



**The Siren's Bloom**

**By**

**Kate September**

## **The Siren's Bloom**

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**Kate September**

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my father, K.C., who always believed in me, and to my mother, Lucy, who taught me the beauty and power of words.

## The Siren's Bloom

### Chapter 1

"I don't like the sky, sire," General Soren said, glancing up at the darkening clouds that promised wind and snow.

"We have little choice but to press forward," said Tymon, prince regent of the seaside kingdom of Del'Alfia. "We are already two days behind the rest of the regiments in returning home. I'll not tarry longer."

"The tarrying was for a worthy cause called peace negotiations," Soren joked, sliding a glance at his grim-faced companion. The battle-scarred man couldn't help but admire the handsome visage of the olive-skinned prince. Tymon had his choice of ladies at court for his amusement, with his long black hair, noble features and piercing blue eyes. Soren couldn't even compete with him in terms of soldierly physique. Tymon was no soft princeling who stayed behind and let his subjects fight his battles. No, Tymon, son of Taemon, fought with a skill and ferocity that had already made him seem more myth than man when he stepped onto the battlefield.

Soren glanced again up at the sky. A few snowflakes drifted lazily down from the black clouds. Getting caught in an icy mountain pass at night by a storm was not Soren's idea of making progress. But how to convince stubborn Tymon of that was a whole other kettle of fish.

"There's a village not far from here, if I remember the maps correctly," Soren suggested gently. "In fact, it's one of the furthest outlying villages of your kingdom. Might be politic to pay a princely call. After all, these villages have taken a beating with the border wars."

"Which are now at an end," Tymon snapped.

"Thanks to your highness' excellence in both fighting and negotiating," Soren said smoothly, grinning at his childhood friend. "But the hour grows late, and the horses will freeze if not stabled for the night."

"I really don't want to stop," Tymon repeated, sounding aggrieved.

"We are often forced to do things we don't want by the gods' whims when it comes to weather," Soren chuckled. "Look there, up ahead. The lights of that village are showing even now. And don't tell me

## Kate September

that a tankard of ale and some hot bread and sausage wouldn't sit well just about now."

Tymon growled but turned his horse in the direction of the small cluster of houses and stables at the foot of the snowy pass. Soon enough, the two men and the rest of their company reached the house of the village headman, distinguished by the size of his stable.

Soren dismounted and knocked loudly at the door. There was a lengthening moment of silence as they waited, and finally, the door opened a fraction. Both men drew in their breath sharply at the sight of the young woman who stood in the doorway.

Tymon was immediately reminded of the fairytales of his childhood, of the ice maidens that haunted the cold mountain passes. These otherworldly maidens were said to be made of softest snow, with kisses like snowflakes and eyes as clear as ice.

The maid that stood in the warm firelight that spilled from the open doorway could easily be one of those mythical creatures. Tymon almost felt mesmerized by the sight of her, his eyes taking in every detail, from the silver white hair, the pale aquamarine eyes, the cold, pale skin that showed faint tracings of silver blue veins underneath. His gaze turned hungry as it raked over the slim contours of her body, discernible to his trained eye even under the layers of wool she wore.

"May I help you?" she asked softly, her eyes wide with apprehension.

"This is Prince Tymon of Del'Alfia," Soren proclaimed formally. "This village is commanded to give shelter this night to him and his company of soldiers."

The maid's look went from apprehensive to slightly cynical.

"Oh," she said in a matter-of-fact manner and shut the door in their faces.

Tymon and Soren looked at each other.

"This was your idea," Tymon said, a shadow of a smirk playing on his full lips.

"My prince is ever supportive of his general," Soren grumbled and knocked again.

Another long moment passed, and again, the door opened. This time, a large, bear-like man wearing wool and fur skins stood in the doorway.

## The Siren's Bloom

"Greetings!" Soren proclaimed again. "You have been selected for the signal honor of housing our battle-weary Prince Tymon and his company for the night."

The tall man peered at them from under bushy graying eyebrows and appeared to snort.

"Eh, I suppose there's no help for it," he sighed. He turned and called into the house "Boltos! Run and let it be known the soldiers will quarter in the village tonight. Arrah! Make ready for the prince and his man in our house. But don't wake your mother – she needs her rest."

A young lad squeezed past his father in the doorway and stepped into the cold. He bowed to Tymon and Soren, then ran out into the village, knocking on doors and rousing the sleepy herders and their families.

"I'll see to yer horses, sire," the man said tiredly.

"At least tell me the name of the man whose hospitality I am indebted to," Tymon said gently.

The burly man looked up at the prince, and Tymon was quick to notice a mix of sadness and fear in the man's eyes.

"Harmond, headman of this village," he said quietly.

Tymon nodded, still puzzled by the man's sudden fear. He dismounted, and Harmond took his horse and Soren's horse to the stables.

Stepping inside, Tymon couldn't help but grin slightly as he saw the ice fairy bustling about the small but cozy cottage. He and Soren approached the merrily crackling fire in the hearth and stood warming themselves. He absently thought that Harmond had better have a care lest the house's ice fairy melt in his heated embrace.

Tymon watched as the girl – Arrah, he guessed – moved around, slicing bread and warming sausages on a small stove, fetching blankets and pillows, and pulling out extra straw tick mattresses. There was a fluidity, an unearthly grace to her movements that captured his full attention. Into his mind flashed a series of images...

...her breath like feathery caresses against his cheek in white puffs as his lips seared the tender, chilly skin of her neck...

...the slow, sinuous movement of her slender, pale arm as it traced with a cool touch a path down his sun-warmed body...

...silver hair and black hair mingled together on silken pillows, watching her delicate shoulders rise and fall as he stroked the outline of her body on the covers with his hand...

## Kate September

Tymon caught his breath, his throat suddenly dry. His eyes dilated with pure desire. The bloodlust from battle hadn't fully left his system, and he was seized with the urge to grasp the girl to him, drag her to the buttery and do exactly as he liked there.

"We are out of tea, but I have some ale," Arrah said in a plainly irritated voice, though the music of it could not be fully suppressed.

Tymon swallowed hard, as if dragged back from a pleasant place into a less pleasant reality. The girl's delicate features were screwed up in an expression of infinite cynicism...though, by the gods, the quirk of her eyebrows was maddening.

"Ale would have been my preference anyway," Soren laughed.

Arrah lifted her chin and snorted slightly, as if to indicate she was hardly surprised by the choice and went to fetch two tankards of ale.

"You do realize that it's liquid ice that runs through her veins and not blood, my prince?" Soren murmured. "That's a one not easily won by a few charming words."

"I never claimed that it was my words that charmed women," Tymon retorted with a knowing smile. "In fact, I believe it's the way I –"

Harmond entered the cottage, a blast of snow blowing in around him. He appeared cold and unhappy but addressed the men politely.

"Yer horses are tended to," he said. "I trust Arrah has provided victuals and drink fer yeh?"

"Oh yes," Soren replied with a smile.

Harmond frowned but nodded. He sat heavily down at the wooden trestle table and gestured for the men to do the same.

"Please, help yourselves," he said, gesturing to the food on the table.

"Thank you, we will," Tymon replied gravely, his eyes fixed on Arrah as she appeared carrying two tankards of ale.

## The Siren's Bloom

### Chapter 2

Washing dishes was a cold, unpleasant business as far as Arrah was concerned. But there was no helping it. She couldn't go warm up the melted snow by the fire because that would involve carrying a basin of water over the two slumbering figures sprawled out in front of the blaze.

So, she gritted her teeth and plunged her hands into the icy water, scrubbing out the tin platters and pewter tankards. She threw a look over her shoulder at the sleeping prince and general. They had behaved themselves relatively well during the rest of the evening, sharing the news of the peace treaty that Tymon had negotiated with the neighboring kingdom after handing them a devastating military defeat. She was pleased, for that would mean the end of cross-border raids that caused no end of hardships to her village.

But there was something in the way that the prince kept stealing glances at her that left her unsettled. It was as if he spoke with his eyes, telling her precisely what he was thinking about when he looked at her. No man had touched Arrah yet, but the girl knew enough from her mother's whispered teachings to see that the prince harbored impure thoughts about her.

Arrah snorted softly and curled her lips in disdain. If he thought she was some village lass to be tumbled in the hay, then he had better make other plans. With a sigh, she wiped the final dish dry and quietly crept up the ladder to the loft where she slept. The roof slanted sharply so that she had to bend over to reach her pallet bed. Outside the small, round window by her low bed, she could see the swirling snow blurring the night sky. She plumped up her pillows, pulled the curtains around the bed, and peeled back the covers.

As quickly as her chilly fingers would allow, she unbuttoned her tunic and slipped off her heavy skirts and petticoats, as if emerging from a brown woolen cocoon. With a contented little sigh, Arrah slipped under the covers and pulled the curtains closed.

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## Kate September

Hours passed. The fire burned low in the hearth, and Tymon's sleepless eyes had watched it wane. He had been drifting off, warm and comfortable, listening to the faint sound of dishes being washed. But it was a fainter sound yet that awakened him surer than a war claxon.

It was his ice fairy in her aerie. Every slip of a button, rustle of fabric, and slight scratching of cloth against smooth skin rang in his ears. He felt like he was hallucinating and could almost see the slim body glowing in the pale snow light.

Tymon grunted and turned over, hugging the blanket around him, then pushing it aside restlessly. He could feel the pulse in his throat echoing between his legs with painful throbs. How long had it been since had known the comfort of a woman? Surely not since this wretched campaign of his father's began months ago. He growled in frustration, then stopped.

There was a slight whispering of blankets brushing together, the sound of a slight weight shifting on straw tick mattress. It was Tymon's undoing. Unable to care about wrong or right, he crept out of his bed with the stealth of a thief rather than a prince. He climbed the ladder and looked around the small, dark loft. The breath caught in his throat as he saw a pale arm and delicate hand peeking out from heavy curtains that surrounded the maiden's sleeping corner.

With a feral grin, eyes alight with desire, he soundlessly crept closer and closer until he was at the curtain's edge. His palms were burning as he gently pushed aside the heavy drape, opening it just enough to admit his body but not so wide that any whiff of cold air might wake her.

Tymon felt his throat grow dry as he looked down upon the slumbering girl. One hand was curled underneath her chin, and the other extended out, peeking through the curtain. As she lay on her side, Tymon studied her profile, the small, straight nose, the inviting slope of a high cheekbone melting into pale rosy lips and a pointy little chin. The gentle indents and curves of her body underneath the covers almost caused Tymon to lose what little control he had left.

Kneeling by her side on the pallet, he moved with infinite slowness, placing his fingertips against her shoulder and applying a whisper of pressure to turn her over onto her back. The girl made a small sound and

## The Siren's Bloom

rolled onto her back, unconsciously settling herself back among the pillows and pulling the covers up to her chin.

Now that was a move entirely foreign to Tymon's plan, but the prince was equal to the challenge. Gingerly, he took the covers between his long fingers. Inch by inch, often pausing to make sure she didn't awaken, Tymon pulled the covers down. He watched hungrily, reverently as the fabric rose and fell as it slipped over the small peaks of her breasts, smiling to himself as the girl shivered instinctively as the fabric brushed against the thin chemisette that covered her nipples.

Finally, the blanket was down around her knees. Moving with excruciating care, he leaned forward and lowered his face to hers. He was even careful of his breath so that it didn't fan too much against her face and wake her. Silently, he brought his lips to hers, brushing only the faintest of kisses at first, barely touching them. He brushed another fleeting kiss against her lips and was rewarded by seeing them part slightly as Arrah sighed.

Resting his weight on one elbow, his massive arm muscles tensed to support him, he continued to give her the lightest, most feathery kisses. His free hand reached up and touched her jaw, close to her ear. Barely maintaining contact between his burning fingertip and her cool skin, he traced a line from her jaw down the side of her neck and to the hollow at the base of her throat.

Tymon watched Arrah the whole time, alert for signs of both arousal and awakening. He saw her breathing became quicker, with more frequent sighs that told of desire rather than any disappointment. Smiling, he continued to let his fingers trace a lazy pattern across her chest, just above the creamy mounds he longed to plunder. He paused for a moment to give her a slightly more lingering kiss, letting the tip of his tongue slip out and flick lightly at her slightly open lips. He watched her mouth open a little wider from the teasing as his fingers drifted along the top of the thin linen chemisette.

With his fingertips, he rubbed light, hypnotic circles on her soft nipples, rendering them both into sensitive points that showed pale lavender beneath the almost sheer fabric. Tymon felt his cock tingle and grow long and painful, trapped in his breeches. But it wasn't time yet, and the prince was nothing if not patient. The last thing he wanted was Arrah to awaken and object. No, when she opened her eyes, he wanted to see

## Kate September

unslaked desire burning in them. He wanted an invitation. No. He wanted a command from the fragile ice fairy.

His touch quickly descended, his hand moving smoothly over the sweet, firm belly and down to her sex that lay hidden beneath her slip and her pride. Slowly, Tymon rubbed the mound through the sheer linen, also letting his fingers dance over her inner thigh. He suppressed a groan as he imagined the silver hair that curled and hid her womanhood, and the pale, soft skin of her thighs. He ached to rip the slip from her and devour her with mouth and cock, to hear her scream with desire as she arched her back and clawed at him like a snow cat. But all he could do was continue to rub and apply gentle pressure to try and tease out her most secret passion without fully waking her.

"Ohhh," Arrah moaned softly in her sleep, her chest rising and falling as if each breath filled her with passion. As if by instinct, she opened her legs a little wider to welcome her desire.

The moment Tymon had been waiting for had come. With a grin, his hand on her sex became hard, urgent and insistent. He tweaked the pliant lips and worried her lotus bud, breathing raggedly as he felt the warm damp seep through the fabric. With his other hand, he grasped her neck and pulled her face to his, hungrily clamping onto her mouth with his lips and plundering the sweet, dark cave with his tongue.

Arrah's eyes flew open, and she sat up and gasped. Tymon felt her spasm and shudder in his arms, and he clasped her to him to still her trembling. He hummed with pleasure in the back of his throat at the feel of the cool maiden against his fevered skin.

"What are you doing here!" Arrah demanded in an angry hiss, her aquamarine blue eyes flashing.

"Hush," Tymon said with a soft chuckle and bent his head to kiss her again. He had felt her contract and spasm under his touch, and now his own need was almost unbearable. He wanted her, he needed her. He was going to have her.

"Get out!" Arrah whispered harshly, pulling away from his kiss. "Get out, get out, get out!"

"Stop," Tymon ordered, still keeping his voice low, but feeling his own temper flare. He had given his village girl pleasure, and now she was going to be petulant in returning the favor to the prince of the land? His blood was high enough with desire, and anger only fueled it more. He

## **The Siren's Bloom**

grabbed her shoulders and roughly pushed her back down among the pillows.

Arrah's eyes went wide, and she lashed out at him. She clawed and struggled, writhing and pushing to get away from him. Finally, just as he took away one hand to undo his belt, Arrah threw all her strength into pushing him aside and rolled off the bed onto the floor. She scrambled to her feet and tried to run away, but Tymon was quick and reached out to grab her by back of her chemisette.

"Come back here, wench!" he growled menacingly, no longer bothering to keep his voice low.

"No!" Arrah said sharply and threw all her weight against his grip. The chemisette gave way, ripping clean down the center of the back. She bolted for the ladder, but in her haste, slipped and fell several feet onto the floor below.

In a flash, Soren was up on his feet, sword drawn. Tymon was already down the ladder and picking the dazed girl up from the floor. Tymon saw Soren's eyes fix on the disheveled girl, riveted to the exposed skin of her back.

"By the gods, Tymon," he said in wonder. "She's not an ice fairy. She's a mermaid!"

## Kate September

### Chapter 3

"What do you mean, Soren?" Tymon demanded, holding up the girl in his arms as she stood on her feet and swayed, clutching at her spinning head.

"The markings on her back," Soren said quietly.

"What markings?"

"The ones her mother died trying to hide from you," rumbled a low, sad voice from the doorway of the bedroom where Harmond and his wife slept.

The prince and the general spun to look at the man, and Arrah squinted at him, trying to put his words together through the hellish pounding in her head.

"Explain yourself," Soren said fiercely, raising his sword so it pointed at Harmond.

Harmond glanced at the sword, seemingly unconcerned by it, his face consumed by sorrow rather than fear.

"Arrah is of the Sea People," he said simply. "She is not the daughter of my body, though she is ever the daughter of my heart. Her mother brought her here eighteen summers ago to hide her, to keep her from the day she was to be torn from her family and claimed as a concubine for the crown prince of Del'Alfia."

"What?" Arrah cried out. Tymon felt her body sag and feared that the shock might be too much after her fall. He felt her small fingers weakly clutching at him for support, and he held her firmly in his arms. Even in that moment, he guiltily indulged in the sweet sensation of her slender body pressed against his, her soft backside firmly against his stirring cock.

"Why did she do that?" Soren asked.

"Like father, like son, is what she said," Harmond replied. "She feared for Arrah's happiness if Prince Tymon took after his father, King Taemon. And, she wanted the girl to have a chance at a free life, not to be chained up like some chattel waiting to be led to the slaughter."

## The Siren's Bloom

"It is an honor Del' Alfia grants the Sea People to take their loveliest maiden as the concubine of the prince," Soren pointed out. "In fact, if I recall, the sea king who negotiated the peace with Del' Alfia a thousand years ago even had the greatest sea witch in the oceans cast a spell on all the babies born under the waters of the world. The fairest maiden of each generation would be born with a marking, a -"

"The *lolila*," Harmond finished. "The rarest and loveliest of all the flowers under the ocean, traced in living silver on the girl's back."

Tymon roughly spun the girl around in his arms to study her back.

"What?" Arrah demanded. "What is on my back?"

Tymon took her by her arm over to an old, polished bronze mirror that hung over a rough-hewn sideboard along one of the walls. He watched as the girl craned her neck to try and see what they were all talking about. With his finger, he traced a line from the small of her back to the nape of her neck, following the pattern traced in silver of a slender, sinuous flower with curling tendrils and long, shapely petals.

She saw Tymon clench his jaw, glance out the window at the dark grey sky of early dawn, then back to Soren.

"Ready the men," he said tersely. "We ride. Now."

"Sire, it's not even dawn!" Soren protested.

"It will be by the time they're ready," Tymon said icily. Soren bowed, looking uncertain and unhappy, but hurrying to carry out his orders.

Tymon still held Arrah by a painful grip on her arm. He strode over to the hearth to collect his cloak and sword, yanking her along with him.

"Let me go," Arrah said, glaring up at him.

Tymon snorted and wrapped the heavy fur cloak around the girl like a blanket.

"Stop!" Arrah ordered, looking frantically at Harmond. "Father - please!"

"He's not your father, you've no claim on him!" Tymon snapped, the white hot rage evident in his voice. "I'll grant you the favor of not taking his head and everyone else's head in this village for keeping the proper due from the crown!"

"Like father, like son," Arrah retorted angrily. "I'm no whore to be dragged off and bedded at your whim! And you're no nobleman to rip a girl from her family, to deny her an honorable fate!"

## Kate September

"Enough!" Tymon roared, his eyes blazing and olive skin flushed. He swung Arrah into his arms, wrapped in the thick, long fur cloak. He nearly crushed the slight mermaid in his arms, so much anger and denied passion were infused into his grip.

Arrah's eyes went wide with genuine panic as Tymon headed for the door, kicking it wide open with a vicious thrust.

"Wait – my things!" she said, grasping at anything to delay him. "My mother – she lies abed sick. At least let me say goodbye to her, and to my father, and to my brother! Wait, please, oh please wait!"

Soren was standing in front of the house, holding his horse and Tymon's at the ready. Tymon swung Arrah onto the saddle then mounted behind her. The other soldiers watched impassively as the girl struggled frantically in the prince's unforgiving grip.

"Nooo!" she screamed, the light, brittle sound shattering the stillness of dawn like the splintering of ice. "Don't take me, please! Oh gods! Oh gods!"

Her heart-wrenching cries seemed to have no effect on the prince. He kicked his steed into a canter and set out in the direction of the path that would eventually bring them to the end of the mountain pass and into the warmer, lush green plains and valleys that sloped softly down to the sea. The rest of the soldiers on their horses fell into line behind Tymon.

Arrah screamed in the agony of her mad grief and squirmed in Tymon's iron grasp to turn and look back at the house she had called home all her life. Harmond and Boltos stood in the doorway. Boltos stared in mute grief after the retreating figure of his sister, but Harmond looked down at the ground. The last Arrah saw of her family was Harmond wearily staggering inside, supported by his son.

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For a while as they rode, Tymon felt the sobs that shook Arrah's slight frame. She seemed barely aware of her surroundings, even oblivious to the cold that Tymon found so cruel. He carefully adjusted the heavy cloak that hung heavily on her small shoulders and enveloped her like a blanket. He felt her calm and stiffen, as if bracing herself with some icy resolve and reserve.

Tymon kept the company moving at a swift pace. He wanted to make it as close to the foothills of the mountains as he could, as he didn't

## **The Siren's Bloom**

relish the thought of spending more than one night in the a tent in the bitter mountain cold. He rode with one arm wrapped around Arrah's slim waist. The top of her silver head just reached the tip of his nose, and he could smell the scent of lavender and fresh hay in the starlight tresses. For a while, his anger and sense of righteousness sustained him.

Arrah was meant for him. He had done nothing wrong in taking what was due the crown. She would lead a far better life, one of ease and luxury in the palace by the sea rather than slaving away as the wife of a shepherd in the Ice Mountains. They should all be thankful he did not wish to take vengeance on the Sea People as a whole for the incredible treachery of one woman, Arrah's mother.

Glancing down at the top of Arrah's head, Tymon reflected that he should have known something was afoot just by her looks. The Sea People were not the half-fish, half-humans of fairy tales. Their skin was especially porous to allow them to absorb oxygen through the water, and the only other distinguishing trait was their incredible beauty. It was not uncommon for men and women to have hair and eye colors that rivaled the brightest coral and anemones. They tended to be pale and slender, moving with a fluid grace born of living a life of moving through water.

Tymon felt Arrah shudder slightly, and he wondered if it was from cold or emotion. Probably both, he thought and was suddenly struck by the idea of how she conceived of his actions. He could almost hear her thoughts screaming at him...brute, brigand, bastard. To her, he was probably a true barbarian, carrying off his woman, ripping her from her home and family without so much as a goodbye. Well, he would make it up to her tonight in their tent.

