



J.M. Snyder

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Del Fantasma: Undertow

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Aspen Mountain Press

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Chapter One

Pulling into the first empty parking spot he could find, Derek Meredith cut off the engine of his car and doused his headlights. The night seemed to rush in, pressing against his windshield as if testing it for entry cracks. For a long moment he sat in the darkness, listening to the *tick tick tick* of his car's cooling engine, and beyond that the sea breeze that rustled the leaves on the palm trees surrounding the parking lot. Through his windshield he could see the ocean roiling below the cliffs like a dark beast uneasy in sleep.

Derek knew *that* feeling, all too well.

He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the mission-style adobe dwelling behind him, the windows lit from within, a neon sign beaming the name of the bar into the night. *Del Fantasma*. For all the time he'd spent in Vista Loma, he'd never been here before. Then again, he wasn't the type to frequent bars – up until a few months ago he'd been in a happy, satisfying relationship that kept him home nights with his lover, Tad Archer. A few months ago, he would have laughed if someone suggested he'd find himself in the parking lot of the Del Fantasma, about to meet a man he knew nothing of beyond a cryptic message on his voicemail. Beside him the empty passenger seat yawned with loneliness. At home, the bed he used to share with Tad stretched in the darkness, just as bare. And yet his heart somehow still beat despite it all...

Thinking of Tad aggravated the wound. With a jerk, Derek tugged on the rearview mirror and the warm, bright sign of the bar was replaced with his own

dark, haunted eyes. They churned like the sea out there, torn up with pain he no longer allowed himself to feel. Tad was *gone* he admonished silently – how many times did he have to remind himself of that little fact? Half his soul, his reason for breathing, had slipped beneath the waves one rough afternoon four months ago today and never reappeared.

In the rearview mirror, he studied his reflection; the smooth skin of his cheeks looked stretched and pale in the darkness, his thin lips were set tightly, his pain-filled eyes had faint lines, and above them, a shock of red roots were beginning to grow beneath the black dye he'd used to smother his fiery hair. Like a thumb ground into a healing wound to reopen it to experience pain again, he forced himself to say the name out loud, "Tad..."

His heart pounded in his chest, and his head ached. *Tad is dead*, he wanted to say, but his throat worked against the words, refusing to let them out, to give them weight, to make them *real*.

Pushing the mirror away from him, Derek yanked his keys from the ignition and opened his door to stagger out into the night. The cool sea air licked his hot face and ruffled his hair. The slam of the door was lost in the wind. Turning up his collar, Derek set his back to the cliff and the sea below it, and headed for the bar.

Inside, Del Fantasma was packed. As the door swung shut behind him, Derek peered through the crowd and wondered how he'd ever find a man he didn't even know. Patrons lined the bar, jostling each other to catch the bartender's attention; a row of booths stretched along the opposite wall, and a few wooden tables filled the center of the room. Everywhere Derek looked, people laughed and drank and called to each other over the pounding bass that poured from the sound system to beat against the walls. Derek recognized the beat of an old song, some hair-band from the 80's; here and there a few people sang along, their voices rising over the music. "I got the peaches, you got the

cream.”

I can't do this, he thought, one hand reaching for the door. He didn't belong here, amid the laughter and noise, among the living. He felt like an outsider looking in, or an ugly bruise on otherwise flawless skin. It was too much too soon; he shouldn't even *be* here...

Then, despite the crowd, he felt someone watching him. He glanced around, searching for a familiar face, and caught the bartender staring at him as if he were the only customer in the place. Tall and well built, the bartender gave Derek a smile that showed way too many teeth, and it bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

No. With a shake of his head, Derek muttered to no one in particular, “I was just leaving.”

In his mind, he moved toward the door, back out into the cool night, back to his empty car and down the barren stretch of road until he reached his lonely apartment. He could picture the rest of his evening all too well – laying on the sofa because he couldn't face the dark bedroom, silence so severe he might have gone deaf, time crawling by as he waited for sleep to claim him. Then the dreams would come, suffocating nightmares of the ocean, floating hair obscuring his vision, a hand stretched for him but just beyond his reach, *Tad*. A longing so poignant, an ache so real, he would cry in his sleep, which he would realize later when he woke with puffy eyes and clogged sinuses.

Unfortunately, Derek's body didn't get the message that he wanted to leave. Instead of turning around and going through the door, he found himself propelled toward the bar. As he moved closer, a woman in front of him turned, grinned to someone behind him, then slid off her barstool to push past him. He helped himself to her seat and the bartender approached with an empty shot glass in one hand. Waving it away, Derek admitted, “I'm just here to meet someone.”

“Isn't everyone?” the bartender countered.

Derek's mouth twisted into a poor attempt at a smile. "I don't mean like that."

The bartender gave Derek a knowing grin. "I'm Cody," he said, holding out a hand. Derek found himself drawn into a firm handshake. "Welcome to my place. So who're you meeting here?"

"I don't know," Derek admitted. From beneath the bar, Cody retrieved a bottle of bright pink Raspberry Schnapps. With a shake of his head, Derek started, "No, really, I don't—"

"One Undertow," Cody said, speaking over him as if he'd ordered the drink, "coming right up. This friend of yours..."

"I don't know him."

Derek watched the bartender fill half the shot glass with the pink alcohol; it winked in the glass like liquid bubble gum. Then the bottle disappeared back beneath the bar and another took its place—Blue Curacao. As Cody filled the rest of the shot glass, the two colors blurred together to form a deep indigo so dark, it reminded Derek of stormy seas. He stared into the inky depths and a sense of *déjà vu* washed over him. In his mind's eye, he saw waves strike the side of a shuddering sailing sloop, he felt the spray on his cheeks like tears, and he heard his voice torn from his throat, Tad's name shrieked into the howling wind.

Cody's voice came from far away, as if he were the dream and the horror of losing his lover was Derek's reality to relive over and over again. With a shake of his head, Derek realized he'd missed a question; since Tad's disappearance, since his *death*, Derek had found himself dropping out of the world from time to time, and he had to force himself to return to the land of the living. "I'm sorry?"

"I asked your friend's name," Cody replied. At the confusion on Derek's face, he prompted, "The person you're meeting here tonight?"

"Oh, right." For a moment Derek looked around the bar—he had never seen the place before in his life. Fear rose in him, an overwhelming sensation of

being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He felt as if he had somewhere else he needed to be. Someone he needed to find.

Tad.

Steadying himself, Derek raised the shot glass and threw it back. The alcohol tasted like NyQuil – it rushed down his throat, stealing his breath. “God,” he gasped. When he set the glass back down, Cody refilled it despite the shake of Derek’s head. “That shit’s lethal.”

“That’s an Undertow.” Cody’s grin widened, if that were possible. “It grabs you when you least expect it and pulls you under.”

Derek grimaced at the full glass and couldn’t imagine drinking from it again. “I don’t want more.”

Cody simply told him, “Courtesy of your friend.”

Then he looked across the room and nodded at someone Derek couldn’t see. He turned to follow Cody’s glance; in the last booth, along the far wall, a man sat draped in shadow. His face was hidden by the wide brim of a black cowboy hat; a single red feather bobbed from its band. When the man saw Derek, he raised a shot glass as if proposing a toast.

* * * *

The same brief message had been left on Derek’s voicemail three weeks in a row. There was something about the raspy male voice that sounded oddly familiar, like a forgotten tune heard years ago. Derek found himself playing the message over and over again in the hopes of jogging his memory, but try as he might, he couldn’t recall where he’d heard that voice before.

“I’ve found what you lost,” the caller said. No greeting, no identification. “Meet me at Del Fantasma Saturday, midnight. You’ll get it back.”

Derek ignored the first call. It had to be someone playing games, he told himself—someone dialing numbers at random and leaving strange messages to

fuck with strangers' minds. He stayed in that Saturday, spending the weekend in the same way he spent all others – asleep, dreaming of Tad in an effort to drown the pain of losing him.

The next call came three days later. Same message, same voice. "I've found what you lost."

Derek tried to shrug it off. But the voice haunted him, its message worrisome. What *had* he lost? He didn't know – he had his keys, his cell phone, his driver's license. He spent the next weekend rummaging through the apartment, taking inventory, looking for what might be missing. But how did one look for something that might not be there? All Derek found were Tad's belongings boxed away in the bedroom closet. He spent that heart-wrenching night wrapped in one of Tad's faded flannel shirts, crying into soft material that still held traces of his lover's scent.

When the call came a third time, Derek almost caught it. He'd just turned off the shower when he heard the phone ring. He scrambled from the tub; one hand snagging a towel as he raced from the bathroom, but the moment his hand touched the receiver, the phone's jangling ring stopped. He waited a full five minutes, toweling himself off right there in the hallway, then picked up the receiver. The interrupted dial tone told him he had a message, and damned if it wasn't the same one. "I've found what you lost."

"What. The. *Fuck.*"

In his frustration, Derek slammed the receiver down three times, punctuating each word. It'd be worth meeting the man if only to stop the calls.

* * * *

Drink in hand, Derek navigated through the crowd to the shadow filled far corner. As he approached, he studied the stranger waiting for him, who threw back shot after shot of the horrid blue-black drink Cody had called an

Undertow. The black cowboy hat was pulled low over the stranger's eyes, but stringy blonde hair curled around the brim of the hat, gray-green in this bad light, as if the man spent too much time in chlorinated water. His skin was sallow, unhealthy looking, and what Derek could make of his face looked thin and pinched – a pointed chin, a heavy lower jaw, a wide mouth that split into an easy grin when Derek stopped in front of his table.

The stranger looked up at him, giving Derek a glimpse beneath the hat and, to his surprise, he recognized those red-rimmed eyes. He remembered where he'd heard the caller's voice before – it had been *years* since he heard it last, when he had been much younger and Tad not yet in his life. The air seemed to rush out of him as he dropped into the seat opposite the man who had been his first friend, his first love, all those years ago. Lingered affection and a hint of nostalgia filled his voice. "Kellen."

Across from him, Kellen tipped back his hat, allowing Derek to get a good look at the man who had grown from the boy Derek once knew. The same lines that rimmed Derek's eyes spidered around Kellen's; his skin was taut, tight over sharp cheek bones, and pale as if he'd stayed underwater for too long. But his smile warmed his features, and his sea-green eyes sparkled with mirth when he murmured, "*Da, Dere. Ihta san chia.*"

Without thinking, Derek's mind translated the ancient language into English. *It has been too long.* With a sip of his drink, he grimaced, then replied, "I'm known as Derek now. By *Mananan*, you're the last person I expected to find waiting for me here. So you're the one who was calling me? Why didn't you just say so?"

A faint smile toyed around the edges of Kellen's lips. "Would you have showed up if I had?"

The smallest hesitation contradicted Derek's reply. "Of course," he said, sipping again at the drink in his hand to avoid meeting Kellen's steady gaze. "We're old friends, Kell."

Reaching for him across the table, Kellen's long, thin forefinger stroked the back of Derek's hand. The touch was ticklish but Derek didn't pull away. He watched, mesmerized, as Kellen traced runic patterns onto his skin, and remembered those fingers elsewhere, smoothing along his chest, curving between his legs. In a distant voice, Kellen whispered, "We were more than friends, once."

Derek jerked his hand from under Kellen's then ran it through his close-cropped hair to play off the gesture. "We were just kids then."

"There is nothing childish about the way I feel for you," Kellen replied.

Is, feel. As if time had not yet dulled the edge of Kellen's affection for him. *This* was why Derek would have never agreed to meet the man. He had never returned Kellen's feelings, not to the extent his friend hoped for, and for that, Derek was sorry. His heart belonged to Tad the moment he met the man, the rest of his old life – his old *friends* – had fallen away.

When Kellen's hand stretched out for him again, Derek moved his hand into his lap, beneath the table, out of reach. "No, I..." He sighed, so damn tired. "Kellen, I can't. I'm –"

With someone, he almost said, but he stopped himself before the words were free.

There was a sadness in Kellen's voice when he asked, "How long has it been?"

"Four months," Derek choked. He ran a shaky hand down his face as if he could wipe away the pain that tore him up inside. "Not a day goes by I don't miss him. You just don't know –"

"Don't be so sure."

Derek glanced up and for a brief moment, saw his own pain mirrored in Kellen's eyes. His old friend cleared his throat, sat back, and the light in his eyes turned cold, calculating. Down to business. Taking a deep breath to pull himself together, Derek asked, "So what's this about finding what I lost? I don't..."

With a rush of clarity, it hit him. *I've found...* "My God," he whispered, eyes widening. "Tad. That's it, isn't it? That's why you called. You know where he is."

Kellen stared at him, the ghost of a smile on his face. Derek struggled to rein in his thoughts – he wanted to vault across the table, throttle the man opposite him, demand answers ... but that slight grin said it all. Almost dreading the reply he might get, Derek asked, "Is he...?"

"Alive, yes," Kellen conceded. "The question is, what are you willing to do to get him back?"

Chapter Two

Despite appearances, Kellen was not human. The pale skin and washed-out hair were reactions to the air and the sun. After a lifetime spent beneath the waves, where his hair usually wisped around his face like golden silk and the greenish tinge to his flesh was not uncommon to his race, the human form was harsh to Kellen, dry and unprotective. Derek remembered the feeling well; for the first few months after he'd left the ocean behind for good, he spent an excessive amount of time in the shower stall at Tad's apartment, just standing beneath the chlorinated spray, wishing the water coursing over him held even a smidgen of brine.

Kellen belonged to an ancient race of sea-dwellers known as merrows. Derek knew this because he had also grown up among their number in the rough waters just out of land's sight off the coast of Vista Loma. Called Dere then, he would swim in toward the shore, drawn by the lighthouse that marked the inlet to the San Diego Bay. There he'd hide among the breakers and watch the surfers with their unwieldy boards that seemed to turn into fish whenever they navigated the waves. He ached to touch those firm, tanned bodies, to feel how smooth the dry skin must be beneath his webbed fingers, to cover those laughing mouths with his own cold lips.

But his excursions from the merrow pod were never solo. Kellen, a few years older than Dere and infatuated with the younger merrow, always swam

two strokes behind him wherever he went. How many times had Dere felt his friend rub alongside him as they swam together, a playful gesture Dere tried to discount? How often had Dere turned his hungry stare from the surfing humans to see his own lust mirrored in his friend's eyes, directed his way? Before he was old enough to recognize his own growing desires, before he even had a name to put to the emotions that swirled like tidal pools within him, he knew Kellen loved him, wanted him, *ached* for him. It was heady knowledge that the young Dere abused to get what he wanted. His friend followed him faithfully, even to the shore.

Human in shape, merrows were covered in fine, iridescent scales that caught the sunlight dappling through the water and flashed like galleons winking among sunken treasure. Unlike the fairy tales of mermaids that captured the imaginations of those on land, merrows had two long, thin legs, tapering into twin fins that unfurled like flippers to help them swim. Their scales grew thick along their backs and arms and legs. On their chests and bellies, the scales were soft, pale, and sensitive to touch. Their genitals were also similar to humans', hidden between their legs by thick curls of hair that twined like a knot of seaweed at their crotch.

Merrows could leave the ocean as long as they held a talisman that would allow them to return. For Kellen, that had to be the feather he'd tucked into the brim of his hat; Derek figured it wasn't there for looks. Other merrows had red combs they wore in their hair, scarlet cloaks that covered their nude bodies, rakish red hats, garnet necklaces, or ruby rings. Always something red that tied their blood to the ocean's flow. The talisman was what allowed them to move between the worlds of water and land; its power protected them in both merrow and human form. If it was lost, or stolen, the merrow could never return to the sea.

But Dere had dreamed of leaving the water behind for good—he knew of merrows who had done that, taken their chances among the humans, and he

wanted to be a part of that world.

As he grew into adulthood he would burrow into the sea floor just beyond the breakers, legs apart to feel the grit of the swirling sand tickle over his aching balls and stiff cock, and watch the surfers command the waves around him. Kellen at his side, would be watching *him* with the same, raging erection pointed his way. "Theirs is a dry world," his friend would say, as if he alone could convince Dere to stay among the merrows. He would brush against him in what was meant to be an innocent gesture. As they grew older, they both knew there was nothing innocent about Kellen's touch. "Stay here, with me."

The surfers might have been out of reach, but there among the waves, Kellen encouraged him to discover his own budding sexuality, and however much he might ache for something else, his body still blossomed at Kellen's touch. For Dere it was mutual exploration, discovery between friends, getting off to feel good. Nothing permanent, nothing *real*.

But for Kellen, it meant so much more.

* * * *

Life as a merrow off the coast of California meant days spent exploring cold waters, out-swimming sharks, or floating above the waves for long hours in the warm sun. But Dere wasn't content with keeping to the depths of the sea; daily he'd chase the currents inland, zip beneath sailboats and outboard motorboats, splash among the surfers in the waves, or sun himself on the rocky cliffs of Vista Loma. Kellen was never far behind; he tailed him like a shadow, dancing through the water a close behind Dere's legs. When Kellen thought he could get away with it, he'd let his long fingers feel their way over Dere's scales, over his back, around his waist, between his buttocks if he could manage it. Dere twisted away from Kellen's eager grip, laughter tickling through him as the older merrow's hands slid over his body.

Some time after his eighteenth year, Dere found himself reluctant to pull away. He liked the feel of another's skin against his, even if it *was* Kellen's. Teasing touches led to games of chase; Dere still out-swam his friend, but only just. More often, Kellen managed to catch him, his slim arms encircling Dere's hips or waist, the weight of his body bringing Dere down to the bottom of the sea, where they'd lie together among the reeds and seaweed and let their hands learn each others' bodies.

Kellen was Dere's first, in every way. Their first kiss was a tentative peck; a brush of lips that sent shivers down both their spines as if they'd just plunged into an icy current. Kellen touched Dere first, smoothing his hand between the cleft of Dere's buttocks, his thumb rubbing over trembling, puckered skin, his mouth pressed against Dere's shoulder, the hand moving lower, fingers fondling the heavy sac that hung between his legs. A firm grip encircled the thick length that had hardened between Dere's legs. Dere had gasped at the sensations flooding him, the desire, the *need*, and one word escaped him— "Yes."

His friend's weight settled onto him, a hard erection poking at his buttocks. Dere arched against the body above him, legs spreading in invitation. Cool lips kissed the back of his neck; Dere writhed beneath Kellen, rubbing his body against the seabed, against the sand and the tight fingers rubbing his length. "Please," he sighed, as Kellen's cock rimmed Dere's flaring hole.

"Please," as Kellen's kisses trailed over one shoulder, his teeth nipping at Dere's scales.

"*Mananan* and all the sea gods below, *please*," loud enough to scatter a passing swarm of silvery krill.

Then Kellen drove into him, spearing him like a fish on a hook, Dere's name kissed into the scales of his flesh. They moved together as one, Kellen above, Dere rolling back against him time and again. Sand churned up in small eddies and seaweed danced around their coupled bodies, hiding them from view. Above, pale sunlight refracted down through the water to play over their

clasped hands, their entwined legs. "*Tiu cariad,*" Kellen whispered.

I love you, spoken so softly, Dere could pretend he didn't hear it.

