

Dark Waters

Selkie Tales
of Romance

by

Jeanie Johnson

& Jayha Leigh

Shara Azod

RaeLynn Blue

Aliyah Burke



Red Rose TM Publishing

Dark Waters Anthology
by Shara Azod, RaeLynn Blue, Aliyah Burke

Red Rose Publishing

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Dark Waters Anthology
by Shara Azod, RaeLynn Blue, Aliyah Burke

Dark Waters Anthology:

Selkie Tales of Erotic Romance

"Overboard" by Shara Azod

"A Love Reborn" by RaeLynn Blue

"Faith's Tears" by Aliyah Burke

"Sealed With a Fist" by Jeanie Johnson and Jahya Leigh

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resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dark Waters Anthology by Various Authors

Overboard" by Shara Azod

"A Love Reborn" by RaeLynn Blue

"Faith's Tears" by Aliyah Burke

"Sealed With a Fist" by Jeanie Johnson and Jahya Leigh

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Introduction:

Selkie stories are shifter stories of those who shift from seal to man and back again. Although Shara and I have written other shifter paranormal stories, those myths surrounding selkies was unique and seemed to call to us.

These stories originated near Scotland, Orkneyjar area where the sea played an integral part in humans' everyday life. This anthology is a celebration of those mythical stories of seals whose peaceful nature seemed a bit out of place amongst a foreign and often unforgiving sea.

The six authors' vision of selkies and their tales are presented in erotic, romantic and interracial fashion for your reading pleasure. However, please note that these stories are not based upon any specific myths per se, but rather expand on the notion of selkie shaper shifters in general. Though some aspects of each story draws from ancient selkie lore and mythology, they do not recreate or reinvent those stories.

We invite you to explore selkie mythology further. These websites will be a wonderful initial starting place.

www.orkneyjar.com/folklore/selkiefolk/

members.tripod.com/theselkie/selkiehistory.html

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selkie

Good luck and enjoy. We do hope you find the tales delightful, sensual and romantic.

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Enjoy!

RaeLynn Blue and Shara Azod

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Overboard

By

Shara Azod

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Chapter One

On a Cruise Ship in the Atlantic Ocean

Dallas knew something was up. She sat at the table surrounded by vacation goers of the worst sort. Pretentious at best, this people in their silks and furs were the types her Uncle Mitch would have called onions—all translucent layers and no core. Their chirping chatter held no interest to her. She was far more concerned with what her uncle's widow and her child were planning. She watched Mae and her daughter, Belle surreptitiously from the corner of her eyes. She was flanked by the two women as if they were afraid she would escape from their greedy little clutches.

Going on this cruise so soon after Uncle Mitch's death had been a mistake. Dallas knew Mae and Belle were more than a little upset he had left his entire fortune to her, while they were to receive a monthly stipend that was far less than they had spent in a week when Uncle Mitch had been alive. What Dallas had not counted on was they would be so upset they would try to get rid of her.

By pure chance, she saw Belle pour some kind of clear liquid into her wine, wine Mae had insisted she try. Dallas wasn't much of a drinker. She damned sure wasn't about to drink when Belle and Mae were her only companions.

Instead causing a scene and demanding Belle show everyone the vial and tell her what was in it, Dallas decided to play along. She held her glass to her lips intermittently without ingesting a drop. She wasn't sure exactly what the

mysterious liquid was supposed to do to her, so she simply followed Mae's lead.

The older woman pretended to be deep into a conversation revolving around some fashion designer's latest collection, but Dallas noticed she seemed to pay an awful lot of attention to her. First were the expectant glances, then questions as to whether or not she was feeling all right.

Dallas played along, pretending to be a little dizzy and slightly disoriented. Nothing could have been further from the truth. She was focused on the woman she called "aunt" out of respect for her uncle, but never when he was not around and never out of respect—Dallas had no respect for the money grubbing selfish bitch.

While Uncle Mitch was being eaten inside out by cancer, Mae and Belle were nowhere to be found. They never let his horrible disease get in the way of their social calendar or incessant spending sprees.

The only thing either woman cared about was money and their own comfort. It had been Dallas who had sat with her uncle, watching him wither away from the robust man he had once been. He had been the only family she had ever known, now he was gone. There was no way in hell she was going to let all he had built up over his lifetime fall into the hands of these women.

"You look tired, dear," Mae gushed, her skeletal hands making the flesh on Dallas' arms crawl as she attempted was supposed to be a caring gesture.

Dallas didn't have to fake the look of severe nausea.

"I think I will go back to my cabin and lie down," she effected what she hoped was a feeble voice as she carefully climbed to her feet.

"Oh! We will go with you," Mae twittered, her unnaturally high voice grating on Dallas' last nerve. "Belle, come help me with your cousin."

Belle was NOT her damn cousin. She was Mae's daughter, but she had never been Uncle Mitch's child. He had adopted her when he married Mae and tried to be a father to her, but Belle was her mother's daughter through and through. She had no desire to be close to Uncle Mitch. She only wanted what he could do for her.

Just as soon as she got out of the dining room, she was going to confront these fake gold diggers. She was going to get them out of her life for good, unless they wanted to go to prison for attempted—whatever they were attempting. She could easily overpower Mae. The woman was all of one hundred pound soaking wet. Belle was another story. Though Belle was naturally big boned, she was weak with no real muscle definition. She shouldn't be a problem either.

Dallas leaned a little bit too heavily on Belle, thoroughly enjoying the other woman's labored puffing as she exited the dining room and made their way down the dimly lit passageway. She was just about to announce her pretense when her heel snagged on the carpeting, twisting her ankle and sending her sprawling toward the floor. Dallas tried to adjust her weight, pivoting her body a little too much in the opposite direction, causing her head to slam against the corner of the bulkhead.

Spots danced in front of her eyes despite the fact her lids were closed. The world seemed to careen on its axis. She tried to pull herself up to her knees, but there was an invisible ton of bricks forcing her to stay down.

"How much of that stuff did you give her?" she vaguely heard Mae hiss.

"I gave her the whole vial." That markedly low nasal whine was unquestionably Belle's.

Dallas wanted to snap at both women she was not so stupid as to drink what Belle had so clumsily dumped into her wine glass. Wanted to, but she couldn't seem to open her mouth.

She heard a sharp *smack* followed by Mae fuming, "She is supposed to drown you dumb twit! What if there is a toxicology report?"

There was a whimper followed by silence. Mae was thinking, not a good sign.

"Well, we will just have to change plans. We will dump her overboard as planned, but we won't call out for help. We will just return to the dining room like nothing happened. Sometime tomorrow afternoon we will report her missing."

No! Dallas tried to scream, she tried to move her limbs to fight off the grasping hands dragging her toward the open deck, but nothing was working right. Her eyes refused to open, her mouth remained firmly shut in spite of her best efforts. She was helpless as she was drug across the cold deck, helpless as the two out of shape women struggled to prop her against the rail, and helpless as she was shoved over.

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Chapter Two

In the Atlantic

Thane floated on his back, enjoying the feel of the sun kissing his pelt with its golden rays. Life was good. His belly was full, the sun had finally come out to play and there was a very gorgeous human floating by hanging on to a piece of driftwood...

Wait, human? Was a human doing floating around in the middle of Atlantic Ocean? There was no land within miles of here. Diving underneath the calm surface of the deep blue-green water, he swam over to where the little human hung on to her piece of wood.

"What are you doing?" he asked, bobbing his head out of the water directly in her line of vision.

