

Paranormal Mates Society: Shiver

Lia Connor

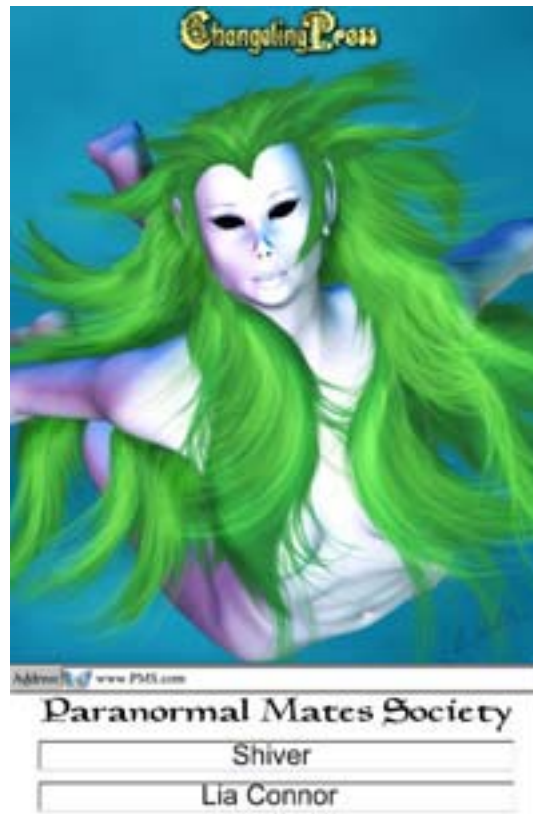
**All rights reserved.
Copyright ©2006 Lia Connor**

No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared by any electronic or mechanical means, including but not limited to printing, file sharing, and email, without prior written permission from Changeling Press LLC.

**ISBN (10) 1-59596-314-6
ISBN (13) 978-1-59596-314-7
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader**

**Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1561
Shepherdstown, WV 25443-1561
www.ChangelingPress.com**

**Editor: Margaret Riley
Cover Artist: Bryan Keller**



This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Prologue

Sigyn reclined in the chaise lounge she'd had specially made for nights at home. Having her girls over for fun and games was all very well, but there were times when a lady simply wanted to be alone. The lovely maidens all understood, which in her opinion reinforced how far superior they were to men.

Men! Sigyn shuddered. It'd take a special fellow, very well vetted for any flaws, to have a chance of winning her after the treatment she'd endured at her ex-husband's hands.

Speaking of whom...

Sigyn reached over to a delicate side table and raised a flute of pink champagne. Admiring the bubbles, she basked in the rosy glow and imagined Loki complaining about the heat while he hid out in Scratch's domain. He might have all the opportunities he wanted to "knock boots" with the devil and possibly that pesky angel, but she'd bet her stock portfolio against how long a Nordic deity would be able to sweat in silence.

And they would be sweating, all of them, as she set the Paranormal Mates Society to rights. Sigyn smiled the small, woman-power smile she'd learned turned big strong men pale. She lifted her glass higher in a toast.

Here's to undoing all of Scratch's mis-match-making, she thought, well pleased with herself. It'll be quite the job, but I'm woman enough to take it on until I've found a suitable replacement. In the meantime, I'll tidy up a few odds and ends...

She slid her laptop to her, neatly adjusting the chiller pad between its surface and her silk negligee, and pulled up an e-mail she'd been reading earlier. It'd come from one of the PMS's more unusual clients, who refused phone contact. A sleep god called Pe-

Ben. Quite the handsome gentleman, going by his picture! Pity he was seeking a male. Sigyn pouted over his photograph for a moment, then opened his letter a second time.

Greetings, Madam;

I write to you in reference to Sirensong who currently advertises herself on your website. I fear she is a vicious creature who will do far more harm than good. She cannot help it; this is the way she was made.

However, I believe that the company's former owner has been dabbling in dangerous waters by matching her with the fire-hearted Daniel, a man I have known for many years. He has known the Siren for far longer.

I must warn you to keep them apart! They will be the death of one another. Nothing good can come of this, and here is the reason why...

Sigyn looked up from the e-mail. A shiver ran down her spine. Oh. Oh, dear. Scratch had reached back through history and twined together a fire and water elemental.

They would lust and hate, fight and fuck, and dance with death until one consumed the other. "Damn you again, Scratch. They do not deserve this." Determined, she dove back into her computer. Surely there was something. By all the gods, she would find something to put an end to their suffering and give them a moment in which to know true love before --

She firmed her lips together. She would take care of it.

Sigyn was a woman -- goddess -- who got the job done.

Chapter One

Epiphanies happen at the damndest times, and let no man ever tell you different. No woman, either, but I'll get to the fairer points in just a minute.

Mine came to me as I sat with a man -- god -- whatever he might be -- called Pe-Ben, though if that's his name for true I couldn't say. He's some sort of winter power for a Native tribe up on the coast of Maine. Nice guy if you like the stoic type. Doesn't say much, and he puts me right to sleep. Says he can't help it, which is fine enough. He knows how to be quiet, and I like having someone to jabber to. Someone who'll believe me, and not go thinking I've lost my mind.

Which I did, some centuries back, but insanity's just part and parcel of my lot in life.

He knows the whole story, and I trust he'll tell each word to someone else when I have gone -- even if he tells it to their snores.

Anyway, this is what happened to me one day in Pe-Ben's home. I sat up, pointed my pipe stem at him, and demanded, "Let me ask you this, and you tell me for true. Have you ever been to Africa?"

He looked at me, all puzzled-like, and shook his head. I figured his look to indicate he didn't mind me going on, so on I went.

"Not the places they let tourists go, mind you. All that's been prettied up nice and modern, sterilized clean, nothing left of the old ways to bother people's sensibilities. Most places, anyway, or at least the ones you find in travel brochures.

"But," I said, gesturing with the pipe, "if you take just a step to the left, you'll find a different style of tourist trap. Grubbied down to suit people's expectations, them who come to play the exotic world traveler. They make me laugh, they do. Watching them, a body can almost read their minds and know what they want others to think in

their regard. Look, how brave, daring the wilds of the dark continent! Or, maybe, they want to pretend they're rough and ready as the old explorers.

"To be honest, I'm not sure which brand of bastard is the worse. Those too dumb to realize they're double-dealing insults out with both their hands, a slap in the face with each too-small tip and pat on the head -- or the idiots who think they can walk out of their safe, polished world, dance a few reels with not really dangerous danger, and come back with a coat of fake bronze on their balls.

"No, none of them are worth spit in the wind so far as I'm concerned."

I leaned back, thoughtfully sucking smoke. "People today don't know adventure. Don't know glory. Don't know what it's like to be alive. Modern folk? They just survive, day by day, bill by bill, toy by toy. They think they're vibrant as the sun, but in truth? Every man Jack is dull as a storm cloud. Gray. There's no color in the world anymore. No stars. Weak yellow sun. Cold, barren moon."

I ramble some when I talk, but Pe-Ben, he just nodded gravely and indicated I should keep going.

I realized what bothered me. "There's no place for dreams anymore. Not true dreams. For believing in what could be. For wondering if there's more to life than just the here-and-now. People are nothing now but empty shells, all of them, wandering around in endless circles until they disappear into history. No one remembers them a few years after they're gone, and no one ever will.

"See, now we're out of the age of heroes, no one matters. Life has no meaning. That'll drive you crazy if you think on it too long, so -- they don't. Just go on and on, forever and ever, amen.

"They don't know what it's like to be alive.

"Not like I do. Like she does."

I fell silent, thinking about her. Her. The woman I've been chasing for, oh, centuries upon centuries now. And you're right, that makes me a lot older than I've any right to be. Still, I suspect she's far older than even me. The lady, my girl, my all-consuming fire. We've hunted each other down throughout the years, and while I don't

know how she feels about me, I know what burns in my body when I think upon her face, her body, her quim.

I always was a fool for lust -- not love, as poets have it -- but pure want. The ache to feel her sinewy arms locked around my back, scratching welts down my spine while I drove into her with my cock, plunging in and out as a sailor assaults the sea, both of us rocking high and hot in a blaze that will consume us both, see if it doesn't. This inferno dancing across the waters will be the death of us both, but I can't see that as a bad thing.

My need to have her is strong enough it overcomes any fear of crossing the bar. I want -- desire -- need her like no one ever before, and never will another soul. If she has a soul. I'm not rightly sure.

Pe-Ben put his hand over my own, giving the knuckles a light squeeze. Now, this might just be my madness talking, but when I looked into his eyes I saw a vision, and I realized what I had to do.

I had to go to Africa.

And so, I went.

The real Africa, which is nothing like the parts I'd been complaining over. You can't get there if you're one of the big stupid herd of foreign humanity. They don't let you in. You don't belong, and your ass is grass if you get caught. They don't even let me get too close, and they know what I am. Sort of. They tell stories, anyway. I've heard a few.

They let me on the coastline at least, no matter how I chose to get here, and I've picked this spot out special. I've built a bonfire up out of everything I could lay hands on, green wood and dead, branches and drifting planks from old wrecks.

Stoked it high and hot as passion denied between a man and a woman.

It blazes like the breath of a god, a fireball dancing against earth and sky. But I can still see the stars, brilliant blazing in the black velvet firmament, and I'd swear the moon's dropped her stony mask to smile at me. She's a vicious bitch, Luna is, and she's been looking forward to shining down on this night for many and many a year. I know.

Don't ask me how I know. Just do. A man can't give up all his secrets, right?

I think the nearby villagers sense, if they don't exactly know, what's going to go down tonight. They have a feel for danger hanging heavy in the wind, which way it blows, and when the gods are massing for a battle. Even if it's not their own gods. They know the difference between a clash of man-versus-man and things mortals just weren't meant to understand.

I understand, though -- I understand it all. That's my curse and my blessing, and I've learned to live with the heavy hanging knowledge.

Tonight I'll die with it, I pray. I'm ready for this to be over.

All I need is her -- slim body, juicy quim, flashing hair -- I need her -- she has to come, sneak out of hiding. I burn to see her throw down the gauntlet one last time.

As the villagers begin beating a *thump, thump, thump* rhythm on their dumber drums, jerky as the heartbeat of a man caught in climax, they raise up a singing sort of wail that doesn't match the beauty I've heard before. The eerie sound seems to fit the night. Weird, wary, warning cries, more animal than human. I think they're channeling the fight to come, and for centuries afterwards, they'll tell this as a long and frightening legend around their huts by night.

Fine by me. Let it be passed down from generation to generation. A warning. A caution. Don't fall into this trap. Never trust a god. Never trust a man. Never trust a woman. Never lose your heart -- you don't know if you'll ever get it back, or what the cost might be, and whether or not you're willing to pay that price.

Wish I'd known, my own self. But no, I had to plunge in head first, had to follow the song of blood pounding in my cock, lust racing through my veins, and here I am.

Then, as I'm thinking these things, like magic -- there she is. I get this odd feeling like maybe the drums and wavering songs summoned her when my own presence couldn't. She'd been waiting for the music to give her strength, or fuel her own fires.

Doesn't matter. I knew she'd come. She couldn't stay away. Never could, never will. Just the way I have her pinned, she has me pinned.