Their tent...the phrase brought a small, involuntary smile to full lips. A smile he knew that that Arrah, who stared resolutely out ahead into the white wasteland, couldn't see.



## Kate September

### Chapter 4

Arrah sat on the edge of the cot in Tymon's tent. She hugged the giant fur cloak around her shaking shoulders. She was careful to keep her bare feet from touching the floor of the tent, as the icy ground below it would have frozen her skin.

She had refused Tymon's rations for dinner, nor had she partaken of the wine he had poured in a goblet for her. She wanted to keep her wits about her, and more than that, she wanted to make sure that she was not indebted to him for anything, not even the smallest morsel of bread.

In the blue semi-darkness of the tent, a wintry smile played across Arrah's delicate features as she recalled Tymon's anger. He had yelled and cursed her, but stopped short of throwing the food and goblet of wine on the floor. Instead, he had defiantly consumed both in a great hurry. She fervently hoped he had a lovely stomach ache to show for his bravado.

The lack of food and drink, however, was making itself known to her body. Her stomach growled, and her mouth felt dry as sawdust. Arrah tried her best to ignore it, carefully studying the tent in an effort to distract herself. It had been erected quite quickly by Tymon and his men while Soren had held the reins of the prince's horse. Soren's ulterior motive, or order more likely, was to keep Arrah from hopping off the steed and running off barefoot in the snow and ice in a futile bid to escape. Arrah sniffed disdainfully at the memory. How silly these seashiders were! She was raised in these snowy mountains and knew full well that without proper protection, she would perish in the cold. Her escape would have to wait until she could steal a pair of shoes.

The thick canvas tent itself was not large, fitting just a cot and a brazier. Arrah had been surprised by the lack of ornamentation and grandeur of the prince's choice of shelter. She had expected him to lash out on a grand scale with his tent, with gold tassels and velvet drapes. But he seemed content with the same tent as his men used.

Arrah's stomach growled again, and she forced herself to admire the eerie mix of blue moonlight coming through the tent and golden firelight from the brazier. As she watched the coals pulse and glow, her

## The Siren's Bloom

eyelids grew heavy. The sturdy folding cot she sat on didn't look like it promised much in the way of comfort. But with the fur cloak wrapped around her in addition to the heavy, closely woven wool blankets, she counted on at least being warm.

And maybe if she fell asleep, he wouldn't try to wake her like he did the night before. The mermaid felt a pang as she remembered that only last night, she had slept in her family's home, surrounded by those she loved in a life she loved. All that was in peril of disappearing now if she could not find a way out of this predicament. Maybe something would occur to her while she slept, maybe she would have a clearer head in the morning. Maybe...She pulled the covers up to her nose and drifted off into sleep.

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Tymon paced outside the entrance flaps of his own tent. His fists were clenched as tightly as his jaw, and he alternately cursed the girl within and repined that he ever bothered with her. What galled him the most was that she had the most appalling effect on him, yet he seemed not to have any on her – at least not when she was awake. With just the tilt of her chin, the subtle shifting line of her neck, a look, the way her fingers held onto the pommel of the saddle, that blasted mermaid could set his heart racing and stir his loins to painful awareness. But she seemed unaffected, even disinterested, by his nearness and his touch. Damn her!

He had held her around the waist and ridden with her a full day, his cock painfully swollen much of the time and rubbing against her backside as they rode. Could she not feel it? Did it not arouse her? How could she not take his desire as a compliment? Damn all mermaids!

Tymon ground his heel into the snow, crossing his arms across his chest and frowning, deep in thought. He struggled to content himself that it was his pride that had been wounded by Arrah's lack of appreciation, assiduously endeavoring to ignore that it hurt only because the opinion of a girl he hardly knew suddenly mattered more than anything to him. Damn her stubbornness!

He meant to wait. He meant to take her in ease at his leisure once they were back at the palace. He wanted her to be bathed, indulged, dressed in gossamer silks and rubbed down with exotic oils to make her flesh supple and willing. He sighed, his thoughts absently veering off in

## Kate September

the direction of all that he had to do upon his return. There were the royal accounts to review, subject petitions to adjudicate, feathers to smooth with the high lords of the land. He'd be lucky to get more than six hours of sleep a night for the first few weeks back. Suddenly, he stared hard at the flap of the tent. Patience be damned!

Without any pretense to stealth, he strode into the tent. Arrah's eyes flew open at the sound and immediately fixed on him. He felt like a giant in the small tent, towering over the mermaid shivering in his cot. Silently, Tymon turned to the brazier and began to disrobe.

Tymon tossed aside the wool cloak he wore instead of the one he had given Arrah, revealing the light leather armor he wore over his dark blue tunic. With practiced ease, he unbuckled the sides of the armor and pulled it off over his head. The worn, battle-stained tunic followed, and he heard Arrah's faint gasp which made him smile bitterly to himself.

He faced the glowing coals, knowing he was treating Arrah to a view of his broad back. He felt so dark compared to the pale, icy mermaid. His skin was that of the seashiders, olive and sun-darkened. But he knew that it also bore the grim designs of years spent in battle. He wondered what Arrah would think of all the scars on his body.

Tymon bent over, his fingers working the lacings of his boots and pulling them off. Straightening up, he unconcernedly undid the fastening of his loose black trousers and dropped them, kicking them aside.

Tymon turned around to face the cot, feeling tall and terrible. He didn't miss how the mermaid's eyes traveled down from his eyes, catching on his shoulders and pectoral muscles, over his abdomen and coming to a full stop at his stiff manhood. Throbbing seemingly with a life of its own, Tymon's cock was standing full at the ready, the crown even swollen purple with desire. With a snort of bitter amusement, he walked over to the cot and grabbed the covers from Arrah's small hands and threw them aside.

He saw Arrah cross one arm over her breasts, visible through the sheer linen rag of her chemisette and reach with the other to shield her womanhood through the flimsy slip she wore. Her clear aquamarine eyes were wide with gut-wrenching apprehension, and the silent plea in them almost stayed Tymon. Almost.

## The Siren's Bloom

### Chapter 5

Tymon paused a full minute, standing over Arrah. She watched as he let his eyes lazily roam what he now apparently considered rightfully his.

"Sit up," he ordered her.

Surprised and suspicious, Arrah obeyed, entertaining the ridiculous hope that maybe he just wanted to throw her out of the bed.

"Remove your things," he said hoarsely, putting all doubt of his intentions to rest.

"No!" Arrah replied automatically.

"You'll do as you're told, mermaid!" Tymon growled.

"You have no right to order me to do such a thing," Arrah said desperately, inching as far back on the cot as she could.

"You were promised to me," Tymon whispered. "You were destined for me. You were denied to me. No longer."

He reached out to grab her by the wrist and rip away the hand that vainly struggled to cover her breasts,

"I have a choice in my destiny!" Arrah blurted out, her eyes filling with tears.

"The only choice you have is how you will accept your fate," Tymon said roughly, his fingers closing around her wrist and easily pulling her arm to the side, despite her fierce resistance.

"No, I have a choice!" Arrah said in a tear-choked voice. She knew his words to be true according to law and tradition. But she knew equally well that her innermost spirit stood firm and unassailable in its conviction that she was freeborn and should be free to live how she chose.

"Please don't do this," she whimpered, looking up at the merciless god of sun-kissed lands that stood before like some magnificent, giant statue sprung to life.

As she gazed up into his dark eyes – dark like a night without stars – Arrah thought she saw something change in the prince's expression. Could it be remorse, or even pity? But even at that moment, she could see

## Kate September

that the needs of his body would overrule whatever better feelings might dwell in his heart.

"So frail," he murmured, looking down at her as he took her other hand and added it to his grip that already held one small wrist. "Nothing more than a creature of ice, water and silver. Yet you stir me like the strong north wind. But I will tame the wind and claim what is rightfully mine."

Arrah tried to contain her emotions and her panic as Tymon pushed her back down onto the cot, holding her arms pinned above her head, both of her wrists in the grip of one of his hands. She found that she couldn't move. Perhaps it was fear, perhaps it was the realization that she was no match for him physically – not even three of her, she suspected, could successfully take him on. She couldn't control the frantic rise and fall of her chest with anxious breath, but she squeezed her eyes shut so that he could not see any of the emotions that played in them.

Poised above her, his knees planted on either side of her hips, Tymon paused, as if to consider his next move. Then, with aching deliberateness, he reached out and grabbed the bodice of the ruined chemisette and roughly pulled it off her chest. He brought the ragged bit of linen and lace up to where his hand held her wrists and deftly bound them with the twisted up fabric. Now both of his hands were free to do as they pleased.

Arrah gasped as the fabric was lifted off her, her eyes flying open as he bound her wrists with it. She felt totally exposed, being naked from the waist up. Tymon only made matters worse by sitting back on his heels, his palms resting against his thighs, and studying her carefully, almost reverently. She would have covered herself if her hands had been free or turned over if he had not been sitting almost atop her. As it was, she had no choice but to be bare and available to his gaze.

Somewhere, deep below the firmly gelled layer of fear and righteousness, a small voice whispered that this was deliciously wicked and naughty in being in such a wanton situation that was not her fault and that she had no control over. No well-meaning shepherd would ever be so bold with her or carelessly bend her to his whim. No blacksmith's son would ever look at her with such experienced eyes that were both appraising and appreciative.

The pinkish lavender tips of her breasts swelled slightly, the gently wrinkled, sensitive nubs rising just under Tymon's gaze. Arrah blushed

## The Siren's Bloom

furiously and remembered the strange touches he had given her the night before, and a pleasurable twinge tweaked between her legs.

Tymon's smile widened a fraction, and Arrah felt her throat grow tight with a bewildered, shameful anticipation. With a growl, he leaned forward, bracing himself on one elbow. Suddenly, his mouth descended on a nipple, taking the turgid bud between his lips and gently sucking on it. His free hand fished for the other nipple and traced maddeningly soft circles around the pale mauve aureole, teasing and torturing by avoiding touching the sensitive tip. As he held the nipple between his lips, the tip of his tongue flicked once at the tip, then again, then launched into a series of unforgiving flicks just as his forefinger finally brushed the most tender spot of the other nipple.

Arrah couldn't help but gasp. She had never felt such a strange, shivering sensation in her breasts before. Every move he made with lips, tongue or fingers seemed to elicit a corresponding throb in her sex, almost as if he was touching her there, as well. Unable to fight instinct, she arched her back slightly to push her small, round breasts more fully into his face, as if urging him to devour them. She gave a shuddering sigh of pleasure as his mouth moved from one nipple to the other, leaving the abandoned nipple wet and cold in the night air.

Tymon never let up his assault on the twin peaks of her breasts. He rolled the small balls of her nipples between his fingers, gently teathed them and tested a few lightly stinging bites. He licked and cajoled them until they were full, wet and almost sore from his attentions. He let the nipples be for a moment as he lazily dropped wet kisses along the line under her breasts.

At the same time, he moved to stretch out alongside her, almost on top of her. His burning cock rested against the fabric that covered her thighs as he pursued his unrelenting adoration of the mermaid's breasts. One hand snaked down the smooth, bare skin of her belly and slipped under the waistband of her slip. He combed through the silky, downy triangle between her legs until his fingers reached the scorching, full, pulsing center of her pleasure. With a groan of his own desire, he parted her soft, pliant lips with two of his fingers and gently stroked the small pearl with his middle finger.

Arrah whimpered with the intensity of her barely restrained newborn desire as he spread kisses like illicit wreaths around her breasts. She wanted something, but didn't even know the words to cry out for it.

## Kate September

She wanted to feel those throbs grow between her legs until they exploded and left her senseless. She wanted his hands and lips on her breasts. She wanted to spread her legs. But this last desire, she would not do. She'd heard enough insults in the village to believe that a woman who 'spread her legs' was bad, wicked and dirty. It took every ounce of control she possessed, though, not to let go and be bad, wicked and dirty as Tymon's fingers found the very spot that ached and sent lightning shivers of pleasure through her body. It all seemed so bad, so wrong to feel so good when she was tied up, naked to her waist and being subjected to the whims and caresses of a man she hardly knew.

That thought alone suddenly made her hips tighten as she felt all the muscles between her thighs contract with spasms of pleasure that finally wrenched a low, musical moan from her.

"Spread your legs," Tymon ordered hoarsely, his desire-heavy eyes fixed on hers.

Still panting from the receding waves of pleasure, Arrah set her jaw and shook her head, her level gaze issuing a mute challenge.

"Spread your legs!" Tymon growled, his fingers curling around the fabric of the waist of the petticoat.

"No," Arrah gasped.

Tymon's face contorted in a spasm of anger and desire. He gave the slip a series of vicious tugs until he heard the seams groan and tear. With a muted roar, he ripped the slip off her body and stared hungrily at the prize before him.

"I said," he whispered menacingly, "spread your legs."

Arrah squeezed her eyes shut so that he couldn't see the shame that burned in them as he treated her as no more than the loosest girl in the village. When he released her thighs in order to brace himself above her, she immediately tried to bring them together.

"Spread them!" Tymon ordered, moving a hand to plunder the soft folds of her secret bloom, teasing and worrying the pleasure bud. He lowered his lips to her nipples again, licking and grazing them. "Spread them wide," he murmured, his lips against the tender flesh of her breast. "Spread them wide for me, my woman."

Arrah tried to force her body to submit to her will, but it was already too supple and too receptive to his touch, and she helplessly obeyed as his fingers coaxed the sweet, viscous honey from between her

## The Siren's Bloom

legs. She arched her back, thrusting her breasts into his face as if they begged for his unending attention.

"That's it, my woman, open your legs wide, let go, be wanton," Tymon murmured feverishly between dropping stinging kisses on her nipples. "Show me your desire. I have you bound and in my grip. I can do as I like with you. You have no choice. I will find what I want between your legs as you lie naked and helpless beneath me."

His voice trailed off as his tongue found a more interesting occupation than speech in the torturing of the tip of one nipple. Arrah felt the effects of his words, and that secret voice deep within her echoed its approval. This was no situation of her making, but that was no reason she couldn't enjoy it. She was free to be that wanton, loose girl in the village, the one who took every herder for a tumble in the hay. All she had to do was spread her legs.

Tymon groaned and slipped one finger inside her sex. Arrah stiffened at the sensation of the invasion. She could feel his finger touching and stroking the walls inside her sex. Suddenly, his finger found a pressure spot that sparked her desire like flame to hay.

Arrah's hips hesitantly bucked up against his hand as he slipped his fingers in and out of her sex in a slow, teasing rhythm. Withdrawing his fingers, Tymon traced his name across her belly in her vinegary honey that coated his fingers. Then, he moved into position above her and gently pressed the crown of his cock against her virgin muscles. Arrah's eyes widened and look anxiously everywhere in the tent but at him, knowing that this was the point of no return. He would not stop until he had claimed her virginity, and she could never go back to the unknowing, carefree innocent she had been before.

"It will hurt for a moment," he said gruffly. "But only a moment."

That drew Arrah's aquamarine eyes to his face, and he reached up and touched her cheek. He drew his hand downward to her womanhood, and his thumb found her pleasure pearl. Arrah drew in a sharp breath. At the same time, Tymon thrust deeply into her, feeling the thin tissue of her womanhood tear. He pressed his thumb hard against her hooded gem, hoping to distract from the pain with a throb of pleasure.

Arrah cried out softly. The pain was intense, like the stinging of a bad burn. She lay gasping for a few moments as Tymon rested within her, unmoving to give her a chance to adjust and to let the pain fade. Finally, the tweaking of the pain receded to the background, and she became more



## Kate September

fully aware of the new, strange sensation of being completely filled. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before. Man and woman, fitting together perfectly, joining as one being. What was simply an empty space in her sex was now complete, her muscles tightly embracing the man's cock in primeval welcome.

Arrah saw beads of perspiration pop out on Tymon's brow as he looked down her, as if watching for the moment when her body relaxed under his. She could tell the effort it cost him to hold back, and she wondered why he took such care not to hurt what was to him just a concubine. It confused her, but gave her hope. She took a deep breath and willed her body to soften in his embrace.

With a growl, he lowered his head to her neck, peppering it with soft kisses as his hips began to slowly move, his cock slipping in and out of the heated, slick silk. He moved his hips so that the base of his cock rubbed against the tender spot of her pleasure, and she felt her body suddenly shiver as if a current of lightning had brought it to life. He slipped his large hands under her back and picked her up slightly off the bed to press her to him.

Arrah struggled not to moan. Every time he withdrew, she became aware of the aching emptiness he left within her. Every time he filled her, she felt a renewed completeness accompanied by a pulse of pleasure. A gasp did escape her lips when he pressed her fully to him. Her damp, sensitive breasts pressed against his hard chest, and she felt completely enveloped in his embrace. It almost became hard to breathe, the pressure between her legs was growing so intense and consuming.

Tymon lowered her back down and rested lightly on her as he moved, his pace starting to increase little by little. His hands were still on her back, and she wondered that he did not comment on the way her heart pounded against his palm.

He dribbled kisses along her jaw line and captured her lips with his. Hungrily, he let his lips and tongue sensuously roam her mouth, chuckling a little at her inexperienced efforts to both repel and welcome him. The double sensation of his tongue plunging into her mouth at the same time as he thrust within her nearly drove her mad with unchecked desire. She made a small whimper that begged him to increase the tempo and pressure of his kisses as he ran one hand through her hair.

"Arrah," he moaned into her mouth, his breath filling lungs her as surely as his cock filled her sex.

## The Siren's Bloom

If her hands hadn't been tied above her head, Arrah would have brought them down to run them lightly over Tymon's face. As it was, she could only open her mouth to him and make small sounds of impatience and desire as he covered her lips with kisses. Somehow, with him resting atop her, she felt more reassured, less exposed. As he plunged into her with cock and tongue, holding her tightly to him, Arrah somehow lost track of where she began and he ended. She felt as if she was simply part of a whole entity, with liquid fire running through her veins as he drove into her bucking hips. Oh, the illicit pleasure of spreading her legs wide open for a man – this man! Of being seduced, ravished, touched in places only a husband had a right to. Arrah squeaked with delight and desire as suddenly, their rhythms fell into time.

"Arrah," he growled desperately as he crushed her to him.

"Ohhh!" Arrah cried out as suddenly, she felt the world explode around her, the lotus bud of her pleasure blooming and sending tendrils of shivering passion through her veins, to the roots of her hair and the tips of her toes. She shuddered and heaved in Tymon's embrace, barely aware enough to feel his lips pressed to her forehead, her cheek, her chin, her mouth.

Tymon roared as his own release relentlessly pounded into her, flooding her with his seed. In the haze of her own pleasure, she felt him stiffen against her, his hot breath panting into her ear.

Arrah's shudders were still subsiding as finally he rolled off her to the side.

Tymon tenderly and wordlessly gathered her in his arms. Exhausted, he looked into the face of the mermaid, smiling as he saw her eyes were barely open. She was utterly spent and almost asleep. He deftly unbound her wrists and sighed contentedly, marveling at how delightful she felt in his arms, so slight and supple, soft in the right places and deliciously firm in others.

"Sleep, Arrah," he ordered softly, kissing the tip of her nose. The barely conscious girl's eyes drifted shut, and Tymon continued to watch until her breathing was the steady and regular breath of sleep.

"My Arrah," he whispered as his own eyes closed, and sleep claimed him.

## Kate September

### Chapter 6

Arrah awoke in the cot alone. She slowly opened her eyes and looked around. The coals in the brazier had burned out, and the air in the tent was chilly even as dawn's light streamed in. She blinked and tried to focus her confused thoughts. She could have sworn that someone had been in the bed. Or had she been dreaming that last night a man had touched her and...

It all came back in a rush of sound, image and smell. Arrah covered her face with her hands and moaned in despair, completely ashamed of herself and angry with the prince. How could he? He had no right! Why hadn't she protested more? Why couldn't she have been more disciplined?

Arrah sat up in bed, suddenly aware of her nakedness. Cursing, she pulled the blankets around her and swung her legs off the bed. Just at that moment, the tent flap open and in stepped Tymon, fully dressed and looking ready to ride. Arrah scowled blackly at the idiotically happy grin he wore on his face.

"Ready yourself to ride, my Arrah," he said happily, his eyes appreciatively roaming the lines of her legs.

"I am not your Arrah!" the mermaid snapped, her aquamarine eyes clear and cold like gems. "And I cannot ride, for I have nothing to wear, thanks to you!"

Tymon started to chuckle, but his laughter and smile faded as he appeared to notice the genuine animosity in her face.

"I have a tunic you may wear," he said cautiously, taking a step to approach her.

Arrah suddenly felt claustrophobic in the small tent, this masterful man towering over her. She clutched at the blankets and scooted as far back in the cot as she could, right up to the edge, but her slight weight threw the cot off balance, and it tipped over, sending her tumbling onto her back.

"Arrah!" Tymon exclaimed and bent to pick her up. In sheer surprise, he drew back as Arrah ferociously batted away his hands, her face crumpling up like a child on the verge of crying.

## The Siren's Bloom

"Arrah, what is the matter?" he asked, too bewildered to be irritated yet.

"You," Arrah spat, scrambling to her feet, "are what is the matter. You waltz in here like everything is all right, like nobody has a care in the world. You call me yours, and I am not yours! You tell me it's time to ride and don't even think that I might need something other than your love to keep me warm on the ride down. And don't even get me started on what was the matter with last night!"

"And exactly what was the matter with last night?" Tymon asked somewhat heatedly. He seemed at a loss by her demeanor, and Arrah fully intended to keep him off balance, to force him to see her point of view.

"Let's just get this straight, all right?" Arrah said crisply, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin. "Last night was not my idea. I didn't want last night to happen –"

"You seemed to enjoy it well enough," Tymon interjected gruffly.

"That's not the point!"

"It's not?"

"No!" Arrah spluttered. "The point is that I didn't have a choice about it."

"Of course you didn't," Tymon said, sounding more confused than ever. "You're supposed to do as I say. You're my concubine."

"I wasn't until yesterday when you so rudely took me from my home without so much as a by-your-leave!"

"You don't have to ask concubines for their leave," Tymon said with a snort, clenching his hands into fists at his side.

"But I'm not a concubine!" Arrah snapped, stamping her foot in frustration.

"You were born to be my concubine," Tymon said, taking a menacing step towards her.

"I was born free," Arrah retorted, holding her ground and looking up at him defiantly. "And I lived free until you decided otherwise. If you had never found me, I would have gone on to live a life of my choosing. So much for your destiny theory!"