The human took one look at him and screamed, her tenuous grip sliding from her makeshift life raft as her body slid under the water. That could not be good. As far as Thane knew, humans still couldn't breathe under water. That's when he remembered, he was still in seal form. His question had come out as such.

"Oops."

Diving back under the surface, Thane shifted his upper body to human form so he could grab her. As long as he kept physical contact, she should be able to breathe without any complication. Being magical had perks like that.

"What to do, what to do?"

He could drop her and let the sharks have her. Humans were trouble, problems his kind didn't need. Not that there were many of his kind left. Looking down at the creature in his arms, Thane was at first curious, then quickly became entranced.

Never had he seen a human with such dark mysterious skin. It was like onyx mixed with gold and copper. How fascinating. Its lips were full, like little kissable pillows, shaded a deep rose. He wondered what it would be like to taste such lips. He had heard tales of kissing humans. Some claimed there was immense joy to be found beneath the sheets with these creatures. Although female selkies were a dying breed, Thane had never been tempted. Women held very little interest for him. He enjoyed his solitude.

The more he looked at her, the more Thane felt the stirring of something peculiar. He had never felt like this before. The thought of letting this little human become food for the simple headed sharks became increasingly abhorrent. No, the primitive creatures would not be tasting his newly discovered juicy morsel. This one was all his.

"I suppose I have no choice but to keep her."

For now anyway.

With a heavy sigh, Thane began the long swim toward land with his cargo. Taking her to the mainland was out. Times had changed, humans no longer believed in the people of the Otherworld. Some still lived among the ungrateful cretins, some shifter types and the like. There were even rumors not all the berserkers of the North had died out, but no one had seen one of the animal warriors in centuries.

Most of the Fae, minor gods and goddesses, pixies, and brownies had retreated into a plane of their own making. There were still enchanted isles surrounding Scotland. Some of the less social druids maintained the place for solitude when they became tired of the pretense of living among the ignorant.

Humans thought themselves to be so smart. None ever imagined the fantastic world that lived right in front of their eyes. No human eye, no metal launched into the sky, no navigation equipment could detect lands warded by those of the Otherworld. It wasn't the only such enchanted isle, but he did not feel comfortable leaving the waters he knew so well to search out one. He would take her there.

The trip took longer than it should have. Thane could not seem to stop himself from stopping ever so often to check his human's breathing and to just stare. He noticed a nasty gash on her head. He had to take time to heal it, but not so much so she regained consciousness. It was so much easier when she was not awake to fight or scream.

She really was beautiful. The most beautiful being he had ever seen. Mermaids with their bright exotic coloring and lush bodies didn't have a thing on her. She was wearing some kind of fancy dress, a type of which he had never seen before. The almost sheer, wet fabric clung to the curves of her body, leaving very little to his imagination. Did all females have breasts so full that stood out so high?

Her nipples were long and tight. Thane felt his mouth begin to water as he examined them through the light lilac color of the gown. He could just make out the darker circle at

the peak of the round globes, with those delightful pointers, thrusting up at him. Even though the water this far north was frigid, he felt his entire body heat to dangerous levels. The seal pelt that encased his lower body felt unbearably tight.

What the hell was she doing to him? She was not even awake, yet she had invaded every available spot in his brain! Perhaps she was no human at all, but a witch. A sorceress sent to tempt him, or a siren leading him to his doom. But wait, sirens sang a man to his demise, and Thane was no man. He was a selkie. An ancient mythical being. He had been on this earth for hundreds of years. He was no easy game for sirens, or any other Otherworldly person. Witches spells had no effect on him.

Then why was he so fascinated by this little human? What was it about her that made his skin sizzle despite the cold waters?

"I will take her to the isle for just a little while," he promised himself. "Once she is recovered and I have worked her out of my system, I will return her to her world."

Even as the words left his lips, he knew them to be a lie. The longer he held her in his arms, the more he wanted her. The libido that had lain dormant for more years than he dared count had awoken with a vengeance. He did not want this tiny slip of a human for a few nights. He wanted to learn all her secrets. He wanted to know what treasures made her smile so that he could bring them to her. He wanted to see her belly swollen with his pups.

Thane stopped dead in the water less than fifteen minutes to his destination. Oh, by the cruel, cruel Fates! After

hundreds of years, just when he had stopped looking, hoping or wishing, Thane had found his mate!

"And by the sea gods, she is ... *a human!*"

What the hell did he do now? Did he dive and take the unconscious woman to the council of elders to mate before she knew what was going on? Did he heal her and wait until she awakened, then explained things to her? Humans were not known to be open to Otherworld beings. Magic tended to freak them out a bit, at least that was what he had heard.

Looking down at his now precious cargo, Thane noted the strength of her little chin. Although she was out cold, her fists were clenched as if ready to fight. This one was going to be feisty.

In spite of his obvious dilemma, Thane couldn't help but grin. Life was certainly about to get interesting. He couldn't imagine a woman like this one standing meekly as the council inspected her for defect. Not that such a thing would stop a mating, it would just require a group healing rather than an individual one.

Making a decision, Thane reversed course. He would compromise. He would have the elders inspect her now. When she woke up, he would explain the situation and make her his. Simple.

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Chapter Three

On the Enchanted Isle

Dallas was on fire, her skin burning from the inside out. She tried to move her arms, but they felt like they were bound by something. The last thing she remembered was drifting in the middle of the ocean, clinging to a piece of driftwood, and then ... and then...

Bolting straight up, Dallas gasped for breath, expecting to find herself sinking like a stone to the bottom of the ocean. She was shocked to find herself in a rather primitive looking cabin of some sort. Looking down she saw she couldn't move her arms because she had been wrapped rather tightly in several coarse blankets. Where the hell was she? The last thing she remembered was some ginormous seal thing sticking its cold wet nose into her face, then she could have sworn the thing shifted into a man.

Shaking her head as if that would clear the cobwebs, she glanced around. Maybe she had washed ashore and some kindly fisherman type saved her. That was why there was dead fish laying in her lap on top of the itchy blanket.

Dead fish? With blood curling scream she flung the fish off her without touching the icky things. She liked her fish cooked—period.

"Auck! Woman, ye damned near busted my ears!"

Dallas screamed anew at the strange, very nude man sitting in a chair right next to what she supposed was a bed of

some sort. It felt as if it had been stuffed with straw and covered with a sheet.

"Oh, and sure, do it again!"

Dallas stopped screaming. The man scowled at her as if he had every right to be irritated with *her*. As if she were the one sitting there in all her glory, like it was the most normal thing in the world. And despite the fact his glory was very, very glorious indeed, it was damned freaky to be drowning one minute and waking with some naked stranger staring at you.

"Well excuse the hell out of me!" she yelled at the rude little, okay, big man.

As he stood, Dallas felt her eyes expand in her face exponentially. Really, really big man! He had to be pushing seven feet. His body was all muscles and smooth lightly tanned skin, and not one hint of hair, except at his—

"Dear sweet Aunt Mary!"

Now that was a cock! It looked like a freaking kickstand. And it wasn't even hard! It just lay there, against his leg, like a python just waiting to attack. Then right before her eyes, it started to, gulp, grow. Soon it was pointing straight at her, as if accusing her of some heinous crime. Funny how she had a sudden near uncontrollable urge to confess, confess what she had no idea, but she was sure she could think of something.

"Ye had best be getting used to it, seeing as how it's yours now."

She probably might have managed to pull her jaw off the ground and place her brain back in some kind of order, if it hadn't been for that sentence. He had said it as if he was upset about it, like she had done something to him. Never

mind the fact he had said it at all, which was just weird. What did his abnormal schlong have to do with her?

