.

His gold gaze traveled slowly down my body in wonder. I could've stayed here all night, letting him touch and look me like that. It was addictive to be so adored.

"You are so beautiful, illuminated by the fire. If your mundane form is this lovely, I hunger to see your sea form."

"What?" I breathed.

"I'm sorry, I should not assume that you will come with me. I just...I can't help but think of it."

"I know. I think about it too," I pulled him down and he stretched out next to me, his head propped up on his hand.

"Tell me about it. What would it be like? What could I expect?"

He hesitated, touching me with a hungry fear, as if he worried I would leave him if he answered. I reached up and ran my

hand over his cheek, down the sides of his neck, careful of his gills, to his hardened chest.

“I’m not running,” I assured him. “Not tonight. And I want to know.”

He nodded.

“Of course, you should. If you go with me, I will...I will bite you. The venom in my bite will bind us together and give you the same abilities I have to shape change. You will have a sea form, many if you choose. And a Mundane form.”

Biting? Okay, that’s...that’s different.

“So I’d be able to come back on land then, if I chose to go with you?” I asked.

“Yes, we could go anywhere you liked. See anything you wanted on land and under the sea. The entire world is open to us, my love, and I will lay it all at your feet if you give me the chance.”

I let all of that sink in for a few seconds, waiting for the panic, for my heart to sink and my reasonable, safe side to take over.

But it didn’t.

Yes, it was a little scary to think of being bitten. But the transformation? A wave of peace settled over me, giving way to excitement. I wondered if I’d have a fish tail, or tentacles or...?

“Whatever I choose?” I asked.

“Yes, the magic would mold to whatever you wanted.” Garrick paused. “You do not seem afraid,” he said.

I gave him a slow smile that bloomed into a full one as the crazy rightness of this settled into my soul. And it was crazy.

Completely, utterly insane. But the thought of going back to the gloomy library, of cataloguing other people's experiences, their lives, their wondrous adventures while I watch all of life just drift past me? That seemed the craziest option.

Here was not only the chance at a new life, but it was with a male that clearly adored the sand I walked on. What would it be like to spend my life worshipped by him? To be a queen in an underwater kingdom?

I laughed, unhindered, free and I took his face in mine before planting a long, slow kiss to his mouth.

“No, no I'm not afraid.”

He grinned at me, exposing those teeth of his.

“Tonight?” I asked. “Could you...could you bite me tonight?”

He startled and stared at me, his cock half extruded from his pocket.

“Are you sure?” his voice was rough, hopeful but hesitant.

“Once I do that, there is no going back, my love. And I would rather live in that amulet than force you into this.”

I sat up and crawled onto his lap, my arms winding around his neck.

“And that's one reason why I know this is right. I want this, I...I think I've always known that I didn't belong here. So take me with you, show me your home and I'll make it mine with you.”

He slammed his mouth to mine, crushing me against him as his cock grew hard and long between us. With exquisite carefulness, he stripped me of my dress and tossed my bra and panties after it. His hands were everywhere. On my back, kneading my thighs, palming my breasts.

“You are mine,” his eyes shone with adoration that took my breath away. “I shall cherish you forever.”

“You better.”

He chuffed out a laugh and then rose to his feet, his hands cupping my ass. I wasn't self-conscious anymore. My tummy rolls didn't matter, the stretch marks on my arms, the sagging of my boobs. All of it was nothing as he laved my skin with kisses and kneaded the flesh of my ass. When a cold spray hit my back, I squealed in shock. He was carrying me into the water and I shivered.

“It won't be cold after a moment,” he promised, nibbling on my breast. “I will take you as I promised, and then I will bind you to me in the midst of your pleasure to minimize the discomfort.”

I nodded, unable to form words as he took one of my stiff peaks into his mouth and began to suckle it. I wiggled and ground down on him, embarrassingly wet all of the sudden. The head of his cock pressed against my clit and I let loose a deep groan. It took a moment to realize two things: that we were far into the ocean by now, and that what I felt was not necessarily his cock.

I gazed down and realized that while his upper half had stayed the same, his lower half had blossomed into two dozen or more tentacles that writhed and curled in the water around me. They were a match to the rest of his scales, blues and greens shone under the water, and it took a moment to realize that there was a bioluminescence happening all around us.

“They will not harm you,” he rumbled as one thick tentacle wrapped around my ankle. “I wanted to see you, pleased by me in the water, taking my tentacles.”

“It’s beautiful,” I curled my arms around his shoulders and gasped as another one snaked up my thigh and brushed my back door.

“Can I?” he rasped.

“Yes, please.”

My body shuddered, but not in fear.

“You must tell me if I do anything you do not like,” he said. “I want to bind you as I take you. But if you don’t like it, squeeze the tentacle I bind your arms with. Alright?”

“Yes, I...I trust you.”

His mouth crushed mine and I tasted sunlight and the sea. It was every happy memory I’d ever had, every perfect afternoon. Then he was sucking and licking my throat as I felt a strong, slick tentacle wrap around each arm and pull both behind my back. Before I could think, he’d bound them but slipped the tip of one tentacle into my hand. I was trembling, but no longer cold. I was at his mercy, this mighty Sea King who could command the bounty of the seas and yet who cared for my heart as if it were the greatest treasure.

When his mouth latched onto my breast, he suckled it hard, groaning as I cried out. My body was warming, and even if I hadn’t been in the water, my pussy would be soaked. He parted my thighs, tentacles holding them open and when I looked down, his cock was fully extruded, thick and long. The suckers on the sides were pulsing and I could only imagine how good they would feel inside of me.

As I watched, his tentacles brought me to him, manipulating my body even as they held it still. I was unable to move anything but my head, but I was not afraid. No, I was exhilarated, more alive than I’d ever felt as he worshiped my

body. He rubbed me up and down his cock as his tentacles parted my pussy lips and toyed with my ass, brushing against it, just barely dipping in.

“I want to claim every part of you,” he growled at me, “inside and out.”

The moon rose, bright and magnificent over us and I saw him, the real unfiltered Garrick. I saw the raw power in his eyes, in every part of him that wrapped around me. In the ripple of muscles in his chest and arms, in the undulations of his tentacles as they moved over me. So many of them covered me now that I was clothed in their iridescent beauty.

“Yes,” I whispered, shaking with it all.

“You are mine,” he said, the tip of his cock breaching my cunt. “Say it.”

“I am... I am yours.”

The appendage at my ass dipped in further, just as his cock did, and an obscene groan burst from me. He wasn't even half in and it already felt as if I were dying and living all at the same time.

“Look at me,” he demanded. “I will have your sighs, your cries, your tears, your happiness. I will have your cum and your adoration.”

“Yes, yes, Garrick.”

Two of his tentacles curled over my nipples and pinched them hard as he moved in and out of me. My eyes started to roll back at the ecstasy of it all when he growled at me, low in his chest. I stared up at him as he towered over me and if it weren't for the way his love for me shone through in his eyes, I would've been terrified. He'd held out on me, not wanting to

scare me. But this side of him, this was the real Garrick, or at least more of the real him.

What will he be like under the water?

Not a frightening thought, but one that sent hot jets of longing through me. I wanted to feel that power directed at me, I wanted to be able to take it all. And soon, I would.

“More,” I begged as he slowed his progress into me.

“Yes,” he pressed his forehead to mine, “Oh, Tandy, my Queen, my love. I won’t...I can’t hold on for long.”

I was about to say neither would I when he thrust into me, back and front, hard, as an end of a tentacle ran through my folds and began to play with my clit. I wanted to move, to ride him, grind down and chase the fire that was coursing through my veins. But he wouldn’t let me. Back and forth through me and on me, Garrick wound me higher and higher but never letting me fall over the edge.

“Please, please Garrick,” I begged as tears fell down my face.

He surged forward and licked them off my cheeks.

“Oh yes, you want all of me?”

“Yes,” I groaned.

“You want to be filled with my cock?” He brought me down onto him and each sucker moved in me, playing with that elusive spot deep inside. “You want me to play with this tight little hole?” He undulated the tentacle back there and indescribable pleasure rocketed through me. “You want to come?” The tentacle at my clit pinched at the same time his cock penetrated me down to the root and his appendage at my back door thrust deep.



I came apart on a scream that rolled and spun through the night. I writhed in his hold as he filled me with streams of hot cum. My toes curled, legs sprawled wide by his appendages, and colors burst behind my eyes. I was utterly lost, drowning in waves of sensation that scared me as much as made me want more. Just as I was sure I would never come down from this place, a sharp pain seared my mind through the fog of it all, but it swiftly changed to warm, soft pleasure.

Garrick's bite at my shoulder.

"Trust me now, my love," he purred in my ear.

Then he submerged me in the cool salt water.

At first, it was fine, I was wrapped up in him, cradled against his firm chest. But then pain ripped through my arms, my legs. It burned a path up my torso and I convulsed. I had a moment, a split second to wonder if maybe I'd made the wrong choice, if I hadn't been his destined queen after all and was now dying for the mistake.

My lungs started to scream for air, but Garrick was taking us deeper into the water, the light above growing faint.

"Breath, my love."

Was he kidding? I couldn't...

And then I felt them, fluttering at the sides of my neck. I coughed as oxygen streamed into my lungs. My hand slapped to my neck to feel the gills, delicately working.

That's when I noticed my hands. Webbed between the fingers from the middle knuckle down to the base with long white nails. Shimmering scales of blue on pale green skin. The pattern thickened up my arm and down my chest, where my breasts were covered in blues greens and golds, just like him but more delicate. My lower half was still legs but there was

also webbing between my toes. I touched the top of my head, and was surprised to find that I still had hair but standing up through it in the middle of my head were three points. They felt like they could've been a smaller version of Garrick's. The size of my breasts, my hips, thighs, even my belly was all the same. The same rolls, and dips just covered in something new. It was still me, but transformed.

"This is your base form," Garrick said. "When you learn how to transform, you will be able to do anything you like. Gods, you are so beautiful, it hurts."

I giggled, a thick watery sound, and clapped my hand over my mouth.

"Go on," he said with a smile, "try it."

"I...I'm really...this is real?" I asked.

He cupped my cheek and cuddled me against him.

"I can hardly believe it myself but yes, this is real."

I threw my arms around him, and let out a trilling laugh as he spun us around. The water was silky as it wrapped around me, warm and perfect in a way that only home could be. In front of me, the world suddenly lit up and I gasped.

Thousands of bioluminescent creatures were spread out before us in a curving trail that I could not see the end of.

"They are showing us the path home," his voice was choked, "they are welcoming us."

"Home," I tested the word. "Our home."

"Yes, my love, our home."

My heart was so full, I thought for certain it would burst. My new home, my new love, my new body. And yet, it already felt

more perfect than what I'd had for the last thirty-four years.

“Should we go?” he asked.

I smiled at him and threaded my fingers through his.

“Yes, let's go home, my King.”

His eyes lit up and he pulled me to him for a rough, deep kiss that sent tingles all through my body.

“Oh, my Queen, I cannot wait to worship you on your throne.”

“I'm going to hold you to that.”

“The first of many promises I intend to make and keep.”

The world glowed around us as I followed him toward my new life.



If you'd like to join the Secret Archive and read all about Daphne and Frasers love story, you can [click here](#) and read *Feral: A Werewolf Monster Romance*. Available on Kindle Unlimited, ebook and print. Find Trish Heinrich on Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok as well as [trishheinrich.com](http://trishheinrich.com)

## About the Author

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Even as a little girl, Trish always believed that any story could be made better with some kissing...or a lot of kissing. Mixing her love of strong women, adventure, and all things geeky with an unapologetic excitement for the naughtier side of steamy romance, Trish is constantly pushing herself in her writing.

When she's not chained to her laptop creating the smutty worlds we all adore, she can be found curled up with a good book, playing a board game with her kids or binge watching Lucifer...Again.

Find her on Instagram [@trishheinrich](#) or on her website to sign up for her newsletter [trishheinrich.com](#)



## Also By Trish Heinrich

The Monsters & Artifacts Monster Romance Series

The Infinite Unions Sci-Fi Romance Series

Silver City Celestials Series

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# ALPHA BETTAS

VERA VALENTINE

## Author's Note

When Ariana's therapist suggests she get a pet to cope with her recent breakup and unemployment, indecision leads her to the doors of Pet Bonanza, where a pair of betta fish catch her eye. Kian and Ro have a secret, however, one far too big for their cramped little display cups. Time's running out for the pair to reclaim their human forms, and it might even be too late altogether. Can Kian silently convince a human to embrace a strange new world of flaring fins, unusual anatomy, and a mate bond he needs to save life as they know it?



Content Considerations: This short story contains mature themes, including light dominance, dirty talk, talk of breeding (non-pregnancy-causing), group activities, oral cleanup after-the-fact, unprotected sex, playful references to home invasion,



a “just @ me next time” level call out to everyone that’s ever left their goddamn reusable grocery bags behind for the hundredth time, and knotting. While MM pairings never need a warning, consider this your heads up that this is an MMF story where swords cross and loving mate polycule relationships are formed in *all* directions.



## ARIANA

IT WAS STRANGE TO BE IN PET BONANZA WITHOUT A MISSION, now that Hemingway was living across the country with my ex. When we'd broken up three months ago, things had been different - I was in a demanding job that required early mornings and late nights, often with little to no forewarning. While Hemingway was relatively easy to take care of, he was also very affectionate, and deserved companionship beyond what I could offer. It had been a tearful goodbye, but even if Steve sucked as a partner, he was a good cat dad; Hemmie would have a better life with him.

But irony hit hard when I got pink slipped a few weeks after they moved out. My then-company was downsizing in the wake of a hostile takeover, because apparently my world hadn't been rocked hard enough. The severance package had

been generous, at least: I'd be able to forgo working for a year or more if I was careful about spending.

Relative financial security, however, didn't do much to soothe loneliness or boredom: my work schedule hadn't just impacted my love life, it had killed off my few friendships, too. That was why my therapist suggested I get a pet of my own, something new to hold my interest and make my apartment feel less bare. I was dubious about the idea, but I'd reluctantly agreed to visit the store as a 'homework assignment.'

A wall of glass-fronted cat enclosures covered most of the store's left wall, containing everything from hyperactive little kittens to a grumpy old stub-tailed tuxedo that glared at me. Hemingway had held a special place in my heart, but if I was being strictly honest, I didn't miss the chore of litter and the unpleasant surprise of hairballs.

I passed a message board filled with flyers for adoptable dogs and puppies for sale, but decided that even a small dog wouldn't be a good fit for my apartment. I didn't want to pick up poop in little baggies. Maybe that made me a diva, but I had a low bar for squick and I wasn't trying to make my life more difficult. A pet was supposed to *improve* my life, not urge me to invest in nuclear-level antibacterial hand soap.

I sighed, blowing out a long breath of frustration as I scanned the aisles. *Alright there, Goldilocks - concentrate on what you do want instead of finding fault with everything.* Alright, something...independent. Something that was pretty and charming that still allowed me to keep my own hours. Something that wasn't expensive to feed or noisy.

*Okay, so a houseplant.*

I sighed again, mentally giving up and turning to leave. Eyes wandering aimlessly, I nearly walked right into a lanky young

man, clad in a garish uniform polo shirt at least a size too big for his shoulders. He backed up a step and laughed awkwardly. “Whoa, sorry! Do you need help? We moved around some of the aisles if you haven’t been in lately.”

I shook my head, forcing a smile that I’m sure didn’t make it to my eyes. “No, I’m good, but thanks. I was considering getting a pet, but I have no idea what I want, so I’m probably not ready, honestly. Dogs and cats are kind of high energy and messy, you know?”

“Hm, no, I get that. My sister feels the same way. Uhm, a bird maybe?” The teen nodded over his shoulder at some cages nearby, where cheerful, ear-piercing cheeps and peeps tumbled out.

“Nah.” I wrinkled my nose and shook my head apologetically. “Not much for noise, either. I live in an apartment and my neighbors would probably kill me.”

“Ohh, yeah, I can see that. I guess like, guinea pigs and hamsters are out too. They can be pretty messy, I have to clean their enclosures all the time.” His brow creased in thought and he spun on a heel, pointing towards the back corner of the store. “What about fish? I mean, you have to change the water and stuff, but they don’t make noise and the filter takes care of a lot of the cleaning.”

*Huh. I hadn’t considered a fish.* They weren’t exactly cuddly, obviously, but a fish would definitely align with my aversion to mess and noise. Also, the goal of getting a pet was companionship and interest, not necessarily hugs. “You know, that’s actually a great idea. What do you suggest?”

The kid beamed and led the way back to a wall of serene blue-backed rectangles, all containing fish in various shapes and sizes. I immediately made a beeline for the goldfish, the only

type of pet fish I was passingly familiar with. The employee, Grant, quietly told me that goldfish bowls were actually bad for the fish and steered me towards the guppy tank.

“Their tails are really pretty, but they seem so small and fragile. I worry they’d go belly up on me if I looked at them wrong.” I laughed nervously, squinting at the swirl of patterns and colors.

“Well, if you want something pretty that’s a little bigger, there’s always the Bettas?” He tapped a tidy metal shelf that looked like a surrealist game of beer pong; a pyramid of clear cups that each contained a single brightly-colored, flared-tail fish. They were gorgeous, and I immediately envisioned one of the serene blue-backed tanks in a bare corner of my living room. It’d look sophisticated. I’d be an exotic fish owner, and have wine tastings, and read fine literature on the weekends.

I moved closer, crouching down to squint at the front row of multicolored choices. Some looked really listless and almost sick, others looked a little too hyper for my liking, their fins frayed and wild. Two, however, swam in smooth circles, occasionally making eye contact across the shelf and flaring their fins at each other.

“Aww. I like *these* two.” I slid the cups beside one another until their lids touched, sending both fish flaring their fins like an artful underwater parade. “Look at them, they’re already friends!”

“Oh, uhm.” Grant coughed a laugh. “That’s not *friendship*, just so you know. All these bettas on this shelf are male, and they’re basically...well, all that fin action is like drunk guys chest-bumping before a fight starts, I guess. They’re called Siamese Fighting Fish for a reason, and if you try and put these two in the same tank, one will probably kill the other.”

I frowned, rotating one of the two cups to get a better look at the flame-finned blue fish inside. “Well I don’t want that, of course. Could I just get them and keep them in their little cups here on my desk or something?”

Grant shook his head, looking around himself conspiratorially before murmuring to me. “Being straight with you, they want us to sell pets here and they’re not really worried about people mistreating them, which I think sucks. Bettas actually *do* need a tank, a heater, and a few other things, but a lot of potential owners walk away rather than shelling out for the stuff they need to keep bettas. If you want your fish to be happy, I’ll show you what you’ll want to buy to set them up properly.”

For the next 20 minutes, I put myself in Grant’s capable hands and dutifully followed him around the store while he loaded up a small cart with two tanks, twin heaters, food, and more. I was grateful an *Introduction to Raising Bettas* book made it onto the pile; I was already overwhelmed with the idea of setting up *two* tanks and I hadn’t even left the store. I had to begrudgingly admit my therapist had been right, though: I was so focused on the endeavor I didn’t have brain space to feel anxious or bored.

Grant winced at checkout when he gave me my total, but it was actually far less than I was expecting to pay for all the accessories a new pet would need. Lord knew Steve and I had spent a fortune on silly little toys for Hemmie just to have him rapturously play with the milk cap, and those weren’t even survival-level items. I knew my fish would be comfortable and happy, and that gave me a sense of purpose and unexpected pride.



Ro

I'D HAD *ENOUGH* OF KIAN'S FIN-FILLED SHOWBOATING. FOR A heart-stopping moment, I worried that he'd managed to capture the woman's eye, and relief set in when she turned back to Grant. When she grabbed his cup and slid it forward on the shelf a moment later, my stomach sank.