After that, it became harder and harder for Dere to refuse Kellen's advances. He liked the sex and the attention, there was no denying it, and he liked aggravating the older merrow to the point of distraction. "I can't live without you," Kellen would whisper into Dere's skin as he trailed tiny kisses up Dere's arm, over his shoulders, across his neck. "Stay with me. Be mine. I need you."

It had to be love, Kellen insisted, the desire that burned through him, but Dere wasn't so sure. His heart belonged on shore, not trapped beneath the waves or pinned on a merrow such as Kellen. He was a good friend, true, and they'd known each other for years, but Dere ached for so much more.

In the evenings when the beaches were bare, he would entice Kellen to follow him past the breakers, where the tide rolled in. They would lay in dry sand that crusted to their damp skin, the fins on their legs dangling in the white-tipped waves, their bodies exposed to the air and each other. Kellen would clamber above him, murmuring nonsense, love and want, and *please just please let me...*

Separating Dere's legs with his own, guiding his cock into Dere, hands fisted in the sand as he pressed his lips to the gills along Dere's throat. His gasps matched the thrust of his hips, over and over, driving into Dere as the waves pounded the shore around them.

Dere kept his head turned, his gaze averted. His body reveled in emotions that didn't penetrate his heart. Through the tangled mess of Kellen's drying hair, he stared at the cliffs above and thought of the surfers he watched during the day, their tanned bodies taut and dry. He imagined any one of them on him instead, loving him, sighing his name into his gills, coming deep within him in a briny rush instead of Kellen.

Each time they coupled, his friend grew more controlling. Now when he told Dere he loved him, the words were no longer hesitant; they were a challenge, one Kellen refused to relinquish. “Tell me you don’t feel the same,” he demanded. When Dere looked away, Kellen swam into the line of his vision, turned his face towards him, stared into Dere’s eyes as if he trying to read what he wanted to see in their inky depths. “All the times we lie together, every kiss, every *touch*. Tell me they mean nothing to you.”

Dere couldn’t go that far. “It feels good,” he’d say, and once he even admitted, “You’re the only one I’ve done this with.” But they weren’t words of love; they were selfish, petty thoughts, and as Kellen grew more adamant about his desire, Dere found it easier to just hide away. From his friend, from the pod, from his own twisted feelings. He loved Kellen’s attention, yes; he loved the sex, and the touches, and the kisses, but he wanted more.

When a sudden summer storm swept in off the coast, drenching the beach and keeping the surfers away, Dere hid from Kellen among the breakers. Half-buried in the shifting sands, he let the waves wash over him as he weathered out the storm, lost in his own brooding thoughts. Lightning struck the water and dark oily lines marked the tide line where dead kelp and seaweed washed up along the shore.

The sea rushed over Dere, violent, angry, its roiling waters as tumultuous as his own bitter heart. He wanted a reason to leave this ocean-borne life of his behind. He wanted someone to energize his staid existence, the same way the lightning charged the water that swirled around him. Someone he could give himself to, body and soul, and put the merrows – and Kellen – behind him for good.

Then he met Tad.

After the squall had passed, a man came down to the shore. Slightly built, waifish almost, with a strong aquiline nose and cheekbones as defined as the cliffs above. He had dark straight hair pulled back from his face and tied in a

sloppy ponytail that hung down his back, strands of it wisping around his face, softening his features. His dark eyes stormed like the sea, and there was a restless energy about him that piqued Dere's interest.

Though he wore a flannel shirt and jeans, the baggy clothing accentuated the narrow jut of his hips, his lanky arms, and his narrow chest. He carried a pad of paper whose pages fluttered in the stiff breeze that blew in from the sea. He picked his way among the driftwood and sea trash until he found a spot that suited him. Dropping to the sand, he raised one knee and set the pad against it, pen in hand, intent on sketching the ocean's fury.

But when he looked into the waves, his dark gaze pierced through the water and seemed to pick out Dere among the white-capped foam. For the first time in his life, Dere felt a connection form between himself and another. That look shot down his spine to coil in his groin, stirring his blood, innervating him. A hand clenched around his heart; each beat pulsed through him like sonar, awakening him, invigorating him.

Without hesitation, Dere pushed away from the sandy bottom and swam to shore. The man on the beach never lowered his gaze from Dere's, and showed no surprise to see the merrow rise from the waves. The cool breeze soothed his damp skin as his scales fell away in iridescent drops like the water dripping from his lithe frame; as his body dried, his gills closed and his lungs filled with air. Feet formed from his flippers, and the fins along his arms receded until they disappeared. Around his neck, a red shell hung on a thin, black cord, and burned as his body changed from merrow to human. As he approached the man on the beach, the shell glowed between them like a small sun, giving Dere's skin a warm, healthy glow.

The man looked up, his gaze a palpable touch on Dere's naked flesh. He felt that stare on his thighs, his cock, the flat of his stomach, the muscles on his arms and chest...by the time it reached his face he had bent down to the man's level, kneeling before him. When he spoke, the rich baritone startled Dere into

arousal. "Hey."

Dere's reply was a demanding kiss that stole the stranger's breath. The sketchpad fell to one side, discarded. The buttons on the flannel shirt parted beneath Dere's eager fingers and soon the shirt followed the pad, tossed away. Each touch of the stranger's mouth made Dere hunger for more; he moved above the man, hands tracing over dry, sandy skin, every nerve of his body on fire. The jeans were unbuckled, unzipped, pushed down, and without a word, Dere moved into place above the man's thick erection. "Please," the man murmured, his hands grasping at Dere's buttocks to spread them wide.

Slowly Dere sat down, taking in the stranger's length inch after inch, until he sat on the man's hips, his legs draped on either side of him. Dere felt the cock in him throb with a foreign heartbeat, and the slightest movement sent delicious shivers cascading through him. The human's flesh was dry to the touch, a marvel to Dere. Even in his changed form, his body would retain a thin sheen of water for an hour or so until he managed to "dry out." This natural lubrication allowed the man's dick to slide easily into Dere's ass, and he took in the full, thick shaft, until he swore he could *taste* it in the back of his throat.

He cried out, a wild sound, dug his hands into the sand as he rocked above the stranger, rubbing his own length in the dark, kinked hair at the man's crotch. As they fucked, the guy watched Dere through hooded bedroom eyes that seemed to stare into the merrow's very soul. "Yes," Dere gasped, and for once he meant it, body and mind, every ounce of him wanted this, and *this*, and *this*, *yes yes YES*.

When the echoes of his orgasmic cries faded away, Dere lay with the human; their limbs entwined together, their bodies still joined as one. Gentle fingers toyed with the shell around Dere's neck, which fell in the hollow of the man's throat. "I'm Tad," he whispered, nuzzling aside Dere's drying red curls to kiss the smooth skin of his forehead. "You are amazing."

"I'm..." Dere hesitated, unwilling to connect his life in the waves with

J.M. Snyder

this tender moment on shore. Burying his face against Tad's neck, he murmured, "Derek. And I'm all yours."

Chapter Three

With Tad, Derek left the ocean behind. The transition into human life was so easy, as if it were meant to be. Tad was a quiet, shy man, so unlike the domineering Kellen. He was quick to blush, and Derek began to anticipate the color that rose into those pale cheeks, the self-conscious duck of Tad's head, the fall of hair that obscured his delicate features from view. He was a beautiful creature, something Derek saw as his own, as if he had captured the man in one of the fabled "soul cages" his mam used to sing of when he was a small gup.

What started out between them as tentative and unsure, strengthened as the seasons passed until Derek couldn't imagine any other life but the one he shared with Tad. Infatuation sank beneath the surface of Derek's heart to mingle with emotions that caught him off guard. Just seeing Tad's smile pulled his own lips into a quick grin. The briefest touch made Derek's chest swell with something he could not define.

Sex, once so casual between them, so unassuming, began to take on an undercurrent of mixed feelings that at first Derek struggled to hide. The whole act was much more involved than it had been in the water – on land, with dry bodies, there were oils involved to lubricate the skin, and more foreplay than he was used to, no swimming away after either; instead he held Tad close.

Though Derek preferred to bottom during sex, he loved Tad's hesitant personality, the quiet spark in him that allowed Derek to dominate every other

aspect of their lives together.

Soon it wasn't so much getting off himself but pleasuring Tad – the man became the focal point of Derek's life, and for the first time he wanted to please someone else, not just himself. Tad taught Derek how to touch him, how to make him gasp in delight, how to make him weak with desire and by doing so, how to find his own happiness in Tad's release. With Kellen sex had been nothing more than mutual masturbation; with Tad, even the simple act of looking at him set Derek's blood racing. A soft word or gentle touch brought him to his knees. A kiss became orgasmic.

Days faded into weeks, then months, then years. Lust deepened into something more, something *real*, a love so strong it took Derek's breath away if he let himself dwell on it. After a lifetime spent keeping his heart unencumbered and free, he found it tethered in Tad, caught in a web so strong, Derek didn't want to break free. When they coupled, it transcended sex, and five years after he'd left the ocean, he surprised himself by whispering loving words into the silky flesh between Tad's legs. "*Tiu cariad*," as he trailed kisses over the hair that fuzzed Tad's thighs. "*Tiu cariad*," in the flat plain of his hip, in his navel, in the hollow of his throat.

The words felt foreign on Derek's lips – he'd never said them to another, never meant them before now. "I love you," whispered into Tad's mouth, passing between them for the first time like the very breath they shared.

As the years passed, Derek imagined his love for Tad as a chambered nautilus within him, growing larger each year, encasing his heart in layer after layer of precious nacre. He forgot the sea's siren song, the merrows beneath the waves, Kellen, and the naive, petty boy called Dere. They all seemed like images from some childhood a dream, ethereal and barely remembered upon waking. His only tie to that life was the red shell he wore on the cord around his neck. And on their tenth anniversary, he gave the necklace to Tad as a symbol of his devotion to the man he'd come to love.

Without that talisman, Derek could never return to the sea, but without Tad, he never wanted to go back. Fastening the cord around his lover's neck, he'd told him, "Now I belong to you forever."

Less than a year later, they went out on a sailing sloop with a couple of coworkers, just to splash around the bay. Whose idea it'd been to round the tip of Point Loma and head out into the choppy waters of the Pacific, Derek no longer remembered. Why they hadn't heeded the rough current warnings posted, why they ignored the threat of a coming storm, he couldn't say. It was a stupid thing they'd done, running that little boat out into the dangerous ocean, but at the time, it seemed like fun.

There were only two lifejackets onboard, and Derek sat on one of them to cushion the bumpy ride. He held Tad in his lap, the two of them laughing into the wind as it whipped around them, laughing at the purple clouds brewing above, as if laughing in the face of the gods. With his arms tight around Tad's waist, Derek buried his face in the gap between his lover's neck and the open fluttering collar of his jacket. The red shell warmed between their skin as if alive. Sea spray dampened his hair but his nose, his eyes, his mouth were full of Tad's scent. By the time it started to rain, they were so far out that the shore looked like a line drawn in the water, and the cliffs seemed to rise from the sea itself.

A sudden squall throttled the boat. "Whoa!" Derek teased, hugging Tad tighter when his lover threatened to slip from his grip. In response, Tad's laughter washed over him as he reached for the rail behind Derek and hung on with both hands. Nuzzling against his lover's neck, Derek murmured, "Where do you think you're going?"

The next rough wave that struck the boat nearly unseated them. The lifejacket slipped from under Derek; he let go of Tad to pull the awkward bulk off his seat, and for the briefest moment, the thought of putting it on flashed through his mind and was gone. Tad stood aside, one hand casually holding the rail, his large brown eyes watching Derek get settled as he waited to resume his

seat.

Another wave hit, this time cresting over the boat's bow and drenching all four friends. Derek sputtered, the sea stinging his eyes, filling his mouth; he felt his breath torn from him as if this small amount of briny water was enough to drown him. Without his talisman, the seawater was anathema to him; even being in a boat on the water tempted fate, but the risk was worth the moment shared with his lover. Though Derek had left the ocean behind, Tad still loved the sea.

Tad.

When he'd wiped the water from his eyes, Derek turned to find an empty space beside him where his lover had once stood. A wild glance around the boat showed his two friends. Tad was gone.

"Tad!" Derek cried out, voice already sharp with hysteria. Behind the boat, white foam trailed in their wake, roiling over rough waves. Somewhere, out there... "TAD!"

* * * *

The name still echoed in Derek's memory, four months later. As he stared across the table into Kellen's unfathomable eyes, he drew in a shuddering breath and tried to get a grip on himself, but everything inside him felt as tumultuous as that storm-tossed sea in which he'd lost his lover. Half-remembered snatches of silvery song filled his head – his mother's melodious voice singing him to sleep with stories the elders told; nostalgic tales of merrows who used to haunt the inlets and ragged cliffs watching for the shipwrecks which brought with them caskets of rum and drowned men.

Those were the days his mam used to reminisce about when humans still braved the waters before they took to the air. Merrows were fond of alcohol – Kellen's shot after shot of the nasty Undertow gave proof of that – and Derek

wasn't the only one among his people to favor the warm bodies or soft skin of those who walked the land. Many a merrow maiden had rescued a drowning man and kept him locked beneath the waves, caging his soul and trapping him like some sort of pet.

I once felt that way about Tad.

The thought came on its own, unbidden, and Derek shook his head as if to shake it away. Yes, he'd thought that way at first, but the longer he lived among men, the more his feelings mirrored their own until the possessive nature of the merrow he'd been dropped away, and the lust he felt for Tad had turned to love. He *loved* that man, still did. Tad had changed him into someone worthy of such an emotion, of giving it and receiving it.

Then the sea had stolen Tad from him, and taken with him any power Derek might've had to return to the water to find his lover.

Kellen's words caught in Derek's mind like a sharp hook, pulling at his thoughts, tearing open wounds he believed just beginning to heal. "Wait."

The familiar eagerness in Kellen's eyes made Derek more nervous than he cared to admit. When that piercing gaze turned his way, he became all too aware of the fact that he'd been alone and lonely for so damn long. Yes, it was Kellen across from him, but his body responded to the open interest in his old friend's gaze in a way that Derek's mind refused to accept. "The Coast Guard went out in that storm," Derek said, trying to keep the conversation under his control. "They dredged the sea for miles along the shore. They never found Tad's body."

Kellen licked his thin lips as he stared at Derek's own. "No, they wouldn't have, would they?"

Derek dared not hope Tad might be...that he was... "What do you mean?"

He spoke so low, the words were little more than shapes formed by his mouth, but Kellen heard them anyway. The smile that crossed his face didn't

quite reach his eyes. “You know the stories, *Dere*. They aren’t just fairy tales or children’s songs.”

“What,” Derek snickered, “you’re saying those soul cages are real?”

Kellen met Derek’s gaze, then sort of shrugged, a gesture that spoke louder than his silence.

Disbelief and anger warred in Derek – as much as he wanted Tad back, he was afraid this whole meeting might be nothing but some sick joke, a way for Kellen to get back at him for leaving the pod, leaving *him*, all those years ago. “Why should I believe you?” he challenged. “Soul cages are nothing but a mythical part of our – of *your* people’s past. A fairy tale told to an imaginary race. Tad is dead.”

The words fell like stones between them, each one sinking into the pit of Derek’s stomach, dragging him down and making him sick. He’d never said them out loud, and now that they were free, he regretted them. Amusement flashed in Kellen’s sea-green eyes and Derek’s hand clenched into an unconscious fist that he barely managed to keep to himself. “Am I imaginary to you?” Kellen wanted to know.

Beneath the table, his foot nudged Derek’s, then raised between Derek’s legs, rubbing up his calf, over his knee. Before it reached his thigh, Derek turned, closing his legs and knocking away Kellen’s touch. Cool fingers glanced over his fist; he pulled it out of reach. “Stop it,” he spat, hating the tremor he heard in his own voice. Below his belt, his pants felt too tight, constricting, and he couldn’t seem to draw a steady breath. “Just stop it right now, Kellen, I’m serious. I’m not interested –”

“Really?” Kellen cocked an eyebrow and grinned. “Or are you just saying that in the hopes of believing it?”

“Tad,” Derek choked. They were talking about Tad here, he had to get through the pain and the loss, and listen to what Kellen was trying to tell him. He had to *focus*... “You said he was alive? Why hasn’t he come back to me?”

Why would he go to *you* —”

Kellen sighed, cutting off Derek’s questions. “He’s not *dead*,” he assured Derek; this time when he reached out, Derek wasn’t so quick to pull away, and he let Kellen’s fingers curl over his. The touch was a balm that covered his pain, soothed his heart. “Not the way you think. Yes, he fell off the boat. There were merrows in the water — you didn’t see them, I know, but we were there. *I* was there. Watching you.”

Gently he began to massage Derek’s hand, working his fingers into the tight fist. “Why?” Then Derek waved the question away — it didn’t matter. More important... “What happened? Where is he?”

Kellen’s enigmatic smile widened. “Merla took a liking to him. She had me —”

“Merla?” Derek seized the name; he’d never heard it before. “Who’s that?”

“My mate.”

The words stunned Derek into silence. “It’s been ten years,” Kellen pointed out. “Don’t tell me you thought I’d just pine away for you all that time.”

Quickly he shook his head. “No, of course not.” But the idea of Kellen with a female, merrow or human, seemed laughable at best. Derek still recalled the hot breath along his skin, pledging a love he himself did not feel. Forcing a laugh, he added, “Ten years, hey. A lot can happen. People change.”

Kellen leaned forward, an earnest look on his face. “Not as much as you think,” he whispered. Derek had to lean over the table to hear him, and the hand covering his pulled him closer still. “I never forgot you, *Dere*. Merla may have borne my children, but not a day goes by when I don’t think of you.”

Derek watched Kellen raise his hand to his mouth as if it belonged to someone else. He barely felt the cool lips press against his knuckles, or the damp tongue that licked out to taste his skin. Softly, Kellen admitted, “In fact, that’s why I’m here.”

“Tad,” Derek replied, speaking in the same low tone. He tried to pull back his hand but couldn’t. “What did she do to him?”

“Merla?” Kellen laughed. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his cheek over Derek’s knuckles, a faint sigh escaping him. “She said he was a pretty thing with his wide eyes and his wild hair. Thrashing about in the water, struggling to break the surface. Let’s keep him, she said. I want him. He’s mine now.”

Derek tugged on his hand, harder, but Kellen wouldn’t release his grip. “No,” he said, sharper than he intended. “No, she’s wrong. He’s mine.”

Those pale eyes opened and stared at Derek, unblinking, bemused. “You let him go.”

“No.” The argument seemed unreal, *no*. Wrestling his hand free from Kellen’s, Derek tucked it under the table, out of reach, and wiped it down the leg of his jeans. “This is stupid. I want him back. I need him. I—”

Kellen raised an eyebrow, the smile playing around his mouth almost taunting Derek to finish the thought. *I love him*. Tamping that down, Derek sighed, “Please.”

For a long moment, he didn’t think Kellen would reply. He’d beg if he had to, but Derek hoped maybe some spark of whatever they’d had together all those years ago might be enough to win the merrow over. *Please ...*

Then Kellen’s mouth twitched, and his smile faded. “He has very soft skin,” he whispered.