"Look, dude—"

"Thane."

"What?" This was just getting weirder by the minute.

"My name is Thane, lass, your mate."

Fighting to extract herself from the scratchy blankets, which was harder than she ever believed, almost managed to calm a great deal of her anger. Whoever had wrapped her up apparently thought they were swaddling a baby. Probably Mr. Naked here. Finally free, she threw the offending things off of her and surged to her feet, pointing her finger upward in the generally direction of his face.

"Look, *Thane*," she laid the sarcasm as thick as she possibly could, to let him know she really didn't give a shit what his name was. "I don't know who you think you are, but I am not your anything! If you saved me, I thank you, though I think it was probably that odd looking seal. But you need to cover yourself and treat me with some kind of respect. I didn't ask to be in this dilapidated little cottage of yours, but I will be damned if I'm staying. Just point me to the nearest phone and I am outta here!"

"Ye doona like the cottage?"

She was prepared for craziness, but the look of hurt than crossed his face made her regret her little tirade just a little teensy bit. She had ripped dude's home after all. That was not very neighborly of her.

She was just about to apologize when all of the sudden, she was standing in the most opulent room she had ever seen

in her life. A huge platform bed made of a deep dark wood with four posts that were intricately carved at the four corners damn near touched the ceiling. The floor was covered with genuine honest to goodness Persian carpets, Queen Anne chairs were placed strategically around the room. The armoire, the knick knacks and all of the furniture looked immensely expensive.

"What the fuck did you just do?" It was more of a yell than a question, but damn it, this shit was freaky! Rooms did not just change in a blink of an eye.

She was dead. She had died—drowned, in the middle of nowhere with no one to mourn her. How shitty was that? It was just so unfair. Sinking down to the floor, fat salty tears rained down her face. She didn't bother attempting to wipe them away. What was the point? Dude wasn't real, none of this was real.

"At least Mae and Belle will never get their dirty hands on Uncle Mitch's money," she tried to console herself, ignoring Mr. Horse Hung completely. He no longer mattered seeing as how he was merely a figment of her dead imagination. She had never been into vanilla anyway. "At least I had a will. All the money will go towards a worthy cause and they will be out of luck."

It wasn't much but it made her feel a little better. Too bad she had to be dead so she wouldn't get the satisfaction of seeing their faces when they learned of that little piece of information.

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The lass was daft. Or maybe she waterlogged just a bit. He had been all prepared to hand her his pelt, a MAJOR concession on his part, and here she was blubbering about being dead.

"Ye are NOT dead woman! I saved you! Me, Thane! And I am not a seal! Do ye not know the difference between a seal and a selkie? Are ye completely daft?"

Well of course she was. Why else would she be sitting on the ground when he had conjured many a fine chair for her lovely ass. And it was lovely. In spite of his extreme irritation, his cock bobbed in agreement in his appreciation of her fine form. And here he had thought she might be a wee put out he had gotten rid of her ruined fancy gown.

With a heavy sigh, he sat down on the floor to face her. Human women were fragile things. He had to remember that, now that he was about to mated with one for life. His father had warned him this might happen.

It was a good thing he had contacted the elders, along with his sire prior to her coming around. The elders had inspected her and declared her fit to bare his children, as was expected when one mated with a human. It was not surprising in the least many of them expressed envy at his great fortune.

It was a damned good thing he decided upon his current course of action. It had allowed him time to investigate the

modern human world. It had been amazing to see how far they had advanced, yet they managed to stay as boorish as ever.

Yes, it was a shame she was human, but her dark skin was soft and beautiful, her lips full and welcoming, more than made up for her humanity. She was far more mysterious and beautiful than any other woman he had ever seen, even those of the Otherworld.

She had hips meant for riding, in fact, all her curves were a playground of delight. Best of all, she would be able to mentally survive the trip the depths for their mating ceremony. Not many humans could deal with such a thing. Although it was impossible to convert a human to selkie form, she must undergo something of a transformation to allow her to breathe underwater and to live beside him for many, many years to come.

Every selkie must return to the sea from time to time, though he would be forced to live the majority of at least one lifetime on land until she was comfortable with notion of ocean living. After that, if he could convince her, she needed to be able to live in the sea.

If he ever got that far, that is. She was just sitting there in some kind of daze, staring off at nothing in particular, rocking back and forth with her arms clutched tightly around herself. Hell, if she wanted a hug, all she had to do was ask. He was not the most handsome of his parents' pups, true, but he was not all that bad.

"Come here, lass."

Thane wasn't sure what surprised him more, that he sat on the floor and opened his arms to her, or that she readily climbed in his lap, laying her head on his shoulder. He was not the touchy feely type in general. Although he felt nothing short of foolish sitting on the floor in the opulent room he had created just for her, he felt as if all was right with the world.

The daft lassie fit as if she had been born to be right where she was. Now that he thought about, he supposed she was. There was only one female born for every selkie male. Gaia in her infinite wisdom had expanded the pool of mates to every sort of female on the earth, due to the lack of female selkies. It may take a fellow centuries to find a mate, but once he did, that was it. Given that their mates could be found anywhere, there were many who never found their other half and were cursed to live a solitary life. As the selkie lifespan was so long, no one knew for sure how long it was, it was a sad existence indeed.

After a time, many simply disappeared, preferring to live life away from others in the deep rather than to watch as males all around him found their one and only. Others were even worse off, finding themselves mated to some of the most vicious of creatures. His brother was mated to a mermaid, poor sap. Mermaids were notoriously mean to the point of being just plain evil.

"There are worse things than being mated to me ye kin?" Thane supplied helpfully. "I can give ye yer heart's desire, and I cannae leave ye for verra long. And ye will nae age as yer kind is want to do. Well, after the ceremony anyway, but a few days should nae add many wrinkles. I will never even

look at another female, and part of my powers will be transferred on to ye after we are well and truly bonded. Plus, I am not all that bad to look at. The mermaids say I am an excellent lover. So all in all, lass, I think ye are getting a pretty good bargain. After all, 'tis I who is stuck with a human."

Thane finished his statement with a huge grin, inordinately proud he was able to state such a convincing case. Yet after five minutes, he began to worry his little lass had heard none of it. She lay silent in his lap, her warm cushy behind nestling his cock which had become as hard a granite, and was now weeping to be inside his mate. Yet another testament to his stellar control. He had yet to throw the wee lassie to the ground and ravish her as every cell in his body demanded he do. He was a veritable rock.

"Lass?"

Looking down, Thane found the woman was staring directly at his smooth chest, a frown marring her beautiful face. He didn't like it. There should be no reason for his woman to frown, not ever.

"What was your name again?"

A huge grin split his face. Now they were getting somewhere. "I am called Thane. And ye are...?"

"Hello, Thane. It's nice to meet you. My name is Dallas, Dallas Craig. If you will kindly point me to the nearest passenger boat, airport, train or bus station, I will just be running along. I would love to stay, but you are insane, and I cannot possibly sit around on the lap of a crazy person. So I really must be going."

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The human-Dallas *what an odd name for a human*, pointed those devastating melting brown eyes dead at him and smiled. His cock jumped in approval. But then she had to continue talking. "If you could just give me back my clothes?"

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Chapter Four

There was no way off this rock! Dallas had tried to go around what appeared to be a freakishly small castle, but there was a dense, heavy gray fog that encompassed both sides of the place, and the sounds emitting from that fog were not encouraging. The only place she could go once out of the massive oak door was to the shore directly in front the rock structure. There wasn't a boat in site, and all she could see was miles and miles of blue-green sea.