But why should I care? It was a *good* thing that the only real competition I had on the entire goddamn shelf was leaving. I'd rule the entire stack of cups, of these mindless, passingly-showy idiots, and secure the next patron all on my own. I wouldn't lie, though: the idea that Kian had been selected first for freedom burned me down to my tail fins. I was clearly the stronger and more attractive of the two of us, anyone could see that.

While I was a beautiful pewter blue with red, rounded fins that fluttered like silk, Kian was an ostentatious dark blue with

jagged red and orange fins that waved like wind-tattered flags. He hadn't even been injured in combat, he just *looked* like that. Disgraceful, really.

But then the woman - *Ariana*, as she'd introduced herself to Grant - reached for my cup too, setting me beside Kian. I flared reflexively, as I had moments earlier: anytime Kian's beady little eyes passed over my cup, I angrily reminded him who was the more intimidating betta. Getting to see my longtime rival so up close and personal was an unexpected intimacy, and I was ashamed to admit I felt panicked and flustered. It took three laps of my tiny plastic cup to calm down.

Kian smirked knowingly, and it enraged me. How *dare* he think it was *him* provoking this anxiety and not simply this unexpected situation? I certainly wasn't afraid of him or his proximity; he was a feeder goldfish in the hierarchy here, and he'd do well to remember that. I flared again and feinted at the cup wall menacingly, for good measure. *Asshole*. She'd choose me between the two of us, I was confident.

When she picked up both of us I could have gone belly-up. Of all the cosmic jokes, had I really been picked up by a patron *with* Kian? I guess it made some sense, even if the irony was a bitter pill to swallow: we were the two most attractive bettas on the shelf, if someone wanted a pair, we were the obvious choice. Not that I'd *ever* admit Kian was attractive, of course.

Still, I was relieved when I heard Grant explain we'd need two tanks. I could fight, I absolutely could, and I would destroy Kian if I needed to, but I wouldn't want to, you know, tear a fin as he struggled to submit. Plus he was not nearly as fastidious as I was, content to lay about instead of swimming, to eat his food leisurely until it practically clouded the water.



It had been a very long time since I'd seen anything beyond the shelf or the back room of Pet Bonanza when Grant changed out our water. The sun outside was unbelievably bright, even through the opaque bag Ariana carefully held us in, and I had to turn my face into my tail. Sneaking a peek through the cups' walls at Kian, I was gratified to see him doing the same: it didn't mean I was weak, it was just a reflex.

The journey was strange, if short, my water sloshing and vibrating in strange ways I'd nearly forgotten. A vehicle called a truck had brought Kian and I to Pet Bonanza a long time ago, and I remembered this jostling from that journey, though I'd tried to sleep through most of that. This time, I'd barely had time to get my bearings before the vibrating stopped and our bag was being picked up again.

A few bumps and stomach-lurching lifts later, our bag was set onto a firm surface, the sides peeled down so we could see something other than the bag's interior. The room we were in was much dimmer than the harsh overhead lights at Pet Bonanza, the walls a soft and elegant grey, with no other pets or tanks in sight. It was absolutely delightful - or, at least it would be if my bitter rival wasn't also swimming around his cup, taking in our surroundings too.

No matter, I could be the bigger fish. We'd have to make the best of it, and besides, I could out-flare Kian any day of the week. Ariana would quickly prefer interacting with me and Kian would be sufficiently humbled: there, now I had something to look forward to.

A soft grating sound followed by a thump indicated that Ariana had likely left, at least temporarily. Another look around confirmed that our tanks and accessories weren't in the room, so she'd probably gone to get them. Kian and I had

spoken with fair regularity when we first arrived at Pet Bonanza, but the installation of a security camera system a few weeks after arrival had ended that. I cleared my throat, my voice rusty from disuse.

“...Kian?”

He swirled in his cup, flame-fins fluttering in a calm display as he turned to face me. There was warmth in his voice that I hadn't remembered from our long-ago conversations, a sort of relief that puzzled me. “Great to hear your voice again, Ro. Interesting turn of events, huh?”

I snorted, sending a few gossamer bubbles wiggling to the surface. “Yes. What do you think of her?”

I'd framed the question cautiously, wanting to know if he intended to fight me for her attention. On some level, it was inevitable, but I wanted - *needed* - to know if his general lazy attitude would extend to wooing Ariana.

“She's gorgeous, that's what I think.” Kian laughed, sending up bubbles of his own.

I managed to keep my fins down through sheer force of effort, but I wanted nothing more than to launch myself against my cup lid and somehow get into his. I would fight him for Ariana, the smug piece of showy bait.



## KIAN

RO WAS, UNSURPRISINGLY, HIGH STRUNG DESPITE OUR LUCK. Even though all adult shifters were confined to their animal forms until they found their mates, some stayed in those forms so long they forgot their dual-form childhoods: something we called “going wild.” That meant forgetting they’d ever been part human at all, eventually giving in to instinct without a mate to ground them. Since Pet Bonanza’s security system curtailed even our furtive, late-night conversations, I worried that Ro had gone fish-brained.

I’d noticed he had started flaring at me over the last few months, as if I was an actual betta rival and not a shifter friend. When our cups’ positions allowed us to see one another, there’d also been less and less light in his eyes. Normally shifters went many years without going wild, but we’d hit some hard luck getting captured and sold into the pet trade.

Our cups were far too small, and with no company but mindless actual fish and no ability to safely speak to each other, it was no wonder he'd declined. I was honestly surprised *I* hadn't.

We weren't from the same family, but we'd been friends before we were stuck in our fins. We'd both unfortunately been snatched by poachers at a betta shifter gathering, just after our age of majority. The trip from the gathering to our pet store shelves had been long and brutal, but I had more hope now that we'd gotten out: Grant was great, but the other employees didn't really care if we lived or died, and it showed. I couldn't count the days I'd gone without clean water, or without enough food, on Grant's days off.

Even without being able to talk to one another - revealing ourselves to non-shifter, non-mate humans was strictly forbidden, on pain of death by the shifter council - Ro had at least been a stabilizing influence until recently. With him on the verge of going wild, I'd been increasingly desperate to catch the eye of a patron, any patron, and showed off for everyone that walked by: I didn't want the same fate I saw unfolding in my friend. Unfortunately, Ro had taken that effort as a challenge, and started seeing me as the enemy. I wasn't, I was just trying to find a way out before I went wild too, or died from neglect. I wish he could see this was the best possible result: we were both out, safe, together, and in the hands of someone invested in taking care of us *every* day, not just on work shifts.

And, potentially, someone that could also be our mate.

If the poachers hadn't captured us, Ro and I would have returned to the areas where we'd initially hatched and likely found betta shifter mates of our own eventually. Our kind did

intermix with humans, though it was far less often than shifter matings, and it had to be approached carefully lest we tick off the council. Essentially, we were expected to vet our potential human mates to make sure they wouldn't startle and blab about our kind to anyone that would listen. The council wouldn't care that Ro and I had gotten poached, because the poachers had only been taking regular fish without proper permitting, not hunting down shifters specifically. We were on our own, even though we were likely to go wild in captivity.

I wasn't a jealous sort at all, and Ariana was a beautiful woman - if she was willing, I wouldn't mind wooing her alongside Ro and finally getting *both* of us out of our fins. The problem was, Ro definitely didn't seem like he was on the same page. If anything, he looked at me like he'd like to pop my swim bladder with the nearest sharp object - at least most of the time. Sometimes I thought I could see his familiar friendly softness, but it was replaced by the blank, instinctual expression of a fish-brain betta by the time I'd had a chance to look further.



## ARIANA

EVEN THOUGH I'D BEEN APPREHENSIVE ABOUT MY FISH-tending skills at first, it only took a day or two of studying the how-to book and squinting at Grant's receipt-scribbled notes to get the hang of it. Fish were definitely less messy than Hemmie had been, and although I missed the sweet furball, I was relieved I wouldn't have to deal with litter anymore. Water changes were comparatively easy, and after a week with my new finned companions, I managed the first one without a hitch.

To my relief, both fish seemed healthy and active, their colors even brighter under the special tank lights I'd set up. Even though Grant had recommended I keep the tanks completely closed off from one another, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that even "rival" fish might get lonely. I was probably

projecting human feelings onto my new pets, but oh well. They weren't head-butting the glass, so it was probably fine.

The blue fish was definitely more alert than the red one, and he always swam up to the surface for feedings. I could almost believe he recognized me, and looked forward to when I flipped the tank lid up. Again, it was probably wishful thinking, but it made me smile - a rare expression since Steve and I split up.

When my groceries dwindled about a week and a half later, I knew I'd have to leave "the boys" alone for a few hours. My therapist and I had worked on "doom thoughts" and defusing them with logic, but my brain still helpfully sent me an entire slide deck of all the things that were going to go wrong while I shopped. A stray cat breaking in and eating both my (still yet-to-be-named) fish. A fire engulfing the apartment from my little scent plug-in freshener. A meteor striking the city and evaporating their tank water.

You know, normal stuff.

I sighed as I gathered up my reusable shopping bags, a sure sign I was procrastinating; I always forgot the damn things, it was practically a ritual. I set them on the counter and crouched by the tanks, feeling a little foolish.

"Okay guys. I'm going grocery shopping and swinging by Pet Bonanza to pick up more of those bloodworms you like. Be good, no wild parties."

I chuckled and patted the top of the blue fish's tank like it was a puppy, grabbing my keys and marching out. The longer I lingered in my apartment, the more time my brain had to whip up disaster scenarios, and I deserved guacamole, not anxiety.

Right before I left, I pivoted and headed over to the television, flicking on a 24/7 news channel. It would at least give my fish something to watch, I reasoned. I had to force myself to head out after that, but I did, firmly shushing my mental “what if” carousel.

*You deserve guacamole. You can do this.*





Ro

SHE'D PATTED THE TOP OF *KIAN'S* TANK AND MY FINS RAISED of their own accord, my fury building as she left the space.

He'd tried to steal her. He'd tried to steal my *mate*, and now she was *gone*.

Why was my mate gone?

What was that movement over there? Another fish?

*Rival. Kill.*

I charged towards the other fish, something firm and painful arresting my forward momentum. Enraged, I tried again, pulling up at the last second as the current told me there was an obstacle. I flared, sending him a murderous look that was all challenge.

My rival flinched, and pride filled me down to the very tips of my fins.

*Coward.*



## KIAN

AS ARIANA LEFT THE APARTMENT, HER REUSABLE BAGS STILL in a neat pile on the counter, I turned to check on Ro. I did this little ritual every day whether he wanted to or not, striking up a small, terse conversation to keep him from going wild and hopefully sparing myself in the process.

Dread pooled low in my piscean belly when I turned to my friend and saw absolutely no recognition in his eyes. It was like staring at one of the actual bettas back at Pet Bonanza, and he was flaring again, adding insult to injury. He charged the glass sidewall, swimming backwards in an angry daze as he made contact. Had he forgotten the glass was there? How fish-brained had he gone?

“Ro? Hey, you there?” I turned and straightened my fins behind me, peering expectantly beyond the half-barrier Ariana had put between our tanks. Silence met my hesitant inquiry,

and as the minutes stretched out and Ro just periodically charged at me, I realized I was on my own now.

Bettas were competitive, so shifters of our type were as well, but we weren't as fight-to-the-death as our pure animal counterparts. I cared about Ro - I liked him. Okay, maybe more than liked him. If we hadn't gotten snagged by poachers when we did, I probably would have stumbled through a conversation I'd had in my head dozens of times, before and after. Once we were stuck in both our fish forms and forced into cramped cups besides, it seemed pointless to voice my secret desires - it wasn't as if we could even fool around as fish.

I didn't know if I could even save Ro now; even though we'd had a short, blunt conversation only a day ago, there was no telling when one of our own had crossed that threshold to wild. No matter what, saving either of us started with me getting out of my fins and into a mating potential, and that meant getting Ariana to kiss me. I could speak to her, break that barrier, but the drawbacks just weren't worth it. Better to live as a fish forever, even gone wild, than lose my life to shifter council enforcers.

Ariana seemed tender-hearted, and kind. I wasn't a manipulative fish by nature, but things were getting desperate and time was running out for both Ro and I. I began to pull together a half-assed plan, needing to turn towards the door to block out Ro's reflective flaring. It was annoying only because he didn't recognize me, because his fins really were impressive. I needed to concentrate though, and *really* sell this if it was going to work.

When I saw the apartment door open and Ariana step in, I bobbed up to the surface of the water and set things in motion.

I took a huge breath of air, letting myself float to the top of the tank as if I were dead, my fins limp and fluttering like sodden flags. I tried to loll my eyes in the direction of the kitchen, waiting patiently for her to notice something was wrong. It only took a minute or two before she was rushing over to my tank with an anguished gasp.

“No no no...” Ariana’s voice got progressively tighter with panic, and I had to focus on keeping my “dying” eyes fixed to the ceiling rather than looking at her expression. The top of the tank lid clunked open, and a whooshing sound told me she’d dipped a hand in my tank, just before my body was lifted out of the water and into the air. Did I feel bad for misleading my hopefully-mate? Sure, but I’d spend our time together making it up to her in a million different ways, hopefully at least half of which would be in bed. I made a big show of heaving breaths, ceasing my thrashing as soon as I was in her palm.

“I...uhm...oh god, what do I...” Ariana made a little whimper of alarm before doing exactly what I’d hoped she’d do: she cupped her other hand over me and leaned in, and I braced for the kiss that would hopefully jumpstart my return to bipedal freedom. Instead of the expected grief-ridden peck, however, she blew firmly. Honestly, the change in air pressure was pretty unpleasant from a fish standpoint, particularly because I didn’t actually need whatever half-assed fishy CPR she was attempting. But that bare brush of her lips into her closed hands was enough to start the mate magic working. A kiss was a kiss, and it was good enough to get me out of my fins.

Ariana sank to her knees as my weight increased in her palm, flopping my rapidly-expanding body awkwardly onto the carpet, her eyes wide with horror. She looked away as my fish-skin stretched and split along my limbs, absorbing into my long-lost human skin. I sighed happily as my body

remembered half of itself again, flexing fingers that weren't connected to each other. As I got to my knees and enjoyed a truly satisfying stretch that felt like it'd been years in the making, Ariana scrambled backwards on the carpet like a startled crab. "What the *fuck!*"

Her chest expanded as she sucked in a deep breath, eyes going even wider, ready to scream her lungs out. Thankfully, even with ungainly feet to contend with, I still had a measure of my aquatic grace in human form. I launched myself at her as she clambered to her feet, shoving her back into the soft embrace of the couch, covering her body with my own and her mouth with a careful palm. As soon as I was sure I had her properly caged, I leaned down to murmur in her ear.

"Shh. Shhhh. Easy now, lotus blossom. I'm going to explain everything, but first I need you to stop that screaming of yours. I'm not going to hurt you. You're going to let me talk if I take my hand away, right?"

The reality of Ariana assaulted my now-human senses in the very best of ways: her scent, spiked by adrenaline, the softness of her silky skin, just barely damp from where I pressed against it. And Gods help me, the struggling wasn't helping matters. Every jolt of her hips and shift of her thighs trapped between mine made my already-clear attraction to my potential mate even more obvious. The one prominent organ I didn't share with my fish-self flexed and bobbed like it was seeking the water's edge, leaving a thin, glimmering trail of arousal that stretched from my tip to the waist of her skirt.

I stared into her soft green eyes, imagining what we'd be like together, when her brow creased and a sharp pain bloomed in my hand. I yanked it back towards my chest with a yelp, a

flash of red in the movement as I stared incredulously at my palm.



## ARIANA

I STRUGGLED AGAIN, SWIPING A HAND ACROSS MY MOUTH AND spitting, torn between screaming now that I might be heard and getting the blood off my mouth. What if - oh God, what if he had some kind of *disease*? Where had he even *come from* and why was he *naked*?

I'd clearly been so worried over my fish that I hadn't noticed a whole-ass goddamn naked *guy* that had broken into my apartment.

How did he get in?

How long had he been here?

*And why was his voice so sexy?*

Okay, so maybe one of those questions was less important than the others, but damned if it wasn't the loudest one in my panicked brain right now. Great, my fish was probably dying



of asphyxiation while I was busy dying of thirst for some kind of drugged-up naked burglar.

As much as I wanted to shove him off and search the carpet for my poor dying fish, he was surprisingly strong - so much for suffering through all those expensive spin classes at the gym.

“Ariana.” Startled into silence by my own name in such a tender tone, I glared at him and bared my teeth in a roar of indignation, belatedly remembering I was supposed to be fighting my intruder.

“*Get off of me* you asshole! I’m going to *murder you* and shove your body down the trash chute *how dare you-*” I lunged forward as far as his hold would let me, but he held his shoulder clear of my teeth, having learned from my first bite. I figured if he had some terrible bloodborne pathogen I was already exposed, and it wasn’t like I could get my limbs free to defend myself.

“Well, I certainly didn’t plan for it to go this way, but...I accept.” The asshole had the nerve to *smile* at me like I’d just given him a birthday present, but his eyes seemed almost animalistic as he did. Catching me off guard, he lunged forward, yanking my tee shirt away from my collarbone and sinking his teeth into the soft stretch where my neck met my shoulder. It was a shallow bite, but it still stung like fire, and I finally found my voice, letting out the loudest scream I could as I grabbed and pulled at his soft red hair, attempting to dislodge him.

If anything, his weight became even harder to move, soft, slow laps of his tongue across the wound taking some of the fire away as he insistently pressed against me. My desire to scream faded abruptly in my throat as I grabbed for the palm I’d just

bitten, lifting it back to my mouth with a strange, irresistible instinct. The man let out a noise that sounded suspiciously contented as the copper of his blood teased at my tongue, his wound - impossibly - already little more than an indentation and silvery scar as his fingers curled on my cheek.

Heavy thumps were followed by a heavier accent as my older foreign neighbor from across the hall knocked at my door and called out, asking if I was alright. An unexpected flare of annoyance sizzled through me at the interruption.

“Fine, Hans! Sorry to worry you, just...uhm...just a horror movie - I had the sound up too loudly. Everything’s okay, thank you!”

*Wait, had I just sent help away? Voluntarily?*

The man on top of me gently released my other wrist, crawling cautiously off my body while watching me intently, as if he was still expecting resistance. I somehow knew down to the marrow of my bones that he wasn’t a threat, that he’d never cause me harm beyond the bite, and even then it had been more instinct than thought. He held his palms up, one whole and one marked now, glancing at the door with a concerned expression, then back to me.

“Ariana, I’m - I’m very sorry, this is probably a lot to process, but you bit me and I didn’t expect it and...you set in motion something very important. I hope you won’t hate me, this isn’t ideal but I think we’ll be excellent together, I really do, if you’d just give me a chance.”

He seemed apologetic, and surprisingly confident considering he wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing and had just indulged in a little light cannibalism with a perfect stranger. I couldn’t figure out why I wasn’t completely grossed out over the fact I’d basically dog-groomed a bite wound I rightfully delivered

to a burglar. It was definitely something I'd be completely grossed out by on a normal, non-burglar day.

I gasped, suddenly remembering my fish. I pushed the man aside as I jumped up from the couch and got on all fours, scouring the carpet and under the couch, giving a tearful little sob. "Oh no! I'm so sorry little guy, oh god where are you? I promise I'll save you if I-"

The man laughed, his arms crossed over a broad chest and - yep, his dick was still out. Boy howdy was it still out. *Focus*, find your *damn fish*. He stood in front of me, making the whole dick-out situation even more literally-in-my-face, and made a quiet noise of inquiry.

"Lotus blossom, what are you looking for? I'm right here."

I tilted my head up - *don't look at his dick, don't look at his dick* - and raised an eyebrow. Surely he wasn't insinuating what I thought he was. That'd be crazy. Potentially even crazier than surprise vampire roleplay in the middle of my living room.