I watch as she steps light as a bird and graceful as a cat over the rocky sand. Her deep green hair moves the way it always did, as if she's floating in fathoms of salt water. Billows in and out around her face, a face I've never been able to describe. Something between woman and bird, human and god, sharp and soft, dark and light, fearful and beautiful beyond compare. To look at her is to know she could kill you without half trying, or drive you to kill yourself, no problem.

Step, step, step, here she comes, pouring over the sand like liquid sex, her hips swaying to the beat of the wild, wild drums. I look up and meet her eyes. She flinches, because she still doesn't understand how I can do that. Supposed to be impossible, but then again, so are we both. The impossible becomes real once more at midnight on an Ivory Coast beach, and we both know how wrong it is for us to be here.

Couldn't stay away from each other, though. Never could, not since first we met. It'll be the death of us both, and welcome to it. Just have to make her understand, it's got to end.

End... yeah. But if I go down, it's gonna be in a blaze of glory. I want the same for her, too. Blazing Chinese fireworks writing our legend across the sky. Ashes from my bonfire scattering across the world on a strong north wind, a brief taste of bitterness on every man and woman's tongue. Let them feel, for a moment, what it's like to love when you shouldn't, and how even a raging lust like ours can conquer death from time to time, for a time, but in the end, it has to end.

Everything has to end.

Step, step, step, here she comes, and I can't tell what she's thinking by looking in her eyes. She's naked, though, and her body tells another tale. I can see how the cool night wind has puckered her nipples into tight little nubs, and how she's already damp, her cunt gleaming between her legs when she steps into the pool of firelight.

She wants me. I can see it, sense it -- hell, I can smell it. She knows, and knows I want her my own self. Hard to hide, since I'm no more dressed than she is and my cock is swollen hard and hot, jutting out in front of me. My spear, they used to call it. Don't

see as how that's a bad metaphor. It's the weapon I've used against her since we first met. The weapon I'll try to bring her down with one more time, tonight.

The weapon that'll maybe win this war we've fought for over three thousand years. It ends tonight. I let that challenge glitter in my eyes as we lock gazes across my bonfire, and I can see how it's sunk in. She hesitates, just for a moment, and then she nods.

She leaps the bonfire light as a breath of wind and lands on me, knocking me down into the sand and we're rolling, rolling, rolling over the rocky dunes...

Chapter Two

"Quick, now, quick! Make haste, men. Haste!"

Daniel grinned at the panicking sailors around him, running to and fro like ants afire on the tilting deck of their fishing ship. He leaned lazily back against the mast, shaking his head and not bothering in the slightest to help the frantic crush of men with their task at hand.

One sailor, murky brown eyes crazed in the middle of his sun-blackened face, stopped to gape at Daniel. "What ails you? Don't you know the danger we're in?"

Daniel shrugged. "Heard the captain," he said, deliberately careless. "We're sailing into Siren waters, right? Is that all?"

"All?" The sailor sputtered for words, shaking his head back and forth, tick-tock, filthy knots of hair whipping in the wind and lashing his cheeks. Daniel eyed him in half-disgust, half-amusement.

"Yeah," he answered. "Sirens. I've heard the stories. This is enough to get big, tough fellows like you worked up into screaming women? I'd check to see if your balls had fallen off if I didn't think I'd get lice from touching you."

Any other time, those words would have earned him a fist to the jaw, or at least someone would have tried. This man? Too panicked to be angry, or too worked up to get agitated for the right reason. Daniel could almost hear his heart pounding rabbit-fast. "They said you hadn't got the brains to know when you should be scared, and now, I believe 'em! Sirens, Daniel. Sirens! Death to any man who hears them sing!"

Daniel scanned the horizon aimlessly. "That a fact?"

"You -- you --"

"Way I've heard it told, these Sirens are half-bird, half-women. Some kind of trick the gods decided to play way back when. Stuck 'em on a rock that jumps around

from place to place, no telling where it'll show up next. Gave them a voice that sets a man's cock on fire. Makes him want them so bad when he hears them sing he'll do anything, even jump overboard and drown."

Daniel pulled a bronze dagger from his belt and idly began trimming a fingernail with the wicked edge. "Killed hundreds, so I've heard. Like to fish bloated, nibbled corpses out of the sea and dance with them while they scream and eat the carrion bite by bite. That about the size of it?"

The sailor had gone white as Daniel reeled off his words, bored and not bothering to hide it. He nodded, all but whimpering, and Daniel laughed in his face. "I might be a new sailor, sure, but I'm not a fool. Forewarned is forearmed, and I'll tell you this much -- I've been looking forward to meeting up with these women."

His teeth flashed bright and white in a savage grin. "I plan to give them a taste of their own medicine."

The sailor stared at Daniel, shaking his head. "I'll tell your mother different." He backed off, as if afraid to take his eyes away. "Tell her you died easy. But other men, I'll tell them you went down like a damned fool, too cocky to be careful of things it's wise to fear."

Daniel arched his eyebrow. "My thanks. You might want to be moving on, now. Captain's coming around with rope to lash us down, and soft wax to plug our ears. As if that'll work. I've heard those stories, too." He laughed, and knew it sounded crazy. Mad enough to scare the sailor off completely, sending him running in the other direction -- smack into the captain, who pounced and quick as a wink had him lashed down like so much cargo. Tears of relief ran down the man's dirty cheeks as he was bound up helpless as a lamb.

Daniel guessed that would be his cue. When the captain looked up, he'd hidden himself behind the mast. If there'd been less of a rush, Cap might have hunted him down, made sure everyone was safe, but the wind pushed them on fast and ever faster, right toward the Sirens' rock. He could see it now, dark as a festering sore on the

horizon. Could almost hear the whoops and cries, screeches and yells of women ravaging for the hunt.

His hand tightened around the dagger in his belt as his captain ran past, tying himself one-handed to the deck. He grinned, feral as a wildcat. Yeah, they said he was too stupid for his own good, and too dumb to know when he should be scared. But the way he figured, there'd be a lot of fame in it for the man who could best women like these.

And oh, but how he looked forward to testing his theory...

When they attacked, he stepped out from behind his hiding place. Bold as brass, legs braced wide on the tilting deck, he shaded his eyes against the blazing sun. With no wax in his ears, he could hear it all -- everything. The sailors cursing at him to get down, get anchored, save himself, and calling him every kind of fool, the worst that ever walked the earth or sailed the seas.

The women swarmed over the ship, singing their songs of terrible death and beautiful murder.

Daniel paid the Sirens and their terribly wonderful songs no mind, focusing all his attention on the female bodies in flight, rushing on to attack the ship. His ship. Maybe not his own possession, but his chosen home, and the place where he belonged.

He laughed, hooting a challenge to the skies, and shrieked back echoes of the Sirens' battle cries. Didn't matter that they wore woman-shapes. He'd have fought them if they looked like men, or seals, Scylla or Charybdis. They wanted a piece of him? Well, he'd just see who cut the first slice.

Daniel knew for a fact he was too stubborn to die. And, he thought with a smirk, far too pretty. Let them come. They might just be surprised.

Just as he'd hoped, as the Sirens got close enough, they faltered in their arrow-flight at the sight of him. "Weren't expecting me, were you?" Daniel shouted. "Used to having your prey all tied up nice and neat, little packets of meat ready for the dinner table! Right? See, what they don't know, but I had the sense to figure -- you wouldn't let a little thing like anchors slow your breed down. If men won't jump over and drown

trying to swim to you, you'll bring the fight to them. Talons and beaks, blood and spunk and song, it's all the same, isn't it? Kill or be killed, and you were made to bring men down to death.

"Well, not me," he said, blazing with battle laughter. "Take them if you want, but I want the best of you to try me on for size. Come on, if you have the guts. Face me! Fight me! We'll see who wins this game."

All around him, women flickering back and forth between the shapes of naked women and dazzling birds landed on the deck, their claws sinking deep into wood or flesh, whatever they happened to light on. Men began to scream the high, shrill screams of newborn babies, leaving the world same way they came into it, bloody and terrified, as the Sirens did their work, plucking gobs of wax from ears and singing into head-holes, liquid notes straight into brains that burst like over-full water skins.

Blood, blood, everywhere there was so much blood, but Daniel, he ignored it. Didn't matter. He'd tried to warn them, and they hadn't listened. So, let them pay the price.

He had his own task at hand. There, it looked as if at least one of the Siren women took his challenge serious. Standing from where she'd landed in a crouch on the foredeck, rising like a leviathan from the froth of crimson and fear, green hair floating about her face. A face empty of all expression, not a human face at all no matter how womanly-beautiful it might otherwise be, blank of anything like feelings except for a glint in her eyes.

Daniel grinned savagely. He knew that look. Lust. Hunger. This one had hot blood for all her cold skin. She'd have been bored by nothing but the touch of chilly female fingers on her small and perfect breasts, petting her cunt, teasing her into tepid orgasm. "No, no, they won't do the job for you forever, will they?" he crooned.

She tilted her head. Curiosity. It'd kill more than a cat, he wagered. "Come on," he coaxed, goading her by treating her like a skittish pigeon. "Think you can take me? Try me on for size. Sing, if you want. Won't bother me."

Step, step, step, and closer still she came. He could see her clearly now. Small and slender, fragile-seeming as if her bones were filled with air and she might blow away at any second. But for all that, he could smell her on the wind. Salt and metal, heated rocks, bitter myrrh, and the scent of a woman whose only passion was the kill.

Daniel lowered his hand to stroke his cock through the rough canvas of his tunic. "Ever seen what these skins we wear hide?" he taunted, low and husky. "Bet you'd love to find out. Me, I'd fuck you till the sun came up and went down three times upon three times. You have your weapon, and I have my own. I can stand up to you on your battlefield. How do you think you'd do on mine?"

The Siren's eyes crinkled at the corners. *Curiosity. Confusion.* Daniel laughed for glee. She was almost his, and didn't even know it.

"Come on, little bird woman," he egged. "Come to Daniel. That's right. Ignore the others. They don't matter, not sistren nor brethren. All you want is me. I'm all you need. Everything that matters. Come to me. Come on. Come."

Step, step, step. The Siren walked easily on the ship's listing deck as if it were solid ground, so light she barely touched down when she walked. Her small breasts flushed with rapid flares of color as she moved toward him, and her quim, bare of any curling hair, began to gleam. She paused, drawing in a deep, deep breath, smelling the slaughterhouse-outhouse stench around them, and getting off on it.

"Want my blood? Want to hear me scream for death?" Daniel licked his lips. "Come on. Fight me!"

The Siren stilled. She stared at him, her eyes still dead of any human feeling, yet he knew -- knew -- he had her. Her nature took over, and she moved a little bolder, approaching him swift as the wind.

He waited, grinning yet, until she had laid both ice-cold hands on either side of his head. Cupping his cheeks. Opening her mouth to sing, and kill him with her music.

Danny? He had other ideas. And she never saw them coming, not the flicker of his hand or the blur as he shoved it forward and buried his belt dagger hilt-deep in the Siren's belly.

Her mouth fell open in a soundless scream. Then, oh, yes, then he saw something besides blankness in her eyes. Fear. Pain. Rage. The kind of rage that promised he'd die for what he'd dared to try.

So he might as well make it worthwhile. Daniel leaned forward, his hand still on the knife's handle, slick with sticky Siren's blood, and sealed his mouth across hers as it gaped open. He slipped his tongue between her lips and tasted the Siren's magic, the power of her song -- bright-burning power with the tang of honeyed wine. He drank from her, all that he could hold, as she shook in his grasp.