For a long moment of silence that seemed to throb with the tension between them, Tymon stood toe-to-toe with Arrah, looking down into her upturned face. Arrah felt a flickering of fear in her heart at the cold, unreadable expression in the prince's eyes.

## Kate September

Abruptly, Tymon turned and dug out his small bag of personal items from under the cot. He pulled out a grey tunic and crossed the small tent to stand again before Arrah. His eyes narrowed and nostrils flared as he stared her down. With calm deliberation, he reached out and ripped the blankets away from her body so that she stood before him in all her blushing, bare glory.

"You are mine," he growled, throwing the tunic at her, then turning on his heel and stalking out of the tent.

Arrah stood, holding the tunic and thinking very hard.

The rest of the day passed in sullen silence for her. She rode with Tymon, sitting in front of him, his arm grimly wrapped around her waist as she snuggled deep within the fur cloak she still wore.

Thankfully, the changing scenery distracted her from the uncomfortable quiet that hung between her and the prince. The frozen, perilous slopes of the mountains she had lived in all her life gradually gave way to verdant foothills dotted with fragrant olive groves and orchards of lemon trees. They left the stormy clouds up in the mountains, and the sun shone down resplendently in a brilliant blue sky. Arrah looked with interest at the whitewashed, thatch-roofed villages that dotted the landscape. Some villages were larger than she had ever seen, with tall gathering buildings and heavy stone walls around them.

As they descended the last set of hills, just as the sun was beginning to set, Arrah's gasp broke the heavy silence. Tymon shifted behind her, as if startled by her surprise.

Arrah stared before her at a shimmering, living expanse of deep blue water, wider and longer than any she had ever seen in her life. There was a salty tang to the air, and strange white and grey birds cried in the air. An intense wave of longing washed over her as she gazed on the mirror-like surface of the water on which the setting sun left a blazing trail.

"What is that?" Arrah whispered so softly that Tymon had to bend his head close to hers to hear the words.

"What is what, Arrah?" he murmured.

"That," Arrah said, lifting her hand and pointing at the water.

Tymon followed her gesture with his eyes and smiled thoughtfully.

"That is the ocean, Arrah," he said quietly. "It is where you were born."

## The Siren's Bloom

"Then it must be why my heart longs for it," she replied softly, her gaze still fixed on the vista before her. "How big is it?"

"It covers more of the world than land does," Tymon replied. "And I am honored to be here at such a moment, the moment where my mermaid sees the ocean for the first time."

"How deep is it?" Arrah asked, ignoring his attempt at graciousness.

"Only the wisest of your folk know, my Arrah," Tymon whispered.

"Where is your castle?" she asked, coming out of her reverie and suddenly aware of the warm fanning of his breath and gentle scraping of his stubbly cheek against her smooth one. Her heart fluttered strangely, and she could feel color rising in her face.

"Do you see those cliffs to your right, where the water's edge meets the land?" Tymon said, pointing in his turn. "The palace is built into the side of the cliff. You cannot see it from here, but it covers the entire face of the cliff, hundreds of feet high and dug deep into the rock."

Arrah nodded and relapsed into silence, her feelings in turmoil as she contended with longing, curiosity, fear and something secretly approaching anticipation. Tymon said nothing further, which relieved Arrah. She sensed that more words would only strain their fragile, unspoken truce. She heard him sigh and order Soren to start the company forward again.

"How long until we reach the palace?" Arrah asked after a few moments of silence.

"Not more than an hour now," Tymon replied eagerly. "The longest part will be as we climb the hill to the top of the cliff."

"To the top?" Arrah queried, confused.

"There is no way to approach the palace from below," Tymon explained. "All that lies below the palace are fierce waves that crash upon the rocks. Therefore, we ride to the top of the cliff and enter down into the palace by a trail that leads down the side of the cliff."

Arrah thought on this for a minute, then replied matter-of-factly, "It seems a silly set-up to me. Should you be attacked, the invaders need only capture the top of the cliff, and all in the palace are instantly under siege."

Tymon chuckled richly. "You are quite clever, my Arrah," he said.

"I am not your Arrah," the mermaid interjected coldly.

## Kate September

Tymon bit his lip and continued, "But you need have no fear. There are secret exits through passages that were dug deep into the side of the cliff. They would take you to safety far from the seashore."

"It must have taken a long time to build such a thing out of mountain rock," Arrah observed.

"Over a thousand years," Tymon replied. "My family has ruled Del'Alfia for even longer than that."

"Oh," was the mermaid's only response, and she fell again into silence. Tymon guessed that she was thinking of the bargain made a thousand years ago that had brought her to this fateful moment.

The hour passed quickly. Arrah got no glimpse of the palace but watched her surroundings carefully as they climbed the road to the broad, flat, grassy top of the cliff. The company approached the edge, and Arrah gasped and involuntarily grasped at Tymon's arm as it seemed for a moment that they were about to step off the edge into open space. He laughed heartily at her embarrassed relief when they stepped directly onto the path that went down to the first receiving courtyard. It was wide enough to admit two-way traffic and had a high half wall to keep one from spilling over the side.

They company reached the receiving courtyard, entering through wide, tall arches that looked out onto the ocean and stretched broadly along the side of the cliff with what Arrah guessed must have been stables filled with sunlight. She glimpsed corridors off the back and figured they probably lead down further into the palace. All of these observations were merely ruses she used to try and trick herself into not being nervous, and like all weak ruses, they failed.

Arrah's heart pounded so hard she thought could almost see her vision pulse with every heartbeat. She instinctively shrank back against Tymon's solid presence as the courtyard filled with servants and stable hands. She had never seen so many richly dressed people - even the lowliest servants wore finer clothes than she had ever owned. The bustling and shouting intimidated her, and suddenly, she felt very alone and achingly homesick for the quiet familiarity of her village.

Suddenly, Tymon disappeared from behind her. She saw him dismount and panicked for a moment, thinking he meant to leave her to find her own way in this strange place. But he reached up and gently lifted her down off the horse and set her softly on her bare feet.

## **The Siren's Bloom**

“Welcome home, my Arrah,” he whispered hoarsely, his voice full of emotion, and he bent his head to hers and kissed her as if to seal her fate.



## Kate September

### Chapter 7

Arrah found herself hustled by Tymon and a bevy of servants down a series of twisting staircases carved out of the very stone of the cliff. She lost track of the levels and vaulted passages through which sea breezes blew.

Finally, they reached what she guessed to be one of the lower levels, as the lapping of the waves at the rocks was more audible to her sensitive hearing. They stepped off the grand staircase and into a broad sandstone passage with high ceilings and arches that showed Arrah that she was indeed right that they were close to the bottom of the palace. The last rays of the sun mixed with the pale blue light of falling twilight and poured in through the arches, bathing them all in living light.

"Where are we going?" Arrah asked Tymon, walking quickly to keep up with him, feeling the cool smoothness of the stone floors beneath her bare feet.

"I am taking you to your rooms," Tymon said, a strange note in his voice.

"My rooms?" Arrah asked, perplexed. "But no one knew of my coming...not even me," she added with a shade of sarcasm.

"Your rooms have been ready and waiting for you since the day I was born," Tymon replied quietly. "They are the rooms of the concubine to the crown prince."

Arrah was stunned and shaken by the thought of this ready-made destiny she had suddenly been thrust into.

"You would have spent your first ten years living at the court of Olos, King of the Seas, learning the graces and skills of the Sea People," Tymon continued, striding toward a set of tall, oak double doors at the end of the corridor. "Then, on your tenth birthday, you would have come to live in these rooms and learned the courtly manners and customs of Del'Alfia. On your eighteenth birthday, you would have been formally given to me."

Arrah felt like her head was swimming, but was intensely grateful that she had escaped having to pass a youth learning to be one thing only,

## The Siren's Bloom

a pleasure toy for a man not of her choosing. Though, she reminded herself, it was a role she would have to play now until she could escape.

"Have there ever been any unhappy concubines?" Arrah asked as they reached the door, watching Tymon's strong hands grasp the large brass knobs, cast in the pattern of sea horses.

"I do not know," he replied, sounding somewhat surprised.

"Your rooms, my Arrah," Tymon murmured, throwing open the doors.

"I am not your..." she started to protest, but lost track of her words as she stared at the magnificence of her rooms.

The chamber was enormous, with vaulted ceilings from which heavy iron candelabra chandeliers hung, the thick ivory candles already burning in them. The largest bed Arrah had ever seen was to her left, with diaphanous sheer curtains in blue and silver suspended from the ceiling and falling around it. At the moment, the curtains were pulled back, held in place by silver tasseled cords fastened to wrought silver hooks in the shape of the *lolila* flower. The bed itself was low and wide – Arrah guessed that four of her might sleep comfortably in it without touching at all. It was piled high with white furs, aquamarine blue silk sheets and a silver bedspread with white *lolila* flowers embroidered all over it.

Across the room from the bed was a tall fireplace, almost as tall as Arrah herself. The mantel was carved from white marble, veined with coral, and a merry blaze warmed the room nicely against the chilly evening ocean air. The far wall was all floor-to-ceiling glass doors that revealed the glowing blue of twilight and the serene expanse of the ocean. Arrah could hear the soft, rhythmic murmur against the rocks not far below. The window panes of the doors were beveled and had *lolila* motifs etched into them. Silver door handles in the same pattern also adorned the doors.

Beyond the windows, Arrah could see a large balcony that was almost like a garden with tall, flowering plants in pots, exotic greens, and silk-cushioned lounging couches with ornate *lolila* motif torches standing tall and throwing glowing light onto the secret garden.

It was almost too much to take in, but Arrah then noticed on the same wall as the bed there was an enormous wardrobe carved from fine maple with a sea motif of shells, sea horses and coral. Next to it was a large dressing table, all mirror and glass, with enameled caskets of gold

## Kate September

and silver open to reveal the jewels inside. There was another small arch to the side of the dressing table, and Arrah took a tentative step forward to explore it, then paused.

"It is all right," Tymon whispered, as if sensing her unspoken question. "These are your rooms."

Without looking back at Tymon, Arrah crossed the room, the polished marble floor feeling cool and slick to her bare feet. She could hear the heavy fur cloak she still wore brushing the floor. Through the small arch was a bathing room that was nearly the size of her other room. There was a discreet cabinet for relieving herself, and next to it, a large marble basin stood with a silver pitcher of water at the ready. There was also a dark oak trunk piled high with plush white towels. But the centerpiece of the room was the bathtub. There was a small flight of stairs up to it, which Arrah mounted to get a better look. It was more like a pool than a tub, she thought, with its long rectangular shape, and deep enough that it looked like it might come up to her shoulders. She did note that there were deep, wide benches in the shallow end of the pool so t one could sit in comfort while bathing.

The rim of the pool was adorned with statues of whimsical fish that poured out warm water at all times. There were large, heavy pots around the edge of the tub with giant lilies that canopied it. There was a low glass table next to the pool that was laden with strange, colorful cut glass bottles of oils and soaps. Several ornate braziers of coal burned around the steaming pool, keeping the air very warm and humid. Arrah looked to the side wall and saw that it was, like in the bedroom, made up of floor-to-ceiling windowed doors that angled up to mirror the steps leading up to the pool. Sheer white silk curtains discreetly covered the windows, and when Arrah peeked out, she saw that there was no balcony, but that the wall fell straight down to the ocean.

"Do you like it, Arrah?" a voice from behind asked softly and hopefully.

"Yes, it's all so lovely!" she exclaimed without thinking, turning to face Tymon who stood with her at the edge of the pool. "I mean, the concubine will be very happy here."

"Will you be happy here?" he asked, a note of hope creeping into his voice.

"These are beautiful rooms, far grander than anything I have ever dreamed," Arrah replied carefully, turning her gaze away from his, not

## The Siren's Bloom

liking the sensation meeting his eyes produced in her heart. "I know that I will be very comfortable and enjoy staying here."

"Perhaps you would like to bathe?" Tymon suggested. "Even now, maids are bringing you clothing and preparing food and wine for your supper."

"Yes," Arrah replied, nodding and breathing a sigh of relief, thinking he would leave her surely to bathe. "A bath sounds perfect."

Tymon smiled softly, his eyes igniting with desire. He went to the windows, swept back the curtains and opened the glass doors so that Arrah could see out to the starlit sky over the midnight blue ocean. He took a step back closer to her and placed his hands on her shoulders to remove the heavy fur cloak.

"Oh!" Arrah exclaimed, a blush making pale pink roses bloom in her cheeks. "No, no, I can do this by myself. You needn't--"

"I know I needn't," Tymon replied, pulling the cloak off her and throwing it down the steps. "But I want to."

"But you have just returned!" Arrah said, groping for some kind of ruse or excuse to get herself out of what she knew was coming, especially as his hands reached down to the hem of the oversized tunic she wore. "Surely there are courtiers to see, the kind will want a report, feasts, drinking, singing, congratulating your soldiers, and you probably need to --"

"All that I need is here," Tymon whispered, pausing to capture her chin and look deeply into her eyes. "Please, my Arrah, do not fight me. Just for tonight if it must be. But let me know you gently. Let me show you who I am. I am weary from months of war and weeks of hard road traveled. Let me rest my spirit with you. Just for tonight."

His plea was not without effect. Arrah's aquamarine eyes darkened with conflicting emotion. Finally, blushing furiously and looking more frightened than aroused, she nodded wordlessly.

With a faint sigh, Tymon bent his head to hers and gently kissed her lips.

## Kate September

### Chapter 8

He kept his kisses light and tender, as if to reassure this trembling mermaid concubine of his that he would keep his promise to be gentle. Though he longed to rip his tunic from her slender body, he restrained himself, finding her small hands and guiding them to the buckles of his leather armor and urging them by gesture to undo the bindings.

Arrah was so confused, she hardly knew what she was doing. Right and wrong, principle and protest had all become muddled when he spoke to her, begging her for...comfort. Part of her secretly and shamefully longed for the lightning she felt when he touched her. Part of her protested that this was tantamount to submission and surrender. Part of her was pleased and flattered that he sought her above anyone else in the palace to pass the first few precious hours of his return. And part of her didn't know what to make of any of it.

But even as she felt her lips parting slightly as Tymon plucked at them and softly sucked them with his own, she obeyed his unspoken command and fumbled with the complex, tough buckles until they were undone. She heard his sigh of pleasure as her hands worked, touching and brushing his ribs as she fought the buckles. Then, she struggled to lift the heavy, stiff leather jerkin off over his head. Tymon chuckled into their kiss and wrapped his hands around hers and easily lifted it off and discarded it on the floor. Pressing his kisses more firmly against her lips and letting his tongue slide out to tease and taste her, he guided her hands to the hem of his tunic, then raised his arms above his head.

Arrah felt her knees were growing wobbly as his continued with his unbroken kiss. She could feel her cheeks burning as she slowly pulled the tunic up over his chest, her knuckles brushing against the hard, warm skin. Suddenly, she was overwhelmed with the desire to touch him, to explore his lean warrior's body. But no, she couldn't. That wouldn't be proper, it wouldn't be right.

For a moment, Tymon broke their kiss as she stripped him of the tunic. Arrah could feel the anticipation in every line of his body as he now guided her hands to the waist of his breeches. Embarrassed tension filled

## The Siren's Bloom

Arrah as she reluctantly set to the task of undoing his breeches, and she found herself loosely wrapped his arms, with him tenderly kissing the tip of her nose and her forehead as if to reassure her.

"Um," Arrah's voice sounded very small and very shy.

"What is it, my Arrah?" Tymon purred, pulling her close against his bare chest.

"Mouf moo arf in fa vay," came her muffled reply.

He laughed, a sound that was rich and full, yet gentle.

"Your boots are in the way," Arrah said, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

"The downfall of many a romantic moment," Tymon said, laughing heartily. He seated himself on one of the steps and proceeded to pull off his boots, chucking them to the bottom of the steps.

"Only if one has great expectations of romance for that moment," Arrah pointed out with a wry smile, forgetting for a moment to be embarrassed.

"Well, I would counter that your expectations of romance are skewed indeed if you don't include laughter as part of it," Tymon replied, leaping to his feet and grabbing Arrah around the waist. He lifted her off her feet and swung her around until she felt a laugh of her own erupt from her throat. Only then did he set her down, cradling her face in his hands and looking deeply into her eyes.

He took one hand and undid his own breeches, letting them fall down around his ankles and stepping out of them. He stood before her, naked and unashamed, watching her tenderly as she couldn't help but take in every detail of him.

Arrah realized she was staring and immediately looked away. She also thought that he probably wanted her to remove the large tunic that fell almost to her knees. Setting her jaw, she shook back the long sleeves and grasped the hem of her tunic. She resolutely started to pull it up, but just as it was about to reveal her sex, her hands stopped. She looked desperate and embarrassed, knowing what she had to do, but unable to make her shaking hands comply.

"Shhh," Tymon whispered, stepping up to her and closing his hands over hers. Slowly and gently, he helped her pull the tunic off to reveal the pale loveliness of her body. He took a moment simply to hold her close to him, wrapping his arms around her frail back tightly.

## Kate September

Arrah felt tears spring to her eyes at such a gesture of reassurance and tentatively returned the gesture, letting her small hands rest against the broad muscles of his chest. Leaning her check in to rest against his chest, she could hear a low rumbling growl of contentment reverberate in his throat. She herself could hardly separate out all the emotions she felt – anticipation, fear, desire, and even tenderness. All she knew was the sensation of their bare bodies pressed together was exquisite, warming and thrilling in its rightness.

Tymon gently scooped her up in his strong arms, easily carrying her with him to the edge of the pool. He stepped down into the water, using the bench as a step, then slowly stepped down to the floor of the pool, letting Arrah acclimate to the water. He bent his face to hers, as if to catch her reaction to the water. Arrah herself was full of both anticipation and trepidation.

“I...have never...felt...so much water before,” she confessed, embarrassed at sounding like such a country bumpkin in such glorious surroundings, in the arms of a man of the world.

“How do you mean?” Tymon asked gently, still holding her securely in his embrace but extending his arms so that Arrah was able to feel the sensation of floating.

“It took too much wood or coal to heat a full tub of water,” Arrah explained, gasping slightly at the sensation of being supported both by Tymon’s arms and by the intangible weight of the water. “A cold basin and a cloth was what we made do with. I used to melt basins of snow to wash my hair.”

“Can you swim?” Tymon asked gently.

Arrah turned her face to him and shook her head. “No,” she replied. “There were ponds and lakes in the mountains, but they were always too cold.”

Tymon pulled her close to him again and kissed her moist lips, the steam of the bath water rising around them like ghostly plumes. Slowly, he released her legs so they could drift down to touch the bottom.

With one arm he swirled the water around them. Arrah felt the caress of little waves and gasped with pleasure as the waves rippled over her body underneath the surface. A slow tide of desire began to roll in as she felt the water of the pool envelop her like a devouring embrace.

“Hold onto me,” Arrah said suddenly, “then pull me up.”

## The Siren's Bloom

"What do you me-" Tymon started to say, but before he could finish, she kicked her legs out from underneath her and plunged under the surface.

She felt the most unnerving sensation of being suspended in nothingness. She could feel Tymon holding onto her wrists. With that measure of security, she tried to take a deep breath. Suddenly, she gave a panicked jerk, and her body twisted under the water, trying to regain a footing.

Easily pulling her to the surface, Tymon held her as she spluttered and choked out the water.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, pulling the curtain of wet hair to one side to look into her face, which was contorted with a sneezing fit from the water.

"I'm a mermaid, right?" Arrah gasped. "I thought I could breathe under water. Apparently, I'm a defective mermaid."

Tymon shouted with laughter and grabbed Arrah by the waist and hoisted her into the air above him. She found herself torn between sneezing, choking and smiling. He lowered her, holding her tightly to him so that their wet bodies slid together.

"My sweet, silly Arrah," he chortled. "Only in salt water, sea water, can you breathe. In fresh water, you are like any other creature of the land."

"You could have told me!" Arrah said, trying to pout, shaking the water out of her ears.

"You could have asked," Tymon countered. "But come, give me your hand again."

Arrah placed her hand in his and found herself pulled into his embrace, the water swirling around them again, sweeping across her skin and making shivers chase along her spine. She was pointedly reminded that they were both naked as she felt her skin press against his, a tingling awareness between her legs responding to his ready manhood hard against her thigh and the tension in his hands as he held her.

Tymon pulled her to the far side of the tub by the low table of oils and soaps. From the table, he picked a green glass bottle flecked with gold dust and swirls of gold blown into the glass. He handed it to her and pulled out the stopper so she could smell its contents.



## Kate September

Arrah cautiously inhaled the scent and turned to him in wonder. "Night roses!" she exclaimed. "I have never seen one, but do they truly bloom only at moonrise?"

Tymon nodded and cupped Arrah's hands, then poured a small amount of the oil into her hands. He guided her hands to his chest, and Arrah understood that he wanted her to touch him.

Arrah frowned slightly. She didn't know the first thing about massage – such things were looked down on in her village as things for weaklings. Staunch courage and endurance were the watchwords she knew better than leisure and pleasure. But still, she had promised this night to comfort him, and honor was equally strong within her as any of the other principles she had lived by.

Starting in small circles, she rubbed the oil over his pectoral muscles, feeling their slight pliancy. Diligently, she moved up to his shoulders, reaching up to work one of his large shoulders with both of her small hands. His muscles were hard enough that Arrah could barely make a dent in the tension she felt in them. The harder she tried, the less she felt she accomplished – other than stoking a most embarrassing flickering flame of lust within her. She felt Tymon smiling down at her as she rubbed his arms vigorously and worked his hands.

Arrah wondered what she was supposed to do next, she was fast running out of chest to rub. Reaching up, and standing on the balls of her feet, she rubbed the sides of his thick neck, feeling the raw strength he possessed in every inch of his body that she touched. Something about that made him feel both safe and dangerous to her, and she wasn't willing to say which sensation she preferred.

"Shall I do your back, sire?" she asked timidly when she had finished.

"Mmmm, perhaps later," Tymon murmured, lowering his head to kiss her. He wiped a little of the excess night rose oil on her lips and licked it off of them. "I have never met a woman who makes going slow so damned difficult!" he growled. "But then, I have never made love to a mermaid before, let alone the loveliest of all the sirens in the sea. Let me touch you, my Arrah!"

He poured more of the oil into his own hands and turned Arrah so that her back was to him. He carefully rubbed the oil into her back. Then, Tymon turned her around and quickly rubbed the oil over the front of her body.