He blushed slightly, ruffling his own hair and dropping his eyes from mine, embarrassed. "I was never in real danger, to be honest with you, but I had to get you to kiss me. I thought maybe if you got worried I was dying you might lay one on me, but I wasn't expecting you to try and blow me up like a balloon, truthfully. You know that wouldn't have worked on a real fish, right?"

I huffed, shoving myself back up to a kneeling position to glare at him again. "Well how was I supposed to know! It works on humans and you - you were my first fish. Fishes? Wait a minute, is the other one like-?"

We both looked at my other fish, hovering in the middle of his tank and fully flared out. He looked *pissed*, about ready to charge the glass, for all the good it would do.

The stranger sighed, sliding a hand down the beautifully-chiseled features of his face. “Okay. Like I said, I promise I’ll explain *everything*, but one thing at a time, please. I’m still trying to shake off the fish brain here. But to answer your question, he’s like me too, but it’s...complicated.”

I rolled off my knees to sit gracelessly on the carpet. “You’re really going to stand there and tell me that you’re- *Jesus Christ* will you *please* cover up your dick?” I looked away from the magnetic pull of his sizable endowment and blindly stabbed a finger at the afghan draped over the back of my couch.

He chuckled, moving towards the couch. The sound rippled over me like water, settling right between my legs the way I wished he would. Before I could begin to unpack that particular insane impulse, he’d cleared his throat, drawing my attention back to him. He’d wrapped the afghan like a beach towel around his hips, an unfortunate woven kitten’s face tented outwards from what he’d at least attempted to cover. The effect was both wildly inappropriate and hilarious, but at least I could look at his damn face now. He settled down across from me on the floor, carefully arranging the blanket to keep himself covered.

He reached out, taking my hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Now. Obviously, I’m not human, not entirely. I am a shifter, specifically a betta fish shifter, confined to my fish form until I met my mate in adulthood.”

I withdrew my hand, looking at him suspiciously, despite the deep instinctual feeling I could trust him. “Your *what now*? There’s no...I-I mean, I don’t even know your name!”

He leaned back, rubbing his palms on his blanket-clad legs nervously. “Erm, well, I’m Kian. And obviously, you are Ariana. I heard you introduce yourself to Grant - it’s nice to meet you properly. That-” he nodded towards the tank where the absolutely-furious red betta was now swimming in rapid circles, “-is Ro. He’s, well I should say he *was* a friend until a few months ago. Sometimes if we stay in our animal forms too long, we forget how to be human. We *go wild* and just live out longer-than-natural lives as our animals. Ro’s on the verge. I was getting there, and a little desperate, hence the whole playing-dead routine.”

“I can’t believe I’m sitting here listening to this. Why am I not freaking out?” I half-whispered the question to myself, staring at the carpet, wondering if I’d been drugged. I had a pretty high startle reflex naturally, and every instinct in me should have had me lunging for a phone, a kitchen knife, or screaming for Hans again.

Kian sighed softly, wincing. “So that would be the mating bond. You triggered it when you bit me, I finished it when I bit you back instinctually. It sort of bridges our emotional intentions, lets you know that I don’t mean any harm and, in betta shifters, that I’m prepared to protect you and fight for you. It’s supposed to reassure you that I’m a good mate.”

“But I didn’t - I was trying to fight you off! I wasn’t trying to...to...whatever the hell this is!” I gestured angrily at my neck, but even through my annoyance I knew he was telling the truth. I felt a powerful, inexplicable pull to be in contact with Kian, and it was taking everything in me to stay sitting where I was.

He hung his head, sighing again. “I know. I know, and I’m so sorry - mating bonds are a serious, permanent thing and this

wasn't supposed to happen, not without discussion and clear agreement. I only wanted your kiss to be able to actually communicate with you, ask you if you'd be willing to consider it. Please believe me, I didn't plan for this or want this for you. Fighting off the need to complete the bond would have been near impossible normally, but I might have managed if I wasn't halfway to going wild myself. We were in that pet store for a *long* time and it's hell on a shifter used to freedom. So, this is my fault, but also it - well, maybe it wasn't entirely."

He looked so crestfallen I reached out and covered his hand with my own, giving it a gentle squeeze. I was still pissed at him for making me worry, and for whatever implications this "mating bond" had dumped in my lap, but he was obviously not doing well. He gave me a wan smile, turning his hand to hold my palm against his.

"For what it's worth, I was right about you. You're a gentle soul and a good woman, I can feel it through the bond. I'm deeply grateful and privileged to have met you, and in particular to be mated to you." His thumb stroked the outside of my hand, and the movement was oddly sensual. In fact, Kian was beginning to look like an oasis in the desert to my libido, sadly neglected since Steve and I had called it quits.

His voice grew soft again. "You, uh, may be experiencing certain *urges* right now because of the bond, and while I'm happy to tend to those, it's completely your choice. I've put enough unexpected choices on you today." He bit his lip in a frown, eyes glued to the carpet instead of meeting my own questioning gaze. My heart thudded in my chest as every cell in my body sang like a horny church choir. *Yes, let's do the urges thing. Immediately.*

“It may be powerful, the instinct, but-” He’d continued explaining, abruptly cut off when I leaned forward and pressed my unexpected guest into the carpet. I kissed him like I’d just discovered home invasion was a kink.



KIAN

*FUCK ME.*

I kissed Ariana back with all the hunger I'd felt building since I met her, a heady cocktail of acceptance and lust sloshing through our new bond. I wanted to bury myself in her, lock us together as my shifter nature intended, breed her thoroughly even though her scent told me she wasn't currently fertile.

And even though my newly-human cock ached with a severity that bordered on concerning, I found some iota of willpower in my instinctual brain. I broke off our kiss, panting with need.

"Ariana. Oh gods I don't want to stop but I need you to listen - just listen for a second. Can you do that for me?"

She propped herself up on her hands, leaning back on her knees to straddle my waist. The taut span of her stretched skirt pinned my blanket-draped cock down in delicious ways, and I had to struggle to remember why I'd stopped her. I groaned as



I gazed up at her beautiful, slightly-swollen lips, already glossy from our kiss, pupils blown with desire. She was a magnificent sex goddess and I was *way* too devoted a friend. “What’s wrong, Kian? Did I hurt you? Is your...your hand still hurt from the bite?”

I shook my head, some of the mating-daze clearing temporarily. “No, I’m *very much* alright, but the first time we...join...it will cement the bond, preventing other claims.” I gestured weakly at Ro’s tank, his fury so palpable I was surprised he wasn’t boiling the water. “Ro needs to get out of his fins like I did, though I’m not even sure it’ll work with how far gone he is.”

Her tongue darted across her lips in thought and I swallowed another groan at the sight. “I understand that humans typically only mate with one partner at a time, I do. But if Ro hasn’t gone entirely fish-brained and can be redeemed, I promise you we’ll bring you such ecstasy together, Ariana. You’ll want for nothing, we’ll serve you and cherish you as you deserve. You’ll be mated to both of us, provided he doesn’t beat the ever-loving shit out of me first.”

Ariana’s brow creased as my cavalier comment soured the moment. I’d have kicked myself if there wasn’t currently a masterpiece of curvy perfection pinning my legs down. “Even if I was willing to - you know - help him, why would I if he’s just going to hurt you? I don’t want *anyone* to hurt you.” Her voice was steel, almost as hard as I was, the protective side of our growing bond becoming evident. I needed to convince her, and quickly, or Ro wouldn’t have a shot in hell of joining our mating.

“He’s just confused. I promise you, he’s a decent guy, arguably even better looking than me.” I flashed her a self-effacing grin,

which I could tell helped patch up some of the disrupted vibes. “Besides, if I wasn’t willing to take a punch for you, I’d be a pretty awful betta mate. Also, just curious here, but how do you feel about...guys together?”

She eased back, letting me pull my legs free. I frankly hated any loss of contact with her, especially with the bond thrumming tight in my chest, but this conversation was important. Her cheeks flushed and she gave a shy smile I found both endearing and a maddening turn-on. “What, like a...threesome? I mean, I’ve watched videos, but...never, you know. I’m willing to try it, maybe?”

I cleared my throat, arranging the slightly-dislodged blanket more firmly around my waist as my cock throbbed at the thought of Ariana pinned between Ro and I. ”Well, yes, that too. But I meant more- uh - *together* together.”

Her curious expression shifted to wide-eyed surprise as understanding dawned. “Oh! Is Ro like-” Her voice dropped to a whisper, “-your boyfriend?”

It was my turn to blush. “Well, not yet. And I was kind of hoping it could be an *our* boyfriend sort of thing.” My cheeks felt so *hot*. I hadn’t been this squirmy since the last time I’d been caught pulling pranks as a human-form teen. I was wildly aroused, but also tempered with worry that she’d reject the idea.

Instead, my sweet mate surprised me yet again, laying her hand on my knee with a soft, sympathetic frown. “You’ve been separated for so long, you must miss him. He must miss you too! Kian, of course I’m alright with it. The extra person thing is going to be a little weird to get adjusted to, but hell, I’m a modern woman, right? You guys agree to do the friggin

dishes, I'm willing to give anything a shot. So how do I... help? Do I kiss him too?"

Relief flooded through me and I rocked forward, hugging Ariana tightly as my throat thickened with emotion. Even though I'd never allowed myself to admit it openly, I'd lost hope months ago that we'd ever find salvation like this. I kept going for Ro's sake, but with him fading into wildness, the doubt and despair had been getting hooks in me. "Yes, thank you. Gods, thank you. I promise we'll both treat you right, you won't regret this." I peppered my mate-mark with gentle kisses, nuzzling into her neck for the sheer joy of it, inhaling her scent.

Sliding back out of her arms, I cupped her face in my palms and kissed her gently, thumbs stroking her cheeks. "He and I will fight, but please don't worry about us. Once you kiss him, stay clear, I couldn't bear to see you hurt. I have no idea what state of mind he'll be in when he shifts, *if* he can even shift."

She nodded, and her emotions - overwhelmed, anxious excitement - flowed through the bond, echoing my own. Her hand slipped around mine as she drew us to standing, walking over to Ro's tank. He was swimming in tight, angry circles, his fins fanned as he feinted at the glass towards me. My blood ran cold as I remembered his human form's broad-shouldered, muscular build, and the few inches of height he had on me.

This was probably going to hurt.



Ro

*MATE.*

She was leaving the rival behind! He was unworthy. I knew it.

We'd fight now. I would kill him and claim my mate.

But the thought of killing my rival filled me with a deep, inexplicable sadness, a grief that nearly made me ill. What was this weakness?

Before I could puzzle over that unwelcome sensation any further, my mate's hand was in my tank. I swam right up to it, nuzzling at her fingertips, reveling in our first contact. I'd build such a bubble nest for her, she'd gladly fill it with eggs for-

I got a little dizzy as I was lifted up, up, and out of the water. Panic. I couldn't breathe!

My gills flexed frantically as I flopped, already missing the pressure of my tank, when something incredibly soft and warm pressed to my side. It was a momentary distraction, and immediately I flopped as hard as I could, seeking water.

I would die.

*No!*

I could not die and leave the rival to reclaim my mate.

My frustration and twitching became more substantial, grunts and growls spilling out of my too-dry throat as my fins seemed to solidify. My body knocked awkwardly against the soft floor, eyes tracking wildly around the room. I no longer felt like I was dying, I could breathe, but the air felt too light, too insubstantial. I struggled upwards, balancing on my fins somehow, which weren't fins at all.

I clambered up, swaying, grabbing at some nearby surface for purchase as I struggled to remain upright. I didn't understand the urge to do so, but my body was preparing for battle and I trusted it. The gills on my neck gave gentle popping sounds as they opened and closed, the ruffled edge of my head fin falling over half my face. I was more than fish, but less than...*them*... my mate and the *rival* that still stood too close to her.

It was time to change that.

I charged at him with a roar, pushing through the hesitation that warned me off of the clear wall when I was in the water. He made some noise, a bark of a syllable that almost stopped me in its familiarity, but I ignored it. Some cheap tactic to avoid a fight, surely: he was a coward.

My face met his chest, albeit without the speed I'd hoped for, what I would have had in the water. Instead, it brought us both crashing down to the soft floor, where I raised a not-fin and

slammed it awkwardly across his face and body from atop him. He caught the movement in his fins - no, *hands*, some faint memory recalled - and again made that familiar bark, that sound that I somehow knew meant *me*.

I howled with rage, pulling my head back and preparing to smash it down into his, hopefully incapacitating him. Instead, he yanked one of his hands free and caught the back of my neck, pulling our faces together and pressing his mouth to mine.

What insanity was this?

A groan sounded between us, vibrating our connection pleasantly, and I realized with a shock it had rumbled from *my* throat. My hips thrust and rutted at his instinctually, a firm, unyielding violence in the movement. My rival merely rode it out, mirroring it like he'd expected it, both enraging me and filling me with a confusing hunger for *more*. My fin flopped wetly against his cheek as our mouths devoured one another, an ache building at my core as I thrust up against something soft and hard at the same time. All at once the softness fell away, and there was only heated skin rubbing on heated skin, a sensation that made my pulse roar in my ears.

My rival slid his fins - no, *legs* - out from beneath the cage of my own, pressing our groins together even more firmly and drawing a choked moan of pleasure from me. Vertigo dipped and slid into my senses as I suddenly found the soft ground pressed against my back, my rival on top of me.

*No, wait, he couldn't win!*

Our mouths parted wetly from each other, our chests heaving as our eyes locked. I expected to see the same fury burning in his gaze as I knew I held in mine, but there was only... softness. Affection. Even...devotion?

His hand moved to my head, gripping the strange, soft fur alongside my fin, holding my head in place. As his mouth descended to my jaw, and the fiery pinch of pain told me I'd been a fool. He'd lulled me into a false confidence, only to strike when my guard was down. I thrashed, but faster than I thought possible, his other hand slid between us, pressing the strange, sensitive root I'd grown against his own, gripping us both in a fist. I was leaking some sort of viscous water from the tip of mine, and we slid together easily, my anger evaporating in the wake of a wave of mind-numbing pleasure.

He mouthed and licked at the pain on my jaw, moaning hotly against my ear as he thrust into his grip around us. "Ro- ung-gods, Ro. I had to, please forgive me...please...fuck you feel so good..."

"*Kian.*" My voice was rough gravel, full of want and need, some cherished memory obliterating my hate for the rival on top of me. This was *Kian*. My childhood friend, my lifelong crush, my trusted confidante, not a *rival*.

The last of my violence surged in a flash of teeth, finding his own jaw, his faint stubble sharp and delicious on my tongue, a hint of copper, a *bond*. Understanding and connection exploded into being as I did in his hand, his strangled, delighted cry mixing into my own shout of pleasure. We fucked his clenched fist to completion together, leaking and spurting against each other's stomachs, desperately chasing our climaxes.

Kian laid heavily on top of me, slicking against my stomach as he eased his hand back, our heady combined scent lingering on his fingertips. He smiled lazily down at me, giving a soft, teasing thrust through the puddle of come between us, lighting up my nerves. I huffed with an answering grin, closing my

eyes and letting my head droop down, my fin wet against my temple.

*Kian and I were mated.* It was a realization that made my chest feel warm and light. Sense was starting to flow back into my brain, and I realized with dawning horror that I'd been all but wild. Kian brought me back from the knives' edge of losing myself with a mating bond, but something still wasn't right. My instincts and body awareness kept confusing themselves, darting between fish-me and human-me with dizzying loops.

*My mate.* No, not Kian. My fish-self recognized Kian as my mate but still pressed urgently against my skull to find the *other* mate. The woman. The one I could sense even now through my faint, brand-new bond with Kian. Feelings of awe and arousal, barely a trickle in my perception, but timid enough that I knew they weren't from Kian. Bracing my palms on the soft ground, I looked over my shoulder to find her, cheeks flushed a deep pink, mouth parted.

*She liked what she'd seen.* My fish-self preened: it might not have been a traditional mating display, but my half-fish senses could pick up on her arousal without even trying. Kian and I had stimulated her, and I hadn't even had to make a bubble nest.

Still, however, I could spot the healing bond bite on her shoulder, which meant things were incomplete. *My* bite needed to be on her too.





## ARIANA

RO HADN'T TRANSFORMED AS COMPLETELY AS KIAN HAD, after I'd kissed him. A delicate fin flopped over his eye like an aquatic emo haircut, smooth half-moon gills marked either side of his neck, and short, translucent webs stretched between the bases of his fingers. As he and Kian rose to their knees, their stomachs glistening with one another's climaxes, the look he gave me wasn't entirely human, but I recognized it all the same.

### *Hunger.*

The desire that coursed through me was organic, but some of it was definitely egged on and echoed through the bond I shared with Kian, and faintly, the one *he* now shared with Ro. The unfinished feel of it all nagged at me, driving me to complete the circuit, to bite Ro the way I had Kian.

I'd initially thought that I'd get to know human-Ro gradually, maybe we'd get coffee and chat, talk about how we'd navigate sharing Kian and maybe one another. The animal instinct I'd gained with the bond told me I was overthinking everything, that the answer was so much simpler. It got even easier as I pulled my shirt off and slid my skirt down, stumbling out of my flats as I reached for both of them in only my bra and underwear, modesty evidently forgotten like my reusable shopping bags.

Having my first threesome on my newish beige berber wall-to-wall wasn't on my sexual bucket list, but, I reasoned, I shouldn't look a gift horse in the dick. I unabashedly snuck a peek downstairs on Ro and what I saw had my toes curling into the carpet, arresting my forward momentum.

"Uhhh. What exactly is...*that* whole situation?" I pointed, rotating my finger in a slow circle in the direction of his groin. As he moved more fully off of Kian, I clapped a hand to my mouth, realizing they were both sporting the same unique equipment. The bases of their cocks were inflated slightly outward, like a bubble stuck at the bottom of a straw, the protrusions both soft-looking and substantial.

Kian's eyes followed mine and he reached down with still-wet fingertips, giving the strange ball-like bulge a gentle squeeze. "Oh, this? That's our knot. When we shift, our internal organs more or less get in line with human anatomy, but our labyrinth organ, uhm, migrates." He gestured downwards with a lopsided grin.

Ro cleared his throat, his voice deliciously deep now that I'd heard more than Kian's name from his lips. "It's sort of our version of a knot. It's a little more giving than the ones our canine shifter cousins are sporting, though. Don't worry." He

squeezed his own, which gently gave under his fingertips, but still seemed to offer enough firmness to be interesting. The lascivious tone in his theoretical reassurance made my core clench.

As my attention lifted back up to their eyes, I realized they were both staring me down like I was a particularly tempting piece of bait. With a shared look, they both began playfully crawling towards me on all fours, their knotted cocks swinging like a silent threat just above the carpet. I sank to my knees to welcome them, sighing with pleasure as the warmth of their skin brushed against my own. Kian nuzzled below my ear, tongue darting against his bond on my shoulder. “Lotus blossom, Ro is still caught in some of his fins, he needs *our* bond to shake them loose. Will you help him, make him ours?”

I nodded breathlessly, reaching for Ro, who nuzzled into the other side of my neck, trailing kisses upwards until our lips met. Their cocks, still sticky and slick, dragged and rubbed at the top of my thighs, promising to make just as much of a mess out of me. As Ro and I kissed, his unique bulge pressed against my leg, tempting and insistent. Ro broke off our kiss with a smile, turning my chin with his fingers to meet Kian’s waiting mouth, letting the two of us pick up where we’d left off on the couch.

As Kian’s tongue teased at my own, his fingers busily plucked at my bra back, unhooking it and easing the straps down my arms gently. I moaned into his mouth as Ro ducked down beneath my arm, his fin sliding along the edge of my breast as he found my nipple and sucked it softly. I’d lost track of which hands belonged to which man already, but I let my eyes flutter closed, reveling in the decadent sensation of touches, kisses, and tongues.