When he let her go, he felt himself glowing, and knew he would never die, now. Not ever. He'd tasted immortality, and made himself one of the gods. Laughing at her open-mouthed shock, Daniel jerked his dagger out of the Siren's guts. "I win," he said, his voice low, the words buried underneath the trailing-off whimpers and shrieks of his dying crewmates.

The Siren touched her stomach, bringing dripping fingers up to her eyes. She stared at her blood first in confusion, and then, as her hand closed into a fist, with the sort of fury that promised he might live forever, but he'd take no pleasure in it.

He'd won the battle, but he'd started a war. She knew it, and made sure he knew it, too.

Without another word, the Siren ran light as a feather on the wind, straight and sure as an arrow, off the ship and into the hungry waters that swallowed her whole...

Chapter Three

At first I think her fighting style hasn't changed, and then I think, *well, maybe it has, in fact*. Used to be if she -- her -- the Siren -- made a lunge at me, knocked me down to earth, it'd be teeth and claws next. Mark me up good and paint the sand with sprays of red. So I'm geared up to fight back, wishing I had my dagger -- that same old dagger I used to draw first blood so many years ago -- but she takes me by surprise.

Nimble as a dancer, like the bird woman she used to be, she rolls off me and up onto the balls of her feet, braced like a street fighter, just waiting to see what I'll do. Her expression's almost as blank and inhuman as I recall from when first we met.

Thing is, she's not who she was, nor what she was back then. No matter how hard she tries to be the monster she was created, she's lost some of her fangs along the way. Grown new ones to make up for it, yeah, but all the same she isn't a favored fortunate of the great sea gods. Not any longer.

She knows it, too. She's less than a goddess but more than a woman, hating the loss of every drop she's shed to survive in this great big modern, plastic world where people sail in big safe ships too noisy for passengers to hear her sing, even if she were so inclined as to play her old tricks. She's immortal, and she's tired, but she's got the balls to see this challenge of the ages through.

Same as me. Can't die, but Lord, I'm tired of living in a world where I don't belong. Looking at her, shifting from foot to foot, just waiting for me to make my move, I wonder, if she had been a pretty village maiden, all curls and flashing white smiles, dimpled cheeks in a suntanned face, maybe twitching her skirts a bit to tease me with a glimpse of shapely leg, or leaning over to tease me with a peep down her blouse -- would I have gone to sea at all?

I left home among the groves and took to the seas, looking for something I could never so much as name. Might have been love, might have been riddles that I yearned to have answers for.

So many stories. Telling tales can drive a man mad.

Yeah, part of why I went was to seek out the Sirens. I knew all about them, every single thing I could learn, so I wasn't afraid. I'd been blessed by every sorcerer I knew to be on the level, and a plenty I figured weren't. Loaded down with gimcracks and geegaws, patterns scarred into my skin, necklaces and bracelets, and oh yes, yes, yes, my dagger.

Not just any knife, for all I carried it ever so casually. Hid my greatest treasure in plain sight so no one understood its value. I'd fought my way through the challenge laid down by a god himself, though I never knew which one, to win that weapon. They'd promised me I'd be able to bring the Siren down with my blade, and well, I don't guess they lied. I just guess it hasn't come about, yet.

Or has it? We changed, both of us, when the blood spilled on both our hands. She became less, I became more, and both of us ended up trapped, caught in this fight that's lasted for millennia. Both of us too stubborn to say "Uncle," yet far too wary to meet a-purpose.

We both know we'll be the end of each other some day. A great big joke on behalf of gods who no longer exist. We're all that's left of their power and might, and aren't we a sight to see? A tough piece of sinew who's sailed all his days, one ship to another to another, maybe settling down here and there for the taste of solid ground beneath my feet, but never being able to stay.

Where she goes between our meets, I've no idea. Maybe she sinks to the bottom of the sea and stays there, hiding where no man can follow after. I don't know how her mind works. Never have. Probably never will.

'Cause like I said, it ends tonight. Please, let it end tonight. With a bang, and not a whimper.

All the while these thoughts have been racing around inside my head, chasing circle after circle, spiraling down, we haven't been still, oh no. Like the way my mind's spinning about, we've been pacing around about the fire. Circling, circling, ever so slow. I've seen big jungle cats circle like this. *Keep the fire between you and your prey*, I warn myself, *while you search for her weakness*.

I grin and reach for the dagger, stuck in the sand not too far away. She pulls up sharp and stiff. Recognizes it, sure enough, and doesn't like the sight one single bit. Reading her is like reading a jungle cat for sure -- nothing there in those wild animal eyes, but her body language tells the tale. She's wary, and she's angry, and she's aroused.

God, yes, I said *aroused*, because she is for a fact and no mistake. The way her skin ripples, not human at all, but as if she feels it every time I imagine drawing my hands down her chamois-soft skin. Not like a proper woman's flesh, but oh, so good. The times I've gotten a good hold, I've felt as if I've caught a python by the flaring hood. Dangerous, probably evil as men define evil, and hell-bent on bringing me down... but all same, beautiful. Breath-taking beautiful, from her billowing seaweed hair to her cold lips, to her small breasts still riding high and firm after all this time, beryl-colored nipples hard as jewel seeds. Her cunt, still smooth and slick, dewy with dampness that didn't come from swimming up to meet me.

Lover's oil, they used to call it. Passion's balm. I purse my lips and blow, aiming the puff of breath at her trembling quim. She draws up short, sucking in a sharp breath, eyes closing ever so briefly. She shakes hard, aspen-leaf quiverings, struggling against how good it feels. Can't let herself enjoy it, can she? If she does, she's giving me a point. A leg up in the game. I know she's strong enough to hold out. I just like seeing her fight the need, and how it gets harder every time I manage a touch.

Harder, oh, yes, it does at that. My cock's not shown interest in anyone or anything, be they male or female, animal or vegetable or mineral, in at least a century or so, but seeing her, naked and fighting against wanton lust, struggling to overcome the passion I can stoke up fire-hot with just a single breath? That does all sort of good

things to a man's loins. Seeing her all but come with the smallest brush lights a fire in my cock, burning blood pumping thick and fast into the flesh and swelling it into the second sort of blade she's learned to fear and fight.

She sways a second longer, then snaps open her eyes to stare at me. It's the same as before. Fascinated, repelled, amazed, tempted, and terrified all at once. She wants to touch, to taste, to give in -- but by all the gods that made her, that have long since been lost to time, she will not concede the battle. All the same, she can't help staring, naked hunger a clear emotion in her animal eyes, nor can she stop her small blue tongue from flickering out to lick dainty, sweet green lips.

I can taste her yet. Mead and murder, life and death, lust and loathing. It's a heady brew, and it's given me life eternal. Given me more than that, too. Given me a taste for her. A thirst that I can never, no, not ever quench, not so long as we two fight.

Her riding my cock like a wild woman on horseback, in the ruins of a temple while Rome burned and Nero plied his fiddle.

A ditch beside the Damascus road, driving deep inside her salty-sweet cunt while what they call miracles happened along our side.

Fighting and scratching our way to an almighty orgasm in an empty list field, where men had died earlier that day, and I'd come, knowing she would, too. My hands all over the skin, ever so slightly rough that far from the seas, prickling me up and down until I thought my head would all but burst. I did erupt in her, coating her cunt with my seed.

The Crusades, me in armor, supposed to be on night watch as we sailed back toward the "Holy Land," with her flown down to fight and fuck on the decks of a ship filled with pious men. Oh, how we did blaspheme, and perhaps this was her sense of humor but she landed graceful as you please on her two slender knees. Grasped my hips with her iron-hard hands and sucked my cock between her green lips. Clumsy, she was, and didn't know what to do, but I taught her, oh yes I did, and when she tasted my come her eyes grew wide with wonder, then heavy with lust. I think the stars themselves blazed brighter for our coming together that night.

The Plymouth Colony, where I scratched a word into a tree for my own amusement. I knew who'd taken the Dare girl, but I had no plans to stick around for explaining myself. She launched herself on me from behind that time, her hands and fingers busy around my cock. I bucked like a wildcat in her hard grip, and hollered fit to shake leaves down around us in a shower. Didn't stop until I took hold and rolled her over to her back on the soft ground, and had her writhing beneath me, caterwauling in her strange musical lust that made my bones burn every time.

I have never been able to get enough of her. I don't suspect I ever will.

To drink my fill of this Siren is the one thing left in the world I want. I know she wants it, too. Her muscles quiver and her breath comes quick, fast, jerky. She shakes with the need to climax, to feel me deep inside, to wrestle with me in a different way. To ride me hard and fast until the little death swallows us whole in a brightly-blazing flame. Bring the curtains down and stop the show with a number no one will ever forget.

I stroke my swollen cock, holding it out in the palm of one hand. "Come on," I taunt, bucking my hips at her. "You know you want this. I know I want you. Want to bury my face between your thighs and lick you dry, then wet all over again."

She gasps as a ripple of lust rolls through her, powerful as a tidal wave. Sways on her feet, mouth falling open. I see the desperation peek through just long enough to know it's there, and it's real as that which I feel myself.

I rub myself again, swiping off a drop of come that's bubbled out, optimistic as ever. Lifting that salty drop to my mouth, I smear it across one lip and lick, tasting the life and the sea and the tang of bronze. She sways, eyes half-lidded, and if she had a voice to use except in singing or in warring, I know I would hear her moan like a shameless whore. She wants it so. Almost more than I do. But she doesn't know why, because it's not what she was made to want. To need.

I changed her when I changed me. Now, neither of us knows what we are, and if a body doesn't know after a few millennia what purpose they have in life unless they're

facing down this enemy with the need to fuck thundering in their veins -- well, it's a good sign this is what you're meant to do.

So I know what I'm doing when I take my life into my hands, and say, "Come on, woman. Do your worst, and I'll do my best. Let's see who wins the last battle of this war. You ready to make an end?"

She stares at me, and I would swear she's shocked. But then, ah, then, I see the smallest trace of relief, and I know she's been just as eager for this moment herself. For the first time ever, she smiles just the tiniest smile -- and then she's leaped upon me again, and brought me crashing down to earth. I bite down on my tongue in shock, taste the metallic blood, and I start to laugh. Laugh like a madman on a spree for the sheer pleasure of it.

Then we're fighting, tooth and claw, no more playing, but all the old gods help me if I can stop laughing for even just one second.

I never did have any common sense.

Chapter Four

"So there you are. I wondered if I'd ever lay eyes on you again, fair lady. Somehow I suspected it would come to pass if I just lived long enough. That hasn't been a problem. So here I am, and there you are."

Daniel bared his teeth, mimicking a grin. "Didn't expect to see me again, did you? Then again, five hundred years is a long time between ship passing by ship in the dark and quiet night. Don't you think?"

The Siren stared up at Daniel from where he'd spotted her, crouched in the bottom of the Romany boat's wreckage. Half a world away from where they first had met, and half a thousand years, but she'd not changed a whit or whisker. Neither had he, for that matter.

At first, soon as the battle glory wore off, he'd been thrilled at how he'd changed. Wounds closed up in an instant. Every bolt he shot hit its target straight in the heart, so neither man nor beast could face up to him and live to tell the tale. All the fish, meat, and skins he wanted. He traded and grew rich, but never fat, and never a single day older.