Derek jerked back as if slapped. “What—”

“A luscious mouth,” Kellen continued, a hint of mirth shining in his eyes. “Tender lips. When I gave him the kiss of breath, he clung to me, don’t you know? Hands grasping at my arms, my chest. He gave in to me oh so easily.”

“No.” Derek shook his head—he didn’t want to hear this.

“Sorry,” Kellen said, sounding anything but. “Had to do it. Covered his mouth with mine so he wouldn’t drown. Held him to me as we swam back to the pod. Cradled in my arms, like this.” Leaning back in the booth, he curved

one arm in front of his waist, the other against his chest, as if soothing a crying baby. "He held onto me the whole way. *So tight.*"

Derek didn't want to hear any more. "No. Stop."

With a chuckle, Kellen admitted, "Turned me on, let me tell you. A strong male body like that, against my own, after all this time? I tucked him into Merla's soul cage and had to jerk off among the reeds I was so hard. Thought of you while I did it, you holding him, kissing him, fucking him."

"*Shut up.*" Derek slammed a hand on the table, and empty shot glasses scattered out of his way. A few fell to the floor with a tinkling of glass. "Kellen, I swear, if you even so much as copped a feel—"

"Oh please." Something wicked flashed in his eyes, and he stared at Derek, pinning him in place. "He's not what I'm interested in. What I came for. What I *want* is you."

Chapter Four

Kellen made his offer plain enough. “You give yourself to me one last time,” he told Derek, his voice intimate and low. Around them the noise of the crowd crashed like waves on the shore, just so much senseless sound that threatened to wash Derek away. Kellen’s eyes had turned cold, calculating—he knew what he wanted, and he knew how to get it. “And I want every part of you, every touch, every kiss, every moan, I want it all. No lying there as I fuck you. No waiting it out. This time I want you making love to me, *Dere*, the way you do to *him*. Got that? Out there on the beach, just like old times, right where you first met him and ripped my goddamned heart to shreds.”

Derek thought back to that first magical moment between himself and Tad when the rest of the world had seemed to dissolve beneath their sudden desire. He remembered a feeling almost painful, it was that intense, of staring into eyes that saw through the waves, through to his very soul. Like a fish snagged on a hook he’d found himself reeled into land, captured by Tad.

He recalled the way his scales had soughed from his body, falling like rain to the sea as he emerged from the sea. But had he felt something else, in the water that swirled over his fins, something almost insubstantial, grasping at his ankles like strands of kelp floating in the tide? A hand reaching for him even as he left the ocean behind. Had the electricity of the storm, the lightning in Tad’s eyes, the fire between them burn so bright because on some unconscious level,

Derek *knew* they were being watched?

If he'd turned back to the sea all those years ago, would he have seen Kellen's unblinking gaze staring at him through the breakers? "You saw."

Kellen's face was an unreadable mask. "I want you to love me like that. No holding back. Give me something to think of when I masturbate; something to warm me on cold nights when I sleep with my mate. Something you should've given me from the start, something I've wanted from you for too damn long."

Disgust filled Derek at the thought of touching Kellen again on the shore, half in the water, the jaundiced skin covered with a merrow's scales. Not to mention that the kiss of salt water on his own body would be like anathema without his talisman. "No," he said, a little louder than necessary. He shook his head for emphasis. "Your heart isn't some mindless organ that gets hard at the slightest touch."

"Don't you want him back?" Kellen asked.

The corner of his mouth turned up in a self-satisfied smirk that Derek wanted to punch off of his face. "God," he sighed, incredulous at Kellen's gall. "I can't believe I'm sitting here discussing this with you. Of course I want him back, you bastard. I want him so badly, I can barely *breathe* whenever I think about him." He shook his head, adamant. "But I can't do it."

Kellen wouldn't let up. "Not even to save his life? He doesn't have to know."

"I'd know," Derek pointed out. "I love Tad. Doesn't that *mean* anything to you?"

Kellen's disinterested shrug was answer enough. Sliding to the edge of the booth, Derek dug out his wallet and threw a few dollars down on the table to cover his drinks. "I'm not the same little guppy you used to bully around, Kell," he said, trying to sound stronger than he felt. His hands trembled and he knew he walked a fine line here, between offending his old friend and drawing on

whatever sense of decency he might have, but Derek wouldn't be pushed around. Not by *him*. "So what, we fuck and then you slip into the sea for good? How can I trust you to bring Tad back to me? How can I trust you not to just disappear?"

"You'll follow me," Kellen explained. His hand reached for Derek's but missed and fisted around the dollars in front of him instead. "When we're done, I'll lead you to where he's kept. I'll distract Merla and you both go free. Simple as that."

Absently, his fingers strayed to touch the feather in the brim of his hat. Derek's gaze followed, and he resisted the urge to laugh. Kellen must not have seen the cord around Tad's neck, nor recognized the red shell that hung there. Derek didn't know whether or not to mention that his only means of returning to the water had drowned with his lover. He could almost imagine Kellen's smile widening as he promised he'd release Tad anyway.

But would he keep his word? Or would he open the soul cage at the bottom of the sea, let the briny current rush into Tad's prison, and watch as the water finally claimed the man Derek thought it'd already taken? How long would Derek sit on the beach, naked, hugging his knees to his chest, hating himself for giving into Kellen's demands as he waited in vain for Tad to return?

Or hell, maybe Kellen would just hold onto Tad anyway, Derek be damned, then show up in another month's time with another itch to scratch, promising the same thing. *Fuck me, and he goes free*. How many times would Derek fall for that? How could he *not*, if there was even the slightest glimmer of hope that maybe the next coupling would be the one to bring Tad back?

And why was he even considering Kellen's offer? "No. There has to be some other way."

Kellen sat back against the booth, arms stretched wide as if to show he'd laid his cards on the table. "I've told you what I want," he said. The look on his face told Derek that his proposal was non-negotiable. "The question is, do you

want him enough to agree to my terms?"

Indignation welled within Derek. He felt used, cornered, and he wished he'd never come to Del Fantasma in the first place. Believing Tad to be dead had been horrible, knowing he was alive and that there was only one way to get him back was almost unbearable. "Fuck you," he spat.

A slow smile spread across Kellen's face. "That's all I'm angling for here."

Derek stood up so fast he struck the table with his hip and sharp pain flared down his leg. It added insult to injury, and he shoved the table hard enough to tumble over the empty glasses in front of Kellen. "I have to think about this," he said, mind awl. Have to think about how to get *out* of this, he should've said, but at that moment he just needed to get out. Go home, nurse his wounds, think of Tad. Let his lover's memory convince him that what he had to do was right. Tucking his wallet into his jeans, he glanced around the crowded bar and refused to look at Kellen any longer. "How can I get back in touch with you? Give me a number, or something."

Kellen's hand closed around Derek's wrist in a grip so tight, his fingers went numb. "Not so fast, sexy."

Derek tried to pull away from Kellen but only succeeded in pulling the merrow to his feet. Closing the distance between them, Kellen leaned in close to Derek, who shrank away. The last thing he wanted was to feel those thin, cold lips on his.

But Kellen gave him a disarming grin. "I know you too well," he whispered, voice carrying over the crowd with ease. "You'll leave here and head for the water yourself, try to find him without my help. No dice."

Searching those pale eyes, Derek tried to explain, "I...I don't have my talisman with me." Kellen let out a bark of a laugh. "No, honest, listen. I gave it to Tad on our last anniversary. He gave me a ring, that's the custom among humans, and I gave him my talisman as a...I don't know, a promise that I'd be with him forever."

Kellen laughed again, and there was a mean edge to the sound. “Some promise,” he teased. Then, holding up the hand he held onto, he looked at Derek’s empty fingers and asked, “Where’s the ring?”

“At home.” Each word hurt to speak – it was one thing to think of these things alone in the dark quiet of night when he lay among his memories and ached for his lover’s touch, it seemed surreal to be standing here in a bar with Kellen, sharing these feelings with little or no regard for how they affected him.

Again he tried to wrest free from Kellen, but the older man was much stronger than he, and Derek’s body was tired, his mind defeated. “Kellen, believe me. I took the ring off because I couldn’t...” He sighed. “I just couldn’t bear to look at it any more after I lost him. There – you happy?”

Kellen looked unmoved by the emotions that warred inside Derek. “So you’re going home.” When Derek nodded, he asked, “Where’s your talisman?”

Around Tad’s neck.

But Derek couldn’t admit that – this whole sham would fall away and Kellen would *know* he’d won then. He’d know Derek needed him to rescue Tad, and it wouldn’t just be one quick fuck on the beach but a week’s worth of sexual slavery. Kellen would want his every sadistic whim catered to and pampered, his every desire satisfied as he strung Derek along until he was ready to return to the sea.

“At home,” Derek whispered. The lie slipped from his lips, and he his eyes rose to meet Kellen’s gaze. “Among Tad’s things. I...I put that away, too, after his death. Let me go get it, and I can meet you –”

“Yeah, right.” Kellen’s hand tightened around Derek’s wrist, eliciting a gasp of pain. “No. I’m coming with you. You can think about my offer on the way.”

Taking a step closer, he rubbed his body against Derek’s, and his grin turned into a leer. “It doesn’t have to be the beach,” he purred, nuzzling Derek’s neck. His breath was sour and alcoholic and turned Derek’s stomach. Sex with

Kellen would be downright nauseating. Derek felt bile rise in the back of his throat at just this simple touch. “Your bed would be much softer I imagine.”

His lips covered Derek’s ear with a wet kiss and Derek jerked away, his whole body on fire. Despite his aversion to the merrow, it’d been so damn long since Derek had touched another, felt hands on his body, breath on his skin. In his pants, his traitorous cock throbbed like a beast raging to be set free. His thoughts turned to Tad and he had to choke back a sob. *I’m doing this for you*, he thought. *Whatever Kellen may think, whatever he may hope for, anything I let him do to me means nothing, Tad. I swear it.*

I love no one else but you.

The ride home was silent, awkward. Derek sat pressed against the driver’s side door trying to distance himself from Kellen as much as possible. In the close darkness of Derek’s sedan, Kellen gave off a faint, fishy odor, a ripe smell that reminded Derek of salt marshes at low tide. He had to crack his window a bit, raise his nose toward the fresh air that ruffled his hair, just to breathe. Earlier that evening, if asked what he’d do to get his lover back, Derek wouldn’t have hesitated – anything, he would’ve said. No price was too large. But sitting here beside Kellen, slapping away the hand that kept lighting on his knee, trying not to gag on the merrow’s dank stench, Derek began to wonder just how far he’d be able to force himself to go to save Tad.

If he had his talisman, he might have tried to make a run for it, drive to the beach and slip into the waves, take off before Kellen even knew he was gone. He’d always been the faster swimmer. If he’d had his talisman...

Tad would be here.

True. If he’d worn the necklace when Tad fell overboard, Derek would have jumped in after him. His body would’ve changed the moment he hit the water – scales erupting along his skin, flippers unfurling from his feet. It would’ve been *him* who gave Tad the kiss of breath that would keep him alive

until they broke the surface. Kellen and his bitch would've never entered the picture. The past four months would not have happened; life would've gone on as it had before the accident. There would've been no phone calls from Kellen, no late night rendezvous at Del Fantasma, no imminent sex act hanging over his head. If only ...

"You know," Kellen said, his voice gruff and sudden, startling Derek. The hand that kept straying to Derek's knee tried to find purchase again, but Derek slapped it away. Kellen's other hand cupped the front of his pants, covering his crotch, the fingers massaging his genitals through his jeans. "Once we get together again, you may find you've been missing me all this time. I took a look at your boy's plumbing and I have to say, my pipe's a little bit bigger than his. I hang a bit lower, meatier all around. I bet you come the moment I enter you, I'm that thick."

Derek's hands started to shake so hard, he had to grip the steering wheel with both of them to keep the car steady. "If you touched him, Kellen, in any way, shape, or form, you're dead. You got that? I'll kill you myself."

Kellen laughed. "I just sneaked a peek."

This time his hand didn't settle for Derek's knee but curved over his upper thigh, snaking toward his crotch. Derek twisted in his seat, blocking that hand – if Kellen knew how fucking hard he was, Derek would *never* live it down. His damn dick had a mind of its own.

"Don't be like that," Kellen cajoled. His hand rubbed along Derek's thigh as the other continued to fondle himself. "I didn't do anything to him, I swear."

They drove the rest of the way in strained silence, broken by the sigh of the breeze through Derek's slightly opened window. When he pulled into an empty spot in the parking lot of his apartment complex, Derek yanked the key from the ignition and jumped out of the car. The door slammed behind him, loud in the quiet night. Walking fast, he hurried to his building, not bothering to wait for Kellen. By the time he reached the stairs that led to his door, he heard

footsteps on the sidewalk and knew Kellen followed.

Inside, he flicked on the light, bathing the apartment in a bright white glow. The living room was disheveled, clothing and magazines strewn about. Empty pizza boxes and dirty cups littered the coffee table. Derek swept them into his arms, carried them to the kitchen, and deposited the whole mess into the trashcan. Then he headed down the hall to the linen closet, where he pulled out a threadbare blanket and small accent pillow.

Back in the living room, Kellen stood in front of the wide-screen television, peering at the pictures of Tad framed above it. Without a word to his guest, Derek dumped the blanket and pillow on the floor then grabbed his own pillow from where it lay on one end of the sofa. Since Tad's disappearance he'd taken to sleeping in the living room, unable to face the empty bed in the room they once shared, but he was not about to give the bedroom to Kellen. Oh no. Let the son of a bitch sleep on the couch. Derek would return to the bedroom, and lock the door behind him for good measure. There'd be no strange hands roaming his body tonight.

Derek gathered up his dirty clothing from the floor – he could imagine all too well Kellen jerking off, a pair of unwashed boxers smothering his face – then pointed at the sofa. “You can crash here.”

Turning from the pictures, Kellen frowned at the narrow couch. “I thought we were –”

“Kellen,” Derek sighed, “it's late, almost two in the morning, and I'm dead tired. I'm sorry this didn't turn out to be the booty call you hoped for but you can't just spring shit like this on me and expect me to go with the flow.”

He almost grinned as the confusion on Kellen's face faded, replaced by the first dark embers of smoldering anger. “This isn't part of the deal.”

“There *is* no deal,” Derek reminded him. “Not yet. I said I have to think about it. You didn't trust me enough to let me out of your sight, fine. You get to sleep on the couch by the front door to make sure I don't slip away in the night.”

We'll talk about this in the morning."

With that, he turned on his heel and stormed down the hall to his bedroom. There he locked the door behind him, hot tears burning his eyes and throat, then fell to the mattress that somehow still smelled like Tad.

Chapter Five

Derek woke slowly, drifting up through dreams as if rising to the surface of calm waters. Images of Tad clung to him like seaweed, trying to hold him under, keep him in sleep. He wanted nothing more than to drown in his lover's arms and never wake.

Insidious memories of the night before swam into his consciousness. Wave after wave of disjointed words that echoed through Derek's sleeping mind, keeping him from wallowing in his lover. Kellen, with that damn cowboy hat cocked at a rakish angle, his fierce eyes as pale and faceted as glass worn smooth by the sea. His "deal," as he wanted to call it – Derek hated the way his own body had responded to the thought of sex, even with...with *that*, after such a drought of physical touch. It was like a damn dog, eager to please, tail wagging, tongue out begging for more.

Some men might find nothing untoward in Kellen's proposal. *Good*, Derek mused as he shifted position beneath the covers, *let one of them fuck him*. He remembered no touch other than Tad's, and he wanted no one else to claim him as his lover had.

The merrow he used to be no longer existed – that creature had died when he came ashore. The human he had become knew only one man, and the thought of allowing himself to be violated by Kellen, of feeling those cold fingers on his skin, of lying beneath that scaly body... Derek gave an involuntary

shudder, and hugged the blankets close around his body as he burrowed into their warm depths. No. God no. Never.

But if it'll bring back Tad...

How did he know the merrow had rescued his lover and wasn't just feeding him a line to hook him? In the bar, Derek hadn't doubted Kellen's word – there, in that world of shadows and noise, the fact that Tad might still be alive was so incongruous with their surroundings that it *had* to be true. But now in the quiet morning, in the comfort of his own bed, with his eyes still shut against the early light, the thought didn't seem so compelling. Here he wanted proof, though he hated that he needed it, but he needed something to show him Kellen wasn't lying. It'd be just like that damn merrow to come along after Tad's death and coerce Derek into having sex with him under the pretense of rescuing his lover. Maybe there wasn't a mate waiting for him back at the pod, maybe the soul cages really *were* just songs to sing guppies to sleep. Maybe...

Maybe I dreamed the whole thing, Derek thought.

It was a thin hope. One that hurt less than the knowledge that Tad might still be alive but just beyond his reach. *Maybe I went to the bar, got drunk, and made the whole thing up in some whacked out attempt to make myself feel better. Tad is gone, Kellen doesn't exist, and I was never anything more than what I am right now, half a man lying in a bed I used to share with my other half.*

As if goaded into waking at that thought, he slipped from the bed amid a rustle of sheets. A nagging pain throbbed behind his right eye, the remnants of that horrible drink he'd had at the bar. His stomach roiled like a restless sea, but after a long moment of leaning on his bedside table, the feeling of nausea passed and he found he could stand. Two shuffling steps took him to the door; he twisted the doorknob back and forth a few times until he remembered it was locked. As he unlocked it, his gaze dropped and he caught sight of his bare legs, long and pale, covered with fine tufts of fluffy red-gold hair. Where they met at his crotch, a thin thatch of coppery curls clung to the base of his cock, the ruddy

length still somewhat hard from his dreams of Tad, the tip almost purple in the dim light.

Even if the apartment was empty on the other side of his bedroom door, the last thing he needed was to flash his neighbors by walking naked into the living room. The sheer curtains that hung in the large bay window behind the couch revealed more than they hid.

Turning his back on the door, he gave it a tug and heard the hinges squeal open as he headed back to the bed. There, on the floor, lay the discarded pair of boxers he'd worn the night before. He bent at the waist to retrieve them, his sleepy mind already thinking ahead to when he would step into them—

Warm hands touched the small of his back. With a gasp, Derek stumbled forward, against the bed. The hands slipped down to cradle his ass, rough fingers digging into pliant flesh, kneading his firm buttocks, lifting, separating his cheeks. Derek gasped into the mattress, hands fisting in the sheets as sudden lust shot through him. His knees buckled, gave way. The hands worked at him, massaging him, spreading him wide. Derek closed his eyes against the swirl of raw sensation that flooded his body, one traitorous word slipping from his lips. "Yes."

A wet, soft tongue trailed down the crack between his buttocks. The hands held him open as that tongue licked its way to the center of Derek's being. His toes curled into the rug, his hands gripped the sheets, his breath hitched in his throat, caught by the damp ministrations overwhelming his senses. The tip of that probing tongue rimmed puckered skin that trembled at its touch; it licked below Derek's tight hole to taste his balls, then learned the curve of Derek's cheeks, first one, then the other, until circling back to his quivering center as if drawn by a magnet to his core. Derek hid his face in the sheets and sobbed Tad's name into the mattress—his cock stiffened at the thought of his lover on him again, after all this time. "Tad," he sighed, the word lost in the disheveled sheets, followed by breathless gasps of "God" and "yes" and "please, please,

please."