## The Siren's Bloom

His quick caresses had quite an effect on Arrah. She shivered as his hands ran over her breasts, and her breath caught as his hands plunged under the water to cover her hips with the fragrant oil.

"Arrah," he growled, now pulling her close to him again.  
"Arrah..."

Tymon's arms suddenly became tight bands of steel around her ribs, lifting her partly out of the water, then letting her slide down his chest, the sweet oil making them both slick and soft. He seized her mouth as she groaned from the dizzying sensation of desire she felt. His tongue plunged into her mouth, finding her tongue and tangling with it.

Arrah trembled. She wanted so much to slide against him again, to feel her sensitive breasts rub against his chest, to feel her smooth belly pressed to his firm abdomen. She wanted to experience that tremor between her legs that seemed to block all reason and second thoughts from her mind. As he kissed her, she whimpered from her own repressed desire, a hunger she never knew she was even capable of. At the very least, she couldn't help herself and reached up to run her slender fingers through his hair, pulling his head down to smash his mouth against hers.

She felt Tymon start, as if surprised by her gesture. But she was not long in doubt of his true reaction. He growled and encircled her bottom with his large hands, picking her up so that she was positioned over his cock. She trembled in his arms, shivering with anticipation.

As he held her up, she rested her arms on his shoulders to balance and moaned softly when he took a breast into his mouth, gently suckling and teasing the nipple with his tongue. His mouth moved to pay court to the other pale globe whose tip was already hard and tingling with anticipation. Another soft moan escaped her lips as Arrah surrendered rational thought to the wash of sensation that roared through her, tugging at every nerve ending in her body. Her bottom wriggled in his grasp, seeking the illicit pressure against her secret pearl. All she knew at that moment was that she wanted him, that she wanted to be completed by him, to feel that heavenly release with him.

Tymon lowered her gently, impaling her on his rigid manhood. He groaned against her breast, and Arrah felt her nipple grow hard again from his hot breath. With a languor that was torturous for her, he lifted her up and down on his shaft, feeling the slickness of the water and the night rose oil adding to her own nectar. She cupped the steaming water in

## Kate September

her hands and let it dribble down onto them, the hot droplets burning for an instant where they fell on her skin.

Arrah purred as she felt him fill her to the hilt. He stretched her and burned within her, and she swore she could feel the throb of his manhood against the walls of her womb. In a daze of pleasure, she scooped up water in her hands and let it run over them, a sensation as tantalizing as the water was luxurious for her.

"Ohh!" she gasped as Tymon moved to thrust within her as he lowered her on his cock. The movement pressed the base of his shaft against the soft lips that hid her pleasure bud and produced a tickling shiver in her sex.

"Arrah," Tymon growled, his grasp on her tightening. He turned so that her back was now braced against the wall of the pool and thrust deeply within her, withdrawing almost completely. The one hand that supported her buttocks gripped the soft, firm flesh, his long fingers digging into the muscle. With his other hand, he caressed her body, capturing and squeezing her breasts, teasing the nipples to painful hardness with the incessant flicking of his thumbs. His mouth plundered hers and wandered over her face, ears and neck, licking and biting.

Arrah spread her arms along the lip of the pool to support herself as her feet did not touch the bottom. She felt the edge of the pool bite into her back, yet the pain was just enough to heighten the pleasure she felt. The increasing power of his thrusts as his control vanished showed her just how fragile she was in comparison to this god of a man. He was dangerous, predatory, sensual, taking what he wanted. Despite vague ideas that still lingered about independence and escape, Arrah found herself reveling in his increasingly demanding caresses, kisses and drilling of her sex. The scented, steaming water sloshed around them, slapping against her skin, spilling over the lip of the pool and decorating their skin with diamond droplets in the torch light.

Arrah threw her head back and closed her eyes, abandoning herself to pure feeling. She could hear the crash of the waves on the rocks below, and the tang of salt air carried in on a cool ocean breeze mingled with the warm, steamy air of the bath. She scraped her nails along the cold polished surface of the marble floor, as if trying to dig in and hold onto something. She was aware of every strand of hair that clung damply to her skin. And most of all, she was aware of Tymon.

## The Siren's Bloom

Every part of her body felt him, from her inner thighs that pressed against his waist, to her legs hooked around his hips where she could feel his backside if she pointed her toes and pressed them against him. Her hips were the center of being, the relentless grinding of their union driving spikes of pleasure into every limb of her body. She could feel her belly rub against his, her breasts in his mouth, against his chest, his lips on her shoulders, her chin, her eyelids.

Arrah's body shook from the force of his thrusts, and suddenly, she fell forward, wrapping her arms around his neck, and pulling his face to nuzzle hers. He roared as her hips bucked against his, emptying into her to the rhythm of her cries.

For a moment, all he could was pant and clutch her tightly in his arms. She felt utterly limp to him, so very soft and pliable. A wave of tenderness rolled over him, and he repeatedly kissed the top of her head that now lay still on his shoulder, murmuring her name.

With a sigh of regret, he felt himself slip out of her, but he smiled as he saw the dazed, exhausted look of pleasure that played on Arrah's delicate features.

"Come," he whispered, tiredness evident in his own voice. "I think I had better wash your hair before you fall asleep in the water."

"Mmm?" Arrah mumbled, fighting to keep her eyes open, clinging to him like a life preserver. She didn't trust her legs to support her at the moment, and he seemed to at least have both feet on the bottom of the pool.

"Wake up, my sweet mermaid," Tymon laughed softly. "We must wash before dinner."

The mention of food perked Arrah up somewhat. "Right," she said with a nod, some of the sparkle returning to her eyes. "Where's that soap?"

## Kate September

### Chapter 9

Arrah awoke alone again, and for a moment, she blinked furiously, trying to remember where she was. As she remembered, she looked around the room filled with morning light. The maids had already been in, it seemed, as the doors were open slightly, and a gentle breeze swirled the sheer curtains.

She rolled over onto her side and stared out the window, listening to the murmured music of the waves against the rocks below. Sleepily, she replayed the events of the night. After bathing, Tymon had wrapped her in the large, soft white towels and carried her into the bedroom. Servants had come and gone, leaving a merry blaze crackling in the tall hearth and a sumptuous meal with silver pitchers of wine on a low table before the fire. Tymon had gone to the wardrobe and pulled out a rich golden brocade robe that he bade Arrah wear, while he himself donned a dark blue dressing gown.

The mermaid smiled dreamily to herself as she recalled the uproarious laughter they had shared starting with the second course, challenging each other to tell the worst jokes they knew. She couldn't remember how the subject had come up, but she knew that by the end of dinner, they were talking like old friends, telling stories and debating with spirit. She had become so comfortable that even when Tymon drew her into his arms and carried her to the bed, she did not shy away and had even smiled into his searching eyes.

Arrah's body shivered as she remembered the slow, torturous love-making that kept them both from getting much sleep. Tymon had taken his time, exploring her body, studying every inch of it as if to memorize it, and he had encouraged her to touch him, groaning with heartfelt pleasure as she ran her hands over his body, exploring his muscled contours with both curiosity and wonder.

At some point, worn out by pleasure, she must have fallen asleep. She turned back and glanced at the empty pillow beside her that still bore the indent of Tymon's head. No doubt he had risen early to attend to the business he had put off last night, she reasoned. And she, who was still

## The Siren's Bloom

going to run away, had no business missing him. She sighed without knowing it and stretched out underneath the silk covers.

A maid entered the room, carrying a heavy tray laden with food.

"Good morning, milady," she said, depositing the tray on a table and bobbing a curtsy to Arrah. "I have your breakfast here, and I will help you get ready."

Arrah sat up, holding the sheet around her nakedness, blushing. "Oh no," she said quickly. "I can dress myself. There's no need for you to stay."

"You're to be presented to King Taemon after breakfast, milady," the young maid said with a smile that showed her dimples. "You'll want to look your best."

"Oh," Arrah replied, frowning.

"Some tea and a bath will help you see things more clearly, milady," the maid said in a sweetly teasing manner. "And if not the tea, then Cook's pastries are bound to change your view of life."

Soon enough, Arrah found herself bathed and dressed, with breakfast inside her, and was surveying the results in the tall mirror next to her dressing table.

The maid had dressed her in a white opalescent silk gown that hung soft and straight, clinging to the mermaid's gentle curves. The semi-sheer fabric was held up by two thin shoulder straps sewn with pearls and the draped fabric of the bodice fell generously low on Arrah's small bosom. There was no back to speak of on the dress, as it was deliberately cut away to reveal the entirety of the *lolila* flower drawn in silver on Arrah's back. The gentle ripples of the skirt fell to the floor and covered Arrah's tiny feet that were encased in silver brocade slippers with small glass heels. The maid had bound Arrah's magnificent silver mane into an elaborate bun with vines of *lolila* flowers woven into it. The small, white star-shaped flowers and their silver vines were Arrah's only adornment, as she flatly refused to wear the jewels the maid had urged on her.

"You look lovely, milady," the maid whispered, her hands clasped and eyes shining with pride in her handiwork.

Arrah raised a skeptical eyebrow at her reflection. "It is all thanks you too," she replied with a laugh. "I know well enough that I have no talent in these things."

The maid blushed with pleasure and bobbed a curtsy. She hoped that she would be assigned to serve Lady Arrah permanently, but first, the

## Kate September

lady would have to be accepted by the king and bonded in a ceremony to the prince.

"You'd best get going, milady," the maid said with a quick nod. "I will show you the way."

Arrah followed the maid out of her chambers and back up through a labyrinth of corridors and staircases. Several floors up from her chambers, the maid ushered her into a tall corridor with arched windows that looked out over the ocean.

"The Great Hall is through there," the maid whispered. "They are waiting for you."

Arrah nodded mechanically, but suddenly had the desire to turn and run as fast as she could away from there. She didn't want to stay here! She wanted to go home! And she certainly didn't want to be presented or bonded – whatever that was – making her escape just that much more complicated. But she was pretty sure, given the burly and alarmingly athletic build of the door guards, any attempt at escape on her part was going to be foiled quickly and efficiently.

With a sigh, she squared her shoulders and nodded to the guards to open the doors. Arrah caught the low murmur of idly chatting voices just before everything in the hall fell silent. A wave of panic roared through the girl's slender frame, and she found she couldn't move. Desperately clenching her hands into fists at her side, she frantically scanned the room with her eyes as if searching for something to hold onto. She found it in the tall, imposing yet reassuring figure of Tymon advancing the length of the long hall towards her.

She exhaled a breath she didn't know she had been holding and allowed herself a moment of admiration for the fine figure the prince cut in his formal dress. He wore a richly embroidered midnight blue velvet cloak that fell to the backs of his knees and was attached at his shoulders by gold epaulettes. A fine grey silk tunic stretched across his broad chest, girded at the waist by an elaborately wrought ceremonial belt and sword at this side. His long legs were encased in loose brown trousers tucked into black boots.

Tymon smiled confidently at her, a smile that seemed to Arrah to be both proud and full of a barely-restrained desire. He grinned as he reached out and took her clenched hand in his, gently unfurling her fist and entwining their fingers.

"Come, my Arrah," he whispered to her. "Do not be afraid."

## The Siren's Bloom

She wanted to retort that she was not afraid, but she doubted her would accept such a bald-faced lie. Reluctantly, Arrah allowed Tymon to lead her down the long center aisle of the great sandstone hall. Rich, bright tapestries adorned the walls, and one wall of the hall was open to the ocean, with great arching windows that almost reached floor to ceiling. Arrah tried to focus on noting the details of the room – the bronze torches in the shapes of seahorses, the smooth, lustrous black and white marble checkerboard tile under her feet. This kind of observation kept her from being too aware of the hundreds of courtiers in their best finery that were gawking at her. She caught glimpses of peacock feathers and champagne-colored satins, fiery rubies glinting in the light, and haughty, curious faces.

Tymon escorted her to the front of the hall, where a wizened old man sat on a tall, gilt throne with claw foot armrests and feet. Arrah studied him in awe for a moment. This was King Taemon? This was the terror of Del'Alfia, the most feared ruler of the Seven Great Kingdoms? This dazed old man whose rheumy blue eyes wandered aimlessly over the crowds was the firebrand of the battlefield?

Arrah felt Tymon squeeze her hand, and she realized she had been staring. Quickly, she sank low to the ground in a deep curtsy. Behind her calm visage, she felt great shock and great sadness. She understood why Tymon was prince regent – his father was in no shape to rule a kingdom, and she felt sorry for the prince's burden of seeing a parent in such a dotage.

"Your majesty," Tymon said, speaking loudly enough for the whole court to hear his words. "The oath of the Sea People has been kept. Deceit cannot keep destiny at bay forever. I have found the maid of the *lolila*, Arrah of the Sea People. I present her to you now, your majesty and beg you to accept her as fulfillment of the age-old covenant between her people and ours."

Arrah stole a glance up at the king who turned his eyes to her and focused with great difficulty. His mouth worked strangely for a minute, his gnarled hands clutching at the carved armrests.

"Let...it...be...so," he croaked finally in a broken voice.

Tymon nodded and scanned the dais, seemingly confused. He motioned to one of the chamberlains, who approached.

"Where is Lady Ema?" Arrah heard him whisper to the chamberlain.



## Kate September

"I do not know, sire," the rotund little man replied, distraught. "She said she would be here."

"Arrah must receive the concubine's blessing from her," Tymon whispered between gritted teeth.

Arrah had no idea who they were speaking of, or what blessing was meant by his words. Tymon pulled at her hand to indicate she might stand. She could hear the courtiers beginning to murmur at this apparent hitch in the presentation ceremony.

"Who is Ema?" Arrah whispered, her lips barely moving.

"My father's concubine," Tymon replied, glancing down at her, his dark eyes inscrutable. "The fairest maid of the Sea People of her time, born with the *lolila* symbol on her back."

Arrah gasped. It hadn't occurred to her that another concubine might still be living at court. Of course, it made sense, but still...Arrah was both surprised and suddenly ravenously curious to see others of her kind.

There was a disturbance at the back of the hall, and crowds of courtiers parted like gaily colored waves wafting exotic perfumes. Both Arrah and Tymon spun around to see what had happened, and Arrah heard Tymon's sharp intake of breath.

A tall, stately woman with coral pink hair shot through with white stood in the doorway of the Great Hall, beside her a tall, cloaked figure. The older woman's eyes were an eerie light green, with elegant lines of age around them, and her skin was as pale as Arrah's own. Arrah guessed that this must be Lady Ema, King Taemon's concubine, and though Arrah thought there was something cold and cruel about the lines of her face, she was forced to admit that the woman was truly lovely.

Lady Ema advanced, the stiff pale green brocade of her high-necked gown swishing along the floor. Golden bracelets tinkled on her wrists, and the woman moved with a practiced motion of seduction. The cloaked figure followed her, making no sound. Lady Ema came to a stop before Tymon and Arrah.

"Sire," she said loudly, a sly smile spreading her still-full lips. "I bring you news of great joy this day!"

"Say on, milady," Tymon replied guardedly.

"After years of tireless searching, we have found my niece, Dellia," Lady Ema said. "Believing her taken by corsairs, we found that she was living in hiding in the deep sea forests with an old wise woman, entrusted

## The Siren's Bloom

to her care by her mother. Her nurse had stolen our baby away in hope of revenge against my family."

"I am glad for you, milady, but I do not see how –" Tymon started to say, but was interrupted by Lady Ema's smooth flow of words.

"It gives me great pleasure to present to you Dellia of the Sea People, maid of the *lolila*!"

At these words, the figure next to Lady Ema threw off its cloak. Revealed to the brilliant light that filled the Great Hall was a mermaid of breathtaking beauty. Flawless alabaster skin, jet black hair streaked with ultramarine blue bound up in an artfully careless great knot and studded with diamonds. The mermaid's eyes were of the same dark ultramarine blue, and there was no denying the smooth cheeks, full lips and graceful neck. Dellia turned slightly so that Tymon could not help but notice the shifting of her ample breasts under the fabric of her low-cut, tightly clinging black dress that outlined full, luxurious hips.

Arrah could feel Tymon tense next to her, and she herself was completely at a loss, torn between puzzlement and sheer admiration of the stunning, classical beauty before her.

"You know well enough that you cannot just claim that your niece is the maid of the *lolila*," Tymon said, his voice gruff and tight.

"Turn, Dellia," Lady Ema ordered, her smile widening.

The court collectively gasped as Dellia turned to reveal a sensuous, shapely back with the very same *lolila* pattern traced in silver on its smooth surface.

"How can this be?" Tymon asked roughly, his jaw set and his eyes flashing. "There cannot be two mermaids born marked thusly!"

"No, there never have been, and there never will, sire," Lady Ema said with a sickeningly sweet tone of sympathy. "The truth is plain enough. One of them is an imposter."

Arrah felt herself turn cold with horror. Naturally, she herself assumed that she was the imposter – after all, she was the one who had only ever lived on land, knew nothing of the ways of the Sea People or their tribute to Del'Alfia.

"And how else, other than his marking, can you prove that...that...Dellia is the one?" Tymon pressed, his voice harsh with urgency and emotion.

"I am her aunt," Lady Ema replied gently, in a tone of great reason. "For the past 200 years, the women of my family have been marked with

## Kate September

the *lolila*. We have been greatly blessed to serve both our peoples by fulfilling the tribute.”

Arrah drew in a deep breath. Well, that settled it. She was definitely the fake concubine, which meant that she should be free to go then. And the thought struck her with as much regret as relief.

## The Siren's Bloom

### Chapter 10

The rest of the scene passed in nightmarish confusion for Arrah. She was whisked away by Tymon from the uproar of the Great Hall and taken to a large study that she guessed belonged to Tymon. Everything about the room spoke of calm and reason, from the neatly piled folios, to the carefully laid out maps, to the heavy, sober furnishings of wood and leather.

Lady Ema and Dellia followed Tymon at his beckoning, and the prince wasted no time in dispatching a servant on an urgent errand.

"And where have you lived all these years, child?" Lady Ema said, turning to Arrah and addressing her for the first time.

Arrah bristled at the condescending tone, but answered politely enough, "I was raised as the daughter of a village headman in the Ice Mountains."

Dellia tittered behind an elegant hand with dimples at the knuckles.

"You mean that you have never been under the water?" Lady Ema asked in mock horror, a sickening smirk on her face.

Arrah shook her head, her jaw set and shoulders squared. She was not about to be intimidated by this woman or her goddess-like niece. They cared much more than she did who became Tymon's concubine. At least, that's what Arrah told herself firmly and repeatedly.

The door to Tymon's study soon opened to admit an old man in flowing violet robes. Arrah studied him with interest, noting that he was, though old, still quite handsome, with high white eyebrows, a straight nose and square jaw. Long white hair fell down his back to his waist, and Arrah observed he carried a wrought silver staff with him.

"Seppius," Tymon said, advancing and reaching to clasp the wizard's hand, relief obvious in his voice.

"Sire," the old man replied, inclining his head and smiling warmly at the young man.

"I need your help," Tymon began, only to be cut off by a deep, rolling laugh from the old man.

## Kate September

"I know you do, lad," Seppius said with a grin. "I am a mage, after all. You should give me some credit."

Tymon returned the grin with a wry smile that crinkled up his eyes in a way that made Arrah's heart skip a beat – even though she told herself sternly that her heart had no reason to skip any beats at all with this man.

"My ladies," Seppius said, turning to Lady Ema, Dellia and Arrah, bowing to them courteously. "If I might have Lady Dellia and Lady Arrah approach me, I shall examine them."

"What?" Arrah exclaimed, looking to Tymon with a mix of suspicion and fear.

"If one of you is falsely marked, Seppius, the greatest of all the mages in the Seven Great Kingdoms, will be able to tell," Tymon replied firmly.

"Come, child, I shall not hurt you," Seppius said to Arrah with a chuckle, extending his hand to gesture for her to come close.

Slowly and with great reluctance, Arrah moved into place beside Dellia, who had been most obliging right away. Arrah gave the mermaid a sidelong glance and almost laughed at the comic disproportion between them. Arrah barely reached Dellia's shoulder in height, and was certainly her inferior in girth and curvature. Arrah felt she was very much a sparrow presenting itself for inspection, to be judged against a peacock.

Seppius stood toe-to-toe with Dellia, gently cupping her chin with his hand. He turned her face from side to side and looked deeply into her eyes. The mage did not bother testing out any of the other obvious attributes, except in reaching down to her wrist to take her pulse.

"Turn," Seppius ordered, and Dellia obeyed, a satisfied smirk on her face.

Seppius spend a long time studying the *lolila* marking on Dellia's supple back. He poked at it with his finger, which drew a flash of irritation across Dellia's perfect features. He bent over to study it from the very base of her back all the way up to her neck.

"Your age?" he asked Dellia politely.

"Nineteen summers this month," she replied, her voice like whiskey and velvet.

He grunted a little and nodded to himself. "Now, Lady Arrah," he said, stepping over to the silver-haired mermaid.

## The Siren's Bloom

"I am not a lady of any court," Arrah said hastily. "I am just Arrah."

"And that is enough for you, eh?" Seppius murmured, his brow furrowed.

He cupped Arrah's face in his hand. His grip felt warm and soothing, and Arrah swore she could feel a gentle buzzing of energy in his touch. Arrah did not flinch or turn her gaze away when he looked deeply into her aquamarine eyes. But the sensation of meeting his gaze was unlike any other. He seemed to connect with her, she could almost hear the whisper of his voice in her mind, little half-murmured phrases, a curiosity, as if he was searching for something, for a memory she did not know she had. Her own eyes went wide, and she trembled in his grip.

Tymon looked on, his arms crossed over his chest, one hand rubbing his jaw in a nervous gesture. The prince's uneasiness didn't help Arrah's own trepidation as Seppius released her and turned her around to study her back. Seppius traced a finger along the *lolila* pattern of Arrah's back, sending a shiver through her. Arrah noticed that the mage stepped away from her much sooner than he had from Dellia.

"Well?" Tymon demanded finally after the mage had stood in silence for several minutes, staring out the window as if lost in thought.

"How old are you, Arrah?" Seppius suddenly asked, turning to the girl.

"Eighteen summers last month," Arrah replied, lifting her chin in a gesture of defiance. Against what? She couldn't say. But she felt angry, hard and ready to fight whatever came her way.

Seppius chuckled and shook his head. He turned to Tymon.

"Both *lolila* markings are real," he said in amused manner. "It is impossible to judge which one is the real concubine based solely on that. But one of them is false," he added more seriously. "The rules of the spell are that no two mermaids can be born within the same generation with the *lolila*."