Soon enough, that reckless thrill had been replaced by fear. What had she done to him, with her blood and her song and her kiss? He knew it had to have been the Siren's affair. He'd stayed far away from gods of any sort since he met up with her, figuring they knew enough to leave him well alone themselves.

He'd learned how to live life on the run. Not so hard, for a sailor -- jump ship at whatever port took his fancy, amble about a while, then choose another with a crew he'd never seen before. Cut his hair, dye it, grow a beard or shave it off. He'd learned more languages than he'd known existed. Eaten at fires with warriors more fearful than men could have ever dreamed, and slaughtered their far more dreadful enemies.

Some welcomed him, but some, those who knew or sensed he'd been altered into more than a man but less than a god, ran him off with screams and curses. They couldn't hurt him, but he left all the same.

Seemed as if he'd no stomach for fights any more, not unless he had a belly full of wine or barley beer, or his head well clouded with pungent smoke from burning herbs he'd never seen before. Peyote. Opium. Anything to make him feel alive, he devoured, stuffing it in with both hands. Anything to stave off the fear that came with being immortal. Fear, yes. If a man began to think he'd never die, he started to wonder what he had to live for, and that way lay deep, dark madness.

After a time, he'd turned to the ways of a wastrel. Wandered Venice and Rome, the Continent and the Celtic islands. Lost himself in wine, but never in women, and not at all in song -- unless he was drunk indeed, and then he bellowed out the filthiest tunes he'd ever heard, challenging something he couldn't put a name to, and tugged every pretty girl or boy who caught his eye, seeking to drown his fears and give him a reason to go on.

Never did work, though. Not for longer than the next morning's hangover, or the brief blazing seconds of coming buried deep inside a shapely lady's cunt or a pert young man's tight, iron-fist-velvet-glove ass. They wanted more than he could give -- and he tried, for sure he did, a time or two. He realized all too soon what they needed wasn't in him to give. His heart. He'd lost that when he kissed the Siren, and hadn't even known it.

So now, staring down at the cause of all his miseries and fears, crouched like a rat in the bottom of a carrion wreck, Danny felt himself grinning again and again, unable to stop, cruel and sharp and white as a shark poised to attack.

He drew his bronze dagger from his belt and played with it, balancing the blade on the back of his hand, then tossing it from palm to palm. The Siren's eyes tracked its motions, but never once did she show a glimmer of any emotion. Not fear, not anger, not surprise. Not resignation, either. Blank and alien as a bird or a fish. She would have

terrified a lesser man, but Daniel had been through far too much to let her startle him now.

"You owe me." He held his dagger up to the light, letting moonbeams play off the thrice-sharpened edge. "I meant to kill you, and I suppose you know as much. Meant to drain you of your godhood and take it for my own. Seems like I've struck out on all accounts. Got the whey and not the cheese. I can't die, but I take no pleasure in living. You did this to me. On purpose, didn't you? You knew what would happen when I tasted your blood, your sex, and your lips. Oh, maybe we didn't fuck, not that first time, not my cock in your cunt, but we felt each other from the inside out, and what is that if it isn't sex?"

He walked slowly back and forth as he spoke, feeling those alien eyes track his every move. "Times have changed, haven't they?" He bent and picked up a handful of grubby sand, letting it trickle through his fingers. Not the sand he'd grown up with. This felt light and fluffy as snow or ash, melting away into nothing, whirled off on the winds that blew and blew and blew, never ceasing.

Gods, but he was tired of living as the wind directed.

"This what you've been reduced to? Scrounging wrecks for a bite, a sup, a drink? You know, I hear tales of things they call vampires. Different words in different languages, but it all boils down to the same. Something that drinks another thing's life force, be it blood or be it soul, so they can go on living."

He cocked his head. "I believe you're one of those monsters, even if you weren't meant to be. You live because people die. Their death, your life. Vampires have fangs, and you have songs. You kill, and you go on."

He paused deliberately. "Well, not all of you, from what I hear. Tell me, woman, where are your sisters? Did they go away when the old gods left?"

She stood up arrow-straight, trigger-fast, chin lifted high. Nary a sound, but he didn't need any words to confirm he'd scraped a nerve. "They did go," he said, pitching his voice lower than the rush of the waves, that never ending foamy crash upon the shores all the world around. It echoed in his dreams, his thoughts. He breathed to the

rhythm of the sea. "They went on, or went away. Into heaven or into oblivion, but you couldn't follow, could you?"

Her hands curled into fists.

"You're as stuck here as I am myself, aren't you?"

She bared her teeth. Sharp teeth, not fit for a pretty lady's mouth, but the sight of them reminded him just in time, this wasn't any plain old woman, but a Siren. A plaything of the gods. No human, no true female. The blood in her veins ran cold as icy seas, and he knew she would kill him in a second if she thought she could.

What stopped her? He didn't know. And he couldn't help but push at her, just testing to see how far he could go before she broke.

"You want to fight?" he whispered, searching for any sign of emotion in her cold eyes, her unfathomable face, seeking any sign that humanity had touched her, as a taste of godliness had suffused his own skin and bones. Something to let him know he wasn't all alone in this wide and fearful world.

It made him laugh, to realize he was hoping -- all but praying -- for a taste of comfort from the one being he wanted most to kill.

Maybe she saw the humor, too, in whatever passed for her way of thinking. Daniel would have sworn he saw the faintest flicker of amusement dart through her, silverfish-fast, then gone.

He expected nothing else to happen. She'd stand there, ankle-deep in rotting entrails and broken driftwood, and stare at him as if she were a statue. He'd sit there on the sand and watch her back. There they would stay until the day broke open overhead. Or until he made a move, if he chose. Fought her once again. Tried to kill her.

It'd been the plan, if he ever laid eyes upon the Siren again. Finish the job he'd started. Take his revenge measured out in ounces of her blood and pounds carved from her flesh. Yet somehow, looking at the woman-shaped creature, his mouth went salt-dry, and he couldn't do more than grip his dagger till the bronze warmed in his palm.

The moment went on forever.

Then, step by step by step, never giving him even a peek of what was going on inside her head, the Siren walked forward through the rubbish around her feet. She stepped into a pool of moonlight, letting herself be seen in all her glory, and oh, but how it stole his breath away.

He'd not realized how beautiful she was. Not human, not animal, nor goddess either, but Venus herself could never have compared. From the billowing waves of her hair, forever swimming about her small face, to the puckered nubs of her breasts to each fragile ankle and dainty toe, she stunned him with her magnificence.

He knew, then, he'd never be able to kill her. Not with blades and blood.

He knew what he wanted most to do, and damn the consequences.

Standing, he cupped his sudden, steely erection through his loose breeches. Offering it to her. "Come on," he goaded. "Let's make an end."

Her reaction startled him, both for being a reaction, and the sort it proved to be. As if alarmed, she stumbled back. Eyes fixed on him, on his cock, she backed up hasty as a scuttering rat, tripping over trash but never quite falling.

Realization dawned slow and sure. "You were made to kill," Daniel voiced out loud to seal the truth of it in words. "Not to love. To want. To need. To hunger. But when I kissed you, you felt the craving for a ride."

She closed her eyes.

"You need what I can give you, don't you? You ache to have me deep inside your cunt." He inhaled. "You don't smell like any woman I've ever known, but I know what's on the air, and it's lust, plain and simple. Human weakness infecting you from deep within."

She moaned and quivered, hands sliding up her own chest to cup her breasts as if they hurt. He bet they did. Burned for the feel of a mouth on them, hot and wet. She must have seen men and women in her travels, wondered at the things they did, remembered Daniel's kiss, and felt the fire blazing deep inside. Terrified of the power of lust, but wanting nothing more. Not even if it meant her death.

Daniel extended his hand. "Come on," he urged. "Come to me. I won't cut you this time. Let's warm the sand in this charnel house with the heat of our bodies. Let's make the sun come up."

She shook her head hard, hair flying as if tornado-tossed.

"I need you," he whispered. "Want you. I've wondered for so long why I'm still alive, and now I think I know. Know why you're around, yourself, when your rocks and your gods and your sisters have gone."

Her belly quivered and the breath caught in her lungs. Daniel could all but taste her desperate need thick as cream on the never-ceasing wind. "I want the peace," he whispered. "Come to me, and let's fight this battle. The oldest battle ever. You and me, and winner takes all, be it life eternal or the sleep of death. Come on. Come to me. Come."

The Siren screamed. Her voice, shrill and harsh, desperate and terrified, scored across Daniel's ears with the pain of piercing claws. His eyes squeezed shut on reflex, but he was quick enough to force them back open just in time to see the Siren running, light as a bird skimming across the skies, down and down to the sea, plunging in and disappearing from his sight.

Gone, then. For the moment. Not forever. He knew, somehow, they'd meet again.

To ease the ache in his balls, Daniel took his cock in hand and pumped it hard, fast, ruthless, until he spilled his seed out on the ashy sand. It smelled as alien as her own juices had to his nose, and despite it all he had to laugh.

He'd call this battle a stalemate, then, and look forward to when they fought again. He had a few ideas on how to turn the tides in his own favor when he saw his Siren next...

Chapter Five

I've had her before, you know. She refused me the first time, but not the second. Couldn't hold out any more than I could.

The second time I asked, not with words, but with actions, I'd come across her on a beach. She likes beaches, likes islands, anything on the water's edge. On the knife's edge, where she was made and meant to live.

She stood still as a pillar of salt, waves lapping all 'round her bare feet. Naked and wholly without shame, her breasts high and tight, nipples puckered tight as tart grape seeds, the smell of her sex on the wind. Oh, she was aching for a man. She might not have known it, but I did. She'd had a taste of me when I cut her, and let her taste the way I burned for sex myself. I went and infected her with lust.

Arms out, palms up, she sang a sad and soft little tune to the waves. Horrifying, it was, fit to chill your blood, but me, I ran hot at the sound and sight of her. Off the islands in the South Pacific, where natives beat drums and strange gods lashed at us for being abominations, we were two outcasts meant to come together.

No finesse, no playing around. She knew I was there, always was able to. She ceased her singing and turned around to face me, nothing but that bird-like blankness in her expression, but her lips parting ever so slightly. Were she a mortal woman, she would have been beckoning me on with sweet words, saying "come fuck me, sailor, and make me see the stars."

So I took her, I did. Rough and ready, neither willing to lavish her body with kisses, nor capable of showing her any sort of tenderness. We were harsh on each other, oh, wrestling one another down into the sand. I pinned her hands above her head and crashed our mouths together like a wave against rocks, all salt and cool wetness. Knew I'd always recognize her taste. I was hard as a stone myself, all but bursting through my

clothes for want of her. She didn't try to help as I fumbled the cloth away, but she arched and keened beneath me so sweet I almost tore my garb just to get at her.

Then, without so much as a tease to her clit, for I was a selfish bastard, I slid my cock up against the tightness of her virgin hole. She flexed, knowing this dance even if she'd never trod the measures before. Opened up sweet as a flower, one of those that grow so stubborn, even lashed by salt on islands that shouldn't exist. I slid in, hard, fast, as she wrapped her legs around my waist.

I thought we would set the beach on fire with our fucking, that night, for I gave, and she gave back as good as she got. I can still feel the python squeeze of her quim gripping my dick like a fist. So tight, so cold-hot, so salty-sweet. I lost myself in her, and I do mean that literally. We changed again, she and I, a little less human, a little less godly.