One hand eased between his legs to grip the erection that now pointed out from his crotch, its tip bumping against the bed with a delicious pain. The mouth on him grew insistent, lips kissing and tongue licking, teeth nipping sensitive skin, moving lower to take his balls into its warm, soft orifice. He heard breath panting over his own, hot and heavy, felt it tickle between his cheeks, the nose rimming him, pleasuring him, as the mouth below it suckled and drooled over his aching sac. The hand on his cock rubbed over his balls then slicked the saliva that coated them up his shaft, along his length, until demanding fingers pinched the plum-shaped head of his dick. Derek bucked beneath those hands, their touch, rubbing into the bed, holding onto the faint scent of his lover's memory as he fought for release. "Yes, *yes*."

Then one slick finger entered him, so swift, so unexpected, that Derek raised his hips up off the bed to drive it into him as far as it would go. The hand on his dick tightened in an almost painful grip and the mouth on his nuts clamped down as if pressing grapes between those tight lips. Derek fucked the bed, rocking back against the finger in his ass, humping as he rubbed the swollen tip of his dick against the mattress, so close to coming.

"Tad," he sighed, over and over again, an image of his lover firm in his mind. Derek recalled the morning of that fated boat ride, when they had laid together in this same bed – the finger in him belonged to Tad, the hand on his cock, Tad's. A series of rapid little sounds escaped him, *uh, uh, uh*, a mindless rhythmic beat that matched the sex in his mind until finally, his cock spasmed and he felt an orgasm rip through him like the tide. *Yes*.

Derek fell to the bed, exhausted. The mouth released him, the finger in him slipped free. Then a warm body stretched out over his – he felt a hard cock ease up between his buttocks, the thick length igniting Derek's desire all over again. He wanted to feel *that* in him, he wanted to sit back against *that*, and he whimpered into the sheets to keep from begging to be fucked. Strong hands

rubbed up his back, over his shoulders, to run through his hair. Every inch of Derek's body shuddered at that touch.

Hot lips kissed his ear. Then Kellen's voice breathed into him, filling him with a revulsion that belied his raging libido. "That one doesn't count," he whispered.

Derek's mouth worked around the words he wanted to say, and he had to clear his throat twice before he found his voice. "Get off."

Those lips curved against his ear into a wicked smile. The hands strummed down his sides, tickling under his arms, over his chest, down his hips. "Don't worry," Kellen told him as he stood. The air felt cool on Derek's heated skin, almost cold. "I will."

Derek buried his head in the sheets, too ashamed to move or cover his nakedness. *Tad*, his mind cried out. More than anything he wished it were Tad behind him. His body ached for his lover's tender touch. Beneath him, the mattress was damp from his own cum and the rush of sex had left him feeling used, soiled, deflated, like a discarded condom. He wondered if Kellen had gone, but couldn't face the man and didn't dare turn around to look.

Then he heard low grunting from behind him, heard the familiar frisking sound of skin on skin, and realized his Kellen was masturbating behind him moments before the first hot drops of jism struck his ass.

How long he stayed like that, face hidden against the bed, Derek didn't know. By the time he rolled over, Kellen was gone. In the kitchen, the clatter of pans suggested that he rooted through the cabinets, looking for something fresh to eat. Self-loathing filled Derek like a disease, making his throbbing head pound in fury, his heart stutter in his chest. Slowly he pushed himself up from the bed, out of his own drying juices then he stood, and in a sudden rage, yanked the sheets from the bed. He heard the fitted sheet rip near the headboard but he didn't care—he pulled it free, a snarl twisting his lips. The *audacity* of Kellen to

take him, here, *here*, where Tad's memory still slept!

This one doesn't count.

Like hell it didn't. Derek felt violated, despite the fact that his body had been a willing participant in the act. He felt *used* and betrayed, here in his own home.

His throat stung as Derek choked back his emotions. He couldn't do this. He couldn't let that...that *man* touch him again. It hurt too much, his body wanting one thing, and his mind another. He felt pulled in two different directions, caught in a vicious undertow that threatened to rip him asunder.

Heavy footsteps in the hall alerted him to Kellen's return. Derek dropped the sheets to the floor and crossed the bedroom to slam the door shut. As he threw the lock, a hand slapped the other side of the wood at the level of his face and he jumped back. "*Dere,*" Kellen called out. Then he rattled the knob. "You up?"

Without a word, Derek turned his back on the door. He needed to clean up, pull himself together. Whatever he'd done with Kellen earlier meant nothing, he told himself. Out loud he repeated it, as if speaking the words gave them weight. "Nothing."

The reverberation of his voice seemed to hang in the air, suspended, so he spoke again. "It was nothing, Tad. I promise you." Returning to the bed, he stooped and began to gather up the dirty sheets. "He caught me off guard, that was all. It meant nothing to me. My body reacted the way it's supposed to, you know? But I swear, my heart wasn't in it."

He paused, waiting for a reply that never came. His heart *couldn't* be in it – the organ that beat in his chest was only so much muscle and sinew, flesh and blood. The true heart of him, his soul and everything he knew himself to be, that beat beneath the sea trapped in Merla's soul cage. Kellen could take him, ravage him, fuck him senseless but no matter how far he thrust into Derek, he'd never find that heart, the one that belonged to Tad. *That* part of him Derek couldn't

even give away if he wanted to because it no longer belonged to him.

With the bed sheets in his arms, Derek went into the bedroom's small bath. There he shoved the sheets into the wastebasket by the toilet, tamping them down into a tight little ball of embarrassed regret, down, down, beating them into submission. They didn't quite fit, and when Derek stood back, the sheets began to expand a bit, forcing their way out the top of the basket like a wild, white blooming flower. Derek stepped into the basket, stepping down on them, then turned to stumble into the bathtub. Within minutes, a rain of hot water showered down on him, reddening his skin and washing away the scum of Kellen's touch.

Derek stood beneath the spray letting it sanitize him, cleanse his body and mind. A small voice inside him whispered, *See? It wasn't so bad, being with Kellen again. The world didn't come to a crashing halt, you didn't spontaneously combust. No lightning bolts struck you down. Just fuck him and get it over with already, get Tad back. Hell, you might even surprise yourself and enjoy it. You weren't exactly telling him no earlier.*

A shake of his head splattered water on the shower curtain. No, he wouldn't enjoy it. He wouldn't *let* himself enjoy it. That would be dishonest to Tad. *That* would be disloyal.

Who was he kidding? Even *looking* at Kellen's naked body was tantamount to betrayal. Touching him, fucking him, that was downright blasphemous. He had pledged himself to one man, to Tad. That meant the world to him – it defined him, made him the man he was. Without Tad in his life, there was little holding him here. How often these past few months had he contemplated throwing himself back to the sea, drowning to be with the one he loved? Even if sex with Kellen would bring Tad back, how would Derek ever live with himself, knowing what he'd done?

Knowing that, on some sick level, he'd gotten off on it?

How could Tad ever trust him again? Hell, how could he trust himself?

Suddenly the water beating down around him burned. Derek turned off the shower and stepped out of the tub, shivering. Grabbing a nearby towel, he rubbed himself dry with hard, rough strokes that left his skin raw and sore. Back in the bedroom, he yanked open the top drawer of his bedside table, its casters rolling as he tugged. Unceremoniously, he dumped the entire contents on the stripped bed then began to rummage through them, searching for the ring Tad had given him in exchange for his necklace. His hands riffled over keys, sea shells, paper clips, pens, unopened condoms, half-used trial size tubes of lubricant, phone numbers scribbled on scraps of paper, receipts, coins, all the detritus of everyday life. An address book held together with a rubber band, a melted tube of lip balm, and an empty bottle of sunscreen.

Amid the clutter was a bundle of love letters from Tad – he'd written them while lying in this bed, scribbling them on pages of his sketch pad and reading them out loud to Derek as they cuddled beneath the sheets. Derek had thought it a cute game and believed Tad thrown away the letters, or kept them with his sketches until they began arriving in the mail. When Derek showed the first one to Tad, the a thin blush that crept into his lover's porcelain cheeks was so damn sexy, Derek didn't even get a chance to open the letter before they were back in the bed making love.

The letters stopped months ago; the last came in the day after Tad disappeared. Derek recalled sitting on the edge of the bed, silent tears coursing down his cheeks as he looked at the address written on the envelope in his lover's familiar scrawl. That letter lay at the bottom of the stack, unopened. A piece of twine held the letters together, and Tad's ring was tied into the knot.

Derek fingered the ring, handsome, golden, beautiful in its simplicity. A small pattern circled it, slightly raised and polished above the matte gold beneath it—a Celtic design, interlocking slanted S-shapes that resembled the ocean's waves. When he touched the gold, he felt a jolt of energy course through his fingers.

Quickly he broke the twine and slipped the band onto the ring finger of his left hand. It slid into place like the missing piece of a puzzle. Derek's skin prickled and his hair stood on end as a shockwave of raw emotion raced through him. *This* was his talisman now – this ring tied his blood to Tad's with a power more ancient than the sea and his people, a force stronger than the ocean's temper or the waves' pounding surge.

The power of love.

Chapter Six

Though merrows were attracted to shiny objects such as trinkets and sunken treasure, anything that sparkled when the sun dappled beneath the waves, they avoided unrefined metals such as pure gold or silver. Such noble metals somehow reacted with the otherworldly quality of their flesh, filling them with an odd energy as old as the Earth itself, making their blood run cold. Touching the metal could blister their skin, and Derek had heard that some soul cages employed gold locks to ensure no one else could steal away the human life already taken.

The first gold Derek ever touched was the ring Tad gave him on their tenth anniversary. He could close his eyes and recall that moment in time with such clarity it was as if he relived it all over again. The two of them in the living room, their nakedness covered by blankets, Derek sitting back against the arm of the couch with Tad stretched out between his legs. His lover leaned against his chest, head tilted to expose the smooth curve of his neck as he looked up at Derek. Their bodies were still warm and damp from making love – Derek held Tad tight, as if unwilling to ever let him go, and the way his lover fit so snugly against him made his heart swell until he thought it just might burst. He felt an unusual desire to do something special, to give Tad something more than just his body or his heart. He wanted to give Tad *everything* that he could without holding anything back, but he didn't know what else to offer the man who

already lay claim to every single part of him.

With a sigh, he'd wrapped his arms around Tad's narrow shoulders and rested his head against his lover's own. Something small shifted across the cleft of his collarbone when he moved. Looking down, Derek saw the talisman he still wore around his neck. The small red shell was battered, but almost luminescent in the shadows created by their bodies. Derek sat back, reaching behind him to untie the cord knotted around his neck.

Tad watched, silent, as Derek draped the cord around Tad's neck and fastened it with an almost reverent air. The shell fell into the hollow of Tad's throat as if it belonged nowhere else. His fingers strayed to touch it, tender, his eyes wide. "I know what this means to you," he whispered.

"It means I'm yours," Derek replied with a kiss on his lover's forehead.

A slow smile spread across Tad's mouth, strengthening as he looked down at the talisman between his fingers. Then, without another word, he leaned forward and reached over the side of the couch. Derek's arm tightened around Tad's waist to keep him close, but after a moment or two of rummaging around out of sight, he sat back, a small box concealed in his hand. "What's that?" Derek wanted to know.

Tad's smile turned shy; his cheeks flushed a bright shade that rivaled the color of Derek's hair. "You don't have to accept it," he mumbled, fiddling with the black velvety box he held. He opened it, snapped it shut before Derek could peek inside, then turned it over in his hands to pick at the small metal hinges on the back. "It's just...this is sort of the way we promise to love each other here. Not like your talisman or anything—it's nothing magical like that—but it's kind of me saying I want..."

He trailed off, unsure. Running a finger along Tad's temple, Derek tucked a stray strand of hair behind his lover's ear and prompted, "What?"

"I want you," Tad whispered. When he looked at Derek, earnest love shone in his eyes like twin stars. "This ring is my talisman to you, Derek. It

means I love you, and I always will.”

Derek held his breath as Tad opened the box. The ring sat on a small, black, satiny pillow, the gold brilliant against its dark setting. Though he was no longer a merrow – and with his talisman in Tad’s possession, he’d never be anything more than human again – he was still tentative about taking the ring. Tad watched him, waiting. He reached out and brushed his finger over the polished metal

He felt a faint *zing* that tickled through him like a tiny electric shock. Then he took the ring from its box; his skin tingled from contact, but it wasn’t unbearable. “Left hand,” Tad instructed as he guided the band onto Derek’s ring finger. “Wear it on this finger. Supposedly the vein runs straight to the heart.”

With the ring snug on his finger, Derek could almost believe he felt the power of the gold pulse through him, echoing the beat of his heart. To show his thanks, he pressed his lips to Tad’s in a hungry kiss.

* * * *

After Tad was gone, the ring provided a constant reminder of what he’d lost. Just looking at the slim band hurt Derek. He would catch a flash of gold from the edge of his vision, in the mirror as he combed his hair or reflected off the window of the car, and a rush of emotions would sideswipe him, threatening to drown him in its wake. It often caught him unawares, and could blacken his mood faster than a summer squall blowing up along the coastline. At one particularly low point, he took the ring off and tied it to Tad’s letters. Though he thought of it often, he resisted the urge to open the drawer.

Months later when he put the ring on again, his reaction to the metal surprised him. Standing by his bed, wearing nothing but a towel with his body still drying from the shower, Derek felt energy coursing through him and fought to pull the ring off again. His skin was damp, his fingers swollen, or hell, maybe

the ring had shrunk with time, he didn't know, but once it was on, it refused to be removed. The gold burned his skin like a band of solid fire sizzling around his finger. Heat radiated from it, warming his hand and racing through his veins – it surged up his arm, through his shoulder, heading for his heart.

He plopped down on the bed to pick through the junk from his drawer and found an old, half-used jar of petroleum jelly. His wet hands refused to grasp the lid. As he struggled to open it, his left arm began to ache from the burning sensation that pulsed up its length, curling into his elbow, punching the muscles in his shoulder with a dull pain beating in time with his heart. He felt flames lick down over his chest and gave up on the jar to tug at the ring again. It hurt, oh God, it hurt as if the gold was eating him alive ...

Then the feeling disappeared.

Derek didn't move, didn't dare *breathe*. He sat on the edge of the bed, every nerve of his body waiting for another onslaught of pain, but faint echoes in his arm were all that remained. There was a heaviness in his chest, a strange density that felt as if the gold had traveled through his skin and blood to fill up his heart. Stupid, he knew, but as he massaged the center of his chest, he couldn't get the troubling sensation to go away. On his left hand, his finger throbbed like a bothersome tooth and when he glanced down at his hand, the band was still tight around his finger, almost *too* tight. An experimental push didn't budge it. The gold seemed to have fused with his body, becoming one with him.

Then he noticed the change in the color of his skin. The hairs on his left arm had burnished, singed darker than the pale coppery hair on his other arm, and the flesh had tanned to an almost golden shade. Derek followed the path that the pain had taken, over his shoulder, down to the center of his chest – his entire arm had darkened, and his chest was marked as well in an uneven pattern, the left side darker than the right. As he watched, the glow spread a few inches in every direction, then a few more as if tanning in the rays of a small, invisible

sun. Where his skin changed, the hairs that grew from it darkened into a deep reddish gold. Warmth spread in the wake of that impromptu tan, raising beads of sweat on Derek's brow and upper lip. With the back of a trembling hand, he brushed them away.

Still the gold continued to spread through him, discoloring his skin, covering him like armor forged by the sun.

By the time he dressed, Derek looked like he had four months earlier, when summer was just getting underway and he had not hidden himself from the rest of the world. Skin once pale now took on a healthy tanned appearance. He almost didn't recognize the strong, lean, sun-kissed legs that stepped into a tight black swimming bikini. When he pulled on jeans to cover those legs, the tan feet poking from beneath the denim looked like they belonged to someone else, not himself. Someone confident. Someone alive. Someone determined to take back what had been stolen from him.

So maybe they *were* his.

He pulled on a battered t-shirt, then took one of Tad's old flannel shirts out of the closet and shrugged it on. Then he sat down on the bed again and untied the twine that bound their letters together. He fastened the piece of string around his neck, giving it enough play so that the bottom of the makeshift necklace hung below the collar of his shirt. At first glance, Kellen might think the twine held Derek's talisman, which would buy him some more time...

Until the shirt comes off, he thought.

He shook that away. He might fool Kellen, but there was still the very real issue of how he'd enter the water to rescue Tad. In his human form, salt water was anathema to him—he couldn't swim, and the moment the water covered his head, he'd drown. It would fill his arms and legs like lead, pulling him to the sea floor. How often had he heard the stories of merrows who dared return to the deep without their talismans? Nothing scared a guppy more than the thought of drowning—it'd be like a human unable to breathe in air. The sea

was their god, their element, their way of life. Those who gave that up willingly were not welcomed home – the ocean was a harsh, cruel mistress, as merrows and humans alike had discovered over time. Those who turned their back to her once found her unwilling to forgive. Whole cities were flooded at times by her rage, entire populations washed out in the wake of her fury.

Derek was not conceited enough to believe he'd fare any better when he returned.

Yes, his body had responded to the gold in an unexpected way, but he refused to hope it would do more than give him the sexy new tan. It was probably an allergic reaction, something brought on by a mix of stress and whatever mystical properties that might still remain in his blood.

The fact of the matter was that despite how much he might hope otherwise, a merrow couldn't just create a new talisman. The object was given to them early on by the sea itself, and nothing could replace it. One merrow couldn't use another's talisman; each was unique, personal, a gift given by the ocean to be treasured and kept. Passing his talisman onto Tad had been more a show of his promise to remain on land than anything else. It wouldn't turn Tad into a merrow, nor give him merrowish abilities. In giving it away, Derek had reduced it from a talisman to a mere token, as non-magical as Tad's ring.

But maybe there *was* a bit of magic in the gold after all, some remnant of Tad's love for him, trapped within the precious metal. Maybe the ring had become a talisman of sorts – not one that could protect him from the water, but a physical object that might help keep him focused on his lover, protect his mind during Kellen's unwelcome tryst, lock his emotions away during the sex, and bring him that much closer to rescuing Tad.

* * * *

Derek found Kellen in the living room, stretched out on the couch, naked.

The length of his uncut dick pointed up from a thick patch of dark blonde hair to lay across his upper thigh; his ankles were crossed at one end of the couch, his arms in a similar position above his head. The television was on but that seemed to be the extent of the merrow's technical knowledge. The channel was set to one of those shopping networks and the woman on the screen was raving about a selection of suede handbags. Still, Kellen stared at the screen, fascinated. For a moment Derek stood unnoticed in the doorway and watched his old friend, remembering a time when he himself had been just as amazed at the flickering images on the TV.

Then he thought of the finger fuck in the bedroom, and how his body had betrayed him with this man, just for a spot of sex. He couldn't allow himself to sympathize with Kellen, no matter how innocent his laughter might sound, or how harmless he might look lying on the couch. *This* man kept Tad from him. *This* man alone stood between them. Whatever friendship they might have shared once no longer existed because of that little fact. Derek wouldn't let himself forget it.