Tymon's face grew tight, his lips pressed into a grim line.

"Then how am I supposed to tell?" he asked, his eyes darkening like a brewing ocean storm.

"Time will tell," Seppius said with a knowing smile. Then, he abruptly said, "Well, if you'll excuse me, sire, the head groomsmen has been at me all morning to come and see to the bay mare, for she's about to give birth, and I'm needed for the blessing."

## Kate September

With that, Seppius swept from the room, leaving a faint aroma of fragrant herbs behind him.

Tymon looked down at the floor, his face black and hard. This was not what he had wanted to hear. It made everything so complicated. It would have been so much easier if Arrah had been proclaimed the true concubine – both because Tymon still desired her, and because the prince would have been glad to score off the aged, scheming concubine who had treated his mother, the queen, so badly during her life. He paced over to the window, not looking at anybody and stared moodily out of it for a few moments, pondering his next step.

The slight click of a latch catching drew him back from his reverie, and he turned back around to face the mermaids who waited for his judgment. His eyebrows shot up in consternation when he saw only Lady Ema and Dellia in the room.

“Where is Arrah?” he asked, a dangerous edge to his voice.

Lady Ema shrugged. “No doubt, gone to her room to pack her things,” she said with a satirical airiness. “Now, if your highness would like, Dellia can –”

But her words were heard only by empty air. Tymon was already out the door.

## The Siren's Bloom

### Chapter 11

Arrah reached her chambers after getting lost several times in the labyrinthine cliffside palace. Her intent on entering her bedroom was indeed as Lady Ema had guessed – to find something simple and suitable for travel and pack a few bare necessities that surely Dellia would not miss when she took over those rooms.

But a strange fatigue seized her when she entered the suite glowing with late-morning sunlight. She yawned, but found she wasn't sleepy. It was as if her entire body was drained of energy. Arrah blushingly reasoned with herself that it had been a long night, restful neither in terms of sleep or stillness, it was only natural that she be somewhat tired.

The doors were open, the curtains billowing in the breeze a gentle invitation to explore the balcony. Arrah stumbled across the room and onto the sandstone balcony. She gratefully collapsed onto the silk lounging couch that was surrounded by exotic plants and looked out at the mystical blue ocean that was still such a mystery to her. She rested one arm above her head and let her eyes drift closed, enjoying the feel of the warmth of the sun on her bare face and arms. In the Ice Mountains, summers were generally still quite cold, allowing only for the sowing of the heartiest of seeds, and most of the villagers had still worn layers of wool to keep warm.

Arrah's breathing grew slow and steady as she drifted into a light doze. She did not hear Tymon enter her room, and she was not even aware of him until he reached down and placed a kiss on her bare shoulder. She started and sat up, looking into the smiling face of the prince as he sat down beside her on the couch.

"Oh!" she said, somewhat at a loss for words. "I was just...um...resting."

Tymon cupped her cheek with his bronzed hand, stroking his thumb over the creamy skin. His eyes roved over her lissome form, taking in the way the sunlight pierced the semi-sheer fabric of her white dress, hinting at the delights it covered.

"My Arrah," he murmured, leaning into kiss her lips.



## Kate September

"No."

The reply was involuntary but firm, and Arrah, gritting her teeth, pulled back from Tymon's caress.

"No?" he repeated, a slow heat creeping into his voice.

Arrah sighed unhappily. Suddenly, as much as she knew what she had to do, she didn't want to do it. But she knew she would do it. Mermaid she may be, with seduction flowing in her veins, but she was a mountain-raised in an unforgiving land where there is no reward for the faint of heart.

"Sire," she began softly. "Seppius said that only time will tell who is the real concubine. But, I see no need for waiting around, passing idle days while hoping some clue will be revealed."

Tymon smiled, not altogether a pleasant expression. "Indeed," he said. "There is, as you say, no need of that. As I see it, the choice is mine, if there be no clear indication one way or the other, and I choose you."

Arrah clenched her hands to hide the fact that they shook. She could see in his eyes why enemies of Del'Alfia had feared him. She felt a pang of both fear and something strangely akin to regret, but she knew that she had to hold fast to her resolution.

"It is not a matter of your choice, sire," Arrah said, her voice trembling, but her eyes maddeningly clear in the sunlight. "You have the Lady Dellia who bears the same mark as I, and who seems more willing and certainly more suited to be your concubine."

He seized Arrah by her thin shoulders, his large hands clenched in a painful grip on her flesh.

"Not my choice?" he spat. "No, my little mermaid, it is my choice, and I will have what I want!"

"And your choice cancels out everyone else's!" Arrah gasped, exasperation edging out pain in her voice. "It's always been about your choice, never mine! I did not choose to leave my village. I did not choose to go to your bed. I did not choose to take up this life. It is all what you want, and now that you have someone else who is willing to submit to your choice, you still choose me?"

"Are you not willing?" Tymon growled, pressing Arrah back against the cushions. "After all that I have done, all the kindness I have showed you, all that we have shared, you are not willing?"

## The Siren's Bloom

Arrah set her jaw and met his angry gaze with her level one, sure of her decision. She would have struggled to fight him off, but the strange fatigue still held sway over her body.

"I am not willing," she said in a firm, clear voice, showing no fear, despite the hammering of her heart.

Tymon suddenly yanked her into his embrace and kissed her savagely, hungrily. His thumb reached up and forcefully parted her lips, and his tongue entered her mouth like a conquering army, demanding tribute. She felt her body shiver and respond, and hated the grim smile of satisfaction that spread over the prince's face. Without further prelude, he pressed her deeper into the cushions, pinning her down as the sunlight beat down on them and gulls made lazy loops in the brilliant blue sky above. His hand left her shoulder and roamed roughly down her body, finding the burning secret nest between her legs and stroking it through the slippery gossamer silk.

Arrah groaned, trying desperately to remember her resolve, but the force of his assault and the pure animal hunger of his kisses aroused the red hot desire she now knew, thanks to him, lurked just below the surface of her pale skin. When his hands found her womanhood and started to worry her pleasure bud, she writhed against the cushions of the couch, still pinned by one of his hands. The slight friction of the silk, damp from her honey and warm from his fingers, was a torturous sensation that she could not fight.

Arrah only vaguely heard Tymon's voice as she struggled and squirmed at his touch. He spoke in deep, gravelly tones that sounded rough from his own need.

"This is your lesson, my Arrah," Tymon panted. "I would take you right now, here, in the open air under the warm sun. But first, I must teach you what you won't admit."

He punctuated his words with kisses to Arrah's neck and jaw, kisses that felt hot and damp to her and made her want to melt into his embrace.

"I will make you forget this idea of leaving me," Tymon whispered raggedly as he stroked and caressed her. "I will make you forget all that was before in your life. I will teach you to cry out my name in pleasure. I will make you surrender to me for all time!"

Tymon's fingers worked feverishly, teasing her lotus bud, tracing light designs on her soft, pliant nether lips through the fabric. His mouth

## Kate September

left her lips and moved down her throat with demanding kisses and bites. He grabbed the fabric that covered her small, delectable bosom with his teeth and savagely tore it aside, falling on her sweet, pale breast like a beast. With wild growls, he delighted in tormenting her nipples into hard, candied peaks, all the while relishing the small whimpers and struggles of the mermaid held helpless in his embrace.

Arrah tried to push him away, but her arms felt like lead, and all she could do was cling to him limply. Her body vibrated and responded to his touch with a hunger that only the purest point of pleasure could satiate. She arched her hips to meet his hand, inviting him to stoke with his devilish, insistent fingers the ache that grew between her legs. She weakly wound her fingers in his hair, creating sweet tangles that trapped him and her together in a complex embrace.

With a groan, Tymon raised his head and dove in upon her lips again, leaving her exposed breast tight and glistening in the sunlight. He drowned out her cries of pleasure with his lips and tongue, tasting what he liked, as he liked in her mouth.

Arrah twisted weakly in his grasp, her hips grinding into his unforgiving, unrelenting touch. It was such a wanton, abandoned feeling, to be half-naked in broad daylight, to be writhing like a serpent under the rough caresses of a man whose own desire was unrepentant. The straps of the loose bodice of her dress slipped down off her shoulders, revealing the other perfect, small round breast. She moaned deep in her throat as she felt Tymon's hand desert her sex and reach for a fistful of fabric, pulling it up over her hip and exposing one slender leg. His fingers could now touch what they liked without any barrier, and he plunged two fingers into her wet, aching sex while worrying her pleasure bud with his thumb.

All too soon, Arrah cried out. Her cries were incoherent, and her arms flailed about on his shoulders, plucking at his cloak to try and grab hold of something as her body shook with the violence of her climax. Abruptly, Tymon stood up and took a step back from the dazed, shivering mermaid on the couch. His face was anguished but hard as he looked down at her.

"Are you willing now?" he demanded raggedly, his breath catching in his throat, choked by his own overwhelming need to take her.

Rolling onto her side, Arrah shook and tried to cover her bared chest by crossing her arms. She looked up at Tymon, her eyes wide and unfocused. But his words called forth her resolve and reason from their

## **The Siren's Bloom**

sleep. She set her jaw, and her aquamarine eyes flashed, even as she trembled.

"My body will go to its grave being willing for you," she said, her teeth chattering. "But I, Arrah, am not willing, because it is not the choice I make."

Tymon stared at her in disbelief for a long moment. Arrah instinctively knew that he believed her answer would be welcoming and compliant, that he would be able to sate his own now-obvious need with her. His eyes narrowed, and she saw a spasm of rage cross his face, the very power of his anger crashing against her like waves upon the rocks.

"Damn you, Arrah!" he hissed and turned on his heel, striding out of the room. He slammed the door shut behind him, leaving her to grieve by herself.

## Kate September

### Chapter 12

All the servants of the great palace of Del'Alfia would swear, and what's more, be honest in their oaths, that Tymon was a hard master, but he was fair and rarely one to show his temper without reason.

Therefore, when the chambermaids and footmen saw Tymon stalking through the corridors, almost crackling with the energy of rage, they knew something serious had occurred, and it was best to stay out of the way. He charged into his rooms, slamming the door behind him so hard that the candles in their bronze sconces shook. With a growl, he reached up to run his fingers through his dark hair, only to smell the faint fragrance of Arrah's essence on his hand.

When the elegantly dimpled hand touched his shoulder, the distracted prince moved by instinct alone, spinning and unsheathing his sword so that in a heartbeat, he faced his opponent, ready for a fight.

"What are you doing here?" Tymon demanded gruffly as he found himself staring down Dellia, who stood still as a statue, one strap of her silky black dress falling off her round alabaster shoulder.

Her full red lips parted just a fraction, and she casually ran her fingertips along the flat of the blade as she sauntered up to Tymon, her hips swaying suggestively. Her half-lidded eyes were those of seductress and predator. As she came to stand toe-to-toe with him, her other hand found the aching bulge in his trousers and softly caressed it.

"I am here for you, sire," she whispered, pinning his dark gaze with her mesmerizing blue eyes. "I am here only for your pleasure...to give you pleasure."

Tymon lowered his sword to the floor, but his posture did not unbend from its rigid stance. He looked down at Dellia, noting that she was nearly as tall as he was, unlike Arrah...

Damn the girl! He wanted to give her everything, to be everything to her, and to have her be everything to him. And what did she do? Fling it back in his teeth with those cold, clear words of hers, ringing with resolve.

## The Siren's Bloom

"Your highness is in need of some care," Dellia murmured, slipping to her knees in a fluid gesture and shifting her shoulders so that he could see the gentle rolling of her ample bosom as she unbuckled his trousers.

Tymon still said nothing, nor did he move. His eyes were fixed on Dellia, but he did not see her. He saw a pale, pointy face with defiance shining in aquamarine eyes. The image stoked both his anger and his desire. If the girl truly did not want to be with him, then fine! Let her do without him and see how she liked it. In the meantime, there was no reason he could not enjoy the attentions of a woman who did want him...and her mouth suddenly engulfing his raging, burning cock assured him that she did want him.

The prince closed his eyes without realizing it as Dellia ministered to his manhood with her lips and her tongue, grazing the shaft with her white teeth and swirling her tongue around the swollen crown. He was in a brutal, defiant, domineering mood, and in the blindness of his need, he decided to test this mermaid who sought a place by his side.

Roughly, he grabbed a fistful of her thick black hair and jerked her head back from his loins. Her expression was serene and sensuous, and she offered no resistance.

"Undress me," he growled, dropping his sword to the floor and extending his arms so she could remove his clothing.

Dellia smirked, and rising to her feet, she began to undress the prince. Tymon gritted his teeth at her knowing touch. She moved so that he was torn between impatience and a desire to have her hands linger on his body. She trailed her lips over his body, her tongue flicking at his nipples and leaving a wet trail down his abdomen as she knelt again to remove his trousers and boots.

Once he was naked, Tymon strode over to his large four-poster bed with its heavy tapestry curtains. He lay down on it, his expression grim as he propped himself up against the pillows.

"Strip for me," he ordered Dellia, a feral light in his eyes. "Slowly."

Dellia's knowing smile spread a little wider as she came to stand at the foot of the bed. She raised both her arms over her head so that he could see the full, generous line of her cleavage. She dropped her arms, letting her hands caress her face and make lingering lines down her neck. Her soft pink tongue peeked out and wet her ruby red lips, and she closed her eyes and threw her head back as if already experiencing pleasure.

## Kate September

The raven-haired mermaid pulled down the straps of her dress with agonizing slowness, reaching up with her hands to grip the hem of the bodice and pull it down over her large, round breasts. Dellia purred as Tymon watched her, feeling his chest rise and fall more rapidly with the empty, raging hunger he felt. She thumbed her nipples so they stood up hard and pink, cooing with the pleasure.

She slipped her arms out of the straps and gently pushed down the rest of the dress until she revealed the sensuous full curves of her hips and the dark silk triangle that hid her womanhood. The dress fell in a black silk pool around her ankles, and she stepped out of it with a practiced ease. She got onto the bed, crawling on her hands and knees like a voracious, aroused she-panther stalking the most erotic prey.

Tymon watched as her breasts swung like heavy pendulums as she moved. He extended one hand to grab one, his fingers digging into it painfully. But the pain did not faze Dellia. She threw back her head and growled with wordless desire, then plunged her mouth down onto his sore and ready cock. Tymon groaned with relief as he felt the warm wetness of her mouth take in his entire throbbing length.

He grabbed her hair with his other hand and roughly pushed her faced down onto his manhood. Dellia obliged by vigorously licking, sucking, grazing and swirling the tortured organ, making little grunts of desire in the back of her throat. Tymon rolled his eyes back in his head with pleasure. Even the wet sounds of her saliva and her licking drove him mad. He released his hold on her as he felt himself getting close to his climax. Dellia raised her head, her mouth wet and glistening from her work, her eyes narrowed with calculated pleasure.

She moved to straddle his hips and with a wild cry of delight that jarred and sounded too practiced to Tymon's ears, she impaled herself on his shaft. But he had to admit that she was well-schooled in using every trick to keep him from climaxing until he was out of his mind with pleasure. Just as she would build up a rhythm with her hips, she would stop and pull off from his hungry cock. She would plunge back down suddenly, only to rise again with aching slowness.

Finally, Tymon could stand no more. With an effortlessness born of strength, he flipped Dellia over onto her hands and knees and plunged himself into her from behind. His hands on her waist were like an iron band, and Dellia supplied more than adequate moans to match his drilling thrusts. But Tymon was filled with both desire and rage. All conscious

## The Siren's Bloom

thought seemed to desert him as he rode her as if she were some magnificent steed he harried onto the battlefield.

He raised his hand and brought it down on her smooth, firm bottom with a crisp clap. Dellia started, but adapted well enough and moaned for more. The prince obliged, landing stinging, tantalizing slaps to her round cheeks as he ferociously plunged in and out of her. Dellia's cries sounded too carefully crafted to Tymon's ears, but at he didn't care as he finally released himself within her. The force of his pleasure was so intense that he lifted her off the bed by her waist to pull her hips into his.

Gasping, Tymon collapsed back onto the bed, sated but somehow not satisfied. As if sensing that someone else still occupied his thoughts, Dellia shrewdly did not try to cuddle up to him, remaining instead lying on her side at his feet.

"My prince is thirsty?" Dellia asked smoothly. "May I pour him some wine?"

"No," Tymon panted, frowning. "No, that will not be necessary."

"My prince is hungry?"

"No, thank you."

"My prince desires more..." Dellia let her words trail off as she lazily reached a finger to touch his spent yet still hard manhood, pleased to see it jerk in response.

Tymon groaned. "I do not wish to...tire you..." he gasped, trying to maintain control and gather his scattered wits.

"I am my prince's to command," Dellia whispered, crawling up to his hips and reaching out with her tongue to flick the stirring cock. "I am my prince's to use in...whatever...way he pleases. I am here only to provide pleasure and comfort for my prince."

Tymon stared at her, his mind still reeling from his explosive pleasure. Something didn't feel right, but there was no denying the effect this mermaid had on his body. Why not take what pleasure he could from someone who was willing? He was the prince of Del'Alfia and entitled to some comfort for all the cares he bore. He growled, a low rumbling sound in his chest as she licked his manhood as carefully as a kitten.

"On your back," he ordered, his faced flushed with renewed desire. "We shall see if you are truly willing to do whatever I please."

Dellia instantly rolled onto her back, but kept her triumphant smile hidden on the inside as the prince fell upon her again.



Chapter 13

The day passed, and then another. Arrah saw nothing more of Tymon, nor did she hear anything from him. His silence and avoidance was almost worse than the look in his eyes as he had cursed her and left her. That moment played over and over again in Arrah's head, like a verse that she could not be rid of. She was sorry to have hurt him, but the fact that she was hurt herself was both perplexing and unacceptable. How could she care so much for a man she barely knew, much less for a man who had unfeelingly ripped her from her family and her life for the sake of some tradition? Or, she reasoned, more likely for the sake of his pride.

Arrah had meant to make good use of her solitary time, exploring the palace and finding out important things, like where the stables and storerooms were. She would need supplies for the trip home. But a strange lethargy had crept over her body, and she found that moving beyond her rooms taxed her normally healthy stamina too much. So, she kept mostly to her suite, catching up on much needed sleep, bathing in the pool and sitting outside on the balcony to enjoy the bright sunshine.

The maid she had met on her first day, whom she had discovered to be named Ginis, had brought her trays laden with rich, nourishing foods and had provided the lonely mermaid with a measure of companionship as well. Ginis was quite happy to prattle on about palace gossip, the customs of seaside folk, and all that she knew about the Sea People.

Arrah lingered on the balcony, which was fast becoming her favorite spot, watching the sun set over the ocean. Every gentle brush of the waves against the cliff seemed to speak to Arrah in a language the very cells of her body understood. The smell of the salt air was like a drug to her, and she knew that before she left the seashore to return home, she would plunge her body into the water to know, if only once, what her mermaid heritage truly meant.

There was a rustling sound in the room behind her, and Arrah imagined it was Ginis arrived with her dinner tray. Arrah knew she should move indoors and eat, but somehow, even getting up from the low

## The Siren's Bloom

couch seemed like a draining task. Luckily, Ginis spared her the effort, coming out onto the balcony and briskly pulling her to her feet.

"Come, milady!" Ginis giggled. "There will be another sunset tomorrow. Right now, you must dress!"

"Dress?" Arrah asked, confused, glancing down at the simple white gown she wore. "For what?"

"For the victory feast, milady," Ginis replied, bustling Arrah indoors and into the bathing room. "Haven't you heard a word I've said, milady? Tonight is the great feast to celebrate Prince Tymon's victory and the end of the last of the great wars against Del'Alfia. Everyone at court will be there, even the king will probably be brought down to the feast, if only for a short while. Lady Ema will be there, as will her niece, no doubt. But as the prince's concubine, it wouldn't be right if you weren't there by his side. As he is not married, you'll have a seat of honor next to him."

"Oh," Arrah said faintly, lost for words as Ginis deftly stripped the gown off her and plunged her into the steaming water, scrubbing Arrah's soft skin and rubbing night rose oil into it. The scent brought memories rushing back to the mermaid, but she firmly put them aside.

"It's not official, you know," she said as Ginis hauled her out of the pool and towed her down. "We still don't know who the real concubine is, and I doubt it's me."

"I have no doubt it's you, milady," Ginis replied with a broad, heartfelt smile. "You're loveliest by far."

Arrah laughed at Ginis' wholehearted endorsement and allowed the maid to fuss over her. Secretly, Arrah was relieved that Ginis was there to help dress her, as she was feeling unaccountably tired.

Ginis took special pains to make her mistress look lovely. She had picked out a simple gown of pale dove grey. It was layers and layers of the thinnest, sheerest silk, shot through with a silver *lolila* pattern. The dress' simple, loosely clinging lines suited Arrah's delicate figure. The bodice was designed as a high halter, with the back plunging down to the bottom of Arrah's spine to reveal her marking. Around her waist was a thin silver corded belt with ties that hung almost to the hem of the dress. The supple fabric skimmed Arrah's sparse, slender curves, and moved with a fluidity accentuated by Arrah's inherently graceful gestures.

Ginis braided Arrah's silver hair, weaving in vines of *lolila* flowers and coiling it on top of her head, letting small tendrils down around the mermaid's pointed, delicate face. Ginis pinned the shining mass of braids

## Kate September

in place with pearl-studded silver combs. But that was as far as Ginis got in adorning the mermaid with jewels. Arrah flatly refused to wear anything else, for she felt it did not belong to her – it was the rightful property of the prince's rightful concubine.

"You look like moonlight!" Ginis breathed, clasping her hands with delight as she surveyed the result of her handiwork. "It's as if you stepped off a moonbeam and were wrapped in starlight!"

Arrah blushed, two pale pink spots burning into her pale cheeks. "I believe you're trying to pull the wool over my eyes with your poetry," she teased gently. "But I do thank you," she added with a shy smile.

"Oh hush, milady," Ginis replied, blushing. "Now, the feast is in the Great Hall – do you remember how to get there? Good! I shall try to sneak a peek in the door if those prigs of footmen will let me. I shall be waiting here for you for when you wish to retire."

With another few words of thanks, Arrah slowly made her way to the Great Hall. She couldn't remember having to hold onto handrails to climb stairs ever before. Certainly, she who scrambled up icy mountainsides to help herd the goats was never one to gasp for breath after a flight of stairs. And yet, there she was, leaning against the cool stone wall of the passageway leading to the Great Hall, her hand pressed to her heart as she tried to catch her breath.