The color of Thane's eyes...

"Stop that!" she shouted out loud as if her wayward brain would listen if she said it instead of thought it.

Yeah, right. All she could think about lately was Thane. The crazy ass man was just too fine for words. He was taller than most white men she had ever seen, except for maybe NBA players. Unlike basketball players, Thane was built much more solidly. He wasn't all bulk and hulking muscles, but he wasn't lanky either.

His muscles were well defined, and she knew from experience he was hard as rock. Her poor knuckles still ached from the first time she had to punch him. The ass had had the nerve to just laugh at her efforts.

And that weapon of his. Dropping down at the water's edge, Dallas dribbled the cool water on her neck. The man simply refused to wear clothing, leaving her in a constant state of arousal. How could a girl not get all hot under the collar looking at all *that* all day every day? She had only been

here all of three days, and in that short amount of time, he had invaded her very dreams.

As soon as she settled into a nice, healing sleep she would start dreaming about those large hands caressing her body, that caustic tongue put too much better use between her thighs. And that dick of his...! He was built for sin, no doubt about it. Too bad he was out of his freaking mind.

Who ever heard of a selkie? Yet, that was what he kept insisting he was. She wrote off the neat little trick of turning a shack into a three room castle full of all kind of decadent furnishings. She had been feverish. Yep, that was her excuse and she was sticking with it.

And as far as his daily trips out into the ocean not to return for hours, well she was convinced he had a boat moored somewhere out there. For some reason he was holding her captive. Perhaps because he had never seen a black woman before and he was simple fascinated by the notion of a woman with skin much darker than his own.

From what she could ascertain from his accent, they were somewhere in Scotland. It was probably the Highlands given how deliciously barbaric Thane was. Wait, no-not delicious. Irritating. He was over bearing, egotistical, sweet in his own way, oh so sexy, and...

"Damn it! Get out of my head you bastard!" Dallas fumed, hurling a stray rock out into the ocean.

"Ye will nae get out yer frustrations by abusing the sea, lassie. And I assure ye, my parents were mated right and proper, as we will be soon."

Speak of the devil and he will appear. She didn't bother to deny she was speaking of him. He would never believe otherwise, so what was the point?

"I have no idea what you are talking about," she sniffed indignantly, sticking her nose in the air and waltzing past him back into the mini-castle. "And would you please put some damn clothes on!"

She didn't have to look in his direction to know a shit eating grin was plastered all over his face. The unrepentant ass knew she had a devil of a time keeping her eyes off that massive appendage of his. With each passing moment it was getting harder and harder to stop herself from climbing all over him and having her wicked way with his body.

Whenever he was near, her skin itched and burned to be close to him. Just this morning she had awakened to find she had literally crawled all over him in her sleep. And did he just ignore it and pretend it never happened like she needed him to? No! He had to grin and invited her to do some in depth exploring. As if!

At least he had finally supplied her with clothing, if you could call it that. The simple hopelessly antique dress was made for easy access. It was free flowing without being shapeless, infinitely comfortable, and easy to get in and out of. It was just one continuous dress with no zippers or buttons to fool around with.

Surprisingly, the simple silk kept her warm from the chill, and the deep burgundy contrasted beautifully with her skin. It seemed to cling to her figure though it was incredibly easy to

pull on and off. And goodness, how she longed to pull it off and rub herself all over her captor.

A low moan escaped her lips before she could call it back. Damn, but the man was fine.

"It will only get worse, lass."

Dallas jumped at the deep murmur right in her ear. He was standing so close she could feel waves of heat emanating from his bare skin. How had he gotten right up next to her without her noticing? What would be like to touch him? Was his skin nearly as smooth as it looked? Would his skin be salty if she licked him, just a little?

"What will get worse?" her voice was a hoarse croak, but she really wanted to know. Was he counting on her craving becoming too much for her to bear? Would he taunt her to the point of insanity?

"Mating heat. Yer lovely body recognizes its mate. If only the daft woman in possession of such a bountiful playground would recognize it as well."

"Mating heat. Riiiiight."

If it wasn't this mating crap, it was the constant insistence that he was some kind of magical seal-man-thingie. Selkie, that's what he called himself. She was willing to admit she had no idea how he seemed to make food appear out of nowhere, she had no idea how the candles lit at the exact right moment, and she couldn't quite figure out how a modern bathroom seem to appear out of nowhere after her complaints about the hole in the floor and an old fashioned pump with a huge wooden tub thing, but she was NOT going to jump off the deep end and say

Thane was some kind of mythological creature. He was a man. An oddly hairless (except for the glorious midnight black mane), smooth, beautifully constructed man, but a man nonetheless.

So why do you get so wet you are fairly dripping every time Thane is near? There were days when Dallas fervently wished she could turn her brain off. Always rationalizing, her damn mind was. There was nothing rational about her situation.

She had to get out of here and back to Texas, preferably before Mae and Belle made it back with their crocodile tears with their grubby little hands stuck out for her money. She didn't have time for a completely insane, albeit devastatingly handsome loon of a Highlander.

But the only way out was through that sexy slice of fruitcake.

Turning on her heel to face her nemesis, she considered her options. It would certainly be no hardship to go along with his delusions, within reason of course. If she played along for a little while, perhaps he would take her to civilization long enough to get away. It would be difficult to even appear to suspend her disbelief ... *Yeah, right. You want to jump his bones and you know it.* Okay, fine, it would be no sweat off her back to pretend to be his mate or whatever. But she had to play this right.

"So what does this mate stuff, uh, entail?" Dallas batted her eyelashes, a move she had seen Belle execute repeatedly. Taking a step forward, she boldly ran a finger across his smooth, well defined chest. Damn, his skin was warm and

inviting. Splaying both hands against the expanse of the hard area, she leaned forward for just a little sniff. He smelled like the ocean and wind and the wild outdoors. Her mouth watered as her nipples pebbled into hard points. Just a taste, one little taste...

"Lass, if ye kept it up I will nae be able to..."

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Thane's mind blanked at the first swipe of her warm, wet tongue against his skin. He had waited too long as it was. The mating heat began gently at first, probably to allow the destined couple time to get to know each other.

Unfortunately for humans and those fated to be with them, the gentle forty-eight hour period was not enough. Thane was walking on a very thin ledge when it came to his little human.

He didn't know what was worse; Dallas nude, or Dallas in the form fitting dress he graciously deigned to allow her to wear. While the magnificently nude Dallas had him salivating and precariously close to throwing her down on the nearest surface, the dressed Dallas set his mind to wondering of all the ways he could undress dress her, half dress her, or take her fully dressed. Instead of feasting his eyes on her hills and valleys, he was imagining all the different ways he could expose them for his pleasure.

Dallas confounded him in a way no other female ever had. He found himself visiting his father daily for counsel on how to deal with her. Not that his father was much help, Thane's mother was a siren.

Thane had very limited experience with Dallas' kind. His sire had once been with a human female thousands of years prior, so his help was a little outdated. The world had changed drastically, as Thane had found out.

He had found the ancestral human home his family had set up in the case one of them found themselves bound to the land dwellers had lain abandoned, seeing as how neither he nor his brothers had bothered to visit it.

None of them ever considered they may ever need it, no matter what the elders had warned. Thane had to expend more magic to set him up as a human than he had ever used before. Now that he had found his mate, he could not simply return to the sea at will, nor would he be able to make their home in the watery depths. He needed his mate much more than he needed to ocean, though he would have to return from time to time.