Crossing the room, he snatched up the remote from the coffee table and clicked off the TV. Then he snagged a blanket from the floor and tossed it over Kellen to cover his nakedness. "We wear clothes here," he pointed out.

Kellen glanced back, his smile dissolving at the hard glare in Derek's eyes. "Don't know why," he grumbled, kicking the blanket away from him. "Damn suffocating things."

"Get dressed," Derek replied. When Kellen didn't move, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and let out a loud, exasperated sigh. "Let's get this show on the road."

Kellen started to reply but Derek held up a hand to silence him. "You're no longer calling the shots, Kellen. Much as you'd like to think you are. I know I played right into your hands earlier—"

A smirk crossed Kellen's face; one Derek chose to ignore. "It was a

mistake bringing you here," he admitted. His voice rose dangerously. "But I want Tad back. You can't just keep him like some abused pet. He's mine—"

Derek stopped himself before he started yelling. Taking a deep breath, he ran his thumb over the ring on his finger, earning himself a jolt of energy that fizzled through his hand. It boosted his confidence and gave him the strength to continue. "Here's what we're going to do," he announced. "I need proof. You say you've got Tad, fine. But before I do anything else with you, before I let you do anything to *me*, you need to prove to me he's alive. I won't be fucked over, pardon the pun."

"Proof?" Kellen echoed. "What kind of proof?"

"We'll go down to the shore," Derek told him, "and swim out back to the pod. No sex on the beach, none of that shit. Hell, the place is probably crawling with surfers and sunbathers on a day like today. You can't just plop down in the tide and start screwing. They'll call the cops."

Confusion flickered across Kellen's face. "Cops?"

Derek waved that question away. "You'll take me to Tad. Don't shake your head. Listen. You show me he's there in that soul cage or whatever contraption you've got him in, and I'll do anything you want to get him back. We'll find a secluded spot far away from him so he won't see us and I'll be all yours, I swear it. You'll get your good time. Then you'll let him go. How's that?"

For a long moment Kellen sat, mulling over the offer. Derek held his breath, waiting. His mind could play out the scenario as far as the beach—how he'd manage to step into the waves and follow Kellen to find his lover, or what happened after that, he couldn't foresee. Maybe the beach would be empty despite the hour, and he could change his mind, convince Kellen to bring Tad to shore if he *really* wanted that fuck on land. Then he'd overpower the other merrow somehow, take his lover back, and run away without having to do anything more than their brief tryst earlier. Maybe he could suggest bringing

Tad to shore now. Maybe Kellen would fall for it ...

“You want proof,” Kellen said. When Derek nodded, he laughed and his former smile flashed out. “What, you don’t believe me? Why would I lie to you?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Derek countered.

Kellen nodded. “Okay. I’ll give you *proof*.”

A heavy weight seemed to lift from Derek’s shoulders, freeing him, and he almost smiled back at the merrow as he fought the urge to pump his fist in the air and cry out, *Yes!* He’d just bought himself a little more time.

Kellen’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Did you find your talisman?”

There was a snide undercurrent to his remark that Derek chose to ignore. After a slight hesitation, his hand strayed to his neck, where the twine was tied. “I’ve got it,” he said, defensive, his fingers toying with the collar of his shirt as if fiddling with the shell.

“Good,” Kellen purred. His smile widened, eyes growing cold. There was something wicked in his sure, unblinking gaze that made Derek wonder what the hell he thought he was doing here. Suddenly he was all too aware that he held nothing in his hand but so much twine and empty air.

Chapter Seven

Driving with Kellen beside him in the fading daylight of late afternoon was no less eerie than it had been the night before. Last night the dark and empty streets had helped buffer Derek's emotions, in the glaring sunlight that slanted through his windshield, he found his own convoluted thoughts and feelings so much harder to ignore.

Every now and then he would glance over at his traveling companion, only to catch Kellen staring back at him with a cryptic grin on his face. There was something unsettling about him, about this whole situation. Derek wanted nothing more than to get it over with and get the merrow out of his life for good, but he suspected doing so wouldn't be quite that simple.

Derek rolled down his window all the way, hoping to air out the car's fishy smell. Kellen wore the same clothes he had the night before, though his appearance was disheveled and negligent now – his cowboy hat was pushed back at a sharp angle, the brim no longer hiding his face, his shirt was misbuttoned, and the zipper on his jeans was gaping open. At stoplights when Derek dared to look away from the road, he found Kellen's fingers poking into that open zipper fondling himself or just rearranging his genitals, one of the two. There were no underpants beneath the jeans, and when Kellen extracted his fingers from the hole in the denim, Derek could see dirty blonde curls the color of wet sand puff up through the gap.

Their silence was broken by Kellen's tuneless humming, an annoying, self-satisfied sound accompanied by one hand tapping Kellen's knee. Once or twice he even let out a soft whistle, and the smirk on his face bothered Derek. When they turned onto the road that led to Del Fantasma, Derek gunned the engine as if he could hope to outrun the sound. "Will you stop it?" he snapped.

The smile spread a bit farther. Kellen was enjoying his discomfort. "Stop what?"

Breathing, Derek wanted to reply, but he kept the thought to himself. Instead he concentrated on the road ahead and tried to tune Kellen out.

They passed the bar, closed this early in the afternoon. The neon sign was dark, the windows unlit, the parking lot deserted. In another hour or so, once the sun dipped below the horizon, cars would fill the lot, but now the place looked empty, forlorn, and just seeing it filled Derek with dread. This building was the last remnant of civilization before he reached the sea. Once he past Del Fantasma, he was on his own.

With Kellen.

Derek turned down a side street that was more dirt than road, and slowed the car when he felt the gritty crunch of sand beneath his tires. The road petered out as it ran to the edge of the cliffs overlooking the crashing surf below then it looped away from the cliffs around toward the far end of the peninsula, then started heading down to an old lighthouse and nature preserve before doubling back to Del Fantasma. Beyond the bar was the rest of San Diego. As Derek pulled off the road, he had a brief image of kicking Kellen out the passenger side door then speeding away back to civilization as his old friend tumbled down the side of the cliffs, cursing his name. He'd move past losing Tad all over again if he could just get rid of the damn merrow...

Who was he kidding? He couldn't live knowing Tad was out there, somewhere, without him. Slowing to a stop, he parked the car in front of the metal guardrail that skirted the top of the cliff and turned off the engine. For a

minute the two of them sat there, staring out over the sea. From this height, they couldn't see individual waves or the shore below. The ocean was one unending plain; a deep, brooding color that faded as it stretched to meet the sky on the horizon.

A sense of smallness filled Derek up inside, a feeling of being insignificant, of meaning nothing in the face of this wide, ancient god. Along with that came the familiar, overwhelming urge to leap from the cliff, just spread his arms and plunge into the water, let it claim him, take him back again.

In his veins, his blood seemed to surge with the tide's ebb and flow, and he felt the first stirrings of an erection he often sported when he got too close to the sea. How many times had he and Tad come out here to make love in the back seat of this very car? Or down below in the sand with the sea lapping at their feet like an eager pup? He'd never noticed Del Fantasma before, but when he came here with his lover, his thoughts had been focused on one thing, and one thing only. He had to find that focus again, center himself now. Here he was, alone this time, but still with only one thing in mind.

Tad.

Somewhere below those churning waves his lover was hidden from him. Was Tad asleep, unconscious, unaware of his surroundings, and of what – or who – held him prisoner? Did he know the passage of time? Did he feel each day with the same exquisite pain Derek did without him near?

Derek yanked the car keys from the ignition but he didn't open the door, didn't move to exit the car. Instead he asked, "Tell me more about this soul cage."

His voice seemed to startle Kellen, cutting him off in mid-hum. "Is Tad awake down there?" Derek wanted to know. "Is he cognizant at all? How does he breathe underwater?"

Kellen let out a hearty laugh that made Derek feel stupid for asking questions whose answers he should've already known. "I'm surprised, *Dere*. Of

all merrows, you would be the one I'd expect to know most about soul cages, given their purpose. You always had a weak spot for humans."

"I wanted to join them in their world," Derek pointed out, "not trap them in mine."

"Wouldn't have done you any good anyway," Kellen admitted with a shrug. He picked at the zipper on his jeans with an absent air as if his thoughts were far away from the confines of the car, their conversation. "The cages are just big enough for one. Any human you keep in there would have to be brought out if you planned to mate with it, and how would he breathe underwater? You'd have to settle for jerking off while looking into the cage." Turning toward Derek, he flashed an infuriating grin. "Like I do."

Derek stared at Kellen and could imagine all too well the merrow masturbating while he watched Tad, trapped and helpless. He felt the emotion drain from him, and his voice took on a hard, stony edge to it. "Do you know how much I want to kill you right now?"

Kellen laughed again, clapping one hand on Derek's shoulder as if they were still friends. With a jerk, Derek shrugged it off. "Don't worry," Kellen told him. "Your human is blissfully unaware of me or Merla, or anything else down below. The soul cage keeps him suspended in a state of ignorance. It's like time's stopped for him, forever, until he's freed from the cage. The last thing he'll remember is falling off the back of the boat, maybe hitting the water, maybe seeing me beneath the waves – his eyes went really big at that, I have to admit. You'd think he wouldn't have been so surprised, seeing as how he fucks you."

"He loves me," Derek corrected.

Kellen's disinterested shrug broadcasted his feelings about that. "Whatever. To answer your question, no, he's not awake. He's not *aware*. At best he's alive, if you want to call it that. Merla sits by his cage as she brushes her hair and talks to him like he's paying attention but he can't hear her. She tells me she likes the peaceful expression on his face. She says she wants to lay

beside it, wake to it every morning. We moved the cage closer to the bed so she could watch him as she falls asleep.”

A rush of hatred flooded Derek. He knew the look Kellen was referring to – how many nights had he lain beside Tad in bed and watched those fragile eyelids flicker in sleep? How often had he kissed Tad’s soft, slack cheek, or brushed his mouth across his lover’s pinked lips, or smoothed a stray strand of hair from his brow?

And how many long, lonely nights did he spend alone, his heart aching to see, feel, touch Tad again? He’d hurt her too, this Merla, gouge out her eyes if he could, rip out her hair...anything to keep her from looking at his man with anything approaching lust in her thoughts.

Caught up in his emotions, he didn’t realize Kellen had leaned closer until he felt the merrow’s hand high on his thigh, angling for his crotch. Hot breath fanned his face; Derek turned and found Kellen right up on him, so near that when the merrow licked his lips, Derek thought he could taste the spittle that covered them. He pulled away from the sour breath seconds before the damp mouth pressed to his jaw. “Merla likes him,” Kellen whispered, his words curling beneath the collar of Derek’s denim jacket to burn his neck. “It’s going to take a hell of a lot for me to distract her enough for you to get him back. You’re going to have to make it worth my while...”

The hand closed over Derek’s crotch, giving his semi-hard cock a painful squeeze through his jeans. When he gasped, Kellen’s mouth covered his in a quick, rough kiss. Before Derek could get his arms between them to push Kellen away, the merrow was already gone, opening the car door and stepping out into the brisk sea air. Leaning down through the open door, Kellen grinned at the stunned expression on Derek’s face. His dick throbbed in his pants, and his mouth tingled with Kellen’s kiss. “Well?” the merrow asked with a laugh. “We doing this, or what?”

As the door slammed shut, Derek had to resist the desire to start the car

and gun the engine, knocking Kellen off the cliff and back to the sea. Only one thought calmed his rage enough that he could get out of the car without racing around it to beat the merrow senseless – the thought of holding Tad again, after all this time, of loving him.

Only *that* kept him sane.

A steep, narrow staircase wound down the side of the cliff, steps cut into the very face of the rock itself and slick with sea spray. The thin metal railing that ran the length of the steps gave little comfort as Derek clung to it – the rickety railing shuddered when a hard wind blew in off the waves, and the cold metal chilled his bare hand. He watched his feet as they picked their way down the steps, his sneakers growing wet as he found his footing. Below them, harsh waves struck the rocky shore then dragged back out to sea to throw themselves at the beach again. The air was heavy with salt water; it pressed like a damp cloth to Derek's face, threatening to steal his breath away.

He slipped on a cracked step and his shoulder twisted painfully when he gripped the railing to keep from falling. *This is crazy*, he thought. Not so much the deed as the audacity he had in coming here with Kellen. With Tad it had been one thing – he'd had his talisman then, he'd worn it himself and it kept the sea at bay. But here, without it, he felt like a drowning man scrambling for purchase, dying within sight of shore. Stepping into the ocean, swimming through the water, finding Tad...how would he ever manage to do *that* if he could barely breathe just standing near the incoming tide?

He stumbled again, and this time a strong hand caught his elbow, Kellen's voice whipped around him, strung out by the wind. "Careful there. Don't want to damage the goods."

Derek pulled free from his grip. "Fuck you," he muttered.

It earned him another slap of Kellen's laughter, cackling into the stiff breeze.

The trip down the side of the cliff only took about five minutes, but seemed to last a lifetime. Before they reached the final step Derek had already scanned the beach and saw that they were alone. Though the day had been nice when they left his apartment, this close to the sea, the air turned cold. The sun hovered low above the horizon, its rays stretched out across the ocean like fingers reaching for the beach. A sand-covered plastic bag sat forgotten near the steps was stuffed with a wet beach towel and a pair of bright pink flip-flops stuck out from its opening. As Derek left the stairs, he kicked at a discarded bottle of sunscreen and watched it scuttle away from him over the sand like a crab.

Now what?

Wrapping his arms around his chest to ward off the chill, he turned to crane his neck up at the top of the cliffs. He could just see the grille of his car, up there alone, a solitary sentinel. He and Kellen were quite alone, forgotten by the rest of the world, on this lonely stretch of sand like so much driftwood or debris.

Here the argument he'd presented back at the apartment seemed silly. There was no one here to see them, no one to care if they fornicated in the tide. He thought again of trying to convince Kellen of bringing Tad here to him, but knew the merrow would never fall for it.

As if thinking of the merrow had attracted him, Kellen stepped up behind him and pressed his body against Derek's. His hands rose to knead Derek's tense shoulders then rubbed over his crossed arms to hug Derek back to him. Warm lips kissed his ear. Kellen's sigh filled his world, replacing the sough of the surf and the whistling wind. "Relax," he purred; Derek fought the urge to shudder at the sound of his voice. "Part of our bargain was that you were going to enjoy this."

Derek stepped out of Kellen's embrace, away from the merrow. "I told you, I need proof." His heart started to race, a rapid stutter in his chest when he whirled to face his former friend. "I don't trust you, Kellen. I never have. You

want to have sex here? Fine. But you have to go bring me Tad. Then I'll know he's alive and like I said, I'll do whatever you want to get him back."

"Proof," Kellen spat. His smile seemed to freeze, his eyes hardened. "You just want me to bring him here so you can renege on my offer. No. I'm too close to getting what I want from you, *Dere*. No way am I going to jeopardize that."

"I wouldn't," Derek tried.

He'd always been a horrible liar and Kellen's laugh tore his objections away. That sound was so mocking, so self-assured, so damn *annoying*, it snapped something in Derek. He flung himself at the merrow, fists flailing, hitting Kellen's shoulders and chest and face—anything he could connect with, anything he could hurt. He felt skin give way beneath his bludgeoning, felt hard bone bruise under his hands. Somehow he knocked Kellen's cowboy hat away and the wind carried it a few yards before it was caught by an outcropping of rock. The feather in its brim fluttered, winking at Derek, taunting him.

Surprised, Kellen fell back a step before he managed to catch Derek's wrists in his hands. His eyes were wild, his mouth a dark red gash in his face; even his pale cheeks were flushed with color, and a deep welt on his forehead promised to bruise. "You want proof?" Kellen spat. This time when he did, bright blood struck the sand at their feet. With a shove, he pushed Derek away, releasing him. "I'll give you *proof*."

He dug into the front pocket of his jeans and extracted a familiar black cord. Derek's heart stopped in his chest when he saw it—he staggered back, tripped over the empty bottle of sunscreen and fell to sprawl in the sand. His gaze never left Kellen's hand or the cord that dangled from it. "No," he whispered, one hand flying to his throat to clutch at the twine he'd tied there in a stupid ruse. "You never said—"

"Here's your *proof*." Kellen opened his hand and Derek saw his talisman, the red shell he'd last seen around Tad's neck before the water claimed him.

Chapter Eight

Kellen grinned down at Derek in vicious triumph. “I see that look in your eye,” he said. “I know what you’re thinking. But I’ve got news for you, *Dere*. You gave this away so now it’s no longer yours – it won’t work for you any more than the feather in my cap would.”

Derek couldn’t take his gaze off the talisman nestled in Kellen’s hand. His entire body wanted to lunge for it, take it back, break the fingers holding it prisoner if he could, and claim it once again as his own. *His*. Giving it to Tad had been an unselfish act of love. Seeing it in Kellen’s grip now, imagining the intimate way Kellen had touched his lover to get the necklace off, made Derek seethe with rage. In short, clipped tones, he growled, “Give. It. Back.”

“It’s useless to you now,” Kellen laughed. “You’ve become more human than I thought if you’re naive enough to believe the sea would take you back after you threw away your talisman. After you *gave* it away.”

“I gave it to Tad,” Derek pointed out. “As a symbol of our love –”

Kellen’s voice rose to a high, chirping pitch. “A symbol of our love,” he mocked. “Please, give it up.”

Derek wanted to kick him, knock him flat on his ass and pummel him into the sand, but he stood just out of reach. Any move Derek made to push himself up off the ground would be anticipated and deflected before he even managed to stand. His hands fisted, closing around handfuls of the fine sand beneath him.

He pictured chucking a blast of the sand in Kellen's eyes, blinding him, though the wind would probably whip it away. He was caught. He had no options left. There was nothing he could do except give into Kellen's carnal desires and hope that once the merrow was satiated and had had his fill of Derek's body, he'd be kind enough to retrieve Tad.

It was a long shot, and one Derek couldn't quite bring himself to believe in.

Still, he wasn't finished fighting yet. Tamping down the fear that quivered in his voice, Derek tried, "If the talisman no longer works for me, why can't you give it back?"

"Why do you want it?" Kellen countered.

Derek gave what he hoped was a nonchalant shrug. "Sentimental value —"

"To give back to *him*, I bet." Kellen's sneer told Derek what his old friend thought of *that*. "But he's not here, is he? And right now, you're all mine."

A chill ran down Derek's spine at the smile that accompanied those words. "Kellen..."

The merrow closed the talisman into his fist and squeezed. A pained expression flickered across his face as his grip tightened. "Kell, no," Derek tried — he reached up, fear closing around his heart as if Kellen's fist had grabbed him there, throttling the pulsing organ, willing it to cease its endless beat. "No, you can't! *Stop!*"

A heaviness filled his chest, seizing his heart. With the tips of his fingers, he managed to snag the cord that dangled from Kellen's fist and tugged it free from his grip. But the talisman was no longer fastened to it — a fine red powder sifted through Kellen's relaxing fingers. One or two larger pieces of shell fell to the sand and were lost. "No," Derek breathed.