Ro had reclaimed my mouth as Kian tilted our lustful knot of bodies backwards onto the carpet to better slide my underwear off my hips. I canted them upwards between sipping kisses at Ro's mouth, Kian's hands taking their sweet time skimming down my legs. I could tell from the shock of cool air on my uncovered pussy that I was even more aroused than I'd thought, and it only got worse when Kian's fingers curved against me, curious and stroking. I groaned into my kiss with Ro, my head tilting back as my breath caught.

"I'm going to take you first, little mate. I'm going to fit myself inside of you properly when I claim you, and then Kian's going to claim you all over again. You're going to be a good girl and stretch for us, take all of us, aren't you?"

The gush of arousal my body sent out at Kian's maddeningly perfect fingers and Ro's equally perfect words should have embarrassed me. Ro's thumb traced my lower lip as he looked at me expectantly, the brow not obscured by his fin raised in question. I nodded like a bobblehead, eagerly and too rapidly, drawing a knowing grin from both of them. These men were absolutely ruining me and I didn't give a ghost of a damn about it.

"I think she might be a little impatient for it, Ro. Why don't you show her exactly why shifter sex is better than human sex. I want to watch." Kian flashed our mate a wicked grin and leaned forward, kissing him, then me, as he dragged his fingers out with agonizing slowness, stroking along my G-spot on the way out until he drew a whimpering moan out of me.

Ro caught Kian's hand as he lithely settled himself between my thighs, sucking lewdly on Kian's fingers as he settled his cockhead against my entrance. Kian slid behind me as Ro moved into place, drawing my head to rest back against his

chest, making himself my pillow as Ro teased the slightest dip of his hips against mine. As Ro's lips released his fingers, Kian sighed happily, running the fingers of his other hand through my hair, soothingly. Ro slowly slid his cock into me, watching me for any signs of discomfort, a look of pure bliss lighting up his features. He was the biggest lover I'd ever had, and it took some slow breathing and patience, but soon I felt the kiss of his knot with every fluid stroke, teasing me with its girth.

"*Ariana...*" Ro moaned my name with such reverence, a blush flooded my cheeks in response. I'd never been the focus of so much pleasure, so much worship before and it was wonderfully overwhelming. He began to thrust slowly, savoring each movement like a separate carnal prayer, his eyes locked on mine with an intensity I never knew I needed.

Kian watched our bodies move together, holding me on every upstroke, palms stroking my shoulders, breasts, and arms tenderly, drifting to Ro's when he was close enough. As Ro's pace increased, Kian murmured warmly down to me. "Bond him as he knots you, lotus blossom. Bring him into us with bliss, with love."

I laced my legs over Ro's, holding him tight against me and raising my hips, wordlessly begging for him to enter me completely. The stretch of his knot stole my breath at first, but I let Kian's hands anchor me, bearing down on the knot until, with a pop that made my eyes widen, Ro filled me in ways no man ever had. I leaned up, my teeth finding Ro's pectoral muscle and clenching there as I did around him, the tang of his blood filling my senses as I came, my scream muffled against his flesh. His own thrusts grew short, frantic, and eager until his knot suddenly ballooned in me, widening just enough against my G-spot to ensure that no human man would ever be

able to impress me again. With a roar, he bent down over my arched body, biting the side of my breast more firmly than Kian had my shoulder. It hurt, but as we rocked together, I struggled to give even half a damn about it.

“There...there...so good. My little mate. You took me so well in that tight, perfect cunt. I knew you could do it.” Ro groaned with pleasure, licking my blood off his teeth and resting his forehead heavily on mine, our panting breaths mingling. I hadn’t known someone could turn me into a human log flume with a couple of dirty words, but I was learning all sorts of new things about my body today. Ro chuckled when he felt me tighten in response, propping himself up over me in an effortless plank. “A moment to rest, for your body to relinquish me, and then Kian will show you even more delights.”

I tilted my head up to look at Kian, half upside-down, brows raised. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but I’m not sure I-”

Kian grinned, tweaking my nose playfully. “It’s very human of you to think the mating instinct will take a coffee break. My bond’s already on you, lotus blossom, and your body needs me. Listen to it, let me make you feel good. Let *us* make you feel good.”

I paused, sinking into my sensations for a moment, realizing the normal satiation and exhaustion I felt after a solid sex session was completely absent. Kian was right, their bites had changed something in me, something that now demanded Kian stretch me and fill me as Ro had. The latter was easing back, our bodies still pulling at one another slightly, reluctant to give up our connection.

As soon as Ro had tugged away with a nearly-inaudible sigh, the need came roaring back, practically clawing up my throat

to voice itself, even as I reached for Ro's hand to prolong our physical connection. "Kian, *please.*"



## KIAN

WATCHING MY NEW MATES TOGETHER HAD AROUSED EVERY drop of sexual hunger in me, and while I wasn't necessarily impatient to knot Ariana, I was very *eager*. I coaxed Ro to take my place and swung myself over her body with an almost embarrassing speed. I wanted to rut her, but first I would indulge myself, give her what little rest I could with the instinct pounding at me.

She yelped as I slid to my belly and insistently wriggled under her thighs, smashing my mouth and tongue against the messy juncture of her thighs without a moment's hesitation. She keened sweetly, arching against Ro's hold, and I noticed with a frisson of dark delight he held her wrists firmly captive against his chest. *Oh, she liked that.* Her body told me that as much as the bond did, hips bucking against my tongue as I lavished her clit and dipped inside, making more of a mess as I cleaned her.



Ro's release tasted as good as I'd hoped it would, and mixed up with Ariana's, it was all I ever needed or wanted. I licked and sucked with wild abandon, my knot like an insistent stone throbbing at the base of my cock, more than ready to be sheathed in either mate, *right now*.

I pulled my face away, crawling up her body with a needy, audible whine, going about as wild as an in-control shifter could. Between her bout with Ro, my oral fixation, and a new rush of arousal, she was so slick I buried myself up to the top of my knot in one fluid thrust.

As our helpless cries echoed one another, Ro's hands tightened on her wrists as he smirked with satisfaction. "That's it - rut our mate, fuck her, fill her with your seed and breed her pretty little cunt, Kian. You're a good boy, aren't you? Show me how good you can be for me, for us."

*Oh fuck yes.* Well, Ariana and I apparently had at least one thing in common, and it was a rapidly-growing addiction for Ro's filthy mouth. I whined, beyond words, meeting Ariana's mouth in a frantic, sloppy kiss, then Ro's as he dropped one of her wrists and jerked my chin up firmly to his own. His hand snaked behind my head to grab a fistful of my hair, dragging me slightly upwards, against and into Ariana's body.

"Do it. Knot her, Kian. Fill her now." His voice was a hot, low growl of command and there was absolutely nothing I could do but obey. My hips bucked of their own accord, pressing my knot into her in a single, demanding shove that instantly had her clenching around me. I'd never come so much in my life, jet after jet that felt like my very soul was draining into the ecstatic clutch of her body.

Ro gave a satisfied grunt of approval, getting up to his knees and handing me Ariana's wrist. I accepted it, dazed, looking at

him with confusion. “Hold our mate. Keep her safe and comfortable. Tell her how well she’s done.”

I nodded, almost dizzy with satisfaction, stroking Ariana’s hair and murmuring soft praise in her ear as she nuzzled close. Ro’s face bumped my arm as he nudged in to lick tenderly at his bond mark on the side of her breast. I curved an arm around Ariana’s back and another around Ro’s shoulders, holding my mates close as I kissed the tops of their heads.

Ro moved his ministrations downwards, making me lean back as he shoved between us, rooting under Ariana’s thigh until the warm, wet bliss of his tongue found where our bodies connected. It required some moving and bending, but she and I were all too happy to let him lap up the overflow that seeped sluggishly around the base of my knot. He continued for several minutes, gentle, pleasurable sensations meant to ease us back down to earth, rather than rev up for another round. When my knot finally slipped free, he sucked me down to the base, shifting his gills back on momentarily to do so, stuffing me down his throat until I clutched at his shoulder with shocked overstimulation. His answering grin as he swiped a forearm across his mouth warmed me to my core: the Ro I knew was back entirely. Ariana and I had saved him.

Afterwards, we’d carried Ariana to the shower together, taking our time to clean and rinse our mate with almost ritual devotion. Water was sacred to fish shifters for obvious reasons, and even though our bond marks had already been exchanged, something about being in the water together drove it all home for me. I was mated to two wonderful beings, and felt like the luckiest betta that had ever existed. Ro held me tightly as Ariana rinsed out her conditioner, placing a soft kiss on my forehead before she and I traded places.

After, she'd insisted we dry off and climb into bed together, which was exponentially more comfortable than the floor had been. Cuddling with them was amazing, but I'd always been a light sleeper compared to Ro's coma-like, snore-filled nights when we were young and in human form, and that still apparently held true. After carefully tucking a blanket around my mates, I rose and watched the sunset through the living room windows with a serene sense of peace, my muscles aching in all the best ways.

When Ariana wandered into the kitchen blinking and yawning an hour later, she took one look at the empty kitchen sink and turned a wide-eyed stare at me. "Kian, did you do the dishes?"

I nodded, drying my hands on a small towel. I'd also cleaned the counters and taken out the trash but I didn't want to seem like I was bragging. I pivoted, folding the damp hand towel I intended to put back on the oven door handle. "Well of course I did. You said it was important to you, right?"

When I turned back to her, the underwear she'd put on to sleep in was crumpled on the carpet, and she was on her knees on the couch, gloriously naked breasts on display over the back of it as she crooked a finger at me and smiled. "Come here, Kian."

Behind us, a warm, low chuckle from the hallway told me we had an audience.

I tossed the towel haphazardly over a shoulder as I moved to the living room with a speed my fish-self would have envied, grinning as I prepared to put on a hell of a show for our mate. "Yes *ma'am*."



*The end...for now!*



Thank you so much for reading *Alpha Bettas*! If you'd like to read more sexy aquatic goodness, try my MMF fantasy novel *Stowaway and Silent Song*, which includes both a selkie and a mute male siren. For more unique / unexpected characters, including balloon animal shifters and a door shifter, stop by my website, [ValentineVerse.com](http://ValentineVerse.com) for a freebie story, titles, content notes, and more!

## About the Author

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An unapologetic book-huffer and devourer-of-stories, Vera Valentine has carried on a torrid love affair with the written word for nearly all of her 40 years. Grown in the diner-laden wilds of the New Jersey Pine Barrens and transplanted to North Carolina, she lives with her husband, eight cats, and two dogs, most of whom are house trained. An avid fan of the Paranormal Why Choose genre, she tossed her author hat into the ring in September of 2021 and never looked back.

A self-professed chaotic copybara, Vera can usually be found spending too much time on social media, chilling with fellow authors, or scribbling down ever-expanding plot bunny ideas in her trusty paper sidekick, the Bad Idea Book™.

If you'd like to stay up-to-date on Vera's latest projects and preorders, stop by her website - [ValentineVerse.com](https://ValentineVerse.com) for information, links, newsletter signups, ARC opportunities, and more!



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# A GLOW FROM THE DEEP

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WREN K. MORRIS



## *Author's Note*

Adriana became a pirate to right the wrongs of her world. She was good at it, too. At least she was before her mutinous crew gave her the choice between a sword or the sea.

Abandoned in the middle of the ocean with her ship sailing on without her, Adriana must try to survive.

Though abandoned, she's not alone. A light beneath the waves beckons her into the arms of two ichthyocentaurs, sea monsters straight from myth.

When Aphros and Bythos offer her a second chance at life, Adriana must decide if she can accept. To do so would mean a chance at salvation, vengeance, and maybe even love...but is it worth becoming a monster herself?



Before you follow the light in dark waters, reader beware: In the deeps there are creatures with monstrous anatomy; foul language; body transformation through sex; fanged bites with venom; near drowning; slut-shaming (minor, not from our MCs); double penetration; throat bulging; and graphic sex between consenting, sentient adults.

Featured tropes include: ménage à trois; fated interactions; size difference; monstrous anatomy; Greek myth reimaged; revenge as a love language; and graphically-described sex between consenting adults.



## ADRIANA

“YOU CAN’T BE FUCKING SERIOUS.”

Calvin dug the sword into my back, pushing me further onto the plank that my crew had hastily lodged in the ship’s railing.

*My ship’s railing.*

I scowled at the lapping waves where the hull broke the endless blue, the very water I had felt such a kinship with now a threat. Just moments ago I had stood at the helm, my “loyal” first mate at my side, my purpose clear. That sense of pride and duty was all but shattered when I heard the scrape of metal as Calvin—that mutinous little shit—drew his blade and pressed it to my neck.

My tawny braid whipped in the wind as I continued to stare down at the sea below, the water a brilliant blue against the brown wood of the hull in the afternoon sun. The halyards

slapped against the mast as the wind shifted east, the sails pulling taut again as we sped towards Salters' Bay with our surreptitiously acquired cargo. It was our largest haul yet, heading to a destination I would no longer reach.

Calvin twisted his blade, its needling point pushing through the worn linen fabric of my shirt so that it dug into my skin. He scoffed at me, as if my unwillingness to drown myself was a mere inconvenience.

“Jump, Adriana. At least this way there's a chance you'll survive.” A bark of laughter ripped through him, mirrored in a few chuckles from some of the crew. “If you'd prefer, we could just take your head.”

I answered his mirth with a joyless chuckle of my own.

“Survive?!” The word snarled out from between grit teeth, my gut churning as tears burned in my eyes that I begged not to fall. I refused to show weakness to those who had betrayed me. I threw my arms wide, gesturing to the expanse of endless blue. “We're in the middle of the ocean! How the fuck am I supposed to *survive*?”

I looked at him over my shoulder, his smile gleaming with malice. He shrugged, completely at ease with the fate he had decided for me. “Maybe a ship will come along and you can barter passage. You were always so good at selling yourself.”

My knuckles turned white as I clenched my fists at my sides. His blade scraped across my body, bunching the fabric of my shirt as I turned to face my mutinous crew. They had all assembled on deck, chores and tasks forgotten, to watch their captain die.

*Ungrateful bastards, every last one of them.*

“Is that it, then?” I called out, my voice strong and true somehow, despite my hurt. “You’re all too good to follow a courtesan now?”

“Whore,” someone muttered.

So that *was* it, then.

I took stock of each and every face. Thomas’ eyes darted down, seemingly transfixed with the grain of the deck he swabbed daily. I had pulled every single one of these men out of back alleys and broken lives, including him. I had dragged him by the wrist after catching him picking my pocket, bringing him under my wing and into a more profitable—albeit no less illegitimate—life as a pirate.

He had looked up to me like a hero, his green eyes shining bright with thanks and admiration. Now he wouldn’t even repay me with a glance before he sent me to die.

There were others like him, looking everywhere but at me, slight trembles in their hands or nervously tucking their hair behind an ear as the wind whipped it into their downturned faces. Others stared at me, their glares cool and unfeeling. There was no weakness in their posture, no hesitation.

The third group, however, was the worst. It was them that made my tears well, that turned that sinking feeling in my gut into a churning mess of emotions. Cook’s face wasn’t passive or regretful. Instead, his mouth curved at the corner, the shine of the older man’s eyes dancing as he took in the scene.

Heartbreak lumped in my throat. I had once thought of him like an uncle, his fun-loving but paternal presence there for jokes or advice along our way.

*How long?* How long had they been planning this, smiling to my face while they pictured my death?

I had sacrificed and pushed every day to take care of my crew, to make *The Whore's Revenge* one of the most notorious vessels this side of the Crimson Isles. I had worked tirelessly for them, for us, and now they were stealing it from me.

“Get on with it!” Cook’s gruff timbre called over the whisper of the wind.

I clenched my teeth as I stared him down, turning my head slowly to take in every single face.

“Mark my words; the sea will not bear mutineers for long. You *will* pay for this.” My empty threat only made the flames of my rage lick more sharply at my spine. Revenge was so sweet I could taste it, but so far out of reach it left a bitter tang on my tongue.

“I’m sure we will,” Calvin sneered, rolling his eyes. He reached forward, grasping my pearl necklace—my most treasured possession—pulling it until the delicate chain snapped. A sound of grief, something between a sob and a wail, tore from my throat as I went to snatch the precious item back, but the dig of Calvin’s blade in my side made me still.

“Give our regards to Davy Jones.” He tucked my necklace into his pocket with a smarmy grin. It was the last thing I saw before his boot slammed into my stomach, sending me plummeting backward to the sea.

My body plunged into the inky water below, its frigid embrace stinging like a thousand tiny knives in my flesh as it knocked the breath from my lungs. The abruptness of it left me floating, adrift in the brine for a few desperate moments as my mind fought to overcome the shock.

Frenzied thoughts took over, my pounding heart pushing me to move while my limbs remained static.

I needed to move. I needed to swim. I couldn't give up, not yet.

Reason finally overrode panic, the ache of my empty lungs demanding action. I followed the buoyant pull of my body toward the surface, working my arms and legs to bring my head back above the rolling waves. Gulping in air, I watched as my ship continued on without me, the cheers of my former crew audible on the wind.

*Bastards.*

Swimming in a circle, my heart sank as not a single shore appeared. There was no goal to reach, no place to rest and recoup. Nothing but endless, rolling blue, and a ship I once loved sailing away with haste. Its proud silhouette mocked me as it became smaller and smaller with distance. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, centering myself as I tread water.

Pick a direction. That's all I had to do: pick a direction and try.

*East.* East was as good as any. I would swim east and hope for the best.

My movements fell into a rhythm, the salty kiss of the waves plastering my clothes against my skin as I glided through the water.

*Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, breathe. Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, breathe.*

The setting sun plunged beneath the horizon and left me in the blackness of the deepest night. I rolled to my back, gasping breaths filling my aching lungs as I took a moment to float and rest. The sky stretched above me, a blanket of cloudy darkness. It felt right for the guide of sailors everywhere to have abandoned me as well. Not even the stars would shine brightly on me now; I no longer had a ship for them to lead.

I let myself float for a while, exhaustion making my limbs heavy. Eyes trained to the sky, my mind wandered. Images of the brothel flashed through my mind. Hurried courtesans in various states of dress rushing between rooms. The smell of the Madam's black tea, both bitter and reassuring, as she eyed me across her desk. Gisele's freckles and the soft scratch of her hoarse laughter.

I could picture the golden light of the fire dancing over her features as we whispered by the hearth, feel the way her breath feathered across my cheek as I whispered promises and plans in her ear while my fingers brought her body to bliss. So often we awoke in each other's beds, having met after our clients had gathered their belts and shoes and left. It was honest work, being a whore, but we had dreamed of our lives after. Our life together.

The work had been acceptable, but the clientele... Some were pleasant, some even delightfully pleasurable, but there was many a wealthy man who viewed us as dispensable. There wasn't a month that passed without one of us leaving in the undertaker's cart after a patron had gone too far with a heavy hand.

Even with the risk, it was one of the few professions my sex was allowed, so we stayed. Saving coin. Loving each other. She had given me my pearl necklace as a promise that we would always be together as we planned our future.

We hadn't planned for the day Gisele was tossed onto the cart.

Her limp body, painted in the purples and blues of pain, was thrown out without care. Spirited away to hide the "mistake" of a gentleman for a few extra coins.

The distraction of the memories became too much, drowning me in their own way. I shook my head, wet hair slapping



against my back with the movement, my braid long unwound by the waves.

I had fought against circumstance back then. I would fight now.

I rolled in the water to begin my journey again in earnest, using each movement of my body to push myself through the water and the memories back to the recesses of my mind.

*Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, breathe. Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, breathe.*

Time passed slowly, meaningless in this endless expanse of the sea. My muscles screamed in protest at each movement, aching from the sea's abuse, but there would be no rest. Exhaustion ebbed at the corners of my mind like the darkness growing at the edge of my vision, waiting for me to slip beneath the waves, eyes swollen from the salt, body heavy with fatigue.

*Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, breathe. Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, bump.*

*Bump?*

My rhythm faltered, exhaustion all but forgotten as the sensation registered. A shiver of realization rippled up my spine.

*Something* had brushed against my skin.

The moon was but a sliver in the cloudy darkness overhead, its anemic light offering no help as I looked around me for a clue of what had joined me. A faint glow danced *under* the waves.

My breath caught. I paused, treading water as I squinted intently at the darkness where I had seen the light. I blinked, reaching up to wipe my eyes, even as the saltwater on my

hands just added to their burn, but the water remained the same undulating darkness.

*Had I imagined it?*

I began to move again, trepidation filling my belly with dread, thoughts of escape filling my mind.

*Escape what, though? Escape to where?*

There was only open water around me. My heartbeat stuttered as I watched the faint purple and blue shimmer again beneath the waves, swirling alongside me as I hastened my pace. The glow vanished again, leaving no trace of its presence except the prickles of awareness along my skin.

The mocking light pulsed again.

My mind fought to rationalize what my eyes demanded I acknowledge as I tried to keep my movement consistent. The last thing I wanted to do was thrash about like wounded prey. I knew, logically, that there were waters that had an eerie glow at night, shallows bathed in blues and greens that sparkled like stars.

Pirates spun tales of foreign shores shining in the night, beckoning ships to their doom. Yarns woven over tavern ale. Their foreboding whispers sank into my bones, filling my belly like iron that weighed me down in the water, even as my racing heart urged me towards a second wind.

The stories told of tricks of the water itself, but the unease in my bones wouldn't let me dismiss what I was seeing as a mere trick of the sea. *Something* was here, I had felt it brush against me. I pushed myself to keep swimming, each stroke becoming more determined as I kicked and fought against this new, cruel fate.

*Stroke, kick, breathe. Stroke, breathe. Stroke, kick, stroke, THUMP.*

A large form careened into my body, sending me spiraling as I was wrenched to the side and forced below the waves. My body was too tired and worn to listen to the urging of my mind as it screamed for me to fight, to swim, to flee.

My manic hands raked through the water as I urged my head towards the surface, breaking free just long enough to gulp in a desperate breath, but it was too late.

The creature that had come for me was done playing.

I wasted the precious air I had with a scream as thick arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me down. I was lurched away from the surface, water closing over my head as if to seal my fate. The beast dragged me into the blackness of the deep, all hope left above. I pushed against my captor's grasp, but it was no use.

The monster's limbs tightened to press me firmly against its body, holding fast despite my best efforts. Even as my arms and legs thrashed for freedom, it pushed effortlessly through the water, my struggle clearly not a hindrance.

I watched in horror as another form, a *second* creature, emerged beside us. Its large body blurred before me then darted out of sight so fast I would've thought it an illusion if not for my current captor.

Illusions seemed silly when you were already living a nightmare.

I was out of breath and outnumbered. A being of land too far from shore. My chest burned with the need for air so acutely it could wait no longer.

*This was it.*

*This was how I died.*

I widened my eyes against the salty burn of the sea to take in one last look, a final vignette even as the corners of my vision grew dark and hazy from the panic and lack of air. A calm settled over me. My limbs stilled. I rested like a doll against the beast, the whoosh of the water around me as we moved no longer a source of panic. It was almost comforting, a last embrace of the vast blue I had made my home.

One clear thought registered among the disjointed fragments. I had no options left for survival, but...I could at least choose how I died. Drowning seemed a better fate than being torn apart by whatever had grabbed me as their prize.

Before I could open my mouth to accept the kiss of the sea, my head was turned to the side. I flinched at the contact, eyes widening in fear to meet those of the other creature, the one not holding me.

It was too late. The oxygen deprivation had already ruined me, for what I saw before me could not exist.

Blurred as it was by my irritated eyes, there was still unmistakably the face of a *man*. Or at least, a face *like* a man's. Pale blue eyes seemed to glow back at me. His skin shone in the water, shades of deep purples and blues blinking in and out of focus as he moved. Parts of him seemed to light up at times before fading back to muddied darkness. Hair moved about his head like the tendrils of a jellyfish slinking through the water.

I stared at the hallucination, so taken with the figments of my dying mind that I didn't realize he was moving closer. Shock froze me in place when very real, webbed hands cupped my head and cold lips pressed to mine.



## APHROS

BYTHOS PRESSED HIS LIPS TO THE HUMAN'S, HIS GILLS FLARING as he pushed oxygen into her lungs. Her swollen, reddened eyes widened in shock and then quickly squinted back to a slit, likely burning from the water. Tiny hands shoved against his chest in futility, using even more of her waning strength.

I hated seeing mortals like this, adrift in our realm. Humans were not made for the sea, their bodies dependent on air, their skin too easily torn. Such a small and fragile race, but a stubborn one, clinging somehow to a world too harsh for their being. Ingenuity had given them ways to traverse the water that was so inhospitable to them, though misfortune could still leave them behind in the depths.

That was where we came in.

“Calm yourself, little mortal,” Bythos chided as he pulled away from her lips.

Hazel eyes followed the bubbles that plumed from his mouth in fascination before she renewed her bid for freedom. My brother carefully reached to still her movements as she battered at his chest, lashing in my arms in the process. She had to be nearing collapse; we had watched her swimming for hours.

“You’ll just tire yourself further,” I said as I held her body tighter, restricting her movements even more.

The mortal froze at the sound of my voice and a tremble started through her limbs, either from the chill of the water or fear taking over. I could feel her heart racing, the cantering beat thrumming with the speed of a scuttling crab.

“Shhh,” I whispered softly, replacing my frustration with what I hoped was a comforting tone. My gills feathered against her neck as I spoke, even as she flinched away. “We’re trying to help you.”

I didn’t want this one to exhaust themselves to the point of death while fighting to get away. Humans always seemed to disregard their own health, especially when faced with the open ocean and two ichthyocentaurs.

“We’re tritons, sea centaurs tasked by the Fates to help mortals like yourself, to save you from an unfortunate end caused by a betrayal,” Bythos added.

Mortals had spent hours carving images of us bearing Aphrodite in her shell, and yet dismissed us as myth. They made offerings to her temples, but viewed us as something else, mere rumors to thrill sailors on long nights at sea.

Though they dismissed us, we carried on with our purpose—lest the Fates find us lacking and sever our strings instead. The Moirai occasionally sought balance through transformation

when one's destiny was interrupted by another. For those sent to the deeps, we aided in that justice.

Bythos stared at the small being, brow knit with worry. The patterns of light that danced along his tail moved quicker than usual, the syncopated glow agitated to match his nerves. If we didn't start the change soon, this mortal would die. There was precious little time to save a drowning human, and we would only do so with their consent.

"Little mortal," he began, his words measured and soft as if approaching a scared hippocampus. He reached carefully toward her tiny frame, the deep purple of his webbed hands stark against the pale skin visible through her sodden white shirt. The mortal jerked backward into my chest and then froze, trapped between us.

Bythos stopped moving and raised his hands in placation, trying to ease her panic. "Please listen to me," he pleaded. "We don't have much time." Every heartbeat we spent explaining brought us closer to her death.

The human stared at him, still other than the tremble that wracked her limbs.

"If you let us help you, you may survive," Bythos began. Her head cocked at that, rich brown tresses gliding through the water. Fingernails dug into my arms as if clinging to the promise of life. "But you must understand you will be *remade*, your body reborn to the sea. You will no longer be what you once were, no longer able to walk the shore."

Bythos watched intently, taking in every twitch, every minute movement the human made. "Nod if you understand."

She dipped her head, the fraction of a movement not enough for her to lose sight of my brother, but enough to show

agreement.

“Is that something you want?” he pressed. “Are you willing to survive and to live on here, in the deep?”

A growl rumbled from my chest. They were taking too long, if the shade of her flesh—flush with the need to breathe—was any indication. She was using precious remnants of air to think. It was an important decision to weigh, but those thoughts would be meaningless if she drowned.

I glared at my brother and then looked pointedly down at the mortal, urging him to act. I didn’t want to startle her by spinning her body to do it myself—not when she had only just started to relax—but I would if he didn’t move.

Bythos huffed, annoyed with my nagging, but pushed forward again to lock his mouth onto hers. She reached up to push him back, the movement likely instinctual, but softened when she realized his purpose.

Her hands rested flat against the dark, purplish blue planes of his chest instead of pushing him away as she parted her lips. Her chest rose as the bright blues and pinks of his gills flared, breath passing between the two before he swam back again.

“We can only do this for so long.” His equine legs treaded water as he spoke, the only open sign of his agitation. “Your skin, your body is not designed to linger here. The pressure alone will kill you even if I continue to help you breathe. If you wish to survive, you *must* be changed.”

I loved my brother, but sometimes he was too patient and careful with them. “If you do not, then we will kill you quickly.”

She startled at my words, but it couldn’t be helped. She was using time she didn’t have to weigh a very limited choice.



“We have no desire to hurt you,” I said, softer this time. “It would be a mercy.”

“We won’t leave you to drown or to meet a predator. A quick death is the only other mercy that we can offer.” Bythos shot me a withering look, his voice gruff. He didn’t want me scaring her, but she *had* to understand, and quickly.

Something about his words ignited a spark in the little mortal. She pulled her body up, straightening her posture against my chest, jaw set. This time, her answer was a firm, sharp nod, unmistakable in intent.

“You wish to be changed?”

The human repeated the movement, going so far as to reach calloused fingers towards Bythos in invitation. I lifted her forward, ready to begin the process, but Bythos swam backwards, lips set in a firm line as he shook his head.

I scoffed, gills flaring. “She’s ready,” I growled.

He grunted in frustration, rolling his eyes at me. “We have to be absolutely sure she understands, Aphros. This cannot be rushed, even if we are cutting it close.”

I knew he was right, as he usually was, but I didn’t want to lose this one—my intrigue added to my impatience.

She had spirit. I *liked* spirit.

I turned the mortal in my arms, my webbed hands turning her jaw so that she faced me.

She was beautiful, even in her distress. Blue-tinged lips pursed below a slightly crooked nose. A determined set of brows furrowed at the change in position before relaxing again. She didn’t fight as my mouth descended to hers, soft lips opening

eagerly. I breathed into her, her chest rising and falling against mine.

A small hand reached up to cup my jaw, mirroring the way I held her face. Fingertips flitted across my cheek, my nose, taking in my features through touch. There would be time for exploration and discovery, but *later*, when time was on our side.

I pulled away, curling my lips in what I hoped was a reassuring smile before I turned her to face my brother.

Bythos was by far the better sibling for patient and thorough explanations, always ensuring that there was no room for regret. Too many had had their fates and their bodies altered by the will of others—some even hunted these very waters—after the gods and other beings made decisions without consent.

I took a deep breath and unclenched my jaw, urging my anxiety to ebb. The grasp of my fingers softened to gently rest on the mortal's hips. Bythos eyed me carefully, then gave me a nod, my renewed patience passing his apparent inspection.

He turned his violet gaze back toward her, his features soft once again. His frustration was with me, not her, after all. "To change you, you must receive our venom," he said.

The human twitched in my hold at that word. I fought to hide my chuckle and stroked my hand down her arm reassuringly.

Venom was understandably disconcerting when you faced mortality.

Bythos continued on, undeterred by her concern. "It's the only way we have to change you and make you a child of the sea. The best way for us to start is with a bite. It will hurt, but only temporarily. There's life to be had after, unlike the fate you

will face if you prefer not to receive it. Are you sure you want to be changed?”

My nose nuzzled into the curve of her neck. The mortal stilled, waiting as my lips pressed to her shoulder.

“It’ll be my fangs in your skin, little mortal.” I teased my fangs over her flesh, goosebumps following in my wake. “I promise the pain won’t last. It may even shift to be... pleasurable. Shall we begin?”

The weight of the moment settled in the water around us, the sea quiet with bated breath. The tiny human gave one last dip of her proud chin before tilting her head to the side, exposing her throat. With a quick strike, my fangs sank into the soft, supple expanse of her flesh.

In the blink of a moment Bythos lurched forward, locking his lips over hers, swallowing her cry of pain so that she wouldn’t inhale seawater. His fingers stroked the side of her face, waving her long hair out of the way to caress her cheek, whispering soft words of comfort all the while.

Venom drained from my fangs, the hollowed points sending a constant stream until they were spent, aching with the emptiness. I eased the pressure of my jaw, carefully sliding my teeth from her abused flesh. The little mortal tried to reach up and touch the mark, but Bythos held her hands in his, cupped carefully in his webbed fingers as I laved at the wound, urging more of my saliva across her flesh.

Venom filled our fangs, but we carried that same potent secretion in the points of our fins, our saliva, our tears, and even our cum. Just like the ocean in which we resided, the fluid carried the potential for death or life—only those found worthy by the Fates would survive it.

The wound began to close, the change already beginning as I watched faintly glowing veins spread from my bite, webbing across her skin like the tendrils of a jellyfish. Venom chased through the mortal's body, learning her, knowing her, tearing apart what she was to make her something new.

Bythos released her hands once the bite was safely scarred over. The mortal reached up tentatively, delicate finger tips tracing each mark from my teeth.

The strangest sensation filled my chest, swelling like a pufferfish as I watched her touch the puckered marks.

*My bite. My mark.*

I bit my lip as I stared at the scars, loving the imprint of my fangs on her flesh.

This...possessiveness was new, something I hadn't experienced with other changings, but it felt...*right*. My chest rumbled with approval.

The human moved easily with me when I turned her face for another breath, even leaning into my touch. Hazel eyes, sclera red and irritated from the water, opened and closed with heavy blinks. I watched enraptured as the irritation faded, the white turning black as the hazel tones of grass and earth faded into a brutal, radiant blue, the color captivating in its beauty and bite.

I smiled in approval, but the mortal did not startle as she took in my fangs. She returned the expression, flashing her teeth—still blunt at the tips—before looking back to my brother.

Bythos lifted one of her arms away from her body, holding it gently. He raised her wrist towards his mouth, eyes locked to hers, intent with question.

He might move gently with the mortal, but he couldn't fool me. My brother's body pulsed with tension, his eyes dancing

over my mark on her skin, jaw set with determination...and perhaps even jealousy.

He was strung taut with need, almost too focused. I smirked. It was refreshing to see him this close to losing control.

It seemed I wasn't the only one feeling possessive of this human.

“Bythos needs to bite you as well,” I explained, brushing my lips over my mark again, a small chuckle giving away my mirth at my brother's expense. “Now that my bite is closed, you'll need more, and I'm afraid my fangs are empty.”

The little mortal curved her lips into a smile and shook the wrist Bythos held, not to dislodge it, but in assurance. His teeth sank into her delicate skin, the glow of venom dancing along her veins as metamorphoses began again.



## ADRIANA

IT WAS UNLIKE ANY SENSATION I HAD EXPERIENCED BEFORE. A stinging chill radiated from the bite, but was quickly chased away by heat that pulsed to the very tips of my fingers and toes. The venom was thick like honey, rich and decadent as it spread through my body.

Every nerve responded as if it were the hands of a skilled lover. A tremor shot down my spine, gooseflesh spread across my skin, even my belly coiled tight with that same slow build of energetic tension that came with arousal as the toxin strummed my body to awareness. Hot, wet need grew at my center until each heartbeat pushing the venom through my veins echoed in the pulse of my cunt.

So *that's* what he had meant by pleasurable.

I was so overwhelmed by my body's response that my lips parted in shock, forgetting my precarious state. Water flooded

my mouth, the unforgiving deluge of salty sea stealing my breath. I sputtered and coughed, only managing to choke on more of the brine before Aphros grabbed my chin, swiftly turning my face to angle over my shoulder so that he could smash his lips to mine.

I sputtered but he held tight, his mouth forming a seal as I gulped and gasped, forcing air into me even as I choked around it.

Bythos released my wrist and swam forward, caging me in against his brother. His hands hovered around my shoulders where they shook as I fought to breathe in the precious air. His purple, glowing eyes darted across my face frantically.

“Not yet, little mortal. Your gills need time.” His deep voice rolled through the water on a wave of bubbles. He looked at his brother, eyes searching. “Should we take her back to the surface to recover?”

Aphros waited until I had control once more, my lips closed against his as he ran a soothing hand up my back, before turning to Bythos. “You know it’s best if we keep her here. If the wrong part of the change occurs too close to the surface, her body will acclimate to the shallows instead. It’s not as safe for her up there.”

As if prompted by their words, white-hot, searing lines etched into the skin on either side of my neck. My flesh was peeling apart, rending itself with invisible claws. I cried out and swallowed even more water, eyes wide with panic, but this time was different.

There was no choking, no coughing to be had as the smooth liquid rolled through my mouth and...*out*.

I raised my hands to either side of my neck. With each breath, little currents of water fanned over my fingers before I brushed along something new. Scaled ridges had replaced flesh. They flexed against my fingers in time with my exhales.

Water was flowing in my nose and mouth without pain or fear and out through my gills.

I had gills.

My lips tipped up in wonder, fingertips continuing to trace the new features with a ginger curiosity. I should be afraid; I should be petrified of what was happening to me, but...I wasn't. *It wasn't.*

*It wasn't* happening *to* me. I had *chosen* this.

Many things, terrible things had been done to me without my choice over the course of my life. As a lower class child, in my time at the brothel, and in my life of piracy. The betrayal of my crew was only the most recent, albeit one of the more painful examples.

This change was one I had chosen, much like the day I decided to set sail.

A peace settled over me at the comparison. I had felt so *right* in that decision, justified, excited. I had approached the docks knowing the woman I had been had died in the brothel with Gisele, and a new being would be born on the sea.

Once again, the water was changing me as I left behind what I was to become something new.

My gills were not the only difference the venom had made. The dark water around us no longer seemed empty, but teeming with life. The inky depths became a myriad of blues and greens filled with creatures and flora that darted and swayed, some familiar, some otherworldly. The icy chill of the



water seemed like a faint memory now. I swayed my arms and legs through it, the temperature comfortable and easy against my flesh.

I almost mourned the loss of sensation as the pulse of venom faded, leaving behind little aftershocks of pleasure like a strong orgasm.

I looked down at my body, the rest unchanged beyond the gills, I knew somehow that it was different. I felt stronger, invincible, even. And *more*.

Circumstances of betrayal could only birth something cold and biting, and yet there was a sensuality to it. It was a feeling I had worn like a hat for many a customer to earn extra coin, but now it felt...inherent. I was carnal. Decadent.

Aphros and Bythos waited patiently, hovering in the water as I took stock of the changes in my body. I looked quizzically into Bythos' glowing lavender gaze. "What am I?"

I startled at the sound of my voice. The fact that I could speak here at all was a wonder, but my voice itself had changed. It was smoother. Somehow more melodic than it had been above the water.

I stared in wonder at the little bubbles that continued to float away, before a chuckle from one of the monsters called my attention back to Bythos.

He raised his shoulder in a shrug, such a human gesture, almost comical from the creature. "Right now you're...in-between."

"But the change...it's stopped." Disappointment dripped from my voice, even as the little bubbles seemed to mock it with their buoyancy.

I knew it as well as I knew I was no longer truly human. I was in a sense of stasis, the rush of euphoria now gone, leaving me empty and...wanting. Even pain would be preferable to this feeling of incompleteness.

Aphros turned me slightly in his arms so that I could see both of them at once. "Completing the change takes more than just two bites." He gave me an almost apologetic look, eyes soft and indulgent. "You'll need to continue to receive venom until the change is complete."

A wiser being may wish to stay like this, or to even ask about the possibility, but I refused to even voice it. I craved the change. Whatever I was to become was under my skin, hovering like a daydream you woke from too soon.

I lifted my wrist in offering again, but Aphros shook his head, taking the extended arm gently in his hand and lowering it back down.