He could not imagine not offering his Dallas every advantage, therefore it was necessary to resurrect the ancient title one of his uncles had tricked the ancient King of Scotland out of many eons ago. Thane had found, to his chagrin, Scotland had long since been annexed by England, meaning he had to expend energy and magic to travel there to set up his long since defunct title as well as to set up his human fortune. That task was greater than he had ever expected.

In the meantime, with patience he never knew he had, Thane waited, allowing Dallas as much time as she needed to become accustomed to him. His father had warned him against it, yet Thane knew with all Dallas had been through, she was hanging on by a thin thread. The last thing he wanted to do was push her over.

Then she touched him.

As long as she was running from him he was fine. He had not overtly touched her at all, afraid he would not be able to stop. He had begun to despair she would ever come around. The feel of her hands on his body lefty him breathless and weak in the knees. But her tongue, Sweet Mother, his body was set to flame by the first little innocent swipe of the wee instrument of torture.

With a battle cry he had not uttered in centuries, Thane sweet his woman in his arms, charging inside and up the narrow stone staircase into the room he had created just for her. The act of dropping her on the bed was the last concession to any sibilance of control her could claim.

Thank the gods his Dallas did not attempt to deny him, it would have driven him out of his half-gone mind. Instead she looked up at him, her chocolate eyes wide with wonder and anticipation. He could see her chest heaving with every harsh breath she took.

Not willing to take the time to undress her, Thane simply waved his hand and the dress was gone.

"Sweet merciful goddess, ye are..."

There were really no words for what she was. Thane paused, rocking back on his heels just to drink her in. Lovely

could not begin to describe her. The goddesses could take one look at her natural form and howl in envy. She was lush and full, every inch the woman. The darkness of her skin against the pale sheets entranced him. Dark and mysterious, everything about her called to him as deadly as the sirens that led mortal men to their doom.

He wanted, no needed to learn all her secrets. His fingers actually trembled as he reached out to touch her, her skin sending an electric current all through his body. Running his finger across the surface of her flesh, watching the contrast of their skin tones sent his rock hard cock to weeping.

She was built for the gods, yet she had been given to him. No selkie was ever as blessed as he. He would spin lifetimes playing here, this body would bear his progeny, this woman would share his lonely life. Funny, he had never realized he was so very lonely until now. He craved her heat in a way most selkies craved the water. For her, he would gladly give his pelt. Just for her.

"Lass, I do nae think I can go slow or be gentle," his voice was a deep purr he barely recognized. His head spun at the magnitude of what was about to happen. Finally, he would take his mate. Three days in a span of thousands of years meant nothing in the grand scheme of things, yet to him, it had been a lifetime. Watching, waiting, wanting but not touching had taken a toll on him unlike anything he had ever been through.

"Don't go slow," her whispered words penetrated his brain like a bolt of lightning. "Take me, please, Thane. I burn."

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Chapter Five

Dallas was an inferno of need. Her body was awash in flame and Thane had done nothing more than run his finger across her body. She was so wet she could feel her juices flowing. Why did he just touch her? Wasn't this what he had wanted all along?

Then his lips descended and all doubts were cast to the winds. He didn't merely kiss her, he possessed her, his tongue seemed to stroke her flames higher as he tangled his with her own. She found he was breathing for her, as she could not seem to draw in enough air, and she couldn't care less.

His hands gripped her hair in a painful hold, forcing her head back for his plundering. His free hand savagely pinched and kneaded first one breast, then the other. His body was wedged between her splayed thighs, that oh, so massive cock rubbing sensuously against her dewy opening, but never entering.

Her body arched and twisted, but to no avail. He was not going to take her until her was good and ready. Heavens knew she was more than ready. She wanted it all, and she wanted it now.

"Ah, lass, I told ye this would not go easy," Thane growled down at her, breaking away from his soul stealing kiss. "But I will nae hurt ye. I must properly prepare ye, I am no wee male."

"I don't care," Dallas protested. She didn't. She just needed. "I need you. Please, fill me."

She couldn't recall ever feeling so empty before. Every nerve center in her body was alive and screaming. Her hips bucked in desperate pursuit of what she knew only he could provide. She tried to grab at him, but he was too quick. He pinned her arms to the mattress, nipped her neck as he did so.

"Easy, Dallas, lass. We have all the time in the world."

Yeah, that was easy for him to say. Every touch sent shivers acing through her even as her flesh heated to the point of boiling. His hands were everywhere, softly exploring as if he had never touched a woman before—

No way. The man was far too sexy and far too lethal to be a virgin. Still, the way he touched and tenderly kissed her neck, her shoulders, her belly, it made her wonder.

"Are you a virgin?"

Dallas really hadn't meant to blurt it out like that, but she was kind of glad she had. She really wanted to know. Not that she would stop if he was, but it would be nice to know if she was going to have to charge here.

Thane didn't bother to stop his exploration to answer. A simple growl was all she got in reply, followed by a sharp slap, right against her exposed, tender sex.

She would have been upset, if only the burning sting didn't feel quite so good. Not too hard, not too soft, but just enough to make her juices flow over time. It pushed all thoughts of Thane being a virgin quickly out of the way.

As if the little slap never happened, Thane resumed his aching slow perusal of her body with his hands, his mouth, his tongue; never touching her where she wanted him most but just outside the areas that screamed for attention. The side of her breasts rather than the nipples, her chin and neck rather than her mouth, the insides of her thighs rather than her weeping sex. He was driving her insane with the butterfly kisses and soft caresses.

She realized belatedly that was probably his intention all along. She was fast reaching the point where the man, or whatever, was in serious danger of being ravished by her. No matter how hard she tugged on those silky locks of hair, he just refused to be budged. He was driving her insane with need, and she had just about had enough when finally she felt the hot wet sweep of his tongue along the seam of her pussy. A groan of pure need passed through her lips as she grasped his hair in an effort to bring him closer.

Still, Thane took his sweet time, his tongue taking long leisurely swipes from her clit to her desperate opening. Dallas was considering punching him in the side of the head when he suddenly sucked her clit into his mouth, sending seismic shockwaves from the tip of her toes to the top of her head. Her orgasm was so unexpected, she couldn't even scream, her breath leaving her body in a rush.

"That's it, *leannan*. Come for me."

As if she had a choice?

Her eyes opened in mere slits as she watched him watching her, his fingers delving deep inside her as she rode the waves of one of the most powerful orgasms she had ever

experienced in her life. And he had managed it with his mouth alone.

"I want more, *leannan*. Do it for me again."

His thumb flicked at her engorged clit as he said the words, causing her to gyrate her hips, welcoming his oh, so talented fingers deeper. She as ensnared by eyes, unable to look away from the orbs that help her captive. His thumping on her clit was relentless, she couldn't have stopped the second orgasm if she tried, and there was no way in hell she was going to try.

Thane was spell bound by the sight of his mate in the throes of ecstasy. Nothing he had ever witnessed was ever so beautiful, so pure. It didn't matter his cock was so hard it hurt, he had to taste her again. Dipping his head between her splayed thighs, he drank in her essence, licking up every drop so that none was wasted.

"So sweet," he murmured against the soft, wet fold of the pussy he wanted to spend forever getting to know.

In the back of his mind he knew time was running out. He needed to make her his mate in every way before entering the ocean with her to finalize their bond. But he could not stop himself from feasting on her sweet tangy essence. The more he tasted, the more he wanted. He feared his hunger would never be satiated.