Didn't stop us from going after each other again, slipping deep inside, her slim ankles locked around my back as she loosed her battle cries in place of gasps of passion. Time after time after time we've fucked each other blind, deaf and stupid, and been eager for another round, until she has to run, or I do, myself.

I've lost count of how many times I've come to orgasm buried in her body, and if I'd owned the same bedpost from then until now there'd be more notches cut furrow-deep than solid wood. You could comb your hair with such a thing, or scale a fish.

More, I can remember every -- single -- encounter. Every time I've had the Siren in my arms, the moment burns itself into my brain, branding irons on raw hide or tattoos on flesh. Might dim a little, soften around the edges, but the mark is there until you die and crumble to dust.

I lose a moment to the swirling black, longing, just for a second, for that sweet oblivion. What did they call it, once upon a time? Drinking from the pool of Styx? Well, even if the Styx still ran deep and wet instead of bone dry, Charon sitting on a crumbly edge playing mumbledy-peg with a handful of coins and molars, I doubt there'd be a drop to spare for the likes of me.

Or her.

We're long past our time, both she and I, and here's the thing -- both of us, we know it. Or I do, and I think she feels the same, so much as I can ever tell what's going on in what passes for her mind. Whatever sits inside her skull, it's not made of the same stuff as mine. I've seen human brains. Pink, gray, throbbing intact or splattered in chunks across a battlefield. Hers can't be made of the same matter.

Always amazes me that from what the scientist types all say, this hunk of meat is what makes us think, love, live, *be*. Never will forget the times I snuck into operating theatres and watched vivisection taking place. Lost my taste for battle after a few of those, 'cause once you've heard those kinds of screams, you ache for a thousand years of quiet, on your knees, begging whatever deity it is that rules the worlds to scrub that sound out of your mind. We're all just meat, yeah? So much meat, with this tiny little spark that keeps us going. We're wind-up toys, and our puppeteers keep passing the strings over to whoever's turn comes next.

Sometimes I think I'm crazy. Sometimes, I know it for a fact. No common sense? More like no sense at all. Because no matter what I do, or how well I talk myself out of it when I'm deep into my cups or sober as a priest, I always end up where I know -- sense -- feel she'll show up next. She's a drug I taste every century or so, and though each time I think I've kicked the habit, one whiff of her salt and sex on the never-ceasing wind and I'm a goner. Can't rest until I've sought her out. Tracked her down. Picked a fight one more time, and each time I find myself hoping that this time it'll be the turning point in our war.

But then, each time, she makes my blood run hot. Hotter than lava boiling from volcanoes, the kind that ate up Pompeii in one big gulp, the Earth's spunk that carries seeds of death, not life. A force of nature you might admire until it kills you.

Yeah. That's me and her.

I suspect, if anyone were watching, they'd think we were things of beauty to behold. Me, time forever stopped when I was young and strong, bronzed by the sun, a glint of mischief always dancing in my eye, limber-supple as a monkey from climbing rigging since I was old enough to walk. I've been mistaken for a god walking about on

Earth, a fallen angel, an alien, and most often lately, a model or a movie star, which does always set me to laughing until the people who've crept up wanting autographs or a photo crab-crawl away, alarmed and thinking I might just be crazy, and you know what? They might just be right. I'm probably madder than a March hare, as they say.

No. I know I am, and it's all down to her. She stole the counting-down clock that tick-tick-ticked inside my veins, each heart-beat sliding toward the final zero, and gave me a battery that would never lose its charge. She stole, or I stole. Probably a bit of both. Attack, revenge, attack, revenge, it's all the same in the end, right?

She won't tell me what I took from her, but I've spent considerable time thinking upon the question, and I think I know the answer. I took away her destiny. I changed her path. She should have gone the way of her sisters and the old gods who made her. When their rock disappeared and the Greek pantheon faded well away, she too should have dissolved into her final rest. But no, she lives on and on, same as I, and though her eyes only ever so rarely show anything like a human sense of feeling, I get the rare glimpse that tells me the story of her deep and dark despair.

She doesn't know how to live, same as me, and neither of us can figure out how to die. Nothing like the mystery that is man and woman to screw up a spiral down the mortal coil, is there?

I'm thinking this is why she chose to give in -- no, not give in, nor give up. Isn't in her nature to quit, as it's not in mine either. She made the decision, some few millennia ago, to stop fighting what she wanted, what she made me burn for, and let me in between her slender, succulent thighs.

When we first fucked, I swear to you the seas all but boiled. My hummingbird heart beat fast, fast, fast as I thrust into her tight, sweet quim, finally there after so many sleepless nights wondering what she would feel like. Though she arched her spine up and let her mouth fall open, she never made a sound. She grabbed at me and held on tight, her hands cold, their flesh not at all warm and willing like a human's, but just as eager to urge me on. I can still feel her chilly legs twining around the small of my back, fragile ankles locking hard as iron shackles.

When I would have paused for breath, maybe a little notion of making this last, she used muscles no man or woman ever thought of owning to clamp down around my cock and squeeze me till I thought I'd burst. Rippling around me in mid-thrust like a thousand tiny tentacles or fingers lived inside the walls of her quim, and each one of them stroked my cock better than a king's favorite courtesan could ever do.

No way I could back off from her touch, because I knew what it meant. She wanted this, she liked this, and she meant to see it through to the natural conclusion. Couldn't have gotten up and walked away if I'd wanted. Never could have, anyway, not before, not during, and not afterwards.

One of us always leaves the other.

You can't call what we do "making love." It's fucking, plain and simple, raw and primal, probably illegal and considered indecently obscene on account of she's not a human, but the way I figure she's not an animal either, and neither of us are what you'd call subject to the laws of whatever land we fetch up in, so I'm not one to get overmuch concerned.

There's no question of consent. She might fight and claw, bite and scratch, but when I test her with fingers that never will lose their shipboard calluses, her quim is always slickly damp with the need for what this is we do together, her muscles quivering with the eagerness to dance.

When I slide my cock in, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, I watch her face ever so careful, because right then is one of the moments I might see an expression. It's ranged, it has, everything from blistering hatred to wide-eyed bliss to a loneliness that is terrible to see. Never gives me any insight into why she changes so from meet to meet, or what might be on her mind, but it gives me a clue as to how this dance should go.

Rage, and I let my tiger loose, eating her up with sharp biting kisses and digging nails that she returns in kind, leaving us both bloody and sore, welted up and walking funny for days afterwards -- me, at least. Wouldn't know about her. She's not one for the afterglow; just gets up soon as she catches her breath, and runs back to the sea.

If she's got that spaced-out glaze of bliss, then I take it down a notch. She likes it kinky, then. Lets me do wicked things no proper lady would consider, from taking her like I would a man, my cock buried in her tight little ass, or riding me as if I'm a boat on the sea, rising and falling with the rhythm of the waves. She might buck me off and climb aboard her own self, just as she pleases.

I like it when she's drunk or drugged or stoned. Maybe that makes me not such a good man, and if so, well, so be it. She lets herself go, then. She lets herself enjoy the fuck and doesn't want it to be more than ships passing in the night, colliding ever so briefly, and then sailing on along.

But then, there are the times she wants it soft and slow. Too close to what they call "making love" for my comfort, because then she needs the kind of tenderness I've long since forgotten how to give. She wants long, steady sweeps of my fingers and mouth, up and down her slender, trembling limbs. Wants me to caress her and pretend to something less threatening than love, but with more feeling than a living dildo could care to give.

Wants me to kiss her, slow and sweet, sweeping my tongue inside her mouth. Tasting her strange and special spicy wine flavor while I thrust lazily in and out of her cunt, gliding slick-slow in the proof of her hunger for me.

If she were mortal, or fully a human female, I think she might cry when we go at the deed that way.

She hasn't asked for it slow and sweet in a couple hundred years. I think she knows better. After one such meet, forty-seven circles around the sun later she sought me out, instead of me to her, and held up a hand when I would have started with our dancing battle. She pressed a tiny square into my palm, wrapped in sailor's oilcloth, and then was gone before I could track how fast she moved.

When I opened up the package, my own face, changed just a bit, stared back at me from a rough oil painting no bigger than a ship's biscuit. My own features, mixed just a bit with hers, and I knew that had been my son, the only child I know myself to

have fathered, and that he'd have been dead then, which was why she let me know about him at last.

Did she do it on purpose? Don't guess I'll ever know. Nor what he was, either -- man or beast or something in between, but mortal at least.

Wish I knew his name.

I think maybe she knows what's going on inside my head, because she makes one of her rare sounds, the kind I'd think was a laugh if I didn't know her better, and I realize *oops*, let myself get distracted. But then she's on me, shredding my daydreams with the sharp talons of her fingernails and sinking down, hard and fast, on my upstanding cock.

And then I change my mind. Yes, she is laughing, in her way -- sounds like a loon-bird screaming to the sky -- as she rises and falls, fucking herself on my cock, her spine arched and her hands digging furrows into her own breasts.

For just a moment, the drums stop pounding, and that's all right, because for me, the world's stopped. Time stands still, and I *remember*...

Chapter Six

He saw her next on board the *Mary Celeste*. Ever afterward he'd laugh, listening to old salts and young imps full of wide-eyed wonder. What could have happened to all them poor folk? Gone, with nary a trace as to when or how or why.

Daniel liked it best when he heard those tales swapped round about from mouth to mouth in a pub at night, when he could sit by his lonesome in a corner and sup all the bitter ale he wanted, listening so long as he pleased.

Never did pipe up and tell a soul of them the truth, though. What would be the point? They got far more fun out of wondering and spinning yarns about things they had no real clue for, than they would with a simple "The Siren did it."

Besides which, then there would be questions, and he mostly figured any honest answers would be laughed at as one of the wilder lies, or get him strung up for consorting with the devil.

After living so long already he felt pretty sure he wouldn't die dangling, but he didn't look forward to anyone else finding that out by trial and error. Who knew what they'd try next? He might not be able to die, sure, but he felt pain just fine.

Thanks, but no thanks. Daniel knew enough to keep his mouth shut. All the same, when the men started spinning out their stories, if he got bored he'd let his eyes fall halfway closed, and he'd remember how it really was.

Idle and unable to sleep, he'd nicked a dinghy from his fishing boat and rowed on out into the fog. Couldn't see the stars, but it made no never-mind. If he got lost, well, he'd just keep on going until he saw land yet once again.

What he saw first was the *Mary Celeste*, floating dead and stilly-calm on the precisely rippling water. Any sailor worth the salt he rode on could tell when a ship was full of life, and when it had become a floating tomb, whether the corpses it held

were made up of meat and bone or nothing but memories and ghosts. The *Mary Celeste* was empty as a dead man's tomb.

Yet he'd sensed something. Felt a presence. Known it was her, even before the crooning notes of a lullaby tinkled out onto the murky air, curling in wisps and tendrils like the song of a phantom. Appropriate enough. Danny had grinned, tossed anchor, and swum the rest of the way.

She'd been there, she had, and he suspected she'd known he was coming, for she was waiting for him. The ghosts danced pavaanes about her, whirling wispy specters that curled like smoke. She watched with her lifeless animal eyes, tracking each one as she might a fish for dinner. Not smiling, but all the same, he felt her savage glee and her fearful despair.