"I'm afraid our fangs are depleted, for now," Bythos answered, pulling my attention to his lavender gaze. "There are other ways, however. We can wait, now that you can breathe underwater, until our fangs are full again. But it's dangerous."

He eyed the open water around us, eyes narrowing and lips setting in a thin line as if we were surrounded by foes. "You aren't yet built to survive here."

"We have barbs in our fins that carry the same toxin." Aphros curled his tail as he spoke, lifting the serpentine length in front of my eyes before pointing to serrated edges along his fin that seemed to glint in the glow of his body.

"It's also in our saliva, tears...and other fluids." Bythos added.

I chuckled, feeling the flex of my gills with the movement.

"Do you mean your cum?"

I watched their faces, curious to see their reaction.

Embarrassment could mean I'd overstepped, or that they were not sexual creatures. The latter seemed unlikely; they didn't kiss me like a bashful ingénue or beings foreign to intimate touch. No, embarrassment would likely be from a faux pas on my part.

If they were too eager, they would be more like a lecherous client. The ones who had been rushed and desperate, or worse still, the ones who implied we craved their attention rather than the coin in their pockets. If it felt like they had baited this entire interaction, just for this, I might have to take my chances in the waters as I was.

But Bythos and Aphros reacted in the way I found most palatable.

With a bob of his chin, Bythos agreed, unperturbed. "Yes, that too."

Neither monster seemed overly eager, nor disinterested. For them, sex was an option, a simple fact. There was no pressure or coercion, nor avoidance. It wasn't on a pedestal, nor was it treated like something dirty to whisper about in hushed tones.

I liked that. I liked *them*.

I glance down their bodies, eyeing the smooth lines of scales tracing down over their abs. The more human elements of their forms would've been lauded by society as desirable, but their other features were just as intriguing. The deep "v" of their Adonis belts dipped between strong equine legs, flowing smoothly in patterned scales towards the sleek underbelly of their serpentine forms.

I cocked my head, brow furrowing as my eyes lingered on the smooth scales. But...*where*...

Aphros threw his head back with a deep, boisterous laugh, large bubbles that seem to reflect the sound filling the water above him. “Something missing?”

I felt my cheeks flush with heat as Bythos looked from Aphros to me and back again.

“She’s looking for our cocks, brother.” Aphros turned a cocksure grin to Bythos as he spoke, shoulders still moving with his mirth.

I smirked as Bythos’ lips curled in a smile of his own. “I assure you, little changeling, we have them, and they’re more than enough to tempt you.”

“Adriana,” I said. “My name is Adriana.”

A pleased sound rose from Aphros’ throat, pulling my attention back to him as his eyes took on a familiar heat. “We can take that route, Adriana, if you wish, but you do not have to do so. We can try to wait for our fangs to refill and protect you from the elements and predators that lurk here, or we can prick your skin with our fins if you’d rather. It’s up to you.”

They were giving me the choice again, ensuring that it was my own *and* that it was weighed carefully. I could sit here and wait for their bite, be repeatedly poked with serrated blade-like fins, or...have sex with monsters.

I eyed them again—their strong bodies, the flex of their arms as they watched me patiently. I thought about the press of their mouths to mine, how it felt to be held against their broad chests, and the delicious, pleasurable flood of their venom in my veins.

I snorted, water shooting up my nose and out of my gills. What a hard decision, indeed.

“I’ve always appreciated expediency.” I pulled Bythos closer and pressed my lips to his.



## ADRIANA

A PLEASED RUMBLE SOUNDED FROM BYTHOS' CHEST AS HE returned the kiss, his ridged tongue tangling with mine. The exchange of air no longer factored into our movements, as I no longer needed it. We were messy and indulgent, even playful as I sucked on his tongue, loving the texture of it in my mouth. He nipped at my bottom lip, fang piercing just enough for a bit of crimson to join the dark water. The abused flesh pulsed with a spark of pleasure from a remnant of venom, but it faded quickly, nothing like it had been before his fangs were spent.

Firm hands ran over my shoulder before Aphros cupped the back of my neck, turning me away from his brother to claim my lips for himself. Bythos made a sound of protest, but Aphros returned it with a humored hum against my lips.

“Share, brother. Or have you forgotten how?”

The thought of them having shared before thrilled me. Society praised master craftsmen for the hours committed to their art, but damned those who dared to find a creative outlet on their backs. I, for one, was happier to be in experienced hands.

Aphros released his hold on my chin, peppering my jaw and neck with teasing bites and kisses until he got to my nape, sending a shiver through me. It had always been a sensitive place. I moaned as his fingers laced into my hair, taking hold with the most delicious pressure to better angle my head. His lips trailed the delicate flesh along my spine, dipping down to the collar of my shirt and back up again.

Not to be outdone, Bythos took my mouth again in a demanding, toe-curling kiss before pulling back with a wolfish grin.

“It’s starting again.” His gaze darted between my eyes, face close enough for me to notice a light blue glow along his cheeks. “Your eyes are glowing now.”

*That’s* where the bluish light was coming from. My eyes were like theirs, luminescent and bright in the water.

“Do you like what you see, Adriana?” Aphros nipped at my ear as he purred the question.

I love the sound of my name on his lips.

“Yes,” I answered. My voice had deepened, growing husky with desire, but there was no reason to be coy. Now I could see every detail of their fins, delicate, glimmering colors of scales covering strong bodies of honed, sleek muscle. The more I saw of them the more beautiful they became.

A tiny growl of approval rumbled in my throat, the sound so animalistic it was cut off by surprise.

Bythos' gaze heated at my approval. He reached forward, purple fingers grasping the fastenings of my breeches. "I want to see you as well."

"Please."

With my agreement, the brothers snapped to action, perfectly in tune. Aphros used the sharp tips of his fins to slice through the fabric of my shirt and sent it floating away in the water as Bythos undid the buttons of my breeches, sliding them down my legs. Soon I was completely bare. Aphros moved from behind me to float beside his brother.

His eyes were full of lust and wonder as he cupped my cheek, trailing his fingers down my neck, between my breasts, until his hand rested on my waist. "Beautiful," he whispered, so quiet the bubbles from his words barely had form.

"Strong," Bythos added, his own webbed hand touching my various scars. His knuckle brushed over a nipple, making my breath hitch at the sudden touch. He chuckled at my reaction, cupping my breast and running his thumb over the tight, little bud again. "And sensitive."

Aphros took my mouth as Bythos continued to play with my nipples, pinching just enough to make it hurt in the most delicious way before laving them with his tongue, repeating the process until my body was shaking with need.

"More," I begged, panting against Aphros' lips. "I need more."

"And more you shall have," he answered. He swam away from me even as I made a sound of protest. His smile turned feral as his hand slid down his abdominals, down to where a human's cock would hang, then slid his fingers in.

There, in the center of his body was a slit, and from it emerged... *Oh my.*



Two long phalluses, sleek in appearance, protruded from the pouch. Aphros worked his fist up and down their lengths as if they were one large cock, splitting and joining above and below his hand as he moved. His movements were smooth, aided by a layer of a thick liquid that looked like cum, but did not wash away in the water. It was mesmerizing, the anatomy so different from what I had seen before and yet...intriguing.

“Are two cocks too many for you, Adriana?” His lips tipped in mirth.

I arched my brow in challenge. “Hardly.” My eyes darted to Bythos, a moment of hesitation taking over. “But four...”

Four I *could* do, with some creativity, but it would be a lot.

“Three,” Bythos corrected, hands going to his own slit.

Instead of two long, thin shafts like Aphros, Bythos had a single cock. It was long and thick, the same dark purple as his skin except for the head. Rounded edges surrounded a flat, tapered end. The shape reminded me of the way the Madam cut the stems of flowers for placing vases around the brothel, always at an angle, but it was the color that held me captive.

Bythos’ cock was *glowing*. Like the spots on his body, his cock pulsed in bright, beautiful color that lit up the water around it before dulling again, only to return. His slit gleamed with the same slick sheen that Aphros’ cocks had.

At the base of his length were thick tendrils circling his shaft and waving slightly in the water. Each one was also glowing at their tip. I eyed them curiously, swimming closer to get a better look.

Bythos, unbothered by inspection, reached for my hand, leading me to circle his cock and slide towards the base. When

my finger touched one of the tendrils, a prickle of pain shot through my skin. I jerked back, eyes wide with surprise.

Bythos made an amused sound. “You don’t have to be afraid. It’s like a jellyfish sting, only much milder. I’ve been told it can be quite pleasant in the moment.”

I rubbed the pad of my finger against my leg. The sensation had stung at first, but ebbed almost instantly to a pleasurable tingling.

It reminded me of a display that had happened at the brothel, once. A rather wealthy client had ordered a doctor for the ladies, wanting us to be in the best of humors and health for his visits. The doctor had a machine he called a “pelvic massager.” It had sent stimulating pulses through the body until those who tried it had been left utterly satisfied, limp limbed with a slack-jawed smile.

“I’m not afraid,” I assured him. I was eager. *Curious.*

Bythos took my hips in his hands, giving Aphros a knowing look. He pressed his body against mine, cock sliding against my cunt as Aphros slid behind me, reaching around to cup my breasts. Green fingers began to tease my nipples as Bythos slid his thick cock along my lower lips until I was gripping his sides with my thighs, pulling him closer.

“Are you ready, Adriana?” Aphros purred against my ear, but I was done with their teasing. I reached down to grasp Bythos’ cock, lining it up with my cunt and pulling myself down on his length.

Bythos and I groaned in sync as his cock stretched me wide, inch by inch burying itself inside of me until his hips snapped forward, bringing me flush against him. The tendrils at his base quivered against my clit, setting my body alight.

“Oh gods,” I cried, back arching into Aphros as Bythos began to thrust in and out of me in a punishing rhythm, those little tendrils sparking against my clit each time his hips snapped against mine.

My orgasm didn't even have time to build, it just ripped through my body like a tidal wave, paroxysms tingling through my limbs even as the next one began to coil in my belly.

Bythos slowed his thrusts to an aching patient cadence, prolonging the sensation and slowing the build of my next climax. Aphros slid back, pulling my shoulders back with him until I was prone between the brothers, looking at him from upside down. “Do you want to taste me, Adriana?”

I eyed his cocks where they stood against his stomach, smiling before opening my mouth in invitation.

He fisted himself, pulling his cocks together so that both heads slid between my lips.

I was no stranger to sucking cock, and had even sucked two at once before, but underwater, with gills, was an entirely new experience. Aphros pressed forward in a slow but steady movement until my lips were stretched wide with him. The viscous lubrication covering his cocks was slick and salty, like a freshly shucked oyster on your tongue. I hollowed my cheeks, pulling him deeper into my throat with each forward press of his hips.

Aphros was being too careful for me, holding back even as I tried to pull him further into my throat. He fought so hard to maintain control, only moving a fraction deeper with each forward movement, but I had had enough. My hands wrapped around his equine legs on either side of my head, pulling him to me as I swallowed around his cocks.

“Gods, Adriana,” he barked out, gritting his teeth as my nose pressed against his slit.

Bythos made a strangled sound. “Look, Aphros. I can see you in her *throat*.”

I hummed in approval, knowing Aphros would feel the vibration in his cocks, eager to watch him fall apart.

“Shit,” Aphros grunted. “I’m not going to last.”

Bythos continued to fuck me in a painstakingly controlled rhythm even as Aphros’ hips stuttered as he tried to hold back. The pleasure that had been building slowly at the base of my spine had reached a precipice and stalled, my climax hovering just out of reach.

“Fuck!” Aphros cried out as warm jets of cum shot down my throat, cocks pulsing in my mouth.

The venom in his cum was just what I needed, setting off my second orgasm as my entire body warmed with it. Bythos stilled as I was lost to sensation, holding me steady as I breathed through the paroxysms that wracked my body.

My skin felt almost too sensitive. A prickling sensation flooded down my arms and over my flesh. Aphros lifted me in his arms so that my back lay flat against his chest, still rapidly rising and falling from his own exertion. “Look at you,” he said, eyes tracing along my body.

I lifted an arm where I could see. Thick, dark blue veins marbled my body now, my flesh a mottled blend of a rich sapphire and its human tone. Rows of scales coated the back of my forearm, deep blue with a silver sheen that glinted pale green and icy blue as I moved.

Pressure along my gums had me reaching to touch my mouth. I winced as a sharp prick had me pulling my finger away to

find the tip welling with blood. I looked at Bythos with worry, but he just gave me a soft grin as Aphros pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

“You have fangs now,” Bythos said, watching as Aphros reached to lift my lip and peek at my teeth.

“So sharp,” Aphros murmured. “Your new form will match your ferocious spirit.” I tucked my head into the crook of his shoulder, smiling around my new, sharpened grin.

I *liked* that I had fangs. I *liked* that I had scales. I had liked my body before, but this new one was already feeling right, sharpened and strengthened like my near-death experience had made my soul.

The venom had dulled again, just a whisper in my body now, though my cunt continued to ache with need.

Bythos watched me carefully. “How do you feel?”

“I feel...wonderful,” I answered, “but...I still feel incomplete.”

He nodded, hands squeezing my hips in gentle reassurance.

“You’re close, but not quite done.”

Aphros nuzzled against the top of my head, the little pincers at his temples tangling briefly in my hair.

“Do you think you could take both of us this time?” he asked, his hand sliding down to the curve of my ass, sliding between my cheeks to press a fingertip against my other hole.

“With a little preparation.”



## BYTHOS

MY HEART JUMPED IN MY CHEST AT ADRIANA'S WORDS.

She was so confident, so at ease, even in a situation and place that had to be beyond what she had ever imagined. Of the humans we had helped previously, around half had chosen to die, unwilling to part with their familiar forms. The majority of those who did change opted to wait between bites or to use our fins, taking the more painful and drawn out route to transformation.

THERE WERE ONLY A FEW WHO HAD CHOSEN TO TWINE THEIR bodies with ours, and none with the boldness and ease of Adriana.

MY GAZE FIXATED ON HER MOVEMENT AS SHE REACHED BACK to grab Aphros' cocks, gliding her hand over them to gather his fluids before using them to slick his fingers. His hand disappeared behind her, using that same slickness to prepare her back hole to take his cocks.

HISSING THROUGH HER NEW FANGS, HER CORE CLENCHING around my own cock as he entered her. I used the arch of her back to pull her close, stealing kisses I had too long been denied as she had swallowed Aphros down.

SHE PRESSED HER CLOSED LIPS TO MINE, EVEN AS MY TONGUE teased against their seam, requesting entrance.

"I DON'T WANT TO CUT YOU WITH MY FANGS," SHE WHISPERED against my lips, even as her breath caught again from whatever Aphros was doing.

"YOU'VE FELT THE RIDGES ON OUR TONGUES," I ANSWERED, kissing her again. This time, she parted her lips, letting my tongue into her mouth. I licked along her fangs, feeling the sharp points press against my tongue but not breaking the skin. "You won't hurt me," I said, before kissing her deeply.

"Ready?" Aphros asked.

We broke our kiss, both panting as our gills flared.

"I'm ready," she answered, voice confident and sure.

Aphros locked gazes with me as his hand took her hip above mine to hold her steady. I felt as her body tightened when he

pressed inward, the pressure of his cock inside of her ass bringing her to squeeze mine in a vice as he pushed deeper. One shaft slid between her cheeks at the other pressed deep into her hole.

I darted kisses along her features—her nose, her cheeks—as I whispered.

“Look at you, taking both of us.” Her eyes seemed to shine brighter with the praise. “I never want to leave this cunt, never want to stop fucking you when you grip me so perfectly.”

I groaned as her muscles pulled impossibly tighter, fluttering around my cock. Aphros echoed the sound, his hips finally flush with hers.

“You took it so well, Adriana,” he said, pressing a kiss to her temple.

Adriana slid one arm up behind her to cup around his neck, the other reaching forward to my shoulder before she started to rock back and forth on our cocks.

“Are you two going to fuck me, or am I going to do this myself?” she asked, voice strained with need.

We laughed and then began to move, taking turns pulsing into her as she rocked between us. The water filled with a tangle of bubbles as our moans and grunts filled the space around us.

Adriana’s nails dug deeper into my shoulder until I felt them break skin, knowing then that her blunt, human fingernails had been replaced by claws.

Our movements became hurried and messy, panting breaths taking over until Aphros thrust forward and bit down on her left shoulder. Adriana cried out, her cunt fluttering around me as his venom filled her back hole and the bite wound.



Her release triggered my own. I pushed deep one last time, leaning forward to sink my teeth into her other shoulder. The bit of venom that had refilled in my fangs flowed easily into the bite as my cum filled her channel in spurts.

Adriana cried out, the sound a different pitch from her cries of pleasure. *It was time.*

I pulled out of her, despite my reluctance to leave her body, watching as Aphros did the same.

Her head was thrown back, mouth open as another cry ripped free. My fists clenched at my sides, hating having to see her go through this pain. Rebirth was not an easy process, and while much of it had been gradual, there was always this larger push where her bones and body would reshape themselves for the sea.

Her legs locked together and scales began to spread between them like a spider's web, knitting together until she no longer had legs, but a tail. Fins erupted from the base, translucent and beautiful as they shone with bioluminescence, but sleek and pointed for deadly speed.

Frilled webbing spread from her forearms and ears to form fins there as well, the ones at her ears in delicate points that flexed in the water, brushing back the now silver tresses of her hair.

The mottled look of her skin faded, the blue overcoming the rosier shades she had while human. Her face and torso were the color of a blank sky before a storm, a soothing gray-blue that tapered to deep navy around her navel where scales became plentiful and covered her tail. She had scales along her arms and in some places across her chest, but most of her upper half was smooth skin.

Aphros and I each heaved sighs of relief as we watched her body begin to relax, softening as the transformation ebbed.

She was the most exquisite creature I had ever seen. Aphros' wide grin took over his face, eyes dancing with joy as I returned it with my own smile, swimming to take her hand when Adriana stilled—eyes going wide with fear.

Her collarbone began to ripple under her flesh.

“What’s happening?” Her voice strained with pain, frantic eyes darted from mine to Aphros. Adriana screamed as the bone gave a sickening crack. I watched in horror as the pieces shifted under their skin.

“No!” Aphros jumped toward her, but I shot my tail forward, holding him back.

“No, brother,” I shouted as he fought against my hold.

“Something is wrong.” His voice was broken with anguish as he stared at her helplessly.

“We don’t know that.” I tried to soothe him, but my own panic was almost too much to bear. It was rare, but on one or two occasions a transformation had gone wrong, the receiver unable to survive the demand of the change. “You know we have to let the change finish.”

I stared on in horror as Adriana twisted with pain, unable to do anything to stop it. Clearing my throat, I tried to imbue my voice with confidence I didn’t quite feel. “Trust her, trust the Fates. They wouldn’t have chosen her if she wasn’t strong enough for this.”

We stared in concerned silence as a stillness overtook her body again, limbs taut, head thrown back and frozen, all except for the bones at her sternum. A new ridge rose there under the flesh. It was more prominent than before, giving her an almost

skeletal appearance as it made a peaked “v” that darted from her shoulders to just between above her breasts.

A circle of flesh began to rise from the point, taking on a pearlescent sheen that began to glow.

Pure, white light shone from the raised spot, a beacon in the darkness of the deeps. I couldn't look away, even as I squinted against the brightness. The light called to me, beckoning the very deepest part of my soul to go to her.

To follow.

Aphros' shoulder bumped against mine as we both made our way forward. He was just as entranced as I was, pulled to the light as if under a spell. Clawed, webbed hands reached forward to cup our faces.

Adriana lifted my chin, meeting Aphros' eyes and then mine with piercing, ice blue eyes.

“I'm a triton.”



## ADRIANA

MY VOICE WAS LAYERED, MULTIPLIED IN A HARMONIOUS melody that drifted in the water. Aphros' and Bythos' faces took on a slack, dream-like quality as I spoke, a spell which they seemed to shake off quickly.