"Please, Thane," Dallas thrashed, her body arching off the bed in both an attempt to break away, yet bring him closer. "I can't ... I can't ... Oh!"

Her voice broke as he brought her to yet another orgasm. Perfect. She was perfect. Her responses only drove him to

want to drive her mad with need—need of him. Only him. He had a fierce, primitive need to drive any human man she might have ever been with out of her mind forever.

"Please," Dallas sobbed, her hold on his hair attempting to yank him away from her now soaking sex. "I want you, I need you inside me."

Thane's cock jerked and wept at her words, as if it had heard and agreed wholeheartedly. Burying his face against the soft skin of her inner thigh, gasping for breath. One little sentence uttered in a sultry, panting breath and his control damn near slipped completely.

Rising to his knees, he pulled her on to her lap, only intending to hold her while he worked to suppress his most burning need. But as soon as he pulled her in place, Dallas wiggled her succulent ass and pressed her hot pussy right up against him.

"Lass, ye have to move back," his voice was more of a wheeze than anything else, barely audible with the huffing breaths permeating the room. "I will nae be able to hold back."

Deep chocolate orbs clashed with those the color of the stormy ocean.

"I don't need you to hold back," Dallas told him in a remarkably steady voice. "I need you."

She had scarcely spoken before she found herself being lifted and impaled in one fell swoop. She screamed in pleasure and pain as her nails dug into the hard tissue of his shoulders.

"Oh, aye lass," Thane groaned against her hair. "So tight, so damned good!"

Despite his best efforts to keep her immobile, Dallas wrapped her legs around his waist, her feet digging into his buttocks and lifted her body only to slam down on his entire length. Once, twice, until Thane grasped her hips to take over the rhythm of their dance.

"Thane! I'm going to-oh, shit I'm cumming!"

Her walls clinched so tightly against him, Thane thought his did was being choked to death. And oh, what a way to go!

"Fuck!" he roared as he exploded inside his woman. His woman. No other female had ever felt so right, so flawless. Maybe she was right and she had died taking him with her, because this was surely paradise.

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Chapter Six

Dallas awoke to the sounds of the waves lapping against the rocky shore. Seagulls called overhead, probably spotting a school of fish close enough to the surface for capture. The cool breeze blew softly, cooling her still heated skin. She smiled softly as she snuggled closer to her new lover's chest. The world could go hang for just a while longer. Who knew crazy people were so ... vigorous?

"Leannan, it is time, ye must wake up."

She really didn't want to, but she couldn't very well bask in the afterglow forever. Cracking open her eyes just a sliver, she was shocked to see they were outside the tiny castles and Thane was walking into the surf.

Shit! She had forgotten he thought he was some kind of seal-man. Now the fool was taking them both to a watery grave after the consummation or whatever.

"Put me down!" she screeched, but clutched his shoulders in a death grip. "You may think you are some kind of seal, or whatever, but I am a human and I cannot live underwater!"

"Ye will nae have to live underwater, *amaid!* How many times do I have to tell ye..."

"Then where exactly do you think you are taking me?" Dallas demanded, eyes narrowed and nostrils flared. "I certainly don't see any *land* in the direction you are walking. Perhaps you think we should go for a swim?"

"Hauld yer wheesht, woman!"

Thane figured the only way to get her to shut up was to show her. Her high pitched scream was abruptly cut off when he dove under the water, transforming only his legs as he did so. The quicker he got this ceremony over the better.

In spite of the fact she could breathe just fine under water now that had mated good and proper, she was holding her breath, her head buried in his chest.

Dallas, lass you can breath, Thane told her telepathically, exasperation heavy in the voice he projected.

No, I can't! I am not some kind of sea creature, and neither are-Hey! You are talking in my head!"

Thane couldn't help but laugh at her incredulity. She was breathing now, and that was the most important thing. Although her grip hadn't lessened and her nails were embedded in his skin, she was looking up at him with such wonder, he had to kiss those softly parted lips. Once their mouths touched, Thane could not let go with just a little peck. He allowed his senses to guide them as his tongues invaded the cavern of her mouth, tasting all her sweetness, while keeping her mind off where they were.

All too soon, they arrived at their destination. Thane reluctantly broke away from the kiss and stared down at his woman.

That was nae so bad, was it, leannan?

Dallas couldn't speak. Never mind she was actually in the arms of man who had apparently lost his leg and developed something that resembled a seal's tail-so not sexy-but she was the also at the bottom of the ocean. Not to mention they were surrounded by half-human sorts of creatures.

We are nae human, amaid!

She didn't need to see the frown on his handsome face to know she had said, or rather thought something wrong.

Geez, sorry. I am only human.

She had considered what she had thought kind of mild given the circumstances. How many women would stand, or be held, here all calmly surrounded by half-seal men, a couple of mermaids, and something that looked like some kind of sex goddess?

She is a Siren, and she is my mother, Thane provided.

Wow! No wonder he was all gorgeous and heavenly. And if the dude, or seal-man, next to her was his father, looked like her seal-man was going to stay fine for quite some time.

Thank you, leannan.

Yeah, so we are here why?

She would deal with the fact he hadn't been lying and he was apparently sane much later. She just couldn't assimilate that right now. One step at a time, and the first step was to come to grips with the fact that she was now the mate of a ... What the hell had he called himself ... selkie?

Oh, dear sweet merciful heavens! She was mated? Was that like married, or was it something much more permanent? Swinging her shocked gaze up at Thane once more she realized two things with stunning clarity. The first was that he could read her mind. And it seems that she could read his. There would be no keeping secrets from this one. The second thing was that mated might mean she would have to stay down here forever. How could she be mated to a, a ... male

that was going to live far longer than her own human body would allow.

What would happen when she started to age and wither away? And what kind of children would they have? Would they even be able to have children? Would she have to go into the ocean to give birth to little seals?

You think too much, amaid.

What hell does that mean anyway? There were a million other questions she had for him, but damn it if he was going to call her something, damn it she wanted to know what it was. She had no idea why that was the most important thing to her right this second, but it was.

Foolish woman, Thane's voice had taken on a decidedly husky quality. Kind of like he was ... Did he just call her a fool?

Oh, really? I am a foolish woman? I am not the one who had no idea what indoor plumbing was until it was explained to me! I am not the Neanderthal who just plucks the first female he sees out of the ocean and declare she is my mate then take her down to the middle of the ocean in front of-OH!

Thane grinned like a bandit as he slid home into his woman. Damn, she was so sexy when she was all riled up. He was going to have to keep her all irked and vexed just so he could fuck her out of it. Her eyes blazed as if they were on fire, her chest heaved, her breasts rising like offering.

Oh, aye lass. Your pussy grips my cock just right.

Thane had wondered how he was going to get her to mate with him in front of his elder and the high council, now he realized all he had to do was throw her off a little. Blessed

Fates, what he not accounted for was how his wee lasses affected him. Bracing his feet against the sandy bottom he thrust repeatedly into his the warm cocoon of his woman, driving all other thoughts but him and what he was doing to her from her mind.

All too soon he felt spasms convulsing around his cock, sucking his essence from him. All around them, the elders began chanting, binding Dallas' life force with his own. A golden glow surrounded them as the writhed together, cresting the peak together.

Thane! I can't stop!

Dallas' stared at her mate in wide-eyed wonder. He held her gaze steadily even as he continued to stroke deep inside of her. Wave after wave of ultimate pleasure engulfed her body, each new orgasm building on the last. Surely the body was not equipped to handle this much pleasure. Sure was positive she was going to explode from the inside out. She could vaguely hear some kind of bizarre mantra in her head, she knew the voices was from neither Thane nor her, and that somehow it was changing her, binding her tightly to the enigmatic man who held her, but she didn't care. She didn't care she was stark naked in front of heaven knows who, being pleased within an inch of her life. All that mattered was Thane.