Around them the wind picked up, stiffening, until it shrieked across the cliffs, wailing and scratching at the rocks like a caged dog. What remained of

Derek's talisman swirled with the breeze, mixing with kicked up sand that scoured Derek's exposed face and hands. A faint ache began in his ring finger on his left hand where Tad's golden band rested. As the wind picked up the ring seemed to shrink, tightening around Derek's skin, as if trying to disappear into it. Fiery pain shot through him – with a cry that was lost in the wind, Derek cradled his hand to his chest, trying to hide it from the world and the wind as if that alone would stop the crippling pain that ate into him.

He held the cord in his right hand. When it touched the gold ring, flames erupted along the length of the necklace. Derek fell back, tried to drop the cord, but it burned so fast that it turned to gray ash in his hands. The ring continued to sear him – his finger throbbed with an ache so acute, he was surprised it wasn't red and pulsating. As the ashes of his necklace fell through his hands, he tried again to pull the ring off his finger, but only managed to hurt himself. Where his fingertips touched the gold, fine white blisters erupted along his skin.

Then, just as suddenly as it had blown up, the wind died down, scattering the remnants of Derek's talisman before it like an offering. The blisters popped, clear ooze slicking Derek's fingertips as the burns faded and healed. The ring flashed once – Derek saw it, like sunlight winking off the gold. He felt a surge of energy ripple through him like the blast wave following on the heels of a nuclear explosion. The pain receded and the glow dissipated, leaving behind a memory of the fiery ache. Derek sat forward, once again cradling his hand close to his body, his mind awirl. His talisman was gone, forever. He was trapped here in this dry, hot world where he'd always wanted to be, but he'd had a way back before. Now he was stuck here with Kellen, and Tad had never seemed so far away.

The sound of a belt unbuckling pulled him from his thoughts. He looked up to see Kellen's hard cock pointed down at him, the flaring tip peeking from its foreskin like an inquisitive blind eye, a translucent bead of cum set like a pearl at its center. As Derek watched, Kellen dropped his jeans to the sand and fisted his

dick, pulling the foreskin back to work himself harder. His balls hung heavy below the thin blonde hair at his crotch. "Come on, *Dere*," he purred, squatting. "We're wasting time."

Bile rose in the back of Derek's throat. "No." He scurried backwards, crab-like, trying to put some much needed distance between them, but Kellen was quick. He reached out and snagged the waistband of Derek's jeans before he could move too far away. Nimble fingers unbuttoned his fly, unzipped his jeans. Derek twisted in the sand, clawing at the ground to pull himself out of reach. His jeans slid down his narrow hips, exposing the tight black swim briefs he wore beneath. Kneeling in the sand at Derek's feet, Kellen pulled the jeans down to Derek's ankles then tried to grab hold of Derek's leg, but his hand closed over nothing but air as Derek hurried away.

The jeans hindered his getaway – Derek's feet tangled up in the thick denim and he fell to the sand, legs kicking as he tried to get free. Derek felt Kellen crawling over him, hands digging into the back of his shirt to pin him into place as he positioned him between his legs. Derek clamped his legs together, one word on his lips cried out into the wind. "No."

A hand slid over the satiny fabric of his briefs to knead his ass. Derek tightened his muscles, but one stubborn finger still dipped between his legs to rub over his sensitive hole. "No," he said, louder this time, bucking beneath Kellen in an effort to shake him off. "Kellen, no!"

"Relax," the merrow said again. Kellen leaned down over him, strong arms holding his weight above Derek's writhing body. "You don't really want to fight me."

But he did, he *did*. When the tip of Kellen's hard cock touched his ass, Derek felt it through his briefs like a jolt of electricity, goading him into action. He tried to crawl from under the merrow, his legs parting to dig into the sand. For the briefest moment, his right knee touched the inside of Kellen's leg...

Bright pain erupted along Derek's leg, but before he could cry out, Kellen

had fallen away, clutching at his own shin. "What the *fuck* are you playing at?" he howled.

Derek took the opportunity to kick off his sneakers and shuck his cumbersome jeans away. When Kellen saw him sit up, he grabbed for him. Kellen's fingers caught in the front of his t-shirt and reeled him in like a prized catch. Kellen's hair fluttered around his face in the wind, his sharp features tied in pain. His voice filled with menace. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I need to see Tad," Derek told him. The hand on his shirt slipped and found purchase in the front of his briefs, clutching at his genitals through the thin fabric. Derek gasped in exquisite pain. "Please, *Kellen*."

Kellen's mouth twisted into a nasty grimace. "If you think I'm swimming all the way out to the *Hellcat* just for your peace of mind," he snapped, "forget it. I'll come back here and you'll be gone."

With a shake of his head, Derek assured him, "No, I..."

He trailed off as Kellen's words sunk in. *The Hellcat*, his mind whispered. The waters around San Diego were rife with shipwrecks, and in the kelp beds off the coast of Point Loma there was even an old World War II F-2 Hellcat navy fighter plane crashed on the sea floor. The merrow elders declared the wrecks off-limits because so many scuba divers visited them, but that had never stopped Dere from flitting around the old abandoned ruins hoping for a run-in with a human while leading Kellen on a wild chase. The Hellcat had been a favorite spot of Dere's when he was younger. He'd even had sex with Kellen there once while he gripped the underside of a barnacled propeller blade, another time when the two of them had stretched out along the remaining rusted wing. There were plenty of rocky reefs along the seabed there full of tunnels and caves, any number of which Kellen and his mate could've called home.

Tad's at the Hellcat.

Now he just had to find a way to get there.

Clambering to his feet, Kellen stripped off his shirt, popping the buttons

in his haste to undress. He grabbed Derek's jacket, twin fistfuls of material at his shoulders and hauled him to his feet. "I want you in the tide line, at least," he commanded, glaring at Derek as if daring him to speak. "It's too damn sandy up here."

When Derek didn't move, Kellen gave him a rough shove. "Go."

Derek dragged his feet through the sand, shuffling down to the water's edge like a condemned man. In his mind he played out a vivid daydream where he somehow got away from Kellen, raced back up the steps to his car, and called the local Coast Guard to help him rescue Tad. Divers would search the wreck of the *Hellcat* and find the soul cage, whatever it might look like. They'd have an extra tank of oxygen so Tad would be able to breathe once they freed him from his prison, and Derek would be waiting on the deck of their ship, watching the churning waters below, waiting for his lover to surface.

Hands eased around his waist, and Kellen's erection prodded the small of Derek's back like a loaded pistol. Beneath their feet the sand had turned dark, damp, but the tide had receded and water no longer swished this far inland. In his ear, Kellen sighed, "Right here."

Derek stopped. He stood still like one dead as Kellen stepped around in front of him. Those hands trailed over his stomach, the touch ticklish through his shirt. When the merrow leaned into him, Derek felt that hard cock rub against his crotch with a sweet ache he told himself he didn't feel. There was no denying the way his body once again began to respond to Kellen's—his own erection throbbed as if trying to beat its way from the confines of his briefs and the muscles in his ass clenched in anticipation of entry.

No, he told himself as Kellen eased the jacket off his arms to fall at their feet. His thumb touched Tad's gold ring, and he closed his eyes when Kellen leaned against him, setting his head on Derek's shoulder, stroking his chest. His touch burned through the thin T-shirt Derek wore. *No*.

Then Kellen stepped back, caught the hem of Derek's shirt, and pulled it

up over his head. Derek raised his arms so he could take it off but Kellen stopped halfway and held the shirt over his head, pinning his arms up out of reach.

Blinded by his shirt, Derek shivered when he felt hot breath on his mouth, his chin, his neck. A wet tongue licked out to taste one nipple and a buzz ran through Derek's body, sizzling, like a mild electric shock. He heard Kellen gasp as if he too had felt the sensation, and when the tongue tasted his other nipple, the same brief buzz shot through him, energizing his blood, invigorating his already stiffening dick.

"Kellen," Derek protested.

His old friend laughed. "That's something else," he joked.

Releasing his shirt, Kellen wrapped his arms around Derek's waist and grabbed at his round ass as he rubbed his cock against the front of Derek's briefs. Derek struggled to get the shirt off as Kellen ground into him, nibbling and teasing his nipples. Each touch jolted him with an unpleasant shock that roiled through him until even his hair seemed to stand on end. He pulled off the shirt, tossed it aside, and tried to step back from Kellen, only to have the merrow hook his thumbs into the waistband of his briefs. The next move Derek made to distance them resulted in his swim briefs being tugged down. Of its own accord, his dick swung up to meet Kellen, already weeping from their earlier contact.

The grin on Kellen's face turned into a devilish leer. "Kellen," Derek tried, hoping to buy himself some more time before he had to betray Tad yet again, "please. I want —"

"I don't care what you want." Kellen sank to the wet sand, mouth open, tongue licking out to taste the tip of Derek's dick.

The briefs rolled down to Derek's knees, the fabric twisting in an uncomfortable tangle. Derek tugged at them in an effort to pull them up, cover his nakedness. He glanced around, hoping someone somewhere would see them and they'd have to stop.

Kellen's tongue touched the underside of Derek's cock-head and pain shot through him so acute that he swooned from it. "God," he gasped, taking a step back. The briefs snared his legs and he fell to the ground, hands clutching at his crotch. *God. An ache that had nothing to do with the need of sexual release burned through him, a pain so hot, so real, that Kellen might have crushed a lit cigarette onto the bulbous tip of his dick instead of just his tongue. He rolled away, gasping for air, God. Oh God, oh Jesus. That hurts, that hurts, that fucking hurts.*

If Derek were in pain, Kellen must have felt it, too. But the merrow ignored it and grabbed for Derek's briefs with one hand, the other angling between Derek's legs to poke at his trembling anus. Where Kellen's skin brushed his more pain erupted, and this time Kellen cried out as well.

From the corner of his vision Derek saw the ring on his hand glowing with a golden light that seemed to envelop him, deepening the color of his skin yet again. A strange thought flittered through him, *I'm the gold now. It's in me.*

Somehow when his talisman had broken, the gold must have absorbed some of its magic because now Kellen, with his merrish blood, couldn't seem to touch him.

Ignoring the pain that wracked his body, Derek crawled out of his briefs, away from Kellen. As the merrow writhed in agony, cursing his name, Derek wondered just how much of the talisman's power now resided in his ring. A few yards away, low waves topped with white foam crashed to shore, the ceaseless surf a roar in his ears. Derek's mind whirled – could something in the gold somehow help him get to Tad?

He had to do it. He had to at least *try*.

Scrambling to his feet, Derek left Kellen behind and threw himself into the rushing tide.

Chapter Nine

When the first low wave washed over his ankles, Derek flinched, expecting more pain shooting through him. Instead he felt a warmth spread up his legs, so unexpected, so at odds with the cold water that swirled around his feet, that he stumbled and fell into the tide. Spray splashed his chest and throat and mouth; he licked briny water from his lips, the savory taste as heady as the first sweet drop of drink to a former alcoholic. Without thinking, he plunged his head into the water, let the waves crest over him, buried himself in the rush that struck the shore.

For the first time since Kellen had come back into his life, he relaxed – letting go of the sandy bank beneath him, he let the water flow around him, pulling him along with it back out to sea.

A few yards from the shore, he broke through the water and gasped in the twilight. His throat felt parched and his mouth worked around air he could no longer breathe. The hands that flew to pat at his neck were webbed, and their flat, suction-like tips skimmed over gills slit into the sides of his throat. Ducking back into the water, Derek felt the water rush over his gills, wetting his throat and filling his lungs with salt water that flowed like nectar through him. Underwater, he opened his eyes and found the once-familiar world of his youth faceted before him in cool shades of blue and green. His heart swelled with sudden love for a place he'd never believed he had missed.

Mananan, it was good to be home.

Derek dove in a circle, trying to look at every spot on his body at once. The fins were back on his arms and legs, and his feet unfurled into flat, leaf-like flippers. Iridescent scales covered him, but instead of the greenish shade they used to be, they now sparkled like burnished gold, winking in the fading sunlight that pierced through the water, turning his every move into a flash of light.

Then a pulse shot through him like sonar. No pain this time, but the beat stemmed from the ring on his finger. As Derek held it up before him, he saw it pulse again, felt it roll over him as it traveled through the water, rippling the undersea world.

This time, it ricocheted back to him with a warning. *Kellen*.

Plunging down toward the seabed, Derek pushed into the water. It flowed around him, parting as he swam and closing behind him in his wake. His arms and legs recalled the strokes that pulled him along. Much as he'd like to dawdle, swoop down among the fronds and grasses on the sea floor, dance among the fishes, the pulse on his ring sounded again and this time came back faster than before. Derek knew that must've meant Kellen had entered the water, and was even now swimming after him.

Derek pushed past the nostalgic urge to linger and hurried out to sea. The ring's pulse grew stronger, more frequent, as if it weren't a gold band but a homing device targeting what Derek sought.

Targeting Tad.

Several miles offshore, the kelp forest began.

Tall dark leaves of kelp swam before Derek like a primordial wood, swaying in the currents and obscuring all visibility. The kelp grew in thick masses, from thin roots covering the sea floor and anchored by air-filled bladders, to broad leaves that reached up to the surface of the water where they

created a canopy that hid the flourishing world beneath the waves. Many creatures called the forests home, including the merrows, who used the kelp beds as cover from the humans who dove or boated close to shore. It would be easy to get lost among the kelp, Derek knew from experience, and it'd been years since he'd visited last...

But as he approached the forest, he saw an old barnacled rock that he remembered from his childhood. How many times had he raced through these strands of kelp, Kellen at his heels, the two of them laughing like water sprites, hands stretched out to be the first to touch that rock? In the map of his mind, that rock was a cornerstone, the starting point to a maze that ended at the *Hellcat* and Tad. Derek swam over to the craggy stone and ran a hand over its rough, scarred surface, as if touching it was the beginning of his quest.

Then he pushed away from the rock and parted the kelp closest to him.

The ring's next pulse reverberated back to him quicker than it had before. As Derek turned to glance over his shoulder, he felt a firm hand close around his leg just above his flipper. Derek's mind clouded over in pain sparked by that single touch, and the sea around him grew dark, menacing. His consciousness threatened to slip away. Thrashing through the kelp, he pulled free from the grip and cried out, "Kellen!"

"Got you," the merrow teased. He swam before Derek like an apparition, hair floating around his face in a golden swirl. Every inch of him was bigger than Derek remembered, from his large palm-shaped hands to the strong legs that parted through the water with a mindless ease, keeping him afloat. The human form had fallen from him and left a frightening sea creature in its place. His chest puffed out in indignation, tapering to a narrow waist and thin hips that framed a jutting erection he didn't even bother trying to hide. Raking his gaze over Derek's transformation, he growled, "I don't know how you managed it, Dere."

Derek didn't want to admit that he had no real clue, either. All he knew

was that somehow Tad's ring had fused with him, making his body impossible for Kellen to touch, and brought back his own merrowish abilities. As Kellen advanced, Derek ducked among the kelp, trying to keep his distance. His arms came up between them, as if he could ward Kellen off – as if he *had* to now. "You can't touch me," he called out. "If it hurts me so much, I know it must be killing you."

Kellen laughed. With a sudden surge, he closed the water between them to push against Derek's raised hands. Where his palms touched Kellen's chest, they burned with a deep ache and he had to pull them back. "I can withstand this pain," Kellen promised.

To prove his point, he reached out, encircled Derek's waist with his arms, and hugged him close. A veil of darkness descended over Derek as bright pain crippled his body. He murmured the merrow's name, "Kellen," but found it impossible to say or do anything else.

Through clenched teeth, Kellen muttered, "*This* is nothing compared to what I felt when you left me. If I have to live through this to have you again, I swear I will."

"Please," Derek sighed.

His eyes slipped shut and he felt his body go limp in Kellen's embrace. Pain spasmed through him, burning like fire across his muscles. Kellen might be able to live through it but Derek wasn't quite so sure he'd be able to himself. It took all the strength he had to hold on, mind tense while his body relaxed, waiting for a moment's doubt, a single hesitation.

With one arm around Derek's waist, Kellen trailed the other up Derek's chest, stroking its way over the sensitive scales of his underbelly. Together they drifted to the sea floor, the kelp rising above them like trees to block out the sunlight above. The tension in Kellen's arm eased a bit, and Derek felt a faint, almost tender kiss on his throat, seconds before his feet brushed over the ground.

Without warning, he pushed against the seabed. In a cloud of fine sand,

he shot through Kellen's hands and up among the fronds of the kelp, legs kicking hard as he hurried away. His instincts took over, guiding him through the kelp as he dodged this way and that, a zigzag pattern through the water, his direction changing with each pulse from his ring.

Kellen's voice followed after him. "We've played this game before, Dere," he called out with a laugh. "Remember, when we were kids? I used to love it when you made me chase you. Got me *all* worked up."

"I'm not playing with you any more," Derek announced. He felt fingers brush over his left leg and dodged right, swimming through a narrowly arched reef formation before twisting away again. When he came close to anything – the ground beneath him, the rocks nearby, a dense thicket of kale – he pushed off against the object, giving himself added momentum to outrace Kellen.

Still, the merrow kept up with him, despite Derek's attempts to shake him. Perhaps he'd grown lax these past ten years. Already muscles ached in his legs and arms with a deep, primal burn that had nothing to do with the ring or Kellen's touch. His body remembered the motions, but he didn't quite have the same speed he once had in the water. Already he felt himself slowing down, and Kellen's hands scraped along the scales on his lower legs, then his thighs, as he overtook him. When they closed around his waist again, capturing him, Kellen pulled Derek back to him; a searing pain rippled across Derek's shoulders and ass, and that thick erection pushed between his buttocks, spreading his legs.

"No." Derek whirled in Kellen's embrace, pulling away.

With a laugh, Kellen reached out and caught Derek's own hard cock in one tight fist. The pain of his touch mingled with a bolt of pleasure that soared through Derek – his legs kicked out, his arms spun back, his whole body felt torn in half between the two warring emotions. Derek's body pleaded for more – that hand working him to orgasm, those fingers once again jammed tight in his ass – but his mind railed out, following the rapid pulse of the ring, seeking Tad.

"No," he said again, as Kellen reeled him in. "No," when those hands

held him close, and his cock throbbed in sweet agony against Kellen's soft belly. "No," as Kellen's hands angled Derek's face angled towards the merrow's for a suffocating kiss.

Kellen ignored him. With a slight grin that looked half-crazed with pain in the flickering undersea light, he licked out and ran his tongue around Derek's chin. "Oh yes," he purred.

In a fit of desperation, Derek cried out, "*Gorchymyn i sefyll!*"

It was an old phrase, in the ancient language, one his mother had used to quiet him as a baby. *I command you to stop*. When he'd grown older and asked what the words meant, they made him laugh. *I command you*, so demanding. At that age, the thought of anyone commanding him to do anything had been humorous.

But the words acted like a spell on Kellen. The instant the words were free, the merrow froze. Kellen's grip relaxed, allowing him to drift away – as he did, he noticed Kellen didn't move to follow him. In fact, he didn't move at all. His eyes had glazed over, and his mouth stayed puckered for a kiss, his arms tense as if he still held Derek within their span.

Derek turned and swam a few feet away. When he glanced over his shoulder, what he saw stopped him dead in the water.