For once, he didn't say a word. Didn't have to. Though she didn't look at him, not once, the Siren lay down upon her back, spreading wide her thighs and slipping a hand down to caress her quim. She parted the lips with two sea-green fingers and let him see inside. Wet, pulsing with the slow rhythm of her heart. Wanting to be filled with a live man's cock, to make her feel -- what? Alive? Daniel didn't know, but by the gods he was still a male and while he could have said no, walked away and left her wanting, he chose not to.

That night, upon his knees, he dipped his face between those wanton thighs and licked her cunt from stem to stern, tasting every nub and ridge of flesh. Salt, blood, sex, and pure need.

He made her crazy by nipping where it would hurt a mortal woman, by thrusting his tongue deep into her quim in a not-enough, not-enough penetration that made her twist and writhe, still soundless, but tearing at her own arms as she came again and again, muscles clamping down on his tongue and fingers.

He drove her past the point of no return, not stopping when he knew she would be sore, realizing she craved the pain of too much, too fast, as much as she did the pleasure of his tongue rasping her nub or his fingers stretching her hard and cruel deep inside. Just not deep enough, never deep enough.

When she finally screamed, he lifted his face, smeared to shining with her oils, and laughed to the moon like a baying wolf. Then he gave her what she wanted. Tore into her hard and fast, feeling her quake and shake beneath him, too far gone to even grasp him in return. He could feel her coming in a steady stream, each orgasm rolling into the next, waves crashing to shore, and filling her fit to burst through her skin. He felt as if he were a god, fucking her to life, making her more human still, and when his balls drew up tight, he had a taste of her own crazed pleasure-pain as the seed all but exploded from his cock. He painted her from the inside, listening to her wail and sing, unable to keep silent, even here.

Being a man, he'd felt his eyes roll back in his head, and he'd fallen asleep on top of her with a brief hope she wouldn't suffocate. No worries. When he woke an hour later she was gone, leaving behind the rich, flavorful reek of too much sex, blood, and briny salt. Her tears had burned little circles and trails into the wood.

He didn't know what she'd done with the good folk of the *Mary Celeste*, nor did he care. Maybe she'd killed them all -- paralyzed them with her song, and tossed them overboard one by one by one. More than like that was the answer.

But sometimes, he wondered. Fancied maybe she'd been hunting for clues to the riddles that plagued her own heart and soul, and when she couldn't find any, or perhaps when she did, caused them all to cease to be. Not needed any more.

Or possibly, she ate them.

Something had happened to drive her wild. But, Daniel reflected, ever and always, as he sipped his ale, his Siren had lost another ounce of her animal nature that night. He knew it sure as anything. She'd given in to the urges of a wild woman, and become something more like human, just as he felt the new strength of a waking god thrumming in his sinew and hide.

He kept quiet about it, though. Quiet, but intended full well to get some answers when he saw her next...

Chapter Seven

Now don't get me wrong, I have no problems with sex in this position. Might have done when I was young and somewhat more a fool than now, but times have changed, and if I haven't so much myself, at least I know enough to fall in line.

Men used to say lying on your back was the woman's place, down in the dirt, while big old muscles and machismo pounded her like plugging posts into holes. Then they'd laugh great big white-toothed guffaws, drink another skin or two of wine too young to taste good, and go off to rut with one another.

It does make me want to shrug and toe the sand when someone lumps me in with the entire gender.

But I can comfort myself. I don't have to be one of them. Don't have to be like them, because really, I'm not. I am me, and she is she, and when every so often the twain shall meet we can do whatever we damn well please.

I can tell she likes it, riding the buck and arch of a man's hips, clamping my cock vise-hard with those deep inner muscles of hers, and I pause to wonder -- does she take other bedfellows? I don't say lovers, because I don't suspect she can so much as love. Not the way most humans account for the emotion, or want to have it in return. Never seen her with clothes or coins, either, so there's no way to tell.

Be a fine joke on me if she makes herself a grand living dressing in the best of the tawdriest of each age, and stands on street corners singing ever so softly to herself, drawing men and women all alike into her arms, into her belly, cock and cunt and meat and bones and blood.

Then I think, well, that's a dumb notion if I ever heard one. Sex? For her, for me, it's all a war. She fights, and I fight back. Sometimes I forget whose turn it is to strike a blow, but it's no matter when we've come together on a beach. Times like now, it's only

me and her and the emptiness that would once have been the gods en masse, a-watching.

Watching her, poised high and sinking down, her eyes shut tight, I think I'd think this was pleasure for a mortal woman. Her, though, she's getting what her hungry quim craves most, but -- not, either. There's a tension in her legs as they grip me, side by side, thrumming like a guitar string that's just been plucked sharp and brutal. Reverb that goes on forever. It makes me laugh. Everything about her is music.

Not pretty little ditties and sweet sounding lullabies, oh, no. My Siren, she is song as it was meant to be. A weapon of the gods, not blunted in the least by time.

Then her eyes flash open, and I can tell she's felt me probing at her intentions. She doesn't like that. Can't get too close, no matter how little sense that makes. She won't let me fall in love with her, nor herself with me, time and tides and a long-dead sailor child notwithstanding. She will not ever, no never, give up that last drop of whatever it is that's keeping her alive -- maybe me too, come to think on it.

She gives her head a clockwork tilt down to fix those blank black eyes on me, and I cannot help a shudder. She is beautiful as she is terrible, for all the slightness of her size and the lightness of her heft. I know she's a killer, and has no remorse for the lives she's eaten up.

Why, then, do I feel such awful sadness beaming from her center like the tears of the moon? If she could cry, I think she would want to. Scream and beat her breast, the way I'm sure she's seen mortal women mourners do, for all that's gone by and she will never have again.

These are strange thoughts to have when we're both naked as newborn souls and fucking like lusty whores, the both of us, because I believe I qualify for the title and I might just wear it with some pride. All the same, I don't like the way her sorrow reaches out smoky, foggy tendrils trying to grasp and curl around my heart. Can't be having that, not now, not when I have planned what I have planned. No sleeves to hide my secrets in, but I'm fair certain she can't read my mind.

If she could second-guess me on any hidden plans, she'd have run from this African beach, this fire, this sand warmed and wetted by the sweat of our rutting bodies, before we even got so far as letting me thrust deep and warm and hard into her quim. She'd have denied herself what she wanted before she'd have given me the satisfaction.

Right enough she should have. But I wonder, as I look up at her, still rising and falling in a slow and easy rhythm that could last us the long night through, if maybe she *does* know what's on my mind. Has an inkling of my notions, anyway, and doesn't mind so very much.

Maybe she'd even welcome it, herself. I don't know, and have no idea how I'd ever be able to tell, unless I ask her. Then I'm laughing, because yes, indeed, I *am* a man, and not able to ferret out the simple answers when they're right under my nose. Ask her, of course, fool that I am! I believe she'll be inclined to listen, and as another vine of vaporous grief twines round my heart, I think she may just agree with the thoughts weighing anchor heavy on my mind.

But one last dance, right? One more to set the world on fire, boil the oceans salt and hot, and bring the stars down in a rain of dreadful death and hail. Oh, but it will be glorious, when we put an end to this everlasting waltz.

Until then, I'll give it all I've got. I'll tread the measures with a right good will, and give my Siren a taste of harmony like she's never had before, at least not from me.

I admit the truth now, see. To myself, and soon, to her. Doesn't matter if she isn't ready to hear the words. If she isn't yet, well, she never will be, and I don't feel up to another millennium or so of this circling round and round.

Her black eyes widen just a bit when I let rip with a wild, maniacal laugh, and I'd swear I heard a gasp of surprise when I reach up and seize her by the bloody forearms. A roll, a twist, and then she is beneath me, pressed deep into the sand by my weight.

Then I'm on her, hungry as only an old sea dog can be, all teeth and claws, both painted red by nature's one true brush. I'm horny as a sailor who's not laid eyes on a woman in a hundred moons, and I want her more than air, than water, than breath...

than life. I cover her palm-sized breasts first with my big rough hands as I plunder her honey-salty mouth, falling open oh so sweetly under my attack. I know her, and I know this is how she wants our meet to go.

We've played at soft and sweet, but now is not the time for games. This is life, this is death, and this is us, in the raggedy line between. This is where it's all primal as the earth and sea, where nothing matters but how good her pulsing cunt feels gripping my cock as if she'll never let me go. I want to show her that for all she's done to me, and I to her, I'm not ungrateful for some of what's passed between us.

So, with one last suck and bite of her chilly lower lip, I turn my mouth's attention to those breasts, covering them with the evidence of my -- yes, I will say it -- love. Lust. Whatever it is that lies between us, it really does defy any words that try to describe the feeling. And it makes me laugh to realize, once again, that for all her blank, void black eyes, she *feels* our connection as I do myself.

It's bound us together for all time. You can't not feel a tie so strong as ours, no matter who or what you might happen to have become.

She arches beneath me sweet as a bowing wave, salty as the tide rushing out and away, and her arms come up to clutch me tight. There's urgency in her own movements now. She doesn't want this chorus to hit the last go-round, herself, but all good things end, and she's too much for even a man so practiced as me to last against forever.

I can't hold back any longer, no more than the sun can stop its chasing of the moon for envy of its golden glow, and when she bears down next and bites my shoulder with her sharp and pointy teeth, I let it go, let it all go, and feel the orgasm swallow us both alive. Jonah and the whale. Down, down, down, spiraling to oblivion in the belly of this beast with a double back, laughing like a wild hyena or a lunatic seal as I plunge into the dark of deathlike sleep, spent and limp in her arms.

As I struggle for breath, I feel the faintest, most hesitant of brushes along the sweat-slick arch of my spine, and I realize she's trying to caress me. The timid nature of her gesture undoes me as nothing else could possibly ravel me apart both heart and body and soul, and I can't bear to know she cares enough to be gentle.

Gentleness isn't part of what we are, or who we have become. And I can't do this if she's sweet as a lissome lass of old, even in the tiniest way.

I draw out of her and slither to my feet, graceful as if I walked the decks of that ship of so long ago. There's no belt, and so there's no dagger, but I put my hand to my waist and grin down at her. It's the grin of a crazy man, a fellow with nothing left that he minds the losing of, and I know she knows what I want for after-play.

Her eyes say nothing, but she returns my savage glee, and raises herself like a heron onto the balls of her feet. She balances light as a feather, deadly as a cobra, ready to strike when I give the word.

Soon, she'll know how I have planned to end this fight.

"Come on," I taunt, feinting at her. Man to animal to deposed goddess to fallen angel, that's what we are, and the Earth shall tremble when we fall. "Come on, songstress mine. Let's finish out the tune."

And so it is how our final battle does commence.

Chapter Eight

Daniel couldn't say as that he liked the colonies. Or rather, hadn't liked the colonies as they were. Dour men and dried-up women, dull black and blinding white, nary a smile to be found among them that wasn't considered sinful, and the terrifying conviction that their God was on their side and they themselves could do no wrong.

Daniel didn't know as he could say if they were truly sent upon a mission, but he knew for a fact they believed it with a holy fervor, and that scared him halfway across the country fast as he could run. Nothing worse than a monster who believed he had the favor of the gods.