Thane...

The word was no more than a whispered prayer before everything went black.

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Chapter Seven

Thane frowned down at his woman. She had been asleep for twenty-four hours, he was beginning to worry. The elder's had warned him that she needed time to recuperate from the bonding, that her system had formerly been fragile, therefore the transition would be harder on her than others.

He didn't like this at all. The thought that she might be impaired in some way ... his heart beat hard against his ribcage. That could not happen. Dallas had fast become his everything. He needed to see her glaring at him, to hear her calling all sorts of names he couldn't begin to understand.

"*Leannan*, it past time ye woke up," he demanded in his most imperious tone. She hated when he used that "tone of voice" as she so often put it.

"What the hell does that mean anyway?" Her voice was hoarse and a tiny bit slurred but it was something.

"Originally, it meant leman, who was the lairds—"

His words were cut short by a well placed pillow to the face. Thane couldn't contain his joy. She was back!

Raising one brow he looked down at where her head was buried beneath the other pillows gracing the huge bed he had created for her and brought with them to the mainland. It was where they had first come together, he was not about to leave it on the enchanted isle in the middle of nowhere.

"But now it simply means sweetheart." That statement earned him a one eyes glare, causing his face to split in a

giant grin. Aye, she was back. "Do ye nae think tis time to explore your new home?"

"If we are still on that damn island I think I might kill you," Dallas grumbled, not all ready to leave the comfortable bed to see more rocks and water.

"We have come together good and proper, there is nae need to keep ye confined any longer." That earned him a glare with both eyes. Better and better.

"You ass! You kept me there on purpose?" Dallas bounded for where he sat at the end of the bed, pelting his chest with both fists. "Dickhead! Conceited oaf! I could have been home by now!"

"Lass, ye are tickling me." Thane had the gall to laugh at her best efforts to punch him in the gut. Damned man! "And if I had taken ye to the mainland, would ye have agreed to mate with me?"

Dallas stopped mid-swing. Ha he brought her to civilization after finding her floating in the ocean, she would ran as hard and fast as she could from her seal-man, never giving him a chance to prove he was indeed what he said he was.

"And how many time do I have to tell ye, I nae seal-man! I am..."

"Selkie, I know, I know."

Dallas was instantly contrite. She could feel the twinge of pain her words had caused as if it were her own. She had really hurt his feelings. She hadn't meant to, but there was still much unfinished business she had to take care of. First and foremost, she had to see her aunt and step-cousin pay for throwing her off the damn cruise ship.

Funny, she should have been a complete basket case after the last several days, but she wasn't. So she had mated with a selkie, had been taken to the bottom of the freaking ocean and had sex in front of his parents and various other people, well beings. She was strangely okay with all of it. Except the sex in front of the in-laws. That was just creepy. And more than a little sick.

Thane fell to his back in a fit of laughter, as if the whole thing was hilarious. Dallas didn't see a damn thing funny about the situation. How the hell was she ever supposed to face them ever again?

"Lass, tis expected. Ye had to be bonded tae me. It was the only way."

"Whatever," she grumbled under her breath. It was appalling, all naked and getting it in front of the people that had given Thane life. Ew!

"I swear, lass," Thane had approached her silently and was now busily wrapping his arms around her. How could she not melt into those strong, perfectly formed limbs? "They will nae hold it against ye. They have gone through the same thing. Now, please, let me show ye the home I have made for ye."

Put that way, it would have just been rude to say no.

"Fine, but I kind of need to put on some clothes. *Modern* clothes, thank you very much."

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This castle was nestled against the Northern Scottish cliffs; a real castle this time, not some bizarre tiny structure. The entire building had been updated with all the modern conveniences without distracting from its natural beauty and charm. Dallas found herself choked up at Thane's thoughtfulness.

He had remembered everything she had raged about on the island, like not having any clothing, television, radio, or a computer. The man had made her an office, an electronic nirvana complete with giant plasma, satellite, dual DVD players and a wall to wall stereo system. She had no idea one stereo system could be so damn big!

"You did all this for me?" Dallas was flabbergasted. She had had some decent boyfriends in the past, but seeing as how she was stinking rich, no one had ever thought to actually give her anything of real value.

"Of course!" Thane puffed his chest, looking all adorably offended. "Ye think I would nae think to provide for my own woman?!"

"Don't get your panties in a twist," she laughed in affront. "I am touched. And we really need to talk about this woman thing. I mean, you can't just go around calling me woman, or lass or your leman. Especially not your leman."

"I told ye..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It means sweetheart now." Dallas waved her hand in the air as she walked back into the castle, marching toward one of the sitting rooms that had modern furniture.

Plopping down on the thick stuffed leather couch, she narrowed her eyes and pointed her finger directly at him. Thane felt trepidation crawl up his spine. This was not going to be pleasant. He was fast learning once Dallas got started the only way to stop her was to...

"Wipe that shit eating grin off your face!" Dallas ordered. "We will not be having sex right now. We need to get things straight."

"Ballocks," Than muttered under his breath. Sitting down in the chair across from him he braced himself.

"Look, I know we are mated and all. And I appreciate that," she began in her best down-to-business voice. "Now, I need to go back to the States as soon as possible. I promise as soon as I sort out the whole bitch trying to kill me thing, I will be back—"

"NO!"

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Chapter Eight

"Excuse me?" No he did not just get all caveman on her.

Yep, there he was, hovering over her, his aquamarine eyes all furious and ... concerned. Okay, so it was cute. Maybe even sexy, still, no one told her no. She was a grown ass woman.

"Look, I am not saying I won't be back." She wasn't sure she could stay away. Even now, in the middle of a good old fashioned showdown, she felt herself leaning ever so slightly toward where he stood, which was not so wise seeing as how she was still seated. Sure enough, she lost her balance and fell on her face, right at the damnable man's feet. That was just galling.

"There is nae way I'll be allowing ye to traipse off without me, ye keen?" The bastard had the nerve to lower his voice while leaning down and plucking her off the floor as if she was a child. "Just look at ye, ye cannae even manage to sit still for a spell."

Okay now she was ready for a fight; the kind that got the juices flowing and the blood pumping.

"Allow me? You aren't going to allow me? I don't know who the hell you think you are, but no one allows me to do a damn thing! I will do whatever the hell I please and woe to the asshole who tries to stop me!"

The little speech would have probably been far more effective if he hadn't been cradling her in his arms, or steadily

making his way up the massive curved staircase towards the bedroom they had just vacated a few short hours ago.

Dallas tried desperately to hold on to her righteous indignation, but unfortunately her pussy just wasn't listening, moistening more and more with every step. She found herself rubbing against his suddenly bare skin, anxious to get closer. Hell the suddenly part didn't even bother her as it should have, she was getting used to things appearing and disappearing. She just wished he had made her clothes disappear as well.

By the time he dropped her on the mammoth bed, Dallas was literally panting with anticipation. It was should have been shameful really; she had been intimate with the magnificent creature that was Thane exactly twice, yet her body burned for him. He soul recognized him as her own with a surety that rocked her to her core. These things just didn't happen in real life. The thought that she was really was dead, drowned in the freezing waters of the northern Atlantic crept into her consciousness once more.

"If I have tae tell ye again ye are NAE dead woman, I will be spanking that gorgeous arse but good!"