"Are you ill, Arrah?"

The question and the questioner's voice made Arrah start. She spun around to see Seppius, the mage, standing behind her. He looked down at her with kindly eyes and extended his arm from its rich purple velvet robes.

"Perhaps an old man can be of some simple assistance?" he continued with a smile.

"Oh, thank you," Arrah said, feeling her cheeks burn as she laid her small hand on his arm. Grateful for the support, she walked with him toward the hall.

"I am so pleased when I can help in the ways that ordinary people help," Seppius said, chatting gaily to Arrah. "Usually, a mage is called upon for things that are always so much more difficult and that always call for the one ingredient you have just run out of."

Arrah laughed weakly. "I am glad to be able to indulge you, then," she said, her aquamarine eyes twinkling merrily.

## The Siren's Bloom

Seppius chortled and led her through the tall double doors into the Great Hall. The cavernous room was filled with tables set in patterns. Arrah gazed around her in wonder. The finery that she had seen the courtiers wearing this morning was nothing to what she saw tonight. Exotic, flamboyant silks and jewels sparkled on men and women alike. The air was heavy with the scent of perfume and the aromas of the delicacies that were being paraded in by a steady stream of footmen.

"Oh my," Arrah said in a small voice.

"Do not worry, Arrah" Seppius said to her in a low, thoughtful voice, as if not quite commenting on the scene of sybaritic indulgence before them. "All will be well in the end."

With those words, he left her and strode across the hall to the head table where Arrah saw the royal family seated. She stared at King Taemon with both interest and pity, watching the withered old man gaze about him and mumble, ignoring the carefully cut bites of food on his plate. Lady Ema sat on his left, ignoring him and focusing all her attention on Soren, who seemed ill-at-ease with her obvious intentions.

Before even laying eyes on him, Arrah already knew where Tymon was, what he was wearing, even whether he held a fork or spook in his hand. It was as if she carried the vision of him in her very being, and that eyesight was merely a pale corroboration of a greater awareness.

But what took her by surprise was that the seat to his right, her seat, so Ginis had said, was filled by the voluptuous figure of Dellia. If Arrah was moonlight, then Dellia was the night sky itself. She wore a shimmering satin gown of deep midnight blue, cut low in the front to accentuate her breasts. Sapphires dripped around her neck and wrists, and her blue-black hair was loosely bundled back with sapphire encrusted silver filigree clips.

Dellia was leaning in to whisper something to Tymon, and the two of them shared a smile at her words. Arrah watched helplessly, prey to a sickening, aching feeling in her heart. The scene around her seemed to move in slow motion as the only thing she could comprehend was that Tymon had made his choice. Her slim figure swayed slightly, and the movement caught Tymon's attention.

Arrah saw Tymon's eyes widen at the sight of her, and a strange, almost wistful expression flashed across his chiseled features. But it was gone almost as soon as it appeared, leaving Arrah to wonder if she had

## Kate September

imagined such a thing. Her own eyes were full of confusion and pain, and they found mesmerizing mirrors in the prince's gaze.

Arrah then became aware of Dellia's gaze upon her, and she recoiled from the unbridled hatred in the dark-haired mermaid's eyes. Dellia, as if eager to break the spell of the moment, said something witty, laughed loudly at Tymon and waved her fingers to a servant, indicating that he should show Arrah to a seat.

"Milady?" the footman approached Arrah at Dellia's command. With a small start, Arrah turned and acknowledged the young man with a quick nod. Her eyes met Tymon's one last time, and then she obediently followed the footman to a seat at the far back of the hall at the end of a table.

"It's the only seat we have left, milady," the footman stammered in apology.

"Don't worry," Arrah replied, mustering a smile for the flustered young man. "I am grateful for a chair and a plate of food. Where that chair is doesn't matter to me in the least!"

And for a few minutes, it really didn't matter to Arrah where she sat. Her anger carried her along a swift current of contempt for Tymon and utter disdain for Dellia. Her pride reminded her repeatedly that none of this concerned her, as she was going to leave and go home as soon as she could. She would let the brutish prince wallow in the debauched attentions of his chosen concubine.

Her defiance began to wane as the strange fatigue crept through her body again. None of the courtiers seated near her bothered to speak to her, but Arrah saw their furtive glances at her and heard their tittering whispers. The mermaid felt the assault to her pride keenly, but resolved that she would maintain her dignity no matter what anyone said about her. It was all she could do, but even the resolution did not make the ache in her heart feel any better.

As soon as she could, Arrah slipped away from the banquet hall. She didn't want to head directly back to her rooms, despite the fact that her limbs felt rubbery and weak. Summoning the reserves of her will and discipline, she wandered up a few levels, exploring torch-lit corridors. A few times, Arrah turned suddenly, thinking she heard a footstep behind her, but there was never anyone there.

## **The Siren's Bloom**

A half-open intricately carved wooden door invited her curiosity to enter, and cautiously, she stepped inside. Moonlight poured in through floor-to-ceiling windows, and Arrah gasped as she looked around her.

She was standing in a library. The walls of bookshelves extended up nearly two stories, the tops lost in the darkness of the room. Thick fur rugs were spread across the floor, and in the dimness, Arrah could see the outlines of heavy, oversized leather furniture. She closed her eyes for a moment and inhaled the sweet mustiness of the books. Her eyes flew open at the voice behind her.

“My Arrah.”

Chapter 14

Arrah spun around to find herself caught in the fierce, almost painful embrace of Tymon. He crushed her lips with his, his hands roaming the smooth lines of her body. She could feel his hot breath on her face, and she clung to his arms to keep from sinking to her knees.

"My Arrah," he repeated when he finally lifted his face just enough to stare deeply into her aquamarine eyes. "I saw you at the feast. You were like starlight fallen to earth."

Arrah trembled and closed her eyes, trying to remember that he had stormed away from her, that he had ripped her from her home and family, that he was not to be trusted. And yet, the very timbre of his voice snaked through her veins like a drug.

"Why are you not at the feast, sire?" she asked in a quiet, strained voice, turning her gaze from him.

Tymon gathered her into his embrace even more tightly, as if to squeeze all fear and doubt from her.

"Because I desired to be wrapped in starlight," he whispered hoarsely into the top of her silver head.

"But Lady Dellia," Arrah started to say, only to be interrupted.

"I had to give her a place of honor at the table," Tymon said gruffly, his own voice taking on shades of helpless anger and secret shame. "Lady Ema is a force to be reckoned with at court, and I could not openly insult her by slighting her niece."

He cupped her dainty chin with one hand and softly kissed her lips.

"You are the star I will follow," he whispered. "And I will keep my star on a silver chain next to my heart."

Arrah had no chance to protest and no hope of extricating herself before he was devouring her mouth again. She struggled within herself, even as her mouth yielded to his, tasting the wine on his lips. Her body was burning with sudden need as his hands caressed her bare back and dug into her hips. Her mind screamed at her body's betrayal, and her heart longed for him yet shrank back in fear, not wanting to risk being

## The Siren's Bloom

hurt. She groped for something to do, something to say to buy time so that she could gain some control over herself.

"Will you not be missed, sire?" she said, her voice coming out in a squeak. "Will they not come looking for you?"

"Aye, they'll look high and low for me, no doubt," Tymon chuckled. "But they'd never think to search the king's library on a night of celebration."

"The king's library?" Arrah seized on that, subtly trying to step out of his embrace. "Is that what this place is?"

Tymon nodded, his eyes slipping over her slender figure as the moonlight bathed her in an unearthly, eerie white glow. "It is my father's library, and his father's before him, and so on," he said. "The books and scrolls in here go back over a thousand years, and some are even older than that. Of course, this is just the king's private collection. The main archives have scrolls and tablets from the very beginning of our history."

Arrah turned to him, her face alight with wonder. "What a treasure!" she exclaimed. "If I were you, I'd spend all my time in here, and it would naturally be the first place people would look for me."

"You can read?" Tymon asked incredulously.

Arrah snorted and grinned. "Of course I can read," she said, lifting her chin. "I finished our village school with the top marks of anyone. I can write and do sums as well. Why, can't you?"

Tymon gave a shout of laughter. He shook his head and grinned back at her.

"It is simply surprising, that is all," he replied. "The maid of the *lolila* traditionally cannot read or write."

"How silly!" Arrah exclaimed, quirking her eyebrows. "But why is she not taught?"

Tymon shrugged. "I confess I am not entirely sure," he said. "But I suspect it is because the maid of the *lolila* is meant to be an ornament, and her entire existence is devoted to pleasing her prince. Perhaps book-learning would be too much of a distraction?"

"I grow more and more thankful every minute that I was raised in the mountains," Arrah said, chewing her lip and rolling her eyes. "The other concubines must have been lovely but utterly boring. Though, I suppose, that a lack of book-learning doesn't keep one from thinking. But still."

"But still," Tymon growled, taking a step towards her.



## Kate September

Arrah looked mildly alarmed and took a few rapid steps across the room, trying to look like she was exploring.

"Have you read all that is in here?" she asked quickly.

Tymon smiled cynically. "I have passed twenty-seven summers, my Arrah," he said with a sigh. "And of those twenty-seven summers, thirteen have been spent riding to war in my father's stead. What little time I have had here in the palace has been filled with duty and stewardship of the kingdom."

Arrah looked at him thoughtfully for a long moment, feeling as though for the first time, she was seeing him as not just a prince, or her lover, but as a man who shouldered the cares of a kingdom, a man whom an entire people trusted.

Tymon took a step towards her and watched as she again danced out of his reach.

Arrah quickly took a book off one of the shelves and held it up for him to see.

"Well, now that Del'Alfia is at peace," she said quickly with a playful smile, "it is high time you broadened your horizons with literature."

"And what book is that you have there, my Arrah?" Tymon asked with a smile, though his eyes were those of a predator, a hunter studying his prey.

Arrah looked at the old leather volume in her hands. "It is... 'Guiding Principles of Morality' by Donatus Cromius." She looked up at Tymon, perplexed.

"Ah, Donatus Cromius," Tymon purred, taking another step toward her. "The famous wise man and moralist who lived three hundred years ago. Those are his sermons on good morality for young women. Read it to me, my Arrah."

"I beg your pardon?" Arrah said, taken unawares by the request.

"Read it to me," Tymon growled, lighting a candelabra on a nearby table and coming to stand in front of her.

Not knowing what else to do, Arrah opened the book to the first chapter and began to read. Her voice shook slightly, but she would have been hard put to tell whether it was from anxiety or anticipation.

*"I have long witnessed the growing degeneracy of the young women of our kingdom,"* Arrah read, keeping her eyes firmly on the page. *"It is my*

## The Siren's Bloom

*intent to convey through these discourses a structure that should be adhered to in order to save our daughters and sisters from profligacy.'"*

Tymon circled Arrah as she read the dull, pompous moralist's work. He stopped at her back and lowered his lips to the nape of her neck in a slow, lingering kiss.

"Sire, I –" Arrah exclaimed at his touch.

"Keep reading," he growled, his lips skimming her shoulder.

Arrah swallowed hard and resumed. *"The causes of wantonness in young women can be attributed to many factors, some of which are within a parent's, brother's or husband's control, some of which are not,"* she read.

Tymon prowled around the slender mermaid, stopping in front of her. One by one, he pulled out the combs and pins that held her hair in its elaborate braided knot until her thick silver braids tumbled down her back.

*"Young women are naturally tender-hearted and foolish, and they are easily swayed by suggestion and example,"* Arrah read. She paused and snorted. "That's ridiculous! He obviously never knew any young women, and furthermore –"

"Keep reading!" Tymon ordered sharply, running his fingers through the braids to undo them, then burying his face and inhaling the scent of her hair.

Arrah could feel her body starting to tremble from just his nearness and his touch. Her voice shook slightly as she continued.

*"In order to avoid exposing young women to unwholesome influences, their guardians should exercise unceasing vigilance over their education and acquaintances, limiting their knowledge of art and music to only that which is spiritual,"* Arrah read, her breath catching in her throat as Tymon's lips found her small, shell-like ear and began to lick and tease the tender lobe.

Arrah cleared her throat and tried to continue, *"In addition, parents should guard against unsupervised contact between young women and their older married sisters, for indeed, the salacious tales of these women who have been initiated by their husbands into the debauchery of fornication without the express purpose of procreation are some of the most pernicious influences on impressionable young women."*

Tymon's breath was hot against her cheek as his fingers undid the knot that held her hair up. He felt himself stirring, mesmerized by the sound of her voice. The front of her dress fell down around her waist, and Tymon reached forward to run his hands over her chest. He lingered over

## Kate September

the delicious bumps of her small breasts and then slid his hands down over her belly and hips, taking the dress down as well. It fell in a silvery, cloudy pool of silk at her feet, and Arrah stood naked in the moonlight, wrapped in his arms from behind.

*"It is my opinion that even women who are considered safe by the sanctity of marriage should be preserved from the debauched intentions of their husbands,"* Arrah read, her voice growing hoarse with both embarrassment and desire as Tymon slid himself down her body, his hands running over her legs to grip her small ankles and loosen the delicate sandals that encased her feet. *"Women are built for breeding, and there is no need to introduce them to the full scope of pleasures that a man experiences during intercourse. Women are only the receptacle for the man's seed and do not need to feel ecstasy in order to receive. Men, however, are exempt from this because it is only through the ecstasy of connection with a woman's body can their seed be loosed."*

Suddenly, Tymon stood up and ripped the book out of Arrah's hands. He threw it aside and gathered her up in his embrace, crushing her to him.

"Donatus was a fool," he murmured as he stole her breath with his insistent kisses. "Either that, or he never made love to a mermaid."

Arrah moaned, unable to think of a coherent reply. All she was conscious of was that this man could make her feel both wanton and cherished, both desired and devilish. Her small fingers clutched convulsively at the neck of his tunic, clawing at the fabric as his lips worked down to the hollow of her throat, licking and biting the pale skin. Tymon picked her up, cupping the soft round cheeks of her bottom in his strong hands. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around his waist and found herself seeking his lips with hers, tentatively running her small pink tongue over his teeth.

Arrah felt a difference in this domineering man as he made love to her. His kisses were more pliant and almost plaintive, as if seeking an answer from her to an unspoken question. Even the way his cheek brushed hers struck her as a gentle gesture to a treasured creature. Something stirred within her own heart, and she found herself winding her arms around his neck, pulling his face to hers and responding with equal sweetness and fervor to his kisses. She felt connected to him, part of him, as if they shared heartbeat, body and breath.

## The Siren's Bloom

Her back grew warm against the glass as Tymon repeatedly buried himself within her, his shaft sliding in and out of her warm slickness with little dripping sounds. Her airy moans and his growls blended in a symphony of kisses that filled the silence of the moonlit library. Arrah felt almost drugged by the pleasurable assault on her senses of making love in such quiet seclusion with the ocean itself as the backdrop. She could feel her lover's climax approaching as his mouth plundered hers with a ravenous need.

Arrah clung to him, but as her own pleasure rose, she flung her arms out against the glass, turning her wrists so her fingers were pressed against the glass. She tilted her head back and gasped as the first pulse of pleasure came, crying out as Tymon's lips sucked at her neck as her whole body began to shake with the throbs of her climax. Tymon thrust himself hard into her in long, burning strokes, gasping as his own release came, robbing him of words and sense. All he knew was that he was one with this magical creature he held in his hands.

Panting and nuzzling her soft cheeks, Tymon carried Arrah over to one of the heavy leather couches near the darkened hearth. He collapsed onto it and let her lie on top of him, pulling his cloak around to wrap her in it. For a few moments, they lay entwined, Arrah resting her head against Tymon's chest, listening to his steady heartbeat.

"My Arrah," Tymon murmured with a lazy smile, stroking her silver hair.

"Not your Arrah," she mumbled sleepily.

Tymon grinned.

"We'll just see about that," he whispered, lifting her chin so that he could kiss her lips. "The night is young, and I have plenty of time to plead my case. And I have some very persuasive arguments to make."

Chapter 15

Arrah yawned and rolled over, then gasped and recoiled as she had rolled into something next to her. She exhaled and looked up at the smiling face of the prince. He lay on his side next to her, his head propped up on his arm, watching her sleep.

She blinked and tried to take in her surroundings. This wasn't her room, she decided. Quirking an eyebrow, she turned to Tymon.

"Where's here?" she asked sleepily, drawing the back of her hand across her eyes.

"Don't you remember?" Tymon teased, waggling his eyebrows suggestively as his hand snaked under the covers to caress her smooth belly.

"Oh," Arrah said in a small voice after a brief pause. She remembered fully now – the frantic tumbled lovemaking on the sofa and fur rugs of the library, being carried by Tymon down many flights of stairs to another set of rooms with a four-poster bed, and their tender, slow almost hypnotic couplings throughout the night until they had both fallen asleep near dawn.

Tymon grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "My Arrah," he growled and leaned in to taste her lips.

"She is not your Arrah," came a cold, clear voice across the room. Tymon and Arrah started and turned to stare at the figures of Lady Ema and Dellia standing in the doorway, with several other courtiers and guards behind them.

"What is the meaning of this?" Tymon demanded angrily, his body still but tensed like a jungle cat ready to strike.

"You have broken the rules of tradition, sire, by whoring with this imposter," Lady Ema said icily. "Dellia is the rightful concubine of the prince of Del'Alfia, and you must treat her as such!"

"You speak too hastily, milady," Tymon said, his voice dark and gravelly. "There has been no conclusive proof that either Lady Dellia or Arrah is the rightful concubine. Nor have I made an official choice given the lack of evidence. Now I suggest you –"

## The Siren's Bloom

"I beg to differ, sire," Lady Ema said, smiling unpleasantly. "You made your choice last night by having Dellia dine by your side at the victory feast."

"I did that out of courtesy to you!" Tymon snapped. "A courtesy you are obviously not worthy of."

"If you do not acknowledge that, then surely you will admit that you made your choice yesterday afternoon," Lady Ema retorted.

"How does she know about yesterday?" Arrah asked Tymon, confused and trying to fight back the welling of panic within her. But her mind was fatigued and fuzzy, and that strange lethargy and weakness had crept over her body again.

Lady Ema shot Arrah a withering, venomous glance and curled her perfect lip.

"The prince made his choice when he bedded my niece," she said in a deadly sweet voice to Arrah. "It is not like with you, tumbling some mountain cow that can be sent back with a dowry of goats to make up for being soiled. Dellia is a mermaid of high birth, the chosen of her people as the maid of the *lolila*. Now that she is no longer a virgin, she cannot go back to the Sea People without carrying great shame."

Arrah stared at Tymon, hardly hearing the rest of Lady Ema's words. She felt crushed by the betrayal of knowing that the same day as he swore to her that she was his choice, he had taken another to his bed. She fought to keep the salty tears from welling up in her aquamarine eyes as she looked up at him.

Tymon, his bronzed skin flushed, looked down into Arrah's pale face, his lips pressed into a grim, tight line.

"I will explain to you after I have dealt with this matter," Tymon said to Arrah quietly.

Arrah shook her head numbly, sending her silver tresses falling to the side.

"Imposter!" Lady Ema screeched, pointing to Arrah's back. She lunged forward and grabbed Arrah by her hair and yanked her out of the bed.

"Wait, what?" Arrah cried out, trying to cover her nakedness with her hands, flushing with anger and embarrassment as Dellia looked on with a smug smile on her full ruby lips.

Lady Ema paid no attention to Arrah's protests and spun the girl around so that Tymon could clearly see her back.

## Kate September

"What?" he exclaimed. "How is this possible?"

"What?" Arrah begged. "What is possible?"

"The mark of the *lolila* on your back fades, girl," Lady Ema said, her voice ringing with triumph. "Whatever you used to tattoo it upon your skin clearly did not last. Your deception is at an end."

"What tattoo?" Arrah said, utterly bewildered. Her knees were wobbling, and she was forced to her knees by another wave of exhaustion. Lady Ema yanked her back to her feet by her hair, and Arrah bit back a cry of pain.

"Unhand her!" Tymon roared, jumping from the bed and pulling Arrah out of Lady Ema's grasp, cradling the trembling mermaid in his arms.

"She is no longer yours to command or protect, sire," Lady Ema purred.

"She is a subject of Del'Alfia," Tymon said fiercely. "And you should leave these rooms now if you know what is good for you."

"She is *not* a subject of Del'Alfia," Lady Ema snapped. "She is of the Sea People, and as the highest ranking of our kind living above the water, I am the only one who has jurisdiction over her."

She took a menacing step towards Tymon and Arrah, extending her hand and wrapping it tightly around Arrah's thin arm.

"I could have Arrah exiled under the ocean for her deception," Lady Ema said smoothly. "And we would see how long she would last in the deep ocean badlands, never having lived below the surface. The beasts of the ocean would surely make short work of her. I could order her taken back under the sea and put to death for violating tradition. Or, I could chose to spare her life. If you resist the rules of our people, sire, I will have Arrah taken back under the waters. If you cooperate, I promise that I will spare Arrah's life and let her continue to live on land. Her fate is in your hands. She will live or die by your choice!"

The look on Tymon's face frightened Arrah. She thought for an instant he would literally reach out and choke the life from the haughty, elderly concubine. Arrah could feel the tension in the air and hear the shifting of the fabric on the accompanying courtiers and the subtle creak of leather on the guards. She herself was feeling weak and dizzy, and her mind was too confused to think straight.

## The Siren's Bloom

Suddenly, Tymon crushed Arrah to him and, bending his lips to her ear, whispered so that only she could hear, "You are mine, and I swear we will be together."

Then, he released her and glowered as Lady Ema yanked the naked silver-haired girl to her side.

"A wise choice, sire," Lady Ema said sourly. She turned to Dellia and smiled complacently. "Go to your rooms, Dellia. Your *new* rooms. I will take care of this little slut."

Arrah stared around her in horror, frantically trying to pull her hair over her bare chest and hide her silvery womanhood. Before she could protest, Lady Ema jerked her arm and strode from Tymon's rooms. Arrah stumbled after her on trembling legs and clumsy feet, two pink spots of shame at her nakedness burning in her cheeks.

The exhausted girl hardly knew which direction they went, but she found herself thrown roughly to the floor by Lady Ema. Arrah landed roughly on her knees, knocking her elbows as she tried to break her fall. Biting back a moan at the stinging ache in her bones, she turned to look up at the statuesque concubine who towered over her. Lady Ema yanked Arrah to her feet by her hair, then landed a backhanded blow on Arrah's cheek that sent the fragile mermaid flying back to the floor, hitting her head in the process.