*I was a triton.* I knew it in the very fabric of my being.

I swam back from them, unable to contain my fanged grin as I twirled in the water, showing off my new form.

I was lithe, sinuous muscle and sleek curves. My tail flicked powerfully in the water, sending me above them as their heads cocked back to watch me as I flipped and swam back down, laughter like church bells rising from my chest.

My fins cut through the currents like a hot knife through butter. The water felt open and free and comfortable, like home.

I dipped my chin to look at the little nodule on my chest that had caused me such pain. It hung exactly where my pearl necklace from Gisele would have lain, shining brightly where the opalescent orb used to be.

“You’re exquisite,” Aphros praised, reaching out to take my hand.

“You’re temptation made death incarnate.” Bythos’ voice held no judgment, only admiration as he said it. “I believe you have some of the sirens’ qualities, like your voice. And this.”

He reached forward to almost touch the glowing circle on my chest, stopping just shy in reverence. “I’ve seen creatures with lights like these in the deeps. It’s a lure, it even called to my brother and me, pulling us close enough for you to do with us what you wished.”

“I feel it,” I admitted. “The power, the pull. But you are not my prey.”

Bythos chuckled. “No, I would hope not.”

“We’re your lovers,” Aphros purred, kissing the back of my webbed hand with a smile.

“Do you not have to leave? To see to another mortal in distress?” My heart wrenched as I looked between the two of them. I knew inherently somehow that I *could* leave them, if I wanted. I was capable and strong, the manifestation of desire that would lead to certain death for those I wished to end.

I could carry on without them...but I did not wish to do so. I craved their company, their touch in this new life and in this new body.

“Eventually we will be called to help another, but that does not mean we must leave you. You can always come with us when we do.” Aphros looked to Bythos, the older brother nodding at

him to continue. “This has... *You* have been different from the others, Adriana. I do not wish to let you go.”

“I have my own task to fulfill as well, if you wish to join me,” I answered, gently touching the pearlescent light at my chest. “I believe this is a gift. A reminder, of sorts.”

I looked down at where the light darted between my fingers. “My ship, *The Whore’s Revenge*, was meant to be a new life for both myself and my crew. The name was a promise of retribution for Gisele, a lover I lost, and an opportunity to rebuild who I was from the ashes of her death.”

Aphros squeezed my hand in reassurance as Bythos placed a comforting palm on my shoulder.

“I realize now that the ship’s name wasn’t just a promise, but also a warning to the crew.” My thoughtful expression turned feral as I bared my teeth in a menacing smile, looking up to see their responses. They helped mortals find a new destiny. I sought to end them. I couldn’t help but wonder if this might be too far from their purpose, but I never should have doubted my monsters.

“We have a ship to hunt.” Aphros’ expression turned dark with deadly promise.

Bythos growled, turning to face the direction I knew my crew would still be sailing. “Lead the way, my Vicious Pearl.”



Thank you for reading *A Glow from the Deep*. If you want more Greek-mythology inspired romance with vengeful

women and the men who love them check out [Surrendering to Scylla](#).

# About the Author

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Wren K. Morris grew up surrounded by fields and cows but now resides in Atlanta, GA, enjoying city life with her husband, herd of cats, and two dogs. An avid reader and writer from a young age, Wren has been creating stories since she was old enough to form words, and now does so professionally.

Wren's books focus on a celebration of independent, powerful women and the beauty of our flaws. Her stories range from emotionally charged plot lines that make you feel to pun-laden, light hearted laughs.

If you like emotional, hard-won happily ever afters with Greek mythology and romance, check out her debut novel, Surrendering to Scylla:

<https://books2read.com/scylla>

For more news on releases, you can sign up for Wren's newsletter. Enter this link into your favorite web browser:

(<https://wrenkmorris.carrd.co/#newsletter>).

You can find all of Wren's social media links and more information on her website.

<http://wrenkmorris.com/>





## Also by Wren K. Morris

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*Monstrous Waters*

[Surrendering to Scylla](#)

*From Cocktails to Sleigh Bells*

[From Cocktails to Sleigh Bells](#)

[From Snowball Fights to Hot Summer Nights](#)

# DADDY OF THE SEA

JILLIAN GRAVES



*Author's Note*

Content Warning: spanking, crying, discussion of emotional abuse in a past relationship, explicit sex, sex with monster, graphic descriptions of bodily fluids

Tropes: Daddy dom, brat sub, spanking as therapy, tentacles, praise, “good girl”



## CARINA

“YOU KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO,” VIOLET CHIDES.

“Not happening,” I hiss into the phone, jerking up from the couch, needing to move.

I head for the sliding glass doors at the back of the sixties bungalow. The home has been in my family since it was built, and it’s the only way I could afford living in Malibu making my artisanal candles and oil blends.

“This is what you signed up for when you started selling to the Strange. You play by our rules. You had to know this would happen.”

I let out a dismissive snort as I press my nose to the glass door. Cupping a hand to the side of my face, I peer out over the cliff’s edge several yards from my back door. I search the calm open ocean and the horizon beyond.

The hot orange sun is just starting to dip below the water line. There is nothing else to catch my attention.

*Not yet.*

“Seriously, Carina, do you hear me? You’re only going to hurt yourself.”

“Yeah, I thought it through, and I’m okay with that,” I answer swiftly, before the reality of what I’m committing to can sink in too deeply.

Violet exhales loudly in my ear.

“Apologize or receive punishment—that’s all he said, right?” she asks. “You didn’t even ask him what the punishment was, did you?”

“I was a little bit distracted by the tentacles. I didn’t really think to ask him to clarify,” I admit. “*I’m* human, remember? I was in shock.”

Hell, I’ve been in shock for the past few weeks, and it had nothing to do with LA’s supernatural community. Finding out my boyfriend of eight years has been gaslighting me since he moved in will do that to a girl. Discovering he’d been the one tossing out my prized collection of daddy dom erotica one by one over the cliff, making me feel like I was going crazy when I confronted him about it, meant I was owed payback.

When he finally admitted what he’d done, he claimed he was helping me. He sent my books to their watery grave because, he said, they were an “unrealistic fantasy, too childish for a woman in her thirties,” He’d started with *The Daddy List*, my favorite book in the collection, because “you’ve already read it so many times, you should be done with it.”

*Asshole.*

So when I kicked him out of my house a month ago and he never returned for his motorcycle—the one he'd claimed was his pride and joy and far too delicate to be parked outside so I had to park my car on the street—I'd shoved that hunk of junk right into the ocean.

It seemed fair. Balanced, even. The idea that he would ever ride it, let alone clean up the oil stains, was an “unrealistic fantasy” anyways.

*I was just being helpful.*

It wasn't until the monster, a half-man, half-octopus creature, climbed up the cliff face to my backyard and tossed my asshole ex's motorcycle at my feet that I thought to worry about the Strange consequences of my actions.

“I'm a brand-new baby witch, Carina. You think I've seen the thousand-year-old Celaelai before?” I can practically hear Violet's eyes rolling over the phone. “Only the coven's high priestess has met Kalder, and even then she said it was a brief —”

“Kalder?” I let the name roll around on my tongue, swallowing the fear that accompanies the memory of seeing him for the first time last night.

“Yeah, Kalder, with a K. He's an ocean-dwelling Strange, and they tend to live alone, staying off land. I had to look up an illustration to even get a visual. You know, ummm...” Violet murmurs to herself as I hear what sounds like the frantic flipping of ancient pages. “Here it is. They put a great white shark next to the illustration of him for scale... *Damn*, he's big.”

My stomach does a little flip, twisting and tightening. I don't want to think about... *What's his name?* Kalder, or my ex and

his motorcycle. It's the break-up that never ends and the one I should've started years ago.

*I just want it all over with.*

But Kalder *had* been big, filling my eyesight so completely it had been impossible to take him in fully in the darkness. In my stunned state, I'm not sure that what I remember is even correct.

He had gray hair. It was long and slicked back with water. His skin was blue, or maybe that was just the reflection of the water. My eyes had been glued to the many thick, wet tentacles undulating over the crumpled mass of steel and rubber. I can still hear the sharp, rhythmic suck, then pop of the suction cups as they moved across the metal.

“Holy Goddess, he must've been intimidating.”

He'd tossed the motorcycle up on the cliff like it was nothing. And he'd held the accompanying empty can of oil gingerly aloft in one tentacle. They looked like toys in his grasp, so insignificant that one squeeze and he would crush it all into dust.

*Maybe I should apologize. I could do it. I've apologized so many times before.*

I silently try to form the words in my mouth, but before I can even get through the first syllable, acid stings at the back of my throat.

“The book says that he protects marine life along the coast.” Violet sighs, then, seemingly murmuring to herself, adds, “I just don't know how you could've forgotten about the Celaelai and what would happen if you messed with their home.”

Chewing at my bottom lip, I swallow down the rising bile and truth.



I hadn't forgotten. I just hadn't cared.

*What could a random monster do to me that would be worse than what I've put myself through with my ex?*

"He must've been so pissed about the motorcycle," she continues.

"He—" I stop abruptly, pale ginger brows furrowed and lips pursed with the sudden realization. "He wasn't."

*Apologize or take your punishment, little human.* He'd said it firmly, but there had been a smile on his face.

"He... he didn't seem angry at all."

That I remember clearly, the very edges of his curled almost-human lips limned in moonlight. It was a smirk, a little fucking smirk. He was waiting for my apology, eager to see me supplicate.

I frown, a hand tightening into a fist at my side, as I pace in front of the glass doors. Anger easily, comfortably smothers the fear.

*Well, fuck that.*

I won't be apologizing.

A bright white light catches my gaze. I shake my head, trying to free myself from it, only to be hit again by the glare.

Pressing my face to the glass, I search for the source of it. The sun has dropped lower in the sky, the light having transformed from burnt orange to hot pink and purple. But I can't find it.

I could escape my fate, I realize. I could run. But as soon as the thought enters my mind, I quickly shake it away.

*I just got rid of one asshole I let into my home. I'm not about to make another mistake and leave it for someone else.*

The white light hits me in the eye again, but this time I turn fast enough to see its source.

A tentacle, midnight blue and tapered at the tip, growing ever thicker the more it is exposed, peeks up over the cliff's edge. Its underside is marked with rows of suction cups a shade or two lighter. And the bright light is the waning sunlight reflecting off the salt water-slicked skin.

The tentacle slaps down on the ground, and I jump. Its dexterous tip digs into a crack in the stone and finds purchase, then four more tentacles raise themselves up over the cliff's ledge.

He's here.

*Fuck.*



## CARINA

“I GOTTA GO,” I INTERRUPT VIOLET’S EXTENSIVE LISTING OF intimidating Kalder facts and end the call.

I drop the phone on the nearby coffee table.

“Let’s get it over with,” I murmur to myself even as my pulse quickens and my teeth chew at the edge of full bare lips. I make myself slide open the back door and step out onto the small raised patio. “Rip it off like a Band-Aid. You’ve dealt with worse.”

It’s midsummer, and the air is still warm. There is a light breeze coming off the waves, blowing the full hem of my short skirt around my thighs. I’m barefoot, and the painted wood is cool under my feet.

As I turn to close the door, I debate going back in for shoes, only to find the light around me growing dimmer by the

second. Glass that had only moments ago reflected the sunset is now dark in shadow.

*Suck, pop... suck, pop... suck, pop...*

“Little human,” booms a voice from behind me.

My stomach tightens on itself, and my heartbeat fills my ears, reducing the crashing of waves to an insignificant clap.

Eyes glued to the wooden planks at my feet, I turn back toward the cliff, determined to show no fear. I don't make it more than a few steps off the porch before I'm forced to look up.

“Fuck.” I swallow hard.

His bottom half is as I remember, eight sleek dark blue arms spilling out from his waist, growing thinner to their very tips. In the dusk light, they are iridescent, catching the purple, pink, and yellow in the sky as they undulate.

From the waist up, he looks human, mostly. His face is wide and his nose broad. However, his skin is a pale blue, and his eyes seem to shift between the most vibrant of cobalt to a rich kelp green. His barrel chest and human arms are both dusted with deep blue hair, and small, aerodynamic fins protrude off his forearms and the tips of his ears.

It's clear he is strong, and his muscle is covered in a protective layer of fat. But I was wrong about his long gray hair. It's not the slate gray I thought it was but silver and sparkling. Even now it catches the waning light like sunlight reflecting off the crests of waves, almost too bright to look at directly.

All I can hear is the rush of blood in my ears.

*Like a Band-Aid. Just rip it off.*

“You said sunset.” I aim for a tone of casual nonchalance, but I land on irritation. “The sun has almost set. Did you forget?”

The monster is twice my height, which is especially intimidating because I’m only an inch or two below six feet. And without the darkness of night, I see exactly how far his tentacles reach, from one end of the porch to the other. I’ve never felt so small, not next to humans or Strange, not even with the gargoyles who have to duck to fit through doorways.

It’s an unusual feeling. I’m unsteady and uncomfortable, but in a way that makes my knees weak and requires effort not to avert my eyes. I hate that I don’t hate it.

“I don’t forget, and I’m never late,” Kalder replies, his voice deep and so smooth it makes my mouth dry, “especially when someone threatens those I watch over.”

I wait for him to say more, to start up whatever this punishment is, but he just looks at me. His shifting blue-green eyes seem to inspect me, moving slowly, so slowly, from the top of my ginger head to my bare feet. Unconsciously, I roll my shoulders back, hands clasped behind my back to hide my fidgeting hands. My breasts are pressed forward, tight against the bodice of my dress. As a cool breeze blows my long hair over my shoulders, I wonder if my nipples are visible through the fabric.

*What am I doing?*

I wait longer, and he says nothing, appearing as if he has all the time in the world, like he could drag this out for hours, if not days. And I can barely keep my hands still and my toes from tapping.

“I’m not apologizing, Kalder,” I blurt out.

His thick silver brows lift ever so slightly in a fleeting expression of surprise.

“Okay.” He nods, giving me nothing. “I see you know my name. What do I call you?”

The firm set of his mouth curves up on one side.

*Is that a smirk?*

“I did nothing wrong,” I snap.

“What is your name?” His lips flatten to a line, and his eyes shift darker as they narrow on me.

My stomach tightens, and I fist the hem of my skirt, twisting the fabric tight to my body.

“I’m not apologizing,” I repeat, unable to stay still or quiet.

Kalder asks again, “What is your—”

“I... I... did nothing wr—”

“Do not interrupt me, princess.” He doesn’t move toward me. He doesn’t need to. His voice is even in tone and volume, and yet my entire body freezes and my mouth clamps shut.

*Do not interrupt me, princess.*

I’ve heard it before; my body knows the words. The sternness, the sheer invading presence of him, sends me off balance. It forces me to obey. Worse, it makes me want to. For a millisecond, an apology threatens to tumble out.

“You did do something wrong, and you know it. The coven made you well aware of what happens if you mess with my home, and you did it anyway and put many creatures at risk. I gave you options last night, and you’ve made your choice.” His gaze is locked onto mine, and I cannot move. “Unless you want to extend your punishment, tell me your name.”

“Carina.” It comes out as a squeak.

He gives me a gruff nod before continuing toward me, his front tentacles outstretched. “Bend over, Carina,” he commands.



CARINA

“MAKE ME,” I SPIT BACK. MY SELF-PRESERVATION IS LAGGING a millisecond behind my words, so the moment my mouth shuts, I’m flooded with nervous adrenaline.

His smirk deepens to a full grin, and his eyes shift from aqua to a distracting deep emerald green, forcing me to swallow hard and drop my gaze. He is annoyingly, frustratingly handsome, and he knows it.

*Asshole.*

He shakes his head, mumbling something under his breath.

“What?” I demand.

“Brat,” he says so deep and forcefully it seems to come from the very waves crashing against the rocks. “You want to be a brat, then I’ll treat you like a brat.”

“What the hell does that mea—”



I swallow my words as two of his octopus arms reach for me, coiling tightly around my waist. I yelp as they tighten their grip, not too hard but enough that I'm held solidly in place and made aware of just how thin my cotton dress is. His suckers move in constant motion, pulling lightly through the fabric to my sensitive skin.

Immediately I push back, trying to free myself. I expect his tentacles to give way to my blows. I'm strong, but the monster is stronger, and as I shove against his slick appendages, I only seem to be tiring myself out. Even as I'm lifted inches off the ground, I don't stop.

"You want this to end, you know what you have to do," he taunts.

I know my punishment is inevitable—I agreed to it—and hell, I didn't want to hurt any of the wildlife along the coast, but I'm sick of apologizing. I refuse to hear the words come out of my mouth again, especially with anything that has to do with my ex.

I'd been there for my ex's constant job changes and his friends that I "shouldn't worry about," all the while giving up my space until all I was left with was a corner of my own house. I laid out the welcome mat for his every red flag. Hell, I happily lay down and became the welcome mat. So don't I deserve to be the fuckup every now and again? Don't I get a "get out of jail free" card right about now?

"Not happening," I hiss, unable to stop squirming as the suckers work their way over my waist and hips.

They pull at my skin, drawing my blood to the surface, only to release their suction and send a tingling sensation across my flesh, awareness flooding every inch the suckers touch. I

imagine the hundred little purple rings that must now dot my pale freckled skin.

Kalder smiles—another fucking smirk—and I’m yanked toward him so fast the air is nearly knocked out of me.

“You’ve made your decision. Now stop being a brat and take your punishment.”

Before I can catch my breath to tell him off, he releases me over his lap. With a yelp, I drop several feet until another pair of his sleek tentacles grip me firmly, and I’m forced to bend over his undulating lap. My head is down, and my ass is up, my arms and legs splayed apart, trying to find my balance. My short skirt flies up in the struggle, exposing the lace high-cut panties I’m wearing beneath. Humiliation, bright pink and heated, stains my cheeks.

I reach back to pull my skirt down, only to have the monster’s webbed hand grasp my wrist. His palm is so very warm.

“Don’t you dare, princess,” he commands.

Another phrase my body knows. And it has its own kind of magic. Not Strange magic that I learned about from Violet or her coven, but the kind that seems to uniquely speak only to the cells in my body. It forces me to drop my hand to my side.

I hate it, but I don’t want the disapproval that comes with disobeying the spell.

“Brats don’t get the protection of clothing,” Kalder says sternly, deep grooves forming between his silver brows.

He pushes my skirt up further to my waist. I squeeze my thighs together, trying desperately to wrestle back one tiny bit of control, only to have his tentacles circle my ankles and pull them apart. I agreed to this, but it’s all too much, and I squirm harder, twisting and kicking against his grip. I grab onto a

tentacle in front of me for leverage. It's stiffer in my grasp than I expect, and I pull myself toward it. For a brief joyous moment, I think I might get free, but then one of Kalder's tentacles shoots out to grab my legs and pull me back. I clamp my knees together, trapping the thick wriggling appendage between the top of my thighs. It jerks against me, and a moan escapes.

*Fuck.*

"Settle down, princess."

I can feel the way my slick skin slides against his tentacle and the swollen ache of my clit when I brush against him. I'm wet.

*Fuck.*

And the sucking, popping suction cups writhing against the sensitive flesh of my inner thighs are making me wetter. I try twisting out of it, but I only manage to shift the tentacle between my legs higher, until its suckers are firmly against the damp gusset of my panties.

I try and fail to smother a desperate groan.

"*Ahhh.*" Kalder chuckles softly, running his hot webbed hand over my back, my traitorous muscles easing under his touch.

"So that's what you need."

I turn back, trying to look up at him, when he flicks the tip of the tentacle against my clit. My hips jerk, and my grip tightens on the stiff captured appendage in my hands.

He laughs and lays the length of his tentacle against my pussy, pressing into the soaked panties and nestling the length of suction cups between my folds. Then he begins to suck.