Also, as it happened, they'd taken one look at his dark-tanned skin, tumbling brown curls, and denounced him an imp of Lucifer. Deciding he still didn't feel like finding out what'd happen when someone tried to hang him and failed, he'd scarpered off one night and spent a century or so traveling amongst the native tribes. Made more than a few friends, most of whom were wise enough to recognize he was not the god others would have him be -- just a man, whose life had been forever changed.

He'd come to trust one creature who called itself a god, name of Pe-Ben, who'd seen it all and never batted an eye. Daniel retained his sense of humor, the story of his life, and the memory of the woman-Siren-beast he'd been tangled up with since days of long gone by.

Pe-Ben listened to his tale, nodding soberly whenever Danny paused, and then sat in silence when the tale was told. After a moment's deep contemplation, he'd set about packing a pipe with the finest narcotic compound he had to hand, and passed it over with the flicker of a grin.

Danny had to laugh as he took the pipe. He'd have used different words back then, but thinking about it a couple centuries later, he knew what the winter god had

been saying without any words at all: "You're truly screwed, my friend. I don't see any way out, so you might as well get stoned and forget about it while you can."

A good plan with no drawbacks as long as the buzz lasted, and Danny had spent a normal man's lifetime floating in a narcotic haze.

The Siren never approached him during that span of years, but he figured it would be due to him being rooted, for once, in the middle of dry land that spread as far as the eye could see. She'd need to be near water, that one, and, well, after a while he shook off his hashish haze and realized, so did he.

The ocean called to him, beckoning him back to its salty breast, and unable to help himself he rose up one day and stumbled his way to the opposite shore from where he'd landed, down the coastline to the sandy beach, and to the water's edge. Dipping in one foot, grown hard and tough as horn from leagues of barefoot walking, he'd felt a shiver in his timbers almost better than an orgasm. The bliss of coming home, even if ecstasy were tainted by ergot insanity.

Mad? Yes, mad, and he knew that then with a cheerful sort of acceptance that made it all easy to be borne. Giving up the effort to be rational broke some shackles from his limbs and lifted a hump of worry from his back. He didn't have to try to make the world make sense any more. Just went along for the ride, come what might, and found himself re-learning how to laugh.

It'd been far too long since he'd let himself go and put some effort into enjoying this unnatural life instead of fretting over it. Felt good. Felt free. No worries, no cares, no concerns.

He fell in with a fishing village and laughed at the self-made barons who tried to lord it over all this land -- fools to a man. Didn't they see, couldn't they realize, how fleeting fickle power? You might think you'd got the whole world gripped tightly by the balls, but it'd twist loose and then where would you be? Mansions built on shifting sand, and oh, but how he knew how well those dreams did crumble.

Still, what concern to him? He laughed and drank, danced all the reels he liked with the pretty lasses who caught his eye, and even learned to play the fiddle.

Occasionally, he begged the loan of a rowboat from a neighbor and paddled out a ways into the briny blue.

He could stay there for days, he could, lying on his back and watching clouds float lazily past, making up stories about the shapes they took as they rolled across the skies of blue and gray. As blue a blue as the waters of his youth, of golden years long swallowed by the past, himself one of the two crumbs left on the table of time.

The moment his Siren entered the waters he called his own, Danny knew. Idly, he wondered if they were like magnets, forever drawing like to like no matter how far they had been flung apart. How else to explain the way she kept coming back, as he did himself?

He could admit he sailed out with mostly curiosity, wondering if she might put in an appearance. Still, when he saw her at last, he had to laugh, and laugh, and laugh. His poor Siren!

Seemed she'd found her last transition challenging as he, and become even less the force of nature she once had been, far more weak and human for what they'd done together. She'd struggled to find a path to slither-swim and walk on land with legs made for dancing in the sea. Pitiful, it was, to see her body, made and meant to wear nothing but glorious skin, swaddled up in a mess of clothing and rag-tag fashions.

She'd not gotten her details right, for she wore a Quaker cap that covered all her billowing green hair. In contrast to the stark clothing that seemed to itch and chafe her most dreadfully, she'd painted over her lush green lips with clumsy crimson cosmetics, drawn clown-circles of pink on her salt-white cheeks, and tried to conceal her blank black eyes behind the dark glasses affected by the blind. The overall effect was hilarious yet pitiful, and it touched his heart.

When they met on the beach, he wasn't sure if she heard him coming, or simply chose to ignore him. "Woe is me, ah, woe is me," he'd said, ever so soft. "I've lived seven lives on land, and seven in the sea."

Her shoulders stiffened, and he'd known that she understood, but didn't like it one single bit. Danny had crouched behind her, balancing on his haunches, and kept his

voice soft and low. Coaxing her to turn around as he might a skittish alley cat like as not to bolt and run if he chanced to startle her.

"It's as bad for you as it is for me, isn't it?" he asked. "We don't belong. Neither of us do. We've tried. Suppose I've had better luck than you, and I've enjoyed my time on this piece of land, but it's soon I'll have to sail away again. A man can't stay young forever and in the same place. People ask questions they don't want the answers to, and what they don't understand, they try to kill. You know how it goes."

The Siren had shivered, curling in on herself just a bit. Enough to let him taste a breath of her despond and sorrow. She radiated *lonelylonelylonely* as did the waves of heat from a funeral pyre.

Watching her, balanced ever so wobblingly on the knife's edge between humanity and otherness, Danny felt a sudden and deeply strong urge to touch his Siren as he never had before -- in gentleness.

To lay his hand upon her narrow shoulder and squeeze for the sake of comfort, not in passion or in war. Images flicker-flashed through his mind: notions of taking her to the small shanty he called home, washing off her paint and burning the ludicrous, ill-fitting rags she'd tried to don as a disguise.

Maybe hiring a fancy lady, one from San Francisco, who'd never bat an eye because she'd seen many a stranger thing in her day and knew the price of silence down to the penny. Have the doxy come in and teach his Siren how to paint herself up proper and dress in things that felt good, soft to the skin.

He thought, next, of making them a fishing boat after the fashion of a Romany wagon, a home to float upon the water, where they could sail the world with no one to care how they looked or why they never did grow old. Perhaps to see if they might have another child, if she allowed him that deep inside again. To understand her, as he never had, despite all that had passed between them.

To love her, as he'd never let himself, and to win her love back in return.

All this and more swam through his mind like a flock of silver-fish thoughts, coming and going quick as the breeze, while he rubbed his Siren's far too slender

shoulder and felt how hard she trembled. Slowly, she turned to look over her shoulder at him. One greenish hand came up to take off her glasses.

Danny stifled a curse when he saw her eyes, and how they had changed. Still wild, still feral, still nothing like a human's, but for one moment she let him in and he saw all the pain and confusion that tormented her version of a soul.

He knew, then, she'd given up the fight to find a life on land, to be the normal woman half her blood demanded, and was going back to sea. Back to watery ground for another hundred years -- but she had wanted to see him first. Maybe wanted him to see how she had tried. For his sake? For her own? Probably both.

Danny nodded, and reckless but careful, leaned his curly head against her own, wrapping his arm around her waist. She shuddered and shook in his grasp, and if she had been able, he knew she would have been weeping sore for all long lost and that which would never come to pass.

How much longer would this go on? He knew she wanted to know, but he had no answers, and so after a time, his Siren grew still once more. She took a deep breath and stood, tall as her slight stature would allow. Casting a glance down at Danny, she put hands to her tight and starched clothing, ripping it into laundered shreds that fluttered to earth like dying moths.

Naked once more, as she was meant to be, his Siren placed both hands upon her hips, and gave him a long, intense look, studying him up and down.

He grinned at her and shook his head. "We'll meet again, I guess," he said. She nodded, and as was her wont, ran lightly and soundlessly away down the shore, plunging into the sea.

He stood and watched her wake until she vanished altogether, feeling her grief tainting his own heart. He'd been a fool to make so merry, but now his eyes were open. They didn't belong, either of them, not in the sea nor less on land, not in this day and age, and not walking among others who might tell their tales.

Their story had been a long time in the writing, but everything deserved an end. In the sunset light, watching the love of his life swim away from him once again

because she could not bear to stay. It was then Daniel made up his mind. He would hunt until he found a way to write 'the end' and close the book on the story of the sailor and the Siren.

He reckoned it was up to him, as well it should be. His meddling had begun the tale, and now he would pay his due by wrapping up the threads.

It would be his wedding-gift, a few millennia too late.

The thought made him smile, then laugh once again, out loud, wild and free, until he fancied he felt the earth shudder away from the manic pealing of his mirthless glee...

Chapter Nine

It ends as it began, this night, so much like the way we started off, I'm hard put to stifle down my whoops of laughter. I haven't been much for the mirth in recent centuries, and seems like now I've loosed a giggle and tasted of the tang of humor, I'm drunk on it as a boy who's gotten into a cask of unripe wine.

Hyenas in the wilds behind us start to howl and keen, as if they sense here, here is someone who understands the primal joy of letting everything go for the hunt, the fuck, the kill, the end of all that drives a being.

I like hyenas. These local villagers don't, but they know enough to treat the beasties with a healthy dose of respect. I wonder if they think I'm like them -- a wild creature, neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring. I wonder if they know how right they are.

But I suspect they have a clue, for as the Siren and I circle each other, slow, slow, slowly around the blazing bonfire, the sound of their drums picks up in its pace until it's rapid tattoo fast as a pounding heartbeat. The sound rattling in the chest of a man who's run farther and faster than a mortal body can withstand. If I weren't already mad, the sound they make would drive me there.

Watching her, my Siren, I see how the not-quite music affects her, too. She's tensed and poised, ready for the leap and attack, but every few moments she has to stop, almost reeling, as if the music's a poison unfurling in her veins. Toxin that'll bring her down to dust, and she feels both the agony and ecstasy of this wild and feral song. Might be closer to music than anything she's heard in millennia.

"They know," I say, my voice ever so soft. She hears me, I know she does, for her black eyes snap open and focus on me. I still can't tell what's passing through her mind, but I imagine it's curiosity. Questioning, dread, and maybe just a dash of hope.

I think about this, and then decide I'm sure. If I just let myself go, ride on a wave of drumbeats as if they were the music she understands, I get a glimpse into her mind. It's a fantastical and frightening place in there. Thoughts aren't set up like humans organize patterns inside their heads -- it's all a jumble of light and sound, movement and stillness, rushing rhythms of ocean tides and deeper music than men were meant to hear and live.

But also, deep down, there's a flat-line thread stuck through her like a barb of wire -- that taste of humanity I inflicted on her with kiss and dagger back on the Grecian seas. It's twisted and needled all these many years, making her not know herself as she was meant to do, and she has never known how to understand this strangeness in herself.

Maybe that's why she's sought me out from time to time -- me, who she hates enough to kill, and craves enough to fuck like a wild thing. She got a taste of uncut life, and has never been able to know if she should devour more until there's nothing left but blessed peace, or try to purge it from her system.

She loves it and she loathes it, just as she does myself, and what I did to her.

"They know," I say again, moving slow and stealthy around the bonfire. Circles, circles, circles, her following across the way, mirroring me every move for move. "We belong in a book, you and me. Some legend professor types pick apart. We're not real, not in the ways that matter. We've lasted long beyond our time, and they know this age is drawing to an end." I pause. "Do you?"