Kellen's position had not changed. His muscles stood out rigid along his arms and legs, his eyes unblinking, his mouth still pursed. The only thing about him that moved was his hair in the current. "Kellen?" Derek called out.

No response.

Derek noticed that Kellen seemed to be sinking. The merrow seemed unable to move or swim or...or *anything*. After a moment, when he was sure Kellen wasn't faking, Derek dared to swim closer, within reach. Those large hands didn't move, and those wide, sightless eyes didn't turn his way. *I command you to stop*. Was there magic in the old tongue, too?

Without stopping to think about it, Derek grabbed Kellen's arm and

tugged. He expected some resistance, but the limb moved easily for him – he was able to bring it around behind the merrow’s back with little effort. He did the same with the other arm then used a strand of kelp to tie them together. More strands of the leafy green plant secured Kellen’s ankles, and for added measure, Derek roped several thick fronds around Kellen’s chest, tying him back against the swaying kelp. When he swam clear, he saw Kellen bound to the kelp, face frozen in that same, stupid expression. “Stay,” Derek said then laughed at his own joke.

Light flickered across Kellen’s open eyes, spooking Derek. He’d lost enough time as it was. *Tad*, he reminded himself. Turning tail on the merrow, he sped off into the kelp forest, once again following the ring’s pulse.

For the next half-hour or so, Derek swam through the kelp forest. His pace slowed as he struggled to find his way through the maze of tall, flowing plants. Above him, the kelp closed over his head in a canopy that blocked out the last rays of the dying sun. Though his eyes were accustomed to the dismal darkness below the water, he still found it hard to see through the thick growths that blocked his path.

Twice he veered off course, and once the swish of water behind him forced him to whirl around. Derek was sure that Kellen had freed himself from the kelp and the spell, and was right on his tail, but it’d only been a small shark gliding through the kelp in search of food. Derek kicked away from it.

Just as he was beginning to doubt his own memory, he pushed through a stubborn patch of kelp and saw the *Hellcat* resting on the sea floor ahead.

The old airplane had cracked in half when it hit the ocean. The fuselage looked as if it had been pulled apart by the gravitational forces upon landing and had been strewn across the bottom of the sea. The tail end lay on its side a good dozen feet from the cockpit. Between the two, a variety of sea plants had sprouted over the years. The plane’s nose assembly lay facedown on the ground

before the cockpit with the propellers now more rust than metal. One wing had sheared off during its crash landing, sinking into the sand and disappearing from view. The other wing was intact, raised a bit off the ground and crusted in barnacles, creating an overhang beneath which rockfish swam in droves.

As Derek swam closer, he could see wooden slats beneath the raised wing, similar to the types of cages used to trap lobster. Peering beneath the wing Derek saw the soul cage. About four feet in length, the cage was made of sturdy wood, long, splintery slats bent to form a curved dome shape. The front of the cage sported a wooden door locked with a gold clasp. In a rush of excitement, Derek surged forward, rounding the wing to duck down and press his face against the wood. There were few spaces between the slats. Kellen must've been lying about that bitch of his watching Tad sleep, and about masturbating over Derek's lover. The words were just to rile him up. He should've *known* better...

He found a loose knot and worked it free then leaned against the cage to look inside. The band on his finger no longer pulsed; it rang out with a clear, high note, triumphant. "Tad?" he whispered.

He thought he heard soft breath and his heart quickened in his chest.

Claws scraped over his scalp, pulling him back by his hair. In his ear, a woman giggled. "Silly little guppy," she teased, her voice's sugary tones belaying the cruel undercurrent of her words. "That human's mine."

Chapter Ten

Derek could see at a glance why Kellen had chosen Merla for his mate. Her thin face was gaunt but beautiful with high cheekbones that could cut glass and a flawless, pale complexion. Narrow and long, her face seemed to draw down to a point at her chin. Just above it, lips reddened with crushed coral twisted into a vicious grin that made Kellen's nastiest sneer look tame by comparison. Black hair floated in tendrils around her face like ink spilt in the water. In its thick mass, Derek caught a glimpse of a red comb holding the hair out of her dark, fathomless eyes. Her talisman.

With a hard yank, she pulled him away from the *Hellcat*. As he drifted back, she let go of his hair and swam around in front of him, planting herself between him and the soul cage. Derek wasn't even sure if that was it—he hadn't seen anything inside, and the breath he'd heard could've been anything really—air escaping the knothole, or one of the kelp bladders letting out a sigh.

When he tried to dodge around her, Merla shoved him back. Pain blossomed where her shoulders touched his. "Go away," she growled. Her leg dashed out, catching Derek in the thigh. "I told you, he's mine."

"So he *is* in there?" Derek asked. "I didn't see anything..."

He tried diving around her for another glimpse but earned himself her elbow in the small of his back for his troubles. The sharp blow made him crumple to the sea floor, arms wrapped around his waist as his gills flared, the

breath knocked from him.

“*You* wouldn’t be able to,” Merla snapped. She kicked Derek again, pushing him a safe distance away from the wing and the treasure hidden beneath it. “Soul cages are a female magic. Didn’t your mam teach you anything? Only *I* can see into it. Kellen put that human in there for *me*. That makes him mine.”

Derek had forgotten the possessive nature of the merrow. He’d learned to curb that part of himself in the years he’d spent in human form. To a merrow, anything found was instantly claimed and never returned. In Merla’s mind she had Tad now, so he belonged to her.

In desperation, Derek rushed the merrow. Keeping low to the ground, he swam at her fast, tackling her legs and knocking her back over the top of the plane’s wing. She slid across the rusted metal, scales scraping over barnacles and deteriorating paint as she cleared a swathe across the wing. Her hands grappled with Derek, but he swam away before her nails could find purchase in his flesh. “He was mine first,” he told her, ducking down beneath the wing to grab at the golden latch. “I want him back.”

Claws like daggers pierced his back, digging through scaly flesh and raising puffs of dark blood that dispersed like spore in the water. Derek cried out, twisting away from the merrow who closed in on him. With a swift fury, she backed him into the *Hellcat*, teeth gnashing as she bit at his arms and face, legs swishing around his own, hands beating at him, nails raking over his skin. Derek raised his arms over his head to protect himself. Merla snarled and scratched at his forearms, teeth closing around one wrist. “Stop!” he tried.

Her rage increased. Like a dervish, she whirled around him, striking him, hitting him, beating him into the sandy ground. Derek could barely draw in breath to speak, let alone try to defend himself. The water around them was thick with the scent of his blood. Merla pounded at him, fighting in a frenzy that reminded him of sharks attacking prey. “Stop it,” he tried again, grabbing at her

hair to pull her off. He caught her talisman in his hands, but a whip of her neck caused the comb slipped from his hand and float to the sand. "Merla!" he cried. She paid him no heed. "*Mananan, woman, please.*"

Nothing stopped her. "He's *mine*," she snarled, and her teeth sank into Derek's shoulder. "Mine!" Her legs twined through his, gripping him so tight, his shins threatened to snap. "*Mine!*" Derek felt those claw-like fingers tear at his chest and stomach, reaching lower, as if to break off his dick at the root. He pulled himself into a tight ball, blocking his sensitive underside from her furious tirade, and scuttled like a hermit crab away from the *Hellcat* and its protective banshee.

A few yards away from the plane, the blows stopped raining down on him. Every inch of his body ached, and the sea around him took on a purplish tinge from the dozens of small cuts that bled on his arms and back. After a moment's respite when the bitch didn't resume her attack, he dared to turn around. Merla swam in front of the wing, guarding the soul cage beneath it, her tails swishing with an angry pace, her hair spread out like oil in the water. She glared at Derek as if taunting him to come closer. When he tried, she came at him like a lamprey, hissing and spitting to scare him away.

He shrank back, the ancient words rising to his lips again. "*Gorchymyn i sefyll!*"

Merla just laughed.

Derek swam a few yards away, distancing himself, as confusion clouded his mind. Those words had stopped Kellen in mid-attack, freezing him in place, but had no effect on Merla. Were they not imbued with the gold that flowed through him now? Why would they work on one but not the other?

As if reading his mind, Merla gave a short, derisive snort designed to make him feel stupid. It worked. "Who the hell do you think you are?" she asked, her voice haughty and cold. "Don't you know that only the one who holds my heart can command my body?"

Tears of frustration pricked Derek's eyes. Tad was so *close* and yet still so far away. "My heart lies in there," he said, pointing to the soul cage in the hopes of reasoning with her.

Merla bristled with anger but didn't renew her attack.

"Please. I need him back."

"No." Merla turned, flipping her tails at him in disdain. "And if you come any closer, I'll tear you apart and leave you for the sharks. You're not getting him."

As Derek watched her swim circles around the *Hellcat's* wing, he thought of Kellen still bound in the kelp. *Not without help.*

Derek hurried back through the kelp bed, frantic. He'd been *so close*. When he'd heard Tad's slight breath through the soul cage, it seemed as if the past four months had disappeared. His heart, once a dead organ in his chest, began to beat again, and his thoughts whirled out in a wild blur that made him want to laugh out loud for the first time in weeks. A smile pulled at his lips no matter how he tried to tamp it down. Tad, alive. Within reach, even. All he had to do was convince Kellen to help him rescue his lover —

Kellen.

When Derek caught a glimpse of his old friend among the strands of kelp, he slowed his headlong swim and stopped just out of sight behind a large clump of fronds. Kellen wanted only one thing from him, Derek knew. He'd give that and so much more for another chance with Tad. As much as he loathed to have sex with Kellen, to touch him intimately, to be touched by him, if it brought his lover back, then what did Derek have to lose? It was nothing he hadn't done before. Living without Tad was worse than any momentary indignation he might have to suffer at Kellen's hands.

Taking a deep breath to center himself, Derek parted the strands of kelp and closed the distance between them.

The fight had gone out of Kellen's body. His muscles were no longer tense or taut, and his pale eyes glared through his limp hair. Derek approached with caution, heart hammering in his chest, pounding in his crotch. He wished for some covering, however thin, to hide his budding erection from Kellen's baleful gaze.

The thought of Tad turned him on, true, but he'd be fooling himself if he wasn't aroused at the prospect of a good, hard fuck in general. Since a young gup, Derek had been a pleasure slut, seeking release through sexual experience. With Kellen at first, with his own hand or anything he could rub against, then with Tad.

Making love was a daily occurrence in Derek's life with Tad, and four months without another's touch, another's body in his, seemed like an eternity. That had been the reason he couldn't push Kellen away earlier. If it had to be Kellen now, then at least Derek would get Tad back in the bargain.

At least I'll get off, a part of him whispered. Derek quashed that voice quick, but not before it tugged his cock erect.

Swimming closer, he called out, tentative, "Kellen?"

His old friend turned from Derek's words. "Come back to gloat?"

On its own, one of Derek's hands reached out to brush the hair from Kellen's eyes. "I'm sorry," Derek tried.

The apology seemed so inadequate. With a snort, Kellen asked, "For what?"

For tying you up, Derek wanted to say, but right on the heels of that thought, another took its place and he found himself opening to Kellen in a way he'd never cared to before. *If it gets me Tad...* In a whisper, he admitted, "For not feeling the same way about you as you do for me."

Kellen grunted and turned away. Derek touched his cheek, flinching at the pain in his fingertips, and swam into Kellen's line of vision. The merrow's eyes were downcast, refusing to meet his. Derek ducked lower, hoping to see

that pale gaze turn toward him. Softly he stroked Kellen's cheek, the touch of their flesh was electric, heating the water around them. "That command," he murmured. "I didn't know –"

"What?" Kellen spat. He struggled against the kelp that held him tight. "That it'd work so well? Got what you wanted, didn't you? Got away."

But Derek shook his head. He moved closer until his body pressed against the kelp that bound Kellen's chest. "I didn't know it only worked on someone who loved me."

Kellen turned away, disgust on his face, but not before Derek saw a flash of something bright and painful in his eyes. "Kellen, please. I swear, I never meant to hurt you."

"Leave me alone." Kellen's teeth snapped at Derek's hand but closed over empty water. He struggled again with his bonds, his legs kicking Derek's thighs as he tried to move away. "I don't want to hear your apologies, Dere. I don't want your *sympathy*. You *left* me –"

"I know," Derek agreed, cradling Kellen's face in his hands.

Kellen wrested free. "I kept waiting for you to come back." He bit at Derek's fingers when they found his face again. "Get your hands off me. I thought we had something between us but I was wrong. All I wanted was for you to love me."

"I know," Derek said again. His hands brushed over Kellen's cheeks, skimmed through the strands of his hair. He stroked the tender gill slits on Kellen's neck then trailed one hand over the broad expanse of his chest. Watching the patterns his fingers traced in Kellen's scales, Derek murmured, "I'm so sorry I never felt the same way. All I ever wanted was to leave the ocean behind. I know you can't understand that, but I was just meant to be someone else. I'm so sorry it wasn't someone that was in love with you."

Beneath his gentle touch, the muscles in Kellen's jaw clenched, unwilling to give. A heartfelt plea crept into Derek's voice. "I need your help, Kellen. I

need..." He raised his gaze to meet the merrow's for the first time and the pain he felt inside over losing Tad was mirrored in Kellen's sea-green eyes. "I need you."

Before Kellen could respond, Derek placed a hand on the back of the merrow's head and pulled him down, toward him. Derek leaned into the hard body, one arm around Kellen's neck, the other around his shoulders, clinging to him as he raised his face towards Kellen's. A gasp escaped Kellen, barely audible. Derek licked it away, then ran his tongue over the merrow's thin lips.

A charge shot through him, from his mouth down through his body to coil at his dick. He went from half-aroused to rock solid in the time it took for his lips to close over Kellen's. Rubbing his cock against Kellen, Derek moaned into him as he kissed the merrow for the first time, *really* kissed him, in the loving way Tad had taught him. It started with a glance of his tongue over Kellen's teeth then he delved into the warm darkness of the merrow's mouth. He licked slowly along the front of Kellen's teeth, just inside his lip then dove in farther, demanding more. The hand on the back of Kellen's head held him steady as Derek licked into him, pouring everything he had into this one hungry moment.

All the love he felt for Tad, all the emotions swirling inside of him, all the regret and remorse he felt over Kellen, the desperation and loneliness of the past few months, everything went into that one breathless kiss.

After a slight hesitation, Kellen began to kiss him back. Derek's tongue massaged Kellen's, tasting the merrow's salty cheeks, relearning the curve of his mouth. Derek's flesh recalled the press of this body against his, and he moved against Kellen with a sudden, ardent desire. *I should have loved you*, Derek thought as he opened himself up to Kellen. But such a life would have never made him happy, and his discontent would have stifled them both.

Their kiss deepened. Behind Kellen's back, Derek's hands worked at the strands of kelp, untying the knots he'd fastened himself not a half hour earlier.

When he loosened the bonds around Kellen's chest, the merrow flexed and broke through the kelp. His arms came up around Derek's waist to hold him close and he pinned Derek's tongue to the roof of his mouth, stroking it with his own tongue, savoring it, suckling it, making love to him with his lips alone.

Together they floated to the sea floor, Derek pinned beneath Kellen's weight. His whole body trembled in the merrow's arms, and his legs parted to wrap around Kellen's waist, fastening them together. When he felt a hard shaft prod between his buttocks, his grip on Kellen grew tighter. He hugged his friend to him, eager to feel that thick erection pierce him once more.

"Please," he gasped, the words kissed from his lips. His mind had turned off, his body taking over. Every nerve begged for release, every synapse overloaded, every hair on edge. He wanted, *needed*, this. "Kellen. God, please."

Derek felt the sandy bottom of the ocean against his back and Kellen above him, poised to enter him, when the merrow froze a second time. Derek almost sobbed in desire. "Please," he breathed.

Kellen's lips brushed his ear. "Listen to me if you want him back," he said, his voice low and terse.

There was a sadness in those words, a direct contrast to the clasp of his hands and the cock that throbbed beneath Derek's ass. Derek's body tensed, waiting for a penetration that never came. Instead, Kellen nuzzled Derek's ear and sighed, his breath filling Derek up inside like dry, lonely wind. "Give me ten minutes," Kellen told him. Before Derek could question him, he hurried on. "Then follow. Swim straight for the soul cage, do you hear me? Don't linger, don't look around, don't stop for anything you might see or hear. Got that?"

Derek nodded. "Yes."

Kellen's steady gaze met Derek's. This close, he could count every blonde hair in the merrow's arched brows, every pore on his thin nose, every scale on his broad forehead. When he reached up to run a hand through Kellen's floating hair, his old friend's eyes closed, savoring the touch. Something akin to pain

flashed across his face and was gone. "Go straight to the cage," he whispered, "open it. Take your human and go as fast as you can back to the surface. Back to *your* world. Understand?"

"Yes," Derek said, more sure this time. "But aren't we going to—"

Kellen silenced him with one last, soulful kiss that pressed Derek back to the sand. Pleasure shot through him, warming his blood, igniting his libido, pounding in his cock before spiraling down his legs to curl the wispy fins that extended from his twin tails.

For a moment he felt Kellen swell against him and he clenched his sphincter, trying to draw him in. *Please*, he wanted to cry. His body *ached* for this merrow holding him ...

Then, without another word, Kellen's arms loosened and he was gone.

Chapter Eleven

Derek lay on the bottom of the ocean, a chilly current flowing over him where moments ago, warm flesh had pressed to his. The water cooled the fire that burned within him, turning his desire to so much damp ash that churned in him like regret. He'd been willing to give Kellen what he wanted to get Tad back, but after all this time, the merrow's longing hadn't been for Derek's body, it'd been for his love. "I should have loved you," he whispered into the silence of the kelp bed.

The faint current washed his words out to sea.

Derek counted two full minutes as he willed his erection away. His body buffeted by the cool water lost its lustful yearning soon enough. His erection wilted, his dick sinking between his legs like a burrowing animal going to ground, and the tremors of pain that had wracked his muscles while Kellen held him dissolved into phantom aches like remnants of a bad dream.

As if it came from a vast distance away, the ring began to pulse again—or maybe it had been doing that all along, and Derek only now realized it. Either way, its signal spurred him into action. In a swirl of sand he pushed off the sea floor and swam in a frenzy among the kelp using the green fronds to brush Kellen's touch from his body.

I didn't mean it, Tad, he thought, rubbing at his arms and legs, trying to make himself clean for his lover, trying to make himself *new*. In his mind, he

spoke to Tad as if he were there beside him, his dark eyes hard and judgmental as if he'd seen Derek lying with Kellen moments before. *I should have loved him, yes, but the simple fact of the matter is that I don't. I never have. I never could. I love you.*

Amid the flurry of movement he'd started, Derek dashed from the thicket of kelp leaving the green strands to dance in his wake. By the time he reached the *Hellcat* ten minutes would have passed giving Kellen enough time to confine his bitch of a bride so Derek could free Tad. With a swish of his tails he pushed off a nearby rock formation and darted back to the wreck.

Heeding Kellen's words, Derek swam straight for the *Hellcat* without bothering to slow down or assess the situation. His eyes darted from side to side trying to see everything at once, but he seemed to be alone. The only evidence that remained of Merla's earlier tirade was her red comb lying forgotten in the sand. Derek swam over the ground low enough to brush against the comb as he passed, but she didn't swoop down on him scratching and biting again. He dared to snag the comb in one hand capturing it. Again, nothing.