"You thought you could play the prince of Del'Alfia a trick, did you?" Lady Ema hissed, viciously kicking Arrah in the ribs, watching without pity as the younger girl wrapped her arms around her chest, her face contorted in pain.

"You thought you could win his love, you pathetic little mountain cow?" Lady Ema said, kicking Arrah again and sending her rolling over.

"Please," Arrah begged in a strangled voice. "I don't want to stay here. I just want to go home. Please just let me go back to the mountains."

"Hmmm?" Lady Ema sneered. "No, I don't think so, cow."

Arrah stared up at Lady Ema through a haze of pain, not sure she had heard right. But Lady Ema hastened to clarify.

"No, there's no going home for you, cow," Lady Ema spat. "The prince might forget his duty and come find you. And I gave my word that you would not be sent back into the ocean, though that is the fate you truly deserve, slut! No, you shall remain here...as my personal slave," Lady Ema finished, a sadistic smile spreading on her lips.

"No!" Arrah cried out in a blur of mental and physical agony.



## Kate September

"No?" Lady Ema echoed. In a flash, she had bent down, seized Arrah by the throat and brought her to her feet, holding her so that she was forced onto her tiptoes by the choking grip. "You will do as I say, cow, if you wish to live! I cannot sentence you to death in the deep ocean badlands, but there are other ways to take care of things."

"Oh gods," Arrah moaned as her eyes rolled back in her head and darkness claimed her.

"They can't help you now," Lady Ema whispered hatefully as she threw the unconscious mermaid to the floor.

## The Siren's Bloom

### Chapter 16

The next few weeks blended into a haze of humiliation and pain for proud Arrah. Lady Ema was as good as her word, and Arrah found herself slave to the arrogant, scheming concubine.

Arrah came to count herself lucky if she was allowed to wear a greasy shift to keep herself warm. Whenever she did something wrong, Lady Ema took special pleasure in stripping her and making her do her chores naked. The lack of food didn't help Arrah's waning strength. Little other than hard crusts of bread and sips of water passed the girl's lips, and only when Lady Ema decided that Arrah was in danger of expiring.

Arrah slept next to the hearth, her arms shackled above her head in irons anchored in the marble mantle. She grew so thin and so pale that the other maids who served Lady Ema began to worry and whisper among themselves that surely the little silver mermaid would die if this treatment continued much longer.

From time to time, Lady Ema would examine the fading *lolila* mark on Arrah's back, crowing with satisfaction as the design grew fainter until it was almost invisible. Only the smallest streaks of silver were now visible. She noted the girl's growing weakness, but was hardly concerned by it. If anything, Lady Ema hoped to speed matters along by adding increasingly onerous chores to Arrah's unending list.

To Arrah, it felt like she was trapped in nightmare. Naked and filthy, she would look around her at the splendor of Lady Ema's chambers, with its ornate gilt furniture and rich tapestries, and wonder how her life could have gone so awry in just three weeks. She had not been without schemes in the beginning. She had tried to contact Seppius, but Lady Ema's sympathetic maids had told her that Seppius had been called away to another part of the kingdom. She had tried to run away, but her ailing body betrayed her, and she was brought back to Lady Ema and severely punished.

But almost worse than the physical discomfort Arrah endured was the keen ache in her heart whenever she thought about how Tymon, the man she had reluctantly learned to love, had betrayed her with Dellia. She

## Kate September

knew now that she indeed loved the powerful prince, and had things been different, she would have chosen to stay. But he had plunged a dagger in her heart when he had looked down at her in response to her unspoken question. There had been anger in his eyes, but not a word of remorse had passed his lips, and not a word had been sent to her in all this time from him. So much, Arrah thought sadly, for his promises to be together no matter what.

Dellia was a frequent visitor in Lady Ema's apartments. She talked of the plans for her bonding ceremony with Tymon. Dellia would lounge around on the fine couches, running her long fingers over the velvet and silk cushions and speak with relish over how she had pleased Tymon the night before. Lady Ema grilled her for details, asking about positions and puzzling over the prince's lackluster responses. Neither woman bothered to acknowledge that Arrah, usually shackled to the hearth during these visits, even existed. Though Arrah thought that once in a while, she could detect a certain smug smile playing on the corners of Dellia's lips.

During these visits, Arrah's anger stirred feebly, and she felt that Tymon deserved what he got if he settled for Dellia. But her meager strength couldn't sustain the energy for rage, and she felt forlorn after these visits. She was also scared of what was happening to her body. An infallible inner sense told her that she was dying, that day-by-day, her life energy was draining away. But Arrah could not figure out why or what the cause was. All she knew was that it had started after Tymon had taken her from the mountains. She was frightened and anguished that no one seemed to care what was happening to her.

Arrah had become so weak that Lady Ema didn't even bother shackling her to the hearth. The coral-haired older mermaid just left Arrah naked and shivering on the hearthstones.

For several days, Lady Ema left Arrah on the floor, drifting in and out of a deathly haze. Arrah barely knew what happened around her. Her mouth was thick and cottony from dehydration, and she could feel her skin pulling on her bones, she had become so emaciated. Then, one night, Dellia paid Lady Ema a quick and harried visit. Arrah didn't stir – she couldn't stir, but she listened in a daze to the feverish exchange between aunt and niece.

"Are you going to do it tonight?" Dellia demanded hotly.

Lady Ema threw a glance at the nearly-unconscious Arrah, but Dellia grabbed her aunt by the shoulders and shook her.

## The Siren's Bloom

"Never mind the cow," Dellia hissed. "She'll be dead by the morning, anyway. I've done my part and arranged it so that Tymon will be occupied this evening in the king's study, cataloguing something or other. If you're going to do it, best to finish the old man off tonight."

"You're sure this is what you want?" Lady Ema asked coldly.

"I have earned my right to be the king's concubine!" Dellia spat. "Didn't I suffer enough to bring your scheme to fruition? I'll not linger as the prince's concubine while Taemon dies a little everyday. It could be years before the old flatfish passes away, and the bonding ceremony is in a week!"

Arrah's dizzy mind registered that something was very wrong with this conversation, and she became aware that she needed to pay attention. Without moving to betray her growing consciousness, she strained to hear the hushed, hissing voices of the two stately mermaids.

"And if I say no?" Lady Ema said with an evil smile. "I have accomplished everything I have set out to do. Whether you are the king's concubine or the prince's concubine makes little difference. The important thing is that the tribute payment will go to our family."

"If you don't finish off Taemon, I will!" Dellia said angrily. "With him gone, you'll be free to take all the lovers you want."

"That has never stopped me before, as you will soon learn, Dellia," Lady Ema purred.

"We had a deal, aunt!" Dellia growled. "I did my part. Now, do yours."

Lady Ema looked at the wild eyes of her scowling niece for a long moment. Then finally, she nodded. She walked over to her dressing table and took out a cut-glass vial with a sickeningly yellow liquid inside.

"Never let it be said that I did not keep my word," Lady Ema said bitterly. "Go on – join the revels in the Great Hall so that you may be clear of suspicion."

"What about you?" Dellia asked, obviously relieved as she gathered up her full midnight blue silk skirts and turned toward the door.

"I have my witness," Lady Ema replied with a snide laugh, waving her hand at the seemingly unconscious figure of Arrah.

Dellia joined in the laugh, and momentarily, they were both gone from the room.

Only when she heard the footsteps die away did Arrah dare to move. She was weak and couldn't stand. She could barely crawl on her

## Kate September

belly across the cold floor, dragging herself toward the settee where she aimed for a spring leaf green silk throw blanket.

"Oh, I can't," Arrah moaned in agony as she fumbled for the fabric, her numb fingers barely able to grasp it.

She thought of Tymon's face as he looked at his father during her presentation ceremony. She thought of the sad old man who looked about him but saw nothing and thought nothing, who suffered in the silence of his mind.

"Yes, I can," Arrah said between gritted teeth and willed her body to move.

## The Siren's Bloom

### Chapter 17

Tymon sighed gustily and ran his fingers through his thick dark hair in mock frustration.

"You're sure the Treaty of the Sea People is not in the archives?" he asked the head archivist. "It's important that I find it."

"The Treaty has always resided in the king's library," the balding, portly archivist replied evenly, puffing a bit as he stepped off the ladder and rolled it to the next set of shelves. "Since the Treaty provided really only for the prince and the king, it was thought that the document belonged to him. But your father's late librarian was a nimwit who couldn't catalogue three potatoes in a row. It could be anywhere in here, but it is in here."

Tymon nodded and wearily rubbed his face a few times with his hands. They had been searching the library for hours. But he wasn't about to give up. He wandered over to the tall windows, leaning against the window frame. He reverently touched the pane of glass where Arrah's body had pressed and smiled sadly to himself.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the door, and Tymon spun around to see the door pushed open and a familiar silver-haired figure stumbled in.

The prince's body moved without thought, and in an instant, the fragile mermaid was caught up in his arms. He carried her over to the leather sofa where they had made love all those weeks ago. He studied her with growing horror. She was white and cold, her lips turning blue as if the life was leaving her body. She lifted an emaciated hand and looked at him blearily.

"Your father," she croaked through parched, cracked lip.

"Shhh, my Arrah, don't talk," Tymon whispered, his eyes full of anguish. "Get the healer!" he shouted to the archivist.

"Your father," Arrah said again, her brow furrowing.

"Rest now," Tymon coaxed, brushing back her damp, limp hair from her cold, sweaty brow.

"No!"

## Kate September

Tymon was taken aback by the strangled vehemence of her words and frowned.

"Ema," Arrah gasped. "Ema tonight. Taemon. Make you king for...Dellia...oh help!"

Tymon pulled Arrah to his chest and wrapped his arms around her, his mind racing wildly. Suddenly he pulled her back just a few inches to look into her dazed eyes.

"Are you sure of what you are saying, my Arrah?" he asked in a deadly serious voice, the voice of a man girding for battle.

"Hurry!" Arrah pleaded.

"I can't leave you," Tymon growled.

If he left Arrah, she might die. If he didn't leave her, his father would die. But Arrah, it seemed, had no doubts about which choice the prince should make. She drew in a deep, slow breath and closed her eyes as if gathering her strength one last time. Her eyes flew open, and she pushed at Tymon with all her strength, wrenching free of his grasp and sending him back onto the floor.

"GO!" she wailed, collapsing back onto the cushions.

Tymon lingered for one more moment, his eyes speaking of all the agony in his heart.

"I will be back, my Arrah!" he said, kissing her clammy forehead. "Wait for me!"

As Tymon ran from the library, Arrah's eyes rolled back in her head, and the tension left her body. She sank into darkness and knew no more.

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"Good gracious!" a piercingly cheerful voice broke through the clouds of Arrah's painful haze. "I leave you people alone for a month, and all chaos breaks loose!"

Arrah struggled to open her eyes. Her mind felt thick and heavy, but sharp thoughts started to prick at it.

"Gods, what a mess!" the voice added dryly.

Arrah felt a set of large warm hands pull her slightly upright. A cup was held to her cracked lips, and a sharp, aromatic liquid poured into her parched mouth. She coughed but managed to swallow some of it. Within a few moments, she felt her head clear. Her body still ached and felt almost numb from that strange fatigue, but at least she could think rationally.

## The Siren's Bloom

"The king!" she exclaimed, struggling to sit up, looking around in panic.

"He lives, Arrah," said the voice reassuringly, and the mermaid now placed it with Seppius who was the one who held her up and gave her the medicine. "He lives, thanks to you."

Arrah looked relieved but not happy. She could tell her body was not recovering, and that the draining of her life energy continued.

"Something is wrong with me," she said softly, an urgent note in her voice.

"I know," Seppius replied with an oddly amused smile. "And we shall fix that anon. But first, I believe I hear business coming this way. Take another sip, Arrah, and do not be afraid."

Arrah obeyed as the doors of the king's library swung in, and Tymon walked in, followed by several judicial-looking courtiers and a group of guards. For a wild moment, Arrah thought they were come to arrest her, to take her back to the ocean she had never known, and she shrank back in Seppius' grip.

"Seppius," Tymon said, nodding to the mage. His eyes flicked to Arrah, and she thought there was something odd about him. She sensed a tension in the prince, almost a repressed energy. "We will put an end to this. Now."

"About bloody time, sire," Seppius replied gravely.

Arrah gasped as the guards parted to reveal Lady Ema and Dellia, both looking angry and frightened.

"Stand up, Arrah," Tymon commanded. "Guard, bring Dellia to Arrah's side. Seppius, if you will bare both their backs? Let the judges approach."

When the two mermaids were in position, Tymon spoke again.

"One month ago, two maids of the *lolila* were presented to the court," he said. "They were both examined by Seppius, and he determined that both *lolila* marks were real. However, new evidence has come to light that clearly points to one of them as the imposter."

Arrah, holding onto one of the guards for support, winced at Tymon's words. How could he speak so callously about her? Was it not bad enough that she had suffered from a misadventure not of her own making? Was it not bad enough that her heart was about to be broken all over again?



## Kate September

"Seppius," Tymon said calmly. "Will you please tell the assembly which one of the mermaids is the true maid of the *lolila*?"

"Certainly, sire," Seppius said in a commanding voice. "Arrah of the Sea People is the true maid of the *lolila*."

There was a collective gasp, Arrah's own included. This was not right! It couldn't be right!

"But it fades," she said hoarsely, her immutable sense of fairness forcing her to try her own case.

"That is exactly why it is real," Seppius said.

"That is a lie!" Lady Ema shouted. "I am a maid of the *lolila*, and my marking has never faded. It shines as brightly today as it did forty years ago! Strip me and look if you do not believe me!"

Seppius chuckled mildly. "And you were bound to the prince on your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, milady," he said. "There was no reason for your mark to fade."

"I don't understand?" said one of the judges, scratching his beard.

"Allow me to explain," Seppius said courteously to the man. "The way the spell of the sea witch works is that the girl who is born with the *lolila* is destined to be bound to the prince. Her life energy and loveliness grow for 18 years, and the mark on her back glows bright silver. However, if she is not bound to the prince upon her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, her mark will fade, and she will die because she needs the word bond of the prince, and the energy of his love for her, to sustain her."

Seppius gestured at Dellia's back. "Lady Dellia is 19 summers," he said, trying to keep the note of triumph from his voice. "If she were the maid of the *lolila*, she would be dead and buried beneath the waves. Arrah, who turned 18 summers two months ago, is just about at the end of her strength. She will die in a matter of days if she is not bonded to Prince Tymon."

"But you yourself said that Dellia's *lolila* was real!" Lady Ema pointed out desperately.

"And it must have cost your family a pretty penny," Seppius retorted. "Whatever sea witch you used did an admirable job. But she probably forgot to tell you about the complications."

"Complications?" Dellia asked, starting and looking suddenly uncertain.

"The magic used to create a real *lolila* for you will, unfortunately, drive you mad – if you are not mad already," Seppius said gently.

## The Siren's Bloom

"You didn't tell me that!" Dellia screamed at Lady Ema, her eyes flashing and beads of sweat popping out on her smooth brow. "You scheming bitch! You poisonous blowfish! You knew what would happen, and you used me! I will kill you for this!"

Lady Ema eyed her niece coldly, showing no feeling.

"No, you shall not kill her," Tymon interrupted, his triumph clear in his voice. "Ema and Dellia of the Sea People, you have conspired against your king, your prince, and the country that welcomed you and made you a home. As you have pointed out, Ema, you are not a subject of Del'Alfia. Therefore, I cannot render judgment upon you."

Tymon paused and exchanged satisfied glances with Seppius. "Since such is the case, I have no choice but to remand you back to the custody of King Olos, who is even now receiving our messenger," Tymon said. "Olos is a merman of great wisdom. He will see...justice done."

"No!" Dellia screamed. "NO! NO! NO!"

Lady Ema remained stonily silent, as if retreated behind a façade of calm while her mind worked feverishly to try and plan the chess game of calling in what few favors she still had under the ocean to try and get her life spared, at the very least. Not that she had much hope of it – Olos was as bad as Taemon when it came to punishing treason and betrayal.

"My lords, I ask if you accept my ruling?" Tymon said formally, turning to the grave-faced courtiers. The men nodded and affixed their thumbmarks and signatures to a document one of the guards held ready.

"Take them away," Tymon said grimly. "They shall await the guards of the Sea People in the dungeons."

The guards escorted Lady Ema out of the room and had to drag the flailing and screaming Dellia. Tymon turned with a satisfied look to Seppius, who now held Arrah. But his pleased expression faded when he saw that Arrah had passed out again, and he felt panic rise as he didn't see her slender chest rise and fall.

"Arrah!" he cried out, reaching for her and gathering her up in his arms. "Do something, mage!"

Seppius shook his head sadly. "There is nothing more I can do," he said. "Only you are the one who can save her now."

## Kate September

### Chapter 18

Tymon carried Arrah over to the sofa and sat down, still holding her in his arms. With infinite care and eyes that spoke of his deep pain, he gently laid her legs along the couch and pillowed her silver head against his chest.

"She must be bonded to you now," Seppius said urgently. "We might be able to save her, but once you are bonded to her, there is no going back. She will depend on you for the rest of her life, and whatever else you do, you must share your life energy with her."

Tymon looked long at the pale face of his gallant little mermaid. "Tell me what I must do," he said quietly, the set of his jaw speaking of his resolve.

"Repeat these words to her," Seppius said, pulling out a scroll from the capacious pockets of his purple velvet robes. *"Maid of the lolila, I bind thee to me. For now and for all the days to come, you shall serve me, and I shall cherish you. May your loveliness be my comfort, and may my life be your strength."*

Tymon repeated the words, whispering them softly to the unconscious Arrah. He watched anxiously for a minute, waiting to see if his vow would help. The terrible white pallor of her skin began to warm with the pale pink flush of life. She stirred, her eyes fluttering open in confusion.

"Arrah," Seppius said gently. "Repeat after me."

"Wha- why?" Arrah mumbled, confused.

"Please do it, Arrah," Seppius said, as Tymon could not speak, being too full of emotion. *"Prince of Del'Alfia, I am bound to you. For now and for all the days to come, I shall serve you, and you shall cherish me. May your life be my strength and my loveliness your comfort."*

Arrah, looking dazed and dizzy, mumbled the words, stumbling over some, but getting through the vow. Tymon watched her intently, eager to catch even the smallest sign of life returning. He released a breath he didn't know he had been holding when he saw her chest begin to rise

## The Siren's Bloom

and fall softly. Her skin grew rosy and warm to his touch, and this time, when her eyes closed, it was merely in the sleep of exhaustion.

Tymon looked up at Seppius, and the mage was wise enough not to comment on the tears in the battle-hardened prince's eyes.

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Arrah felt deliciously warm. She recognized the pleasant weight of thick covers on her body, and her slightest movement rustled the silk of the sheets. Buttery morning sunlight was filling the room. The room...Arrah blinked. This was the room of the prince's concubine!

She frowned, her aquamarine eyes crinkling as she tried to remember exactly what had happened. Moments and events came back, sliding together like pearls on a string, but Arrah's sense of time was distorted. She turned her head to the side and was happily surprised to see Ginis quietly bustling about the room.

"You're awake, milady!" Ginis exclaimed happily.

"What...yes...but where, no when am I?" Arrah stammered, sitting up. She paused, realizing that she no longer felt drained and weak. Instead, she felt better than she had in weeks – months even. A smile crept across her delicate lips.

"Oh dear, oh dear," Ginis said, shaking her head as she folded linens and put them away in the cupboard. "They brought you here three days ago, milady. You were so ill – but you recovered quickly! You slept mostly, and we fed you little bits of food and tea when you would sort of wake up. But you were quite dazed, you poor dear, and no wonder, given what you've been through."

"We?" Arrah asked, catching the telling pronoun.

"Oh, yes," Ginis answered with a wide grin. "Prince Tymon has been by your side as much as he could be. He fed you and sponged you down. I swear that he sang to you at one point – it was such a sweet little lullaby."

"He did?" Arrah squeaked, feeling the pink bloom on her cheeks.

"Indeed he did," Ginis replied, nodding vigorously. "Now then, see if you can stand up, milady. I'll go prepare the bath."

Arrah obeyed as Ginis disappeared into the bathing room, delighted to find her old strength completely returned. With a light, happy tread, she stepped onto the balcony. For a few moments, she was utterly content just to feel the sun on her face, hear the soft murmuring of

## Kate September

the ocean, and smell the heady fragrance of the tropical plants on the terrace.

Leaning against the carved sandstone railing, Arrah looked out over the broad expanse of the ocean, sparkling in the morning sunlight. Out in the distance, she could still see the pale dove grey fog that would linger on the water until the sun was high enough to burn it off.

Her thoughts wandered back to the tumultuous events of the past few weeks and naturally found their way to Tymon. She sighed quietly as the warm breeze lifted strands of her long silver hair and made them dance about her.

As if her thoughts had somehow conjured him out of thin air, she suddenly became aware of the prince standing behind her. She frowned, puzzled. She hadn't heard him come in or approach, nor had she turned to see him. It was as if she was simply *aware* of him.

"My Arrah," he whispered and gently wrapped his arms around her slim waist from behind, burying his face in her hair.

Arrah closed her eyes and prayed to the gods for the strength to do what she knew she must.

"Not your Arrah," she replied quietly, her slender fingers unwrapping his arms as she stepped out of his embrace and turned to face him.

A flash of pain crossed Tymon's eyes, and his smile was bittersweet.

"No, you are my Arrah for now and for all the days to come," he said, repeating some of the words from their vows.

Arrah wrinkled her smooth brow. "Wait, that is familiar – what, where have I heard that before?" she queried.

Tymon reached out with one hand and gently caressed her soft cheek. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then paused. Withdrawing his hand, he turned to face the ocean's horizon.

"I had to do it to save your life," he said quietly.

"Do what?" Arrah demanded, a pit of worry growing in her stomach.

"We are bonded," Tymon replied, turning back to face her. "We exchanged the vows – though I wouldn't be surprised if you don't remember."

"What does that mean?" Arrah said suspiciously.

## The Siren's Bloom

"It means," he said, once more drawing her close and tipping up her chin so that he could look down into her face, "that you and I are one entity now. You cannot live without me, and I cannot be happy without you."