She stands still for a moment, hair floating about her face. Snakes, plumes of steam, billows of water, wind in the sails of the ships of old. Green as the sea, soft as otter-pelt. I ache to touch it. Run my hands through the ever-moving strands, twine them around my fingers to feel them forever moving with the pull of the ocean. Wet with her own salty sweat and mine, sticky with the leftover memories of our fucking in the rocky sands, flushed pale blue and breathing in deep gasps. I can almost hear and feel what I've said ticking over in her mind, silverfish-swimming into something she can understand.

And then I feel it -- the sweet taste of relief. Almond sugar in my mouth, bitter as death and sweet as love. She knows, she does, and more, she accepts it. She's glad as I am to make an end. But as she looks at me, I fancy I can read her questions in the air: How? Why? When?

"It'll be a simple thing," I say, ceasing in my circling of the fire because to be plain, I'm too tired to keep on moving. By the gods, I am so, so tired, and I don't want to move another step. "I spent a while figuring it out, but I know how to call the end to the dance we're caught in. I did you wrong, bad and awful wrong, with what I did on that Greek ship so long ago. I thought I'd prove what a big tough man I was, taking down a Siren. Didn't count on what would happen when I tasted your blood and you tasted my dagger.

"We got mixed up, somehow.

"Blood magic, sex spellwork, the meddling of the gods or their whimsical idea of punishment, I don't know. Don't expect I ever will. But they're gone now, and we needn't dance to their tune if we don't want. That's the thing about giving up all that weighs you down. If you have nothing left, you have nothing left to lose. Do you see?"

She tilts her head a little to the left. Oh, yeah, definitely curious now, and hungry for what I'm promising to give.

"Simple," I promise. "It'll be so simple, and then we'll be at peace."

A long shiver runs through her body. Watching it is like seeing a woman caught in the grip of climax -- it's a motion she cannot hope to control. It's ugly and it's beautiful, unearthly and tied down by humanity. That shiver seems to be a mirrored reflection of all she is, and all I have become.

Shiver. A glorious way to say Yes, please.

"Come to me," I say, as I've done a thousand times, but not with the same old tone. I'm not challenging or daring her on this go-round -- I'm asking. Letting her know if she trusts me, I'll take care of her. She flicks her gaze from my face to my feet and back again, but there's no tooth or claw in the weight of her eyes.

She's ready, and yes, oh, yes, it seems she's just as willing, too, for she steps out of her battle stance and walks around the fire toward me. She's not trying to seduce or charm or fight, just treading light as a fairy and timid as a girl, step by step by step closer to the gift that ends it all.

Watching her, I let myself revel in the sure and certain knowledge. Whatever else has passed between us, I love this woman, my Siren, more than life itself. She's in my heart -- she *is* my heart -- and I want to let her know as much. In fact, I have to, for this to work.

She's standing inches away from me now, her hands making aborted swims toward me and back. Doesn't know what to do. That's all right. I'll teach her, and we'll go gently out together on the tide.

I let myself go and do what I've ached to do for far too long: I wrap my arms around her tiny bones and draw her to me, hard against the solid wall of my chest, and hug her tight as if I never will let go. I let her feel all the love I have for her, and enfold her in it like a smoky blanket.

She draws in a sharp breath, and I know she understands, but she is willing yet, and her slender arms reach around to grasp me in return. The way she loves isn't like the way a human woman would give her heart, but I know, with still calm certainty, she's long since given it into my keeping and is letting me confirm my hope.

We stand still for a long, long moment, the drums and waves and hyenas filling our ears, rushing in and rushing out, inescapable as breath and blood and the urge to find your one true soul mate satisfied at last.

We wasted so much time, she and I. I spare a moment for wishing I could go back in time and do this all over again, but then I put that thought aside. It's funny, but I know how some dreams are impossible, even for two creatures who defy all laws of life by their plain existence. We throw the world into chaos, and now it's time to let this bubble of peace surrounding us spread to the rest of the lands and seas.

I ask, my lips brushing her cool scalp beneath her soft, soft hair: "Are you ready, love?"

She nods, nestling her cheek against my chest.

I can feel her question, almost as if I were hearing her say it out loud. Her, who's never spoken a word in any language save for that of music. It's her native tongue, and I don't think she's got the ability to learn any other. She wasn't made with the gift at hand, when all she was ever meant to say could come out in song. It's her song that started our journey together, and it's her song that will bring the circle closed. I pause for one last kiss atop my Siren's head, palm cupping the fragile bones of her skull, and let my love wash over her from tip to toe.

Then I whisper: "Sing to me."

She pulses out a wave of shock, and so I know I'll have to press a bit. "Sing," I say, kissing my way down her face -- forehead, eyelid to eyelid, nose, cheeks, chin, and finally her lips. I say the word once more against her lips, letting her feel the life within my breath. "Sing."

And she understands. Cold hands steal up to cup my cheeks and press them flat. Her mouth seals over mine, and it's like a cork comes loose in both of us as her song pours into my mouth and I swallow the notes whole, taking them deep, deep, deep inside. The sorrow and the joy in her music, only dimly heard, brings a terrible pain and a fearful glory to my heart. This is her, this is me, and this is how we've lived and loved. It's the story no one will ever get written down, and she's spinning it to me one liquid golden note at a time.

Sweet, sweetest poison, and it does what I'd hoped it would do. I taste her music, flooding into me, and I feel the moment when the taste of her mouth and the song combine to make this half-halted transformation complete. She passes over every drop of what makes her immortal and stuck, giving it to me, and I accept it as my due.

I feel her shiver, shake, quiver and quake, and I smell the musky salty smell of sex as she twines her limbs about mine limpet-like. I almost want to laugh, because it occurs to me that this is what we've never done, not ever once before. This is making love.

It is a thing of beauty.

Her music ebbs away soft and slow, the tide rushing away from land, becoming less and less a thing of deadly beauty, slipping into a sweet and crooning song that any ordinary woman might bring forth, and when she goes off-key I know: it's worked, and it is done.

Her lips are warm as sunlight roses beneath my own, and her hair falls soft and sleek over my fingers, no longer forever moving with the power of her magics. Her scent loses its spice of power, and becomes nothing more than the richness of a woman who's been fucked and loved and been given the breath of life.

Life, yes, because that was my plan, and any gods still left were smiling because the thing has been accomplished. Almost. One bit yet to go.

I draw back, but I don't need to breathe. I feel my hair begin to swim about my head in a floating nimbus, and sense the warmth draining out of me fast as water through a sieve. The last traces of humanity seep out of my skin with a burst of enchantment, and then it's done.

We stand together on the shore, surrounded by the bonfire and the beating drums, and look each other face to face. Her eyes are a heartbreaking blue, pooling with the tears she's never once been able to shed. She breathes shakily, in and out, in and out. Terrified, but determined. I can no longer speak to ask her if she's sure, if she's ready, but then again, I don't expect I have to. I can see it in her eyes.

I can see a woman I wish I'd had the chance to know and love.

She raises up on tiptoe and kisses me again, her newly warm lips to my oh-so-cold ones. I feel her smile, and the gesture makes everything worth it. She's ready, and so am I.

Gentle as a whisper, I slip my bronze dagger into her heart and twist. She stiffens and arches, but she doesn't make a sound of pain. Even as her newly-wakened lungs give a rattle for breath that will not come, she's pressing one last kiss to me. Thanks. Forgiveness. Relief.

And then, she's dead. Crumpling away from me to lie rag-doll limp upon the sand.

I wish that I, too, could cry. But I know what's coming next. See, I know what kept her alive. My sure and certain knowledge that Sirens were real. No lip service belief, but a balls and bones and blood certainty that she existed. It kept her tied here, and bound to a life she could never understand, with only this strange love between us to make her want to carry on.

But now she's gone, and there's no one to believe I am real. Not in the way that matters. I have but one moment to throw my head back, and loose, instead of wildling laughter, a song that explodes with rapture and triumph to the stars, and then all is black, and I am --

Epilogue

Pe-Ben came across the article during a dull moment, one of those that always seem to happen when a man's trying to get things accomplished in the online world. Instant messages dry up to silence as people get distracted by this or that, no fresh e-mails or vibes land in the box, and sites aren't being updated while their operators take a break. In the lulls is when people go idly surfing around, sifting through the tangled patterns of the "web" for anything to pass a moment's worth of time.

The picture was what caught his eye first of all. A close-up shot of a face he knew all too well from the time they'd spent together in his lodgings. Devil-may-care, though he didn't believe in devils, laughing aloud as if he'd challenge the gods he knew to have long faded away. Danny. Daniel. The man who'd hovered on the cusp between man and god for thousands of years, all for the love and challenge bound up in his Siren and her song. When they'd met, Daniel's deep and burning ache for peace had sorrowed Pe-Ben's soul.

It looked to him as if Danny had found his long-sought-after rest at last.

Shaking his head in wonder, Pe-Ben traced the features immortalized in a digital photograph. Features carved of sand, fragile as a column of ashes, with nothing to suggest he had even lived and laughed and loved. Not unless you knew him. Then, you might look twice and see the glee that could not be hidden in this, his final death.

He had tasted immortality, and paid the price with a song in his heart.

Pe-Ben scanned the rest of the article, and it told him all he needed to know. A party of tourist hunters had gotten lost in the African jungles and emerged with the sunrise on an isolated strand of beach. There, they'd seen a marvel, and someone had been canny enough to snap pictures: a sculpture of drying sand, already blowing away bit by bit in the winds off of the ocean. A man and a woman, clasped together in an

embrace, looking at each other, eye to eye. So realistic one would swear they had been snatched out of time and this was their echo, left behind.

The pictures were all that remained, now. One of the hunters had been fool enough to try and touch the woman's shoulder, and under his clumsy paw the sand had shifted, crumbled, and collapsed into a mound of powder that blew away like dried salt, melting into the sea. But as it disappeared, they'd found a bronze dagger and taken it with them, retreating fast as they possibly could, but with pictures and story yet to share.

No comment yet on the origin of the blade, but Pe-Ben knew it from old. He'd seen it once, and knew there would soon be talk of how on earth such an ancient thing had made its way from the place in history it belonged in to the center of an eerie sculpture on the beaches of Africa.

They would wonder forever, but Pe-Ben knew they'd never know the truth. Only he carried the secret now, and it would be his burden forever after.

He touched the screen one more time, heart heavy with the ache of loss and love given not wisely at all, but far too well. *Life is short*, he found himself thinking. *Even if you live forever, life is far too short to waste a moment denying yourself the love you've always needed to go on.*

With a small sigh and a nod, Pe-Ben closed the news feed screen and turned back to his member page on the PMS website. He'd had his doubts about Sirensong, the green-haired, white-faced woman who so desperately hunted among the lost and lonely on the website, and feared for her fate when he'd heard the former owner had matched her with someone *very* special. The old devil! He loved his mischief far too well, he did. As for the sand? Well, he supposed there was the end to one tale, and a clue as to the beginning of another. The man who'd sent him a vibe had mentioned sand. This was a sign not to be disregarded.

Half-closing his eyes and smiling, he settled down to wait, savoring the curious swell of peace that rose within him, rushing and ebbing, sure and certain as the tides.

Lia Connor

Lia Connor supposedly lives in the South, but her job takes her almost everywhere but there. Her laptop is her best friend as she travels.

She's thrilled to be working with Changeling Press. She loves to write about the truly strange and unusual. Lia would love to hear from you. You can contact her at liaconnor@gmail.com