He was quite alone.

He slowed, wary, and let the comb fall back to the sea floor. No shrieking banshee came howling out from the cockpit. He turned, but she wasn't swimming up behind him either. She was no where to be seen. Derek dared swim closer to the *Hellcat's* wing anticipating the scratch of claw-like nails down his back at any moment, but they never came.

In a soft whisper Derek called out, "Kellen?"

His old friend was also missing. Fear seized Derek's heart. What if this was some cruel joke? If, just when he'd been willing to give himself to Kellen, the merrow saw an opportunity for further exploitation and left taking Tad and Merla with him to haunt Derek again at a later date? Derek shot across the debris field ducking under the plane's wing, arms outstretched. "No," he

whispered, as his hands closed over nothing but empty water. “No—”

Then his fingers brushed against solid wood. With a sigh of relief Derek sank to the sand as he patted the soul cage to prove to himself it was still there. Skirting it he found the knothole he’d opened before. He pressed his ear against the opening as he held his breath, hoping, praying, *waiting* to hear...

A faint sigh barely there, but *God*, it was a heavenly sound that flooded him with a tidal wave of emotions leaving him weak with relief, with love. Placing his lips against the hole he murmured, “Tad, I’m here. I’m going to take you home.”

Somewhere behind him he heard a girlish giggle that turned his blood to ice. *Merla*.

He whirled around but he was still alone. Her voice came from the other side of the plane’s wreckage. Another giggle then “Oh, Kelly. Oh yes, *yes*. Right there. Mmm yes.”

A deeper laugh rumbled over hers, a sound Derek would recognize anywhere. *Kellen*. The merrow’s words came back to him, *Don’t linger, don’t look around...*

But Merla’s breathless gasp made him curious. Silently he glided to the Hellcat then raised his head over the rusted metal rim that lined the cockpit. He saw nothing but the inside of the plane—the cloth seat had long since deteriorated, eaten away by bacteria and passing fish, leaving behind just a skeletal frame where the pilot once sat. Crawling into the cockpit, Derek stretched across the seat keeping down out of sight, then peered over the far side of the plane.

There on the sand, Merla lay pinned in the same position Derek had been not long before with Kellen stretched above her. One of her hands tugged at a short tuft of sea grass, the other dug deep scratches into Kellen’s back. Her legs were wrapped around Kellen’s waist just as Derek’s had been, ankles crossed, fins curling and unfurling at the sensations he knew must be flowing through

her body. Kellen's head was buried between her small, pert breasts, the same tongue that had kissed Derek so tenderly now licking around one of Merla's nipples. He caught the enflamed bud between his teeth and elicited another breathless giggle from her. She arched beneath him, hair billowing around them like dark storm clouds. "Yes," she cried, "yes!"

Don't stop for anything you might see or hear.

The words resurfaced in Derek's mind. He heard Kellen's voice and started, sure the merrow was speaking out loud addressing him, sure that he'd been seen. But the merrish lovers were locked in their passionate embrace, and when Derek saw Kellen's buttocks clench, gearing up to thrust into Merla, he didn't want to see any more. As he exited the plane he caught a fin on the buckle of the pilot's harness. The straps had corroded away and the metal buckle clattered to the floor of the cockpit. Derek froze—sure he'd been heard ...

But the cry that came from the couple below was only Merla's lusty shout as Kellen entered her. It rose to a fever pitch then shattered into a series of short, fast pants. *Uh, uh, uh*, punctuated now and then by, "Please," and "Kelly," and "YES!" Her gasps and Kellen's hoarse grunts made Derek's cock tingle with renewed interest, and his thoughts turned to his own lover.

Tad.

Pushing away from the Hellcat, Derek dove beneath the plane's wing and touched the soul cage. He had to work quickly. Would she somehow know when the soul cage was opened? How long would Kellen be able to distract her? With a grin Derek wondered, *How long does a good fuck last?*

His hands found the gold clasp that kept the cage shut. Though the metal should have deterred the merrow in him, Derek pressed his left hand to the door without incident. When Tad's ring touched the lock the clasp sprang open on its own. Yanking the door aside, Derek reached into the darkness of the cage. The air inside whooshed out as water flooded in, but he felt long strands of dry hair, ears and a nose and a chin, then a solid, warm body beneath his touch. Working

blindly, Derek fumbled his hands into Tad's armpits then swam back, freeing his lover from his prison.

When Tad's shoes cleared the door of the soul cage, Derek swam over his lover and almost fainted from the sudden desire that roared through him. Skin he never thought he'd feel again warmed beneath his fingers, and familiar dark eyes blinked open seeking his.

For one heart-stopping moment the two men stared at each other, human and merrow, connected by something as insubstantial – and as indestructible – as love. "Tad," Derek sighed. Within him every ounce of his being crowed in triumph, mirroring Merla's throes of lust that she shrieked into the sea.

Then those bright eyes squinted shut against the briny water. Those chapped pink lips parted in a gasp. Fear flickered over Tad's flawless features as he breathed in and his lungs filled with water. Derek pulled him close, aching to hold this man again, arms cradling him as he covered Tad's mouth with his own. Drawing water in through his gills, Derek blew life-giving air into his lover. The kiss of breath; worlds more intimate than the kiss he'd given Kellen earlier, than any kiss he'd ever bestowed before in his life, upon anyone. Again and again he breathed for his lover. He felt Tad's body relax, and arms he had never dared believe he would feel once more in this lifetime hugged him close.

Holding Tad tightly, breathing for them both, Derek headed back to land.

Once they cleared the breakers, Derek let the waves wash them ashore. On the beach he dragged Tad up past the tide line and rolled him onto his back, lying beside his lover as he tried to catch his breath. The gills along his neck gaped once, twice, trying to suck in air as water, then closed up, allowing his lungs to fill with heavy, salt-laced air. Above, a sliver of the moon winked down at them through scuttling clouds that raced across the deep night sky. The waves that crashed around Derek's legs were capped with silver foam that rinsed the scales from his skin. His fins faded into his legs and arms, his flippers

tightened, retreating into toes that dug through the wet sand. The next breeze that blew over his shoulders chilled him, despite the change in his blood that raised his body temperature to a standard 98.6 degrees.

He was human again.

His head rested on Tad's shoulder, his left hand clenched in his lover's wet shirt. In the moonlight the ring on his finger flashed once and a mild shock ran through him then the gold dulled and his skin paled again, the pain faded. Its magic was spent. He knew it would never allow him to return to the water as a merrow. He was stuck in this form, on this land, forever.

With Tad beside him, Derek could ask for nothing more.

Next to him, his lover began to cough. Crawling over Tad, Derek stroked his damp cheeks, brushed the wet hair from his face, peered at eyes that were still shut tight against the night. "Tad?" He huffed into Tad's face, trying to warm him with his breath, but the body under his began to shiver. "Tad? Don't do this to me. Come on, baby, say something. I'm not ready to lose you all over again."

Another cough, this time bringing up a rush of water, and those eyes flew open. Wild and dark, they calmed the moment Tad recognized him. "Dere—"

A fit of coughing cut him off. Derek helped him sit and pounded a hand flat against Tad's back to help clear his lungs. "It's all right now," he murmured, rubbing that hand over Tad's wet jacket. The breeze that licked along his own nude body reminded him that Tad needed to get out of those clothes, and now. While Derek's merrish blood made him impervious to the cold, Tad wasn't quite as fortunate, and the chills that wracked his body frightened Derek. Working the jacket off Tad's shoulders, Derek cooed, "Let's warm you up a bit. You doing okay?"

"Fine," Tad coughed. "What time is it? Where's the boat?"

What boat? Derek wanted to ask, but this wasn't the time. The wind had picked up a few knots and Tad's shivering was getting worse. With Derek's

help, Tad shrugged out of his jacket then pulled off his shirt, tossing it aside. It landed near a pile of clothing – what Derek had worn earlier, Kellen’s clothes mixed in with his. Derek snagged the closest piece of fabric, which turned out to be the flannel shirt of Tad’s he’d put on for some protection against the sea air. “Here,” he said, draping it over Tad’s shoulders. “Put this on. Let me get that.”

Tad had been unbuckling his belt. Derek took over, unbuttoning his jeans and pulling the zipper down out of the way. As his hands moved over the damp briefs beneath the jeans, he found a slight stiffness he knew he could tease fully erect. Though he knew he shouldn’t, not right this moment, not *now*, his body still hummed with unspent desire and the mere fact that Tad was here, beside him after all this time, made the ache at his groin impossible to ignore.

At his gentle touch, Tad moaned into the flannel shirt he’d pulled close around his chest. The sound only encouraged Derek. Without a word, he eased Tad back to the sand. His lover raised his hips off the ground letting Derek pull his jeans down, his briefs following suit.

The cool air caressed wet skin, piquing Tad’s interest. Derek encircled his lover’s thick cock with one hand, cupped his shriveled balls with the other, and massaged both until the blood flowed through them again. Bending over Tad’s genitals, Derek rubbed his lover’s cockhead over his cheeks, his lips, his chin. He kissed it, blew on it gently, warmed it with his mouth and breath. Then he moved lower, rubbing its length against his face, nuzzling into the drying hair that curled at the base of the shaft, blew on Tad’s balls as he worked them in his hand.

It’d been too damn long, and he hadn’t dared to hope he’d find himself in this position again, loving this man. *Thank you for this*, he prayed as he worshipped Tad’s growing erection. *And this*. Derek took the swollen tip into his mouth, tiny beads of pre-come sizzling over his taste buds, riling his senses. *And this*, as he kissed the tender skin between Tad’s cock and his balls, then lifted the soft sac out of the way to kiss the trembling flesh below them as well.

A strong hand entwined in his hair, massaged his scalp then tugged at his ear. "Derek," Tad sighed.

His name in that voice...how many nights had Derek dreamed of the sound? Stretching over Tad once more, Derek covered his lover's body with his own and kissed his name away from those pinked lips. Tad's hands gripped Derek's thighs, settling him onto his hips, spreading him wide. With another kiss, Derek let his lover guide him down, until the bulbous head of his dick pressed between Derek's buttocks. For the second time that evening, his muscles tightened in anticipation, trying to draw his lover into him.

This time he succeeded. Tad pushed into him with a tight fullness that made Derek come immediately, his dick spasming between them. He had forgotten how it felt to fuck immediately after changing from merrow to human. His body's own lubrication negated the need for anything more. The easy glide of skin into his rectum, until Tad's knobby tip bumped his prostate, made Derek writhe in delight. A triumphant cry tore from his throat to pierce the night. He pressed Tad to the sand, covering him with his body and hungry, ardent kisses to keep him warm and shelter him from the wind. Together they found a fast, furious rhythm that worked them both to orgasm time and again.

Around them the waves bowed down, washing their legs and feet, reveling in their union.

THE END



Undertow Drink Recipe

Ingredients

1/2 shot [Blue Curacao](#)

1/2 shot [Raspberry Schnapps](#)

Directions

Pour schnapps, then curacao into the glass. Do not mix.

We hope you enjoyed *Del Fantasma: Undertow* by J.M. Snyder. Aspen Mountain Press is excited to present a series of romances set in the paranormal bar of *Del Fantasma*.

Keep informed of other Aspen Mountain Press releases by joining our newsletter, available at www.AspenMountainPress.com, or one of our yahoo loops at:

www.AMP_Community@yahoogroups.com our chat group or www.AMP_Mountaineer@yahoogroups.com a group where you'll receive announcements only approximately once a week.

Just in case you missed it, our first release of this series was: *Del Fantasma: Texas Tea* by Maura Anderson, followed by Sharon Maria Bidwell's *Del Fantasma: Slow Fuzzy Screw*. Read on for an excerpt of *Texas Tea*.

Del Fantasma: Texas Tea

Lara took a few moments to just enjoy the brief peace. The scent of the nearby ocean carried strongly in the mist and, audible even over the noise of nearby traffic, she could hear the rhythmic pulse of the distant waves. "The heartbeat of the earth," as an eloquent ghost once told her.

Finally ready to meet the amusing and helpful Cody Warren in person, she moved to shut the car door then froze at the prickle of awareness that flowed over her skin. The eerie sensation was followed by whispered words that were as much felt as heard. *Get your keys first or you'll be here a long time.*

Sure enough, the key with the rental agency's tag attached sat on the passenger seat next to the printout of Cody's instructions of how to get from her B&B to Del Fantasma. "Damn it."

She shimmied across the driver's seat to grab the key and picked up her purse from the floorboards as well. It's no wonder she was so forgetful, she was so tired she could barely think at all, "Thanks."

Could they hear her? Never quite sure, she always thanked the ghosts anyway. It seemed like the polite thing to do, even if they didn't acknowledge

her speaking to them. She'd certainly never found any believable handbook to tell her proper ghost etiquette, so making it up as she went was the best she could do.

The parking lot of the tidy adobe building was nearly empty with only two cars other than her rental. Cody's chatty emails indicated the bar was doing quite well and was packed most nights, so they must not have opened for business yet today.

Near the entrance another sign was posted with the business hours that confirmed her guess. The bar didn't open for an hour yet. About to retreat to her car to wait, one of the doors swung open and a large male figure appeared in the doorway.

"Lara?"

His voice almost mesmerized her. Combine the deep, gravely rumble with the muscular body in the black t-shirt and dark pants and she'd have drooled if she'd been any normal woman. Even the slight scruffiness of his dark hair was attractive. But it didn't do any good to drool over something you couldn't have. She'd finally learned that lesson at great expense.

With a mental shake, Lara reminded herself of why she was here. To meet Cody's friend, someone who could both guide her around the Old Point Loma Lighthouse and perhaps allow her a little additional access to areas that weren't normally open to visitors. She was here to finish her book, that's all. Taking refuge in businesslike formality, Lara extended her hand to the imposing man. "Hi, you must be Cody."

He took hold of her hand and gave it a strong shake. "Good afternoon."

Her eyes widened at the tingle up her spine. Despite his warm, calloused skin, despite his firm grip, Cody was something other than human. He wasn't a ghost either, but something in between. Something with the eerie otherworldly feel of a spirit, but intermingled with a sensation she could only think of as

earthy, primal, almost predatory. She'd never encountered anything like it before, anything like him before.

"Ummm... I let my agent know I was on my way here." Lara hoped her voice didn't betray her sudden uncertainty.

Cody gave her hand another small squeeze before he released it. "Don't look so worried, Lara. I'm no threat to you."

There wasn't any reason to think he was, not really. Although they'd met online, he'd only offered to introduce her to his Park Ranger friend. It wasn't like he was asking her for a date or anything. She gulped and pushed away the niggling fear, then allowed herself to be tugged through the door and into the brightly lit room. Half the chairs were still upended on top of the tables and racks of shiny glasses were set out on the bar surface. An assortment of liquor bottles stood in front of the shelves. Obviously, she'd interrupted the preparations before opening for the evening.

She felt Cody close behind her and spun around, ready to apologize and offer to return later but when she met his gorgeous blue eyes, the words seemed trapped in her throat. For just an instant she was unable to look away or even to move. The slow smile Cody gave her broke the strange paralysis and she struggled in vain to remember just what she'd been about to say.

He gestured toward a table near the bar. "Have a seat. Texas should be here soon. Would you like something to drink while you wait?" A slow wink gave him a rakish air. "Anything you want, on the house."

Confused by what she sensed in Cody as well as her own reactions, she sat and, without thinking, asked for her favorite comfort drink. "May I have some hot tea, please?"

Damn. He probably didn't keep hot tea in the bar. It didn't tend to be a popular evening drink. But he'd said anything she wanted, after all. She challenged him with a steady gaze, her sense of control returning a bit as she waited for him to admit he didn't have her drink.

Instead, Cody just gave her another unsettling smile and pulled a brand new box of Oolong tea from a shelf she could barely see the edge of. At her nod, he disappeared into the doorway behind the bar, tea in hand.

Not only did he have hot tea, but he had her favorite kind? This was just too weird and she should certainly be immune to weird by now.

Neither the situation nor Cody seemed dangerous, at least not to her. The ghosts usually warned her of threats. It was one of the useful side effects of her affinity with them. Too bad their presence also scared off every sane person she spent any time with until she no longer even tried to get close to anyone. Being alone by choice was easier than the inevitable rejection when the ghosts decided to frighten them away from her.

The sounds of clanking and voices from the doorway Cody had disappeared through drew Lara's attention back to the here and now. The decor wasn't really what she'd expected—from the name of the bar, she'd almost expected a *Dias De Los Muertos* theme of bright colors, skulls and maybe some skeletons but, instead, it tended toward a modern mission style with a lot of wood and earth-toned Southwestern touches. A warm and cozy bar for such an unusual name.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a hint of movement and whipped her head around to follow it. She caught just the briefest glimpse of what looked like a dog before it disappeared down the hallway marked "Private". A dog in a food establishment?

Poised halfway out of her chair, she tried to see if she could spot the animal again. Cody suddenly chuckled directly behind her and she leapt sideways. Trying to not fall on her face, Lara teetered, arms flailing in a desperate attempt to regain her balance.

A hard yank from Cody and she was in her chair again, sprawled with legs spread and heart pounding so hard she thought she would pass out. "You

scared me.” Her voice sounded breathless and trembling, adrenaline already doing a number on her system.

He had the nerve to laugh at her and she forgot her fear, forgot that he wasn’t just a human, even forgot that he was nearly a foot taller and much heavier than she was. Her lifelong hatred of being laughed at made her temper flare. Too exhausted to moderate her impulsive reactions, when he set her mug of tea on the table and his arm was within reach, she lashed out and slugged it. Hard.

The force of the impact screamed up her arm. The man must be made of stone. He merely laughed harder while she cradled her now throbbing hand to her chest and glared. A small part of her was appalled at her loss of control over her temper and actions but she successfully ignored it.

“You sure you don’t want to act as her tour guide, Code?” The husky baritone voice, sultry, overlaid with a sexy drawl, preceded the man who sauntered from the hall.

Oh. My. God. Attractive as Cody was, this man was stunning. Shorter than her host, he was just as muscular but more compact. Her fingers longed to explore the texture of the glossy black hair he wore cut military-short. His face was tanned and clean-shaven with a tantalizing square jaw and high cheekbones she’d bet spoke of more than a touch of Native American mixed with his obvious Latino ancestry.

Every movement was silent and graceful, nearly soundless, even in his jeans and cowboy boots. The sinuous sway of his hips as he walked reminded her of the calculating, smooth motions of a wild animal, a predator.

And his eyes, his eyes were a bright gold she’d never seen before, framed by thick black lashes that only served to make them more piercing. They were an almost inhuman color, one that would be more at home in the face of an animal.

“Texas, this is Lara Saunders. Lara, this is my friend Matthew Martinez. He’s the Park Ranger I told you about.”

J.M. Snyder

Lara continued to gape at the newcomer, oblivious to the hand he held out to her until he forcibly picked up her own from the table to shake it.

Even his touch felt wild and untamed. And it carried the unmistakable touch of the spirit world as well.

* * * *

Del Fantasma: Texas Tea

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