Arrah stared at him, too stunned to speak. Her mind was in a tumult. The secret voice deep in her heart was delighted to hear that there was an excuse to stay with him forever, but rationality told her that she must still make her choice, and that choice must be governed by wisdom and practicality.

"But I cannot stay with you, sire," she said softly, unable to keep the sadness out of her voice. "I want to go home."

"Why, why do you say that?" Tymon said between his teeth, almost crushing her fragile body with his hands.

"Because I cannot trust you!" she replied in agony as the words were forced from her.

Tymon released her and stepped back as if struck by a physical blow. His face grew dark, and emotion raged in his eyes.

"My Arrah," he said, trying to stay calm and in control of his desire to silence her protests with kisses. "You must learn to forgive me!"

"I do forgive you!" Arrah exclaimed, her delicate face a mask of misery. "But forgiveness does not equal trust. You saved my life, true. But I endured enough that I think we are even now. I have no obligation to you, nor you to me. I just want to go home to the mountains."

Tymon turned to face the ocean again, and Arrah saw the whites of his knuckles as he gripped the smooth sandstone railing. She said nothing but waited in heartbroken silence as the minutes ticked by.

Finally, Tymon turned and bowed to Arrah, then strode inside. He stopped and spoke a word to Ginis, then left the rooms. Arrah could bear no more. She clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle her sobs.

"Oh, oh! Don't cry milady!" Ginis exclaimed, rushing out onto the balcony and taking the pale mermaid into her plump arms. "Come, come, let me bathe you. Then we'll get some breakfast inside you. And his highness told me to dress you for traveling – oh dear!" the maid said as her words brought on a fresh wave of tears from Arrah.

Arrah soon stopped crying and pulled herself together, but no amount of gay chatter from Ginis could win a smile from the mermaid as she was washed, fed and dressed.

## Kate September

The sun was mid-sky, and Arrah lingered on the balcony. She was dressed in a simple, wine-colored sleeveless silk dress. Ginis had bundled her hair back in a low, heavy knot with a matching wine-colored silk ribbon threaded through it. Arrah had protested that for traveling, she needed something much simpler, and Ginis had gleefully replied that the dress she wore was the simplest thing in her wardrobe. The vivid color of the gown made Arrah's pale skin and silver hair glow like living alabaster.

A knock at the tall doors of her room made Arrah start, and she felt her heart begin to race, knowing with the new awareness she felt exactly who was at the door. Tymon entered, his face sad and solemn. He came out to the balcony and bowed low and formal to Arrah, who was struggling to hold back the tears from spilling out of her aquamarine eyes.

"Milady," he said quietly. "If you would do me the honor of following me?"

He extended his arm, and Arrah took it. She was surprised that he did not try to pull her into an embrace, but then again, perhaps not so surprised. He was probably trying to distance himself from her, she reasoned sadly. With a heavy heart, she followed him up the winding stairs and labyrinthine corridors of the cliff-side palace until they reached the courtyard where she had first arrived. Tymon helped her onto his horse, then mounted behind her.

It was sweet torture to Arrah to be held one last time in the arms of the man she knew she loved but could never have. Arrah tried to distract herself and keep from crying by looking around at the scenery. But something struck her as wrong. They were not taking the path she remembered, the one that would climb from the hot, sunny seashore to the cold, cloudy mountains.

"Where are we going, sire?" Arrah asked Tymon, twisting halfway and looking up at him.

"Patience, my Arrah," Tymon murmured evenly.

Arrah began to feel anxious as things were taking an unexpected turn. She struggled between wild, unreasoning hope, irritation and fear that something bad was about to happen. The journey was not long, and soon, Arrah saw they were descending toward a secluded sandy beach. High lava rock cliffs surrounded the long beach, and the sand was almost blindingly white. It was lovelier than anything Arrah had ever seen, and the sight of the ocean, the bright turquoise water so clear and so close, mesmerized her.

## **The Siren's Bloom**

As they approached the beach, Arrah noticed an open-air tent. Four sturdy wooden poles were draped in heavy red and gold silk and velvet curtains that were at the moment tied back by golden cords with tassels. Under the tent was a polished wood dais with a low platform bed, piled high with cushions and covered in golden silk sheets and thick fur covers. Four tall bronze torches stood at each corner, their wide bowls already full of flames. The gentle waves rolled up onto the shore, leaving their cool damp mark on the sand.

“What is this place?” Arrah asked breathlessly.

Tymon bent his lips to her ear and whispered, “It is a place to start over, my Arrah.”



## Kate September

### Chapter 19

Tymon dismounted and caught Arrah in his arms as she slid down off the saddle. He motioned to the retinue that had followed them to retreat, and just the two of them walked down the rest of the path to the sandy beach.

"I don't understand," Arrah said softly, letting Tymon gently entwine his fingers with hers.

"Take off your sandals, my Arrah," Tymon said with a thoughtful smile.

Arrah wrinkled her brow but complied, feeling a thrill run through her body as she stepped for the first time onto the warm, silky sand.

The mermaid's expression went from puzzlement to wonder as the fine grains tickled her toes and warmed the soles of her feet.

"This is amazing!" she exclaimed, looking at Tymon. "This is sand?"

"Yes, it is," Tymon laughed, a bittersweet expression on his face. "I used to build sandcastles here as a child."

Arrah smiled and took a few graceful prancing steps on the sand, picking up her skirts to reveal her shapely ankles. She looked back at Tymon.

"Thank you for showing me this," she said hesitantly. "But I still don't understand."

Tymon looked out over the endless horizon of the ocean. "Much has happened, my Arrah," he said softly. "Much has been damaged, broken...hurt. And too much of it is my fault."

He paused and flipped over a seashell with the tip of his boot.

"I know you would probably forgive me for everything," he continued. "But I also know that you do not trust me...as much as you might want to. The fact also remains that we are bound. Your life force is tied to mine, and I do not think I could be happy without you. But I want to be fair."

Tymon stepped over to Arrah and took her small hands in his large, bronzed ones. His dark blue eyes were full of barely-restrained

## The Siren's Bloom

passion as he looked down into her face. Arrah felt her breath grow uneven at his nearness.

"I would ask one more favor of you, my Arrah," the prince said. "Give me three days here. Stay with me. Let me love you and try to make you happy. If you still want to return home at the end of three days, I will send you there and never trouble you again. But if you find your heart has changed, then you will have a place by my side as my beloved."

Arrah could hardly believe what she was hearing. Tears sprang to her eyes, and her throat felt tight. Words abandoned her as she struggled between what she believed was weakness and principle. She trembled, and she saw that Tymon watched her in agonized silence.

"I will give you three days," Arrah said finally, closing her eyes to hide both her resignation and elation. Her lithe frame tensed, waiting for the crushing embrace, but to her surprise, it didn't come. Instead, she felt his warm lips on her hands and opened her eyes to see him looking tenderly down at her.

Gently, almost reverently, Tymon scooped her up into his arms and walked over to the shaded dais and placed her on the low, soft bed. Arrah looked around her, noticing the escort had left them and that they were all alone on the beach now. She sighed and let herself sink into the warm, soft bed. The warm ocean breeze stirred the heavy curtains that were tied to the poles and carried to her nose the salty scent of the ocean. The staccato cries of gulls punctuated the hypnotic murmur of the waves washing upon the sand.

Blinking in the golden light of the sun reflected off the sand, Arrah watched as Tymon disrobed completely, revealing his magnificent sculpted body. With thoughtful eyes, she studied the dark bronze color of his skin and took note of all the scars his warrior's body bore. She blushed as she realized she had been staring, though Tymon seemed equally at ease, clothed or naked. He stretched out on the satin and fur covers beside her and smiled. Arrah felt her heart lurch as his hand traced a feathery caress down her cheek and neck. It was impossible for the mermaid to miss the kindling desire in his eyes, and it was equally impossible for her to deny that the same fire burned in her.

Silently, Tymon leaned in and kissed her. His lips made a soft wet sound against hers as he tasted her sweet lips. He pressed his palm against her bare shoulder to get her to lie back upon the pillows. Arrah reclined gracefully, one strap of her wine-colored silk tunic dress sliding

## Kate September

down her shoulder. That was invitation enough for Tymon to explore the thin, ivory shoulder with his lips, petting kisses along her collarbone. Arrah found herself smiling with pleasure, and instinctively, she took his face between her hands and brought his lips to hers again.

The prince obliged her unspoken wish by sliding his tongue into her mouth as his hand began to roam her body. Arrah wriggled, trying to get the other strap to slide down her shoulder. She felt so deliciously wicked, making love in the daylight, unhidden, unfettered. The thought that the entire escort knew exactly what they were doing in this place secretly thrilled her even more. The urge to be naked, to show her glorious body to this masterful man was overwhelming. She tried to tug at her dress, but desire made her thick-fingered.

As he plundered her mouth, Tymon seemed to realize what Arrah was doing. With a hoarse groan of desire, he pulled away from her lips and grabbed the bodice of her dress. His eyes were wild and his breathing ragged as he strained his muscles and ripped the front of her dress open. But instead of letting her shrug off the tattered remains, he pulled her up by them, raising her breasts to his mouth.

He took one breast into his mouth, his tongue relentlessly swirling around and flicking at her nipple. He then bit down on it just enough to mix the pleasure with pain, then sucked it hard. Arrah writhed and clutched at his massive arms with her hands as his lips moved to repeat the torture on her other breast, the nipple already hardened by the sea breeze.

She cried out in a wordless plea as she felt each flick of his tongue on her nipple echo between her legs. With a growl, Tymon roughly pulled the ragged dress off her body, handling her as if she was nothing more than a doll to be bent and tossed around. But instead of throwing the dress aside, Tymon tore a long strip of the skirt and grabbed Arrah's wrists. He got up from the bed, dragging the mermaid with him, and deftly, he bound her wrists to the pole that held up the tent's covering.

Arrah's eyes were wide with both shock and anticipation. Her blood was on fire, and she felt like an animal, wanting him to take her, to shake her body with his thrusts, to use her with brutal love. Tymon tore another strip of skirt off and tied her waist to the pole. His expression was lustful and predatory, and he moved with a controlled passion that was both precise and masterful.

## The Siren's Bloom

He fell upon her mouth with demanding kisses, lifting her up by her buttocks. With one swift move, he impaled her on his shaft, burying his teeth into her breast as he groaned with pleasure.

Arrah thought she might go mad from the pleasure she felt. She could no longer deny that during those lonely weeks of suffering as Lady Ema's slave, she had wanted nothing more than to be with this man. His rich, sweaty smell seemed to bring out her inner animal, and the mermaid growled and writhed in his iron grip, bucking her hips as much as the binding around her waist would permit. She felt her desire rise up within her like a tidal wave, crushing all thought and rationality, leaving only hunger in its wake.

"Gods!" she cried out as Tymon thrust into her with repeated fury. He silenced her plea with his mouth, crushing her lips and stealing her breath. He growled savagely as he pumped his manhood within her, feeling her burning, silky walls tighten around him as she tried to grind her pleasure bud into his hips.

Arrah's frustration at being tied up only stoked her desire and made her wilder, more abandoned in her writhing and moaning. Tymon felt her passion rising, her primal need, and her helplessness fired him, making him even more painfully hard within her. He panted, knowing his bliss was near, but he wanted to hear her yells fill his ears and echo off the cliffs. He increased the tempo of his thrusts and mauled her breasts with his raging tongue.

Arrah's cries of pleasure were almost screams as a sensation more powerful than anything she had ever known exploded in her body. She was nearly senseless as she felt the starburst of pleasure reach her fingertips, toes, nipples and lips. She was still groaning and shuddering when Tymon released himself within her.

For a long moment, neither lover could move or speak. Finally, Tymon gently set Arrah down on her feet and undid her bindings. The two of them collapsed onto the bed, and Tymon wrapped Arrah in his arms, unable to speak from the continuing reverberations of his climax.

"Thank you," Arrah whispered breathlessly.

"Don't thank me yet," Tymon growled as he fell upon her again.

## Kate September

### Chapter 20

The afternoon was in full bloom when Arrah and Tymon finally awoke from the light doze they had fallen into after their hungry, frantic lovemaking. While they had slept, loosely wrapped in the covers, a servant had brought them plates of exotic fruit and rich cheeses, along with a silver flagon of honey wine, and two silver goblets.

As they ate, Tymon described what had happened in the three days while Arrah was being nursed back to health. Lady Ema had become withdrawn, almost completely silent. She had said nothing nor shown any emotion when the elite guards of King Olos of the Sea People had come to take her and Dellia away. Dellia, on the other hand, had become verbally abusive and violent. Tymon had been forced to order her to be physically restrained. Seppius had done his best, but the madness from the black magic *lolila* had started to seep into the black-haired mermaid's very blood.

Arrah had listened gravely, nibbling on the fruit and cheese and sipping the wine. She had other questions of the prince, but she didn't ask them. A quiet voice inside told her that Tymon would tell all he could, when he could. Instead, she nodded and looked out at the warm afternoon ocean.

"Come," he said softly, reaching over and touching Arrah's pale shoulder. His fingers caught a few strands of her hair, and he pressed them to his lips. "While the sun is high and hot, let me bring you home."

"Home?" Arrah asked, puzzled and suddenly worried that he wanted to take her back to the mountains.

"The ocean, your first home," Tymon said tenderly, gesturing out at the shimmering expanse of water. "I'll hold onto you until you remember how to swim."

"Remember how?" Arrah laughed. "I never learned."

"You're a mermaid, my Arrah," Tymon said, leaning in and kissing her lips. "You've always known. You just have to remember how. Come!"

He stood up, stretching to his full, magnificent, naked height and pulled her to her feet. Arrah felt both shy and thrilled as they ran naked

## The Siren's Bloom

across the hot sand to the water's edge. She gasped as she felt the salt water dribble around her toes at the edge of the surf.

"Don't be afraid," Tymon said encouragingly.

"I'm not!" Arrah replied instinctively. "But, it feels...alive to me!"

Tymon nodded and led her deeper into the surf, holding onto her as the water rose up to her chest. The cool water soothed Arrah's skin, making it tingle and sending shivers of pleasure and wordless, ancient memory through her veins.

It was as if she could feel the very pulse of every creature in the ocean through the water. She realized she wasn't breathing very much through her nose, but that her skin was tingling all over – like shivers of pleasure as she took in oxygen through the water into her body. At that moment, she realized she was truly in her native element. Just as she had back in the bathing pool in her rooms, she submerged herself completely under the water.

For a moment, Arrah panicked and tried to breathe through her nose. But in the space of a few heartbeats, she realized that she didn't need to breathe at all. Her eyes didn't sting in the saltwater, as her body had been made for it. She let go of Tymon's hands and let herself float for a moment under the surface. Her muscles tensed and relaxed, her innate memory of how to swim returning with frightening ease and speed. Tentatively, she fluttered around Tymon's body underwater, gently kicking with her legs and reaching with her arms. She smiled to herself as she swam out, luring him deeper, until the water was up to his neck. Under the water, Arrah could see the effect she was having on the prince. His cock was hard, and his body tense, as if at any moment he would strike and take her out of the water to kiss and caress her. But Arrah had other plans first.

Effortlessly suspending herself with the graceful moves of her people, Arrah slipped her lips around Tymon's manhood, tasting his musk and the saltwater in her mouth. She saw his body stiffen with surprise and smiled to herself. Slowly, she moved her mouth up and down his burning shaft, feeling him bury his hands in the crazy floating tangles of her silver hair. She carefully licked and swirled her tongue around the swollen crown of his cock, delighting in each throb and vibration she elicited from the organ.

Suddenly, Tymon started to walk toward shore, dragging Arrah through the water. With a roar, he hauled her out of the water and threw her down on the wet sand where the surf washed over her. He got down

## Kate September

on his knees and plunged himself into her ready sex, growling as the saltwater foamed around them. The sun beat down hotly onto their glistening naked bodies. Kissing her ferociously and grazing her nipples with his teeth, Tymon slipped his hands around the firm twin fruits of her bottom, spreading them and letting his finger dance around the tight muscle of her forbidden entrance.

Arrah's gasp of surprise and pleasure sent his wet finger plunging into her tightness, filling her from both sides so that when she bucked up, she ground into the manhood that drilled her, and when she sank down, she was filled by a searching finger. Her hands dragged at his shoulders, clutching fistfuls of his hair and digging her small fingernails into the tough muscles of his back. She rolled and writhed on the damp sand, impatient with ravenous need, her thighs pressing against his flanks as he pounded her with his own unfettered desire.

The white foam of Tymon's seed filled her even as the gentle surf licked her skin with salty, bubbly white waves. Arrah roared and smashed her lips against his as her hips bucked convulsively as her climax rocked between his cock in her sex and his finger in her nether tunnel.

They lay tangled in the surf, panting with the heat of their spent desires. So lost were prince and mermaid in exchanging murmured endearments and tender kisses of fading passion that neither heard the nearing commotion until it was too late.

"MINE!"

A foul scream rent the clean sea air. Tymon rolled off of Arrah with lightning speed and jumped to his feet to defend her from whatever threatened.

Dellia, her face pale and stretched with dark circles under her eyes and strange workings of her mouth, charged out of the surf, a dagger clutched in each fist. Arrah scrambled to her feet and began to run back to the tent where she had seen Tymon lay his sword down with his clothes. Dellia, moving with the eerie grace of the Sea People, dodged Tymon's lunge and ran after Arrah, her bare feet pounding against the sand.

Arrah had just reached the dais, when she instinctively spun around and ducked two deadly blows from Dellia. But before the deranged mermaid could strike again, Tymon was upon her. He grabbed her wrist and spun her to face him, and with lightning speed, she sunk the dagger in her other hand deep into Tymon's chest. His eyes went wide before narrowing. With a strength born of righteous rage, he forced the

## The Siren's Bloom

wrist he still held back towards its owner. Dellia's eyes widened with a sudden moment of horrifying clarity as she saw the dagger plunge back toward her throat. But all emotion fled from her face, leaving her lifeless as Tymon swiftly guided the dagger into her throat.

Arrah cried out as she saw her beloved stabbed, and she caught him as best she could as he fell away from the body of Dellia, which sank to the ground with a dull thud. She lowered him gently onto the bed and frantically tried to think of what to do.

"No!" she cried, smoothing back his damp hair as he limply pressed his hand to the dagger that was still embedded in his chest.

"My Arrah," he murmured in a voice that left no doubt as to what else he wanted to say but could not. He winced in pain and coughed. Arrah felt her own life energy draining away with his, but she felt no sadness at that. She did not want to live without this man.

"Your highness! Milady!"

Arrah stared through panicked, tear-blurred eyes at the two merman guards who had appeared.

"Lady Dellia escaped the prison," one of the tall guards explained, panting with effort from the chase and from being above water. "We followed her here, but are we too late?"

"Run!" Arrah cried. "There are horses and servants at the top of the hill! We might yet save him! Tell one of the guards to ride for Seppius. Hurry!"

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Tymon didn't know how many days had passed, but he knew that he was very glad to be alive enough to open his eyes. He had vague, confused memories of pain, and Arrah's voice saying something urgent, then feverish dreams and bouts of waking.

Turning his head to one side, he saw the slender silver figure of Arrah standing at the tall windows in his room. It was twilight, and the eerie blue light of the fading sky made her practically glow with white fire. Quietly, the prince slipped out of bed, wincing at the stiffness in his limbs and the pain in his bandaged chest. He noticed that he wore loose linen shorts, and that his limbs had been salved with sweet herbs – no doubt a concoction from Seppius.

Gently, he touched Arrah on her shoulder, smiling sadly down into her face as she spun around to look up at him.



## Kate September

"What are you doing out of bed?" she demanded, any irritation in her voice drowned out by relief.

"I came to tell you that I am sorry," Tymon replied simply.

"Sorry for what?" Arrah said, genuinely puzzled.

"I am sorry that all of this happened to you," he said, trying to keep the deep sadness from his eyes. "Dellia's attack made me realize how I have wronged you. I shouldn't have made you stay. It was selfish of me, and I know now that I should have let you return home."

Arrah looked at him in stunned silence. Tymon sighed deeply, his dark blue eyes filling with tears.

"You are free to go, Arrah," he said.

"My Arrah," she corrected automatically, her voice trembling.

Tymon smiled through his emotion and shook his head. "No, you do not belong to me," he said sadly.

"Yes, I do," Arrah replied emphatically. "And I am your Arrah, and you are my Tymon."

"My Tymon," he repeated, stunned at hearing her say his name for the first time and trying to take in the meaning of her words.

"My Tymon," Arrah said again, nodding. She took his face in her hands and made him look into her clear, steady eyes. "I didn't need three days to decide. I knew the moment you kissed me. I belong to you. I belong with you. I will stay here as your concubine if you will have me."

"No!" he replied with a sudden grin, sweeping her into his arms, regardless of the pain in his chest.

"What do you mean no-oomph?" Arrah's protest was cut short by a kiss that told her he was almost completely returned to health.

"You will stay as my princess," Tymon said breathlessly as he finally released her. "And someday as my queen. If you will have me, I will have none other. And there will be no more tribute from the Sea People to Del'Alfia. You were right. I will have Seppius nullify the magic of the treaty. From hereon, the loveliest maid of the ocean shall choose her own destiny."

Tymon saw that Arrah's eyes were swimming with tears as she went up on her tiptoes and kissed him shakily.

"I choose you," she murmured.

"That's good," Tymon replied with a gentle laugh. "Because I don't think I'm quite healed enough to persuade you as you deserve."

## **The Siren's Bloom**

Arrah smiled, the tears of joy running down her cheeks. She swiped at them and looked at her prince archly.

"So, where are the rooms of the princess?" she asked archly.

"Right here," Tymon growled softly, taking her into his arms again.

"Right here, and nowhere else, now and for all the days to come."

Arrah smiled, a smile of utter bliss.

"Really?" she said with mock teasing. "Then we'll have to see about redecorating a bit."

"The hell you will!" Tymon said with a playful growl as he picked her up and carried her over to the bed. "I believe I will have to show you just who's in charge here, after all!"

"I think I already know," Arrah replied with a smile.

**The End**

## **Kate September**

Kate September has been writing for as long as she can remember. Her world has been filled with endless stories and an imagination that at times seemed richer and more real than the world around her. Writing for Kate is a less of a process of creating and more a process of composing, trying to capture the flow, lyricism and rhythm of words as the stories unfold themselves.

Kate lives in Boston with her husband and their dog and fish. A special heartfelt thanks goes to Kate's parents and her husband, and the friends and family who have cheered her on, edited, begged for more chapters, and goaded her into writing.