"Oh, fuck." I groan long and breathy as a suction cup sucks on my clit, pulling it into its tiny muscled ring, then releasing it,

over and over again.

He creates this rhythmic wave, starting at my clit, moving down over my entrance, then finally ending at my asshole. The suckers work themselves one by one so that just when I think I'll have relief, he moves on to the next aching bit of me. I try to remember I'm angry, but my mind only has room for this desperate, needy feeling.

“That’s it, that’s what you needed to settle you down, isn’t it?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. My face heats until my skin is unbearably warm, and I have to tuck my chin to my chest to keep him from seeing.

But he keeps going, his suckers working my swollen flesh, until embarrassment be damned. My hips roll, and I buck against him. He laughs harder, all his tentacles shaking with him, vibrating down to their very tips and pulling another strangled moan from me.

“You humans are so strange, with this little button between your legs... and if I stroke it just right, look how soft you get, look how agreeable,” he murmurs. “You just need your little pussy tended to, and then you’ll be good for me, won’t you?”

The tentacles I’d managed to free myself from have returned to hold me in place. Once again my ass is forced up and my head down, but mercifully he doesn’t try to pull apart my legs. I don’t think I could handle him seeing the giant wet spot I’ve created when he can already feel it.

“Good girl,” he leans down and whispers. “Very good girl.”

Another magic phrase that makes my body melt and one whose origin I can’t deny. Hell, I’ve read it all a thousand times, in every single one of my daddy dom erotica books.

I've read pages of it, fantasized about it, and I wanted it for myself but never got it from my ex.

*It is a fantasy, Car.* My ex's words ring in my head with that nickname I always despised. *No man would ever do this.*

*Asshole.*

"Last chance to apologize before I begin," Kalder warns, his tentacle working me between my thighs.

I can't stop my body from reacting to him. I can barely think, I'm so close to coming. But one thing I'm certain of: I'm done apologizing.

"Not happen—"

I let out a deep, guttural yelp as his wide, webbed hand lands on my ass.



## CARINA

MY ASS STINGS AND HEATS UNDER HIS PALM. MY BODY JUMPS and my legs squeeze together as wetness coats my inner thighs. I tighten my grip on the tentacle in my hands, distracting myself by running my fingers over his swollen suckers.

“You discarded toxic garbage into my home, princess,” Kalder chastises, his voice no longer smooth but rough with anger I hadn’t heard before.

Another spank. This time, it’s a tentacle that lashes across my ass. I whimper as suckers stick and tug at my tender skin as he pulls back. Again and again, the tentacle comes down, sending echoing vibrations straight to the core of me, my cunt clenching, so desperate for more.

*This is not your fantasy,* I hear my ex’s voice echo deep in my mind.

This time, two tentacles land on my ass, and I let out a sharp hiss.

One marks me across the already pinked skin of my upper cheeks, while the other finds virgin flesh on the underside of my ass. It's a stinging pain that hits me behind my eyes and makes me clutch the appendage in my hand tighter. It seems to grow in my grasp. And still the tentacle between my legs alternates between the suckers and flicking of its taper tip over my clit.

"The motorcycle almost hit the tide pools," Kalder growls out with another slap.

I didn't know that. I definitely didn't want that. It was late at night, and I didn't see where it landed. I was just so angry.

His tentacles land again and again, and my body flips between pain and pleasure, anger and climax. There are so many tentacles, so many sensations. Kalder keeps my body on the ropes, unable to settle comfortably with a singular feeling and overwhelmed by it all.

"Worlds live in those pools, and they would've died in there if motor oil fell anywhere but my lair," he barks out, the velvet in his voice gone harsh and his breath labored.

I can barely think, the pain pushing every unnecessary thought from my mind. Gone is my home and the cliffside. There is no space to worry about my exposed ass or my uncontrolled desire. There is just the ache.

"It was empty," I cry out as he delivers another spank. "The oil can was empty."

"It wasn't."

I swear the bottle was empty, unless maybe the ex had stashed another on the bike I didn't see. Another lash of his tentacles

and the biting pain demands I think harder. I try to remember more about that night, what I was thinking, why I'd done what I'd done, but the answer feels just out of reach.

"It was my ex's motorcycle. It was his oil," I whimper, holding his stiff tentacle in my hands, squeezing it with each spank like a security blanket. It grows firmer, swelling in my hand, seeming to turn a shade of purple. I don't know how the Caelais work, but if I'm hurting Kalder, he doesn't complain.

"I watch the shoreline. I've seen you walk along the beach, collecting shells. You pick up after the tourists..."

I use the shells as decorations in my candles and set them in wax in my bottle of oil blends. I didn't know anyone was watching.

"I know your neighbors too, your boyfriend—"

"My ex," I shout out reflexively as his tentacle lands on the underside of my ass.

"He didn't throw the motorcycle into the ocean, did he?" Kalder asks firmly.

"Well, no... no, but he threw other things... important things..." I stammer out as I blink away oncoming tears.

"I know, princess, but this is about you, not him."

*He knows?* That doesn't make sense. Nothing makes sense.

"None of this is," he continues, not giving me a moment to process as his tentacles come down in waves, his webbed hand joining in so my ass doesn't get a break.

I can't tell where the spanks are landing. All I feel is heat and vibration spreading from my ass, down the top of my thighs, to the sensitive ring of my asshole and moving deep within my cunt so I feel every part of my clit aching. My mouth clamps



shut because if I open my mouth, I don't know if I'll bite down on something for the pain or scream in pleasure.

Spank after spank, wetness gathers in my eyes, but I know it's not the reason for my tears. It's not the pain. It's something else, right on the edge of consciousness, the thing that I'm reaching for, the reason I did what I did.

"He's gone. He's been gone, princess. I won't let him hurt you anymore." Kalder's voice suddenly drops to a gentle whisper.

"What were you trying to prove, Carina? What did you want?"

"I... I don't know," I sputter, sliding my grip up his tentacle.

It has stiffened to a slick steel, and the suckers are now puffy and engorged. It jerks under my touch, and I hear Kalder exhale sharply, his tentacles shuddering against my ass. A drop of milky iridescent substance blooms at the tip.

I should've asked Violet more questions about the Calealai, but I'm almost certain I'm holding and stroking, and finding comfort in, Kalder's cock tentacle.

*Fuck.*

The tip of my tongue runs along the inside of my lip as I watch the pale iridescent precum slide down the tentacle shaft, and I wonder what he tastes like.

"Princess," Kalder snaps sternly, shaking out his tentacles, seemingly trying to regain control himself. "You want to be a good girl, don't you?"

*Good girl.*

Fuck that phrase and its magic. My body reacts instantly, eagerly, arching into his hand as his fingers slide up and over my ass, slipping under the edges of my panties.

*You want to be a good girl, don't you?*

Yes, I do. I may not know anything else, the rest may be just out of reach, but I'm sure of this. Frantically, I nod.

"Tell me," he demands. His hand yanks up sharply on my panties so the fabric gathers between my ass cheeks, pulling tight between my wet folds and against my clit.

I let out a strangled moan, struggling to regain my breath as all thought is reduced to the throbbing of my pussy and the desperate need to give my Daddy whatever he wants. His tentacle has slipped beneath the tightened fabric, sliding between my soaked folds. A suction cup surrounds my clit, sucking and releasing the swollen nub in a rapidly increasing rhythm.

"What did you want to happen when you threw the motorcycle into the ocean?"

It had all felt so simple before—just don't apologize, don't give in—but my mind feels fuzzy, and what was clear before is blurring at the edges.

God, I'm so close. His tentacles never stop spanking, and his grip twists my panties until I'm gasping. My breasts ache, and my nipples rub relentlessly against the fabric of my dress, sending shockwaves of pleasure straight to my cunt.

"I asked you a question, princess. What did you want?"

I stare at the dripping cock tentacle in my hands and try to be a good girl. I want to answer, not just for Daddy, but for myself. I could've sold it and kept the money. I could have smashed it with a sledgehammer or donated it. *What the hell did I want?*

"I didn't mean to..." I sputter. "I didn't know about the oil... I didn't think about how it might hurt... I don't want to hurt anyone else... I..."

Tears hit the rock below me as I search for the answer. My ex wasn't always an asshole. By many people's standards, throwing away my books was the worst he's ever done. Yet over the years I always seemed to be doing something wrong. I was too loud. I wanted too much. I was a bad girlfriend. I should've been happy to get rid of him, and yet the moment he was gone, my anger had only intensified. Why?

"Yes?" Kalder urges me on with another suck and pop of his suction cup against my pussy, massaging the swollen, sensitive core of me, manipulating my pleasure so it builds and builds.

"What did you want?"

"To be punished," I sob. "I... I wanted to pay for what I did. For not realizing I deserved better... for realizing too late."

"Yes," he says softly, "you deserve better, but it's not too late, and it's not your fault."

"I'm still so angry."

"It's not your fault," he repeats.

At some point, the spanking had stopped, and only the tentacle between my legs continued to stroke and tease me, pulling my body tighter and tighter. I whimper as his suction cups pick up their speed, sucking my clit, pressing into my soaked entrance, but never breaching. My hips roll and buck, my legs tense, and my toes curl in tightly.

"Why didn't I see how bad it was earlier? How did I accept so little?" I gasp as I push back onto his tentacle, wanting him inside of me.

"It's not your fault," Kalder repeats again and again so softly it hurts. "It's not your fault, princess."

It's all so annoyingly clear as the tears stream down my cheeks and spill onto the stone and tentacles below. When I pushed

that motorcycle over the cliff's edge, I never wanted to hurt anyone else, just myself. I didn't want to cause damage, not to Kalder, not to his world. This was all my punishment.

*God, what if I'd actually killed someone?*

"I'm sorry, Daddy," I sob, pulling the stiff cock toward me as I roll my hips against him, begging to be filled. "I'm so sorry. Please."

"I know, baby, I know," Kalder soothes, finally pressing his tentacle into me fast and hard, giving me exactly what I need.

My pussy spasms as he pushes into me, my soaked cunt letting him stretch me with ease. His suckers pull and tease inside and out until I can't tell if there is a single part of me he hasn't touched. I rock into him harder and faster, my hands working over his cock in matching time. I need as much of him as I can get.

It's all so much, too much, and my emotions break open with my pleasure, anger seeping out of my pores with my sweat, fear and disappointment released with my screams. My body quivers and shakes, throwing off the years of tension that held me too stiff to feel this kind of release, only allowing me to think of it as fantasy.

"That's it, baby, that's it," he groans, urging me on, his own body held so much tighter than before. "Keep going."

His tentacle continues thrusting inside me, pulling every last bit of the orgasm from my body. My body spasms, and my grip on his cock tentacle tightens, sliding up and over the tip. He jerks beneath my palm.

"Stroke Daddy's cock, baby." His smooth voice has gone ragged.

I want to be his good girl, I want to see my fantasy through, but I'm not sure what I'm doing. I've been tentative so far, not yet certain it was his cock. On instinct I spit into my hands. I stroke with one, then tease along the swollen suction cups with the other.

"Like this, Daddy?"

"Just like that," he says, his tentacles tensing around him, binding me so firmly in place that I might as well be shackled to him. Right now, I like it. I feel safe.

With a strangled gasp, sparkling white cum gushes from his tentacle. He comes in waves, spilling onto my hands and breasts. Instantly, my tongue darts out to taste it, and it's salty like the ocean air and just as sweet. I want more, but he doesn't let me. He pulls himself back in my grasp, and when he comes, he marks me more fully across my lips and cheeks, down onto my breasts, until I am coated in him.

He holds me there, my body limp, ass throbbing and red, held up high in his tentacles. His cum is warm on my face and breasts. Slowly, he pulls his cock from my hands and lifts me in his arms, pulling me to his chest, his many tentacles wrapping around me.

"Gods, you're beautiful." He strokes a tentacle over my cum- and tear-stained face, another goddamn smirk on his pale blue mouth.

A small smile pulls at my lips. My fingers dig into his chest hair, and my eyelids, heavy with exhaustion, fall closed.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask, as I feel myself start to move.

"This was a lot to handle, princess. I need to make sure you're okay and your ass heals quickly."

As if I needed the reminder of all that just transpired, a tentacle lightly slaps me on my ass, and I groan.

“I’ve got something to show you, so I’m taking you to my home.”

“Home?” My eyes fly open, and I crane my neck to see past Kalder’s broad shoulders. I’m at the edge of the cliff, with the ocean waves crashing below. “What? In there? Your home in the ocean. How will I breathe?”

“Like this.” Kalder takes my chin in his tentacle, forcing my gaze off the swirling water below and onto the shifting blue-green of his eyes as his mouth claims mine.

He is firm and warm, and he moves so gently, teasing my lips apart with his tongue. I gasp, letting him take me fully. He gives me his breath, and I inhale deeply. When we hit the ocean waves, I’m held, protected in his grasp, breathing with his lungs, the last of my anger washed away with the cool salt water.

The word "Epilogue" is written in a cursive script, centered on the page. It is flanked by two large, ornate, black decorative flourishes that resemble stylized, dripping ink or calligraphic scrolls. The flourishes have intricate patterns and small circles along their edges.

## KALDER

CARINA IS SNORING. HER NOSE WRINKLES AND HER LIPS PURSE with each exhale that echoes in my underwater cavern. Magic keeps the water from coming in through the cave entrance and skylights. I have ways of allowing Carina to breathe underwater when the time comes, but she's dealt with enough newness for one evening. I've kept this room dry for a while now, anyway, to preserve the books.

"Princess," I murmur, stroking her red hair, which has dried to messy waves that fall over her bare back. Her damp clothes lie drying over a rock.

It had taken some effort to get her to rest after I'd shown her my collection of books—of her books. Tears had streamed anew. On land they'd seemed to be for what she'd lost, and now they were for what I'd returned to her.

With a handful of seaweed, I wiped tears and cum from her face and chest first, then instructed her to lie down so I could apply a healing salve from the coven. Her pink ass is elevated with seagrass pillows beneath her hips, and it gleams in the moonlight that shines through the rock skylights from the water above.

There is a light blush on her cheeks, though they are no longer bright red and she's no longer embarrassed. She's meant to be here, meant to be under my care. She's at ease, so different from the rebellious brat she'd been only hours ago.

*The brat and my good girl.*

I like both versions of her.

She'd been testing her limits before, pushing me to give her what she needed. She made me the Daddy who punishes and the Daddy who holds her close. Both versions of myself feel right too.

When the first book, *The Daddy List*, sank to the ocean floor, I'd been tempted to throw it back ashore as I'd done with human trash for thousands of years. But then another sank to my lair, and another the next day, and another and another, each with names varying on the same curious theme. Finally, I opened *The Daddy List* and read. As my collection grew, I built a library under the sea, realizing with each page I read I identified with the human daddies.

That first book listed out the qualities of a daddy so clearly, and it was everything I wanted to be to the creatures I protected and to the partner I hoped to have.

"Ugh." Carina let out a pitiful groan, twisting on the stone bench.



She rolls over onto her side. Hissing in pain as her ass hits rock, she flops back on her stomach.

“Daddy,” she whimpers.

“I’m here, baby.” I reach for the salve and move in close to her side.

“Will you?” she mumbles into her pillow, eyes half-lidded and heavy with sleep. “You can’t always be out of the water, can you?”

“No,” I confirm. I can stay out of salt water for hours at a time, as long as my tentacles are kept moist. But I always return to the sea. “I patrol the coastline from Laguna to a few miles north of here.”

Her ass and thighs bear the distinctive circular bruises of my tentacles, marking her as mine. She is still fragile, still hurting. I’d be a very bad Daddy to just leave her after what we’ve started. I twist open the small jar of lavender and vanilla scented salve and scoop up a generous amount onto my fingers.

I will go slow with her, I decide, lightly dabbing the salve onto her generously rounded ass. She hisses with each cool application, then relaxes as I gently massage it in.

“Lower,” she moans, pushing her ass up and back into my hand.

“Now, baby,” I chastise, ignoring the wetness spilling out onto her thighs and continuing rubbing her down.

“What?” she pouts, her brat side never far away.

I laugh, massaging and applying more healing salve. She moves her hips with my hand but says nothing for a long while. Finally, she reaches out in front of her for the bookcase

carved into the stone walls. She seemingly grabs a book at random—*The Daddy List*—trying to distract herself. She flips through the pages, not looking at the book, front to back, then back to front.

“H...how long are you gone for?” she finally asks, her voice dropping to an uncertain murmur.

*And the needy good girl is back.*

“Never long, but sometimes a larger issue might require me to stay down south for a couple days. Are you okay with that?”

Her nose scrunches and her lips screw up to the side as she seems to think deeply about the question. She taps her fingers across the bright, colorful cover of the book.

“This is the first time in eight years I’ll have my home to myself,” she says softly, a small smile growing on her pale lips. “I get to starfish in my bed, and I can sleep in without the sound of a revving engine waking me up. Hell, I can park in my garage. Maybe expand my business into the space... But...”

“But what, baby?”

“But... is this just a fantasy?” Her fingers play over the edges of the book, pausing every so often to dip beneath the cover.

“I’ve wanted *this* for so long. If I leave, does this end?”

“I’ll be here, and I’m patient. You should enjoy your space and your books.”

She looks up at me through her pale ginger lashes, chewing at her bottom lip, and frowns.

“You’re worried you’re going to miss me?” I ask.

“Yes, Daddy.” She nods.

I grin and stand, closing the jar of salve and placing it back on the stone shelf. My hand keeps working over her ass, but my tentacles move up and over her body until I've filled her eyeline completely.

"Do you see this, baby?" I ask, gesturing to the tentacle in front of her.

"Your... *ummm*... cock tentacle."

A pretty little pink blush deepens and spreads across her cheeks and down her neck.

"Yes." I nod. "And you see this notch at the top here."

I grab her wrist and pull her hand to the narrow sensitive groove that circles where my cock tentacle joins my other seven tentacles. The soft pads of her fingers lightly walk along the edge, exploring the bumps and dips of the connection.

"Lucky for you, your Daddy is a Celaelai and can give you his cock when he's away."

Her eyes go wide, and she clutches the book tight in her free hand. "You mean—"

She moves to circle her hand and has no idea what she's doing to me. I swallow a groan and pull her hand back.

"Yes, you can play with the pretty pussy when I'm gone." I drop my voice to the deep rumble that I've seen makes her squirm. "But only if you're very good."

"Yes, Daddy." She nods eagerly, her hands return to flip through the pages of *The Daddy List* as she looks at me.

I grin, moving back behind her. Rubbing in the last of the salve, I watch her hips unconsciously undulate, trying to gain deeper touch. I grip and spread her thighs with my hands, and

my cock tentacle slides up her leg. Her hips jump, and she lets out a squeal of surprise.

“Now be a good girl and read your book to me,” I command, inching my cock tentacle slowly toward her cunt.

“What?” She exhales sharply, seeming to recognize what was in her hands for the first time. “*The Daddy List*. It’s my favorite.”

“Mine too. Read it out loud for me, princess,” I demand with a short, quick thrust into her tight pussy.

“Oh fuck... okay,” she says. “*The Daddy List*... Chapter one. Seraphina was tired of not getting what she nee... ugh.”

Her ass shakes as I suck on the bundle of sensitive nerves deep inside her. I move slowly now, driving in and out of her as her pussy clenches down on my suction cups.

“Keep reading.”

“*Ummm... ah... tired of not getting what she needed, so she made a list of... uuhhh everything... ummm... she wanted in a Daddy. They would be kind, but firm. Strong, but not cruel. They would protect her, but not stifle her... ummm...*”

“Yes, baby. Don’t stop reading.”



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TITAN

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## About the Author

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Jillian Graves is a paranormal romance and romantic suspense author who likes to write about kinky witches, monsters, and high-heat supernatural shenanigans. She currently lives in Los Angeles with her two cats, Luna and Salem, and her one human, Bill.

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