Dallas blinked up at the gorgeously nude man before her. His skin was all warm looking, sun kissed and smooth. Her tongue darted out to run across her lips as she contemplated his tiny puckered nipples on that perfectly formed chest. Slightly darker from the rest of her body, that area seemed to be calling to her in a personal invitation to taste their wares. Oh, yum ... Wait, she was supposed to mad at him about something wasn't she?

"Can we talk about this later?" She couldn't think straight right now. Not with all that flawless male flesh all in her face.

Thane threw her a wicked grin that did not bode well. Stupid her, she got wetter instead of getting worried. Until, that is, she blinked and found herself wearing nothing but the most scandalous underwear she would have never bought for herself, her hands tied together above her head. There was little point in asking how he did it, being as he was magical and all, but the why started to weigh heavily on her mind.

"Okay, maybe we should talk now."

"Ye donnae seem to kin what the word 'mate' mean, lass."

Thane spoke in a low measured tone, neither showing anger or irritation. That had to be the most irritating thing about him, his failure to get riled. He ran his fingers over the contours of her skin in a lazy manner that didn't match the heat radiating from his eyes. There was no stopping the shiver of anticipation coursing through her body.

"Spread yer legs, lass."

Dallas couldn't really explain why she complied, but she did comply immediately. There was just something in the softly spoken words that inspired instantaneous obedience.

SMACK!

"HOLY SHIT!"

The slap against her pussy was sharp, it stung like a son-of-bitch, yet as the burning heat spread the sting blossomed into a delightful pulsating pleasure she could not even begin to describe. The soft, lingering but closed mouth kiss he placed on her cloth covered cunt helped add to the budding

sensation, making her rock her hips upward. Whether it was for a kiss or another smack, Dallas couldn't begin to say.

"Are ye still thinkin' ye will be going anywhere without me, lass?"

"Uh?" Was he seriously asking her a question that required careful consideration as to how to answer right now?

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

That last one landed just right, sending Dallas over the edge. Her scream was without sound as her body convulsed, her thighs tightening against nothing but air. It might have been an orgasm, but it was one of those exasperating ones that left a girl all needy for more.

"Answer me, Dallas," Thane demanded, running a single finger along her still covered slit.

There was nothing he wanted more than to make the straps of silk disappear, but he needed to lay down some boundaries. They were newly mated; their bond was far too tenuous to let his mate just wander off without him. Even if they had been mated for a hundred years, he still wouldn't have let her go.

The woman she was going to confront tried to kill her. If she thought he would ever allow her to confront them alone—well, she would just have to learn wouldn't she? Nothing under the heavens would ever stop him from taking care of what was his, and she was all his.

"Thane, if you don't get your sweet ass over here and do me now I might have to kill you!"

That's the Dallas he already loved more than life itself even though he was just beginning to know her. Here she

was all tied up and helpless, giving him orders. As much as he would love to oblige, the simple question of who was the man had to be dealt with here.

"I think there is something ye need to be tellin' me, lass." There was no way to keep the aching need out of his voice. His balls were drawn up so tight, he was lightheaded. Submission was not in Dallas' vocabulary, he would never expect her to capitulate that much. But a little give—he had to have that much.

"I am not going anywhere without you!" Dallas spat in his general direction. "Now get your white ass over here! Now!"

With a growl of satisfaction, Thane threw himself at her, making her underwear and binds disappear simultaneously. No sooner than he covered her sweet body than he found himself flat on his back, looking up at the most erotic thing he had ever seen in his life.

Dallas had straddled him so fast, he thought for a second *she* had been using magic. She grabbed his cock in a firm grip, guiding him to exactly where he wanted to be. With a twist of her hips, she was sinking down on him, her head thrown back, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. Damn, that was sexy. Her breasts rose and fell with her heavy pants. Her nipples all taut and erect. Stunning.

Taking a deep breath, Dallas braced her thighs against Thane's and dropped her body down on every inch of his gloriously thick, wonderfully long cock. Sweet merciful heaven, nothing had ever felt so damn good! He stretched her so full she wasn't sure she could contain all of him, but she was going to her best to try. Wiggling to ensure he was

firmly planted, she leaned forward, bracing her hands on his wide shoulders. She had to move cautiously at first, sliding back and forth slowly, allowing their combined juices to lubricate them both for easier movement.

Thane snarled beneath her, but allowed her the freedom to work it the way she wanted to. At least, he did at first. When she began to move faster, her hands moving from his shoulders to his chest to give herself better leverage and allow her to sit up, the massive man began to thrash, bucking up so hard his cock reached her cervix, viciously stabbing her g-spot with such force, there was nothing she could do but hold on for the ride as she came over and over again all over his dick.

"Aye, lass," Thane barked in broken pants, his hands slamming her hips down on him. "Just like that. Come for me, *leannan*."

As if she had a choice in the matter. Her body quaked uncontrollably, not stopping even as Thane flipped them over, placing her legs over his shoulder. He was hammering her so hard, so right, she was starting to see stars.

"Are ye ready for me, lass?" he huffed. "I need to come inside ya, lass."

"Oh, hell yeah!" What a stupid ass question.

With a roar that surely was heard for miles around, he splashed inside her womb, his groin mashing against her clit, sending her into yet another round of hopeless orgasms. Damn, the man was sweet between the sheets.

Snorting with what she supposed was supposed to be laughter, Thane dropped down beside her, pulling her into the

warm shelter of his arms. Oops, she forget he could read her thoughts.

As you can read mine, lass.

Too much trouble, Dallas yawned sleepily, never noticing she had answered him mentally. Now go to sleep. We need to catch an early flight to get to the States before Mae and her cow of a daughter.

Thane smiled into her hair. She was learning.

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Chapter Nine

Dallas tapped her fingers impatiently against the high gleam of the mahogany conference table. Mae and Belle had lost little time. They had apparently decided against reporting her missing the next day after throwing her overboard. Right after dinner, Mae had caused commotion, causing the ship's captain radio in for help to search for her missing niece.

She had to hand it to the older woman. It had been a smart move. The captain had thought Mae's niece had probably hooked up with another passenger. So he had spent the night trying to reassure Mae while sending out a half-hearted search around the ship. When Dallas hadn't turned up after yet another day, they had called for help. Had Thane not saved her, chances where Dallas would have been dead by then.

Mae and Belle had left the ship immediately, returning to Texas to have Dallas officially declared 'Missing' and trying to make a move to take over the estate left to her by her Uncle Mitch. Dallas was sorry she hadn't witnessed the nasty surprise that she had already taken steps to protect her uncle's money from his grasping wife.

Her lawyer had implicate instructions the estate could not be touched by any family member if she was ever declared missing. Her legacy would be managed by her uncle's personal accountant unless or until she was legally declared dead.

In the event she did die before having heirs of her own, the money would be divvied up between a select group of charities. Under no circumstances would a dime ever be seen by her dear 'Aunt' Mae or her cousin Belle.

Why did yer uncle allow that child to be named Belle? Thane's gruff voice sounded inside Dallas' head. *There is nothing beautiful about her.*

Belle could have lived up to her name. She should have lived up to her name. But with her perpetual pouty sour face, she looked like a prune without the wrinkles. Her figure was full and could have been quite appealing if she didn't insist on wearing clothing that did not fit her body type.

For a full grown woman with curves, she was always trying to squeeze into high name fashions designed for women with no discernable shape at all. As a result she tended to look like a very uncomfortable stuffed sausage.

Stop it! It was incredibly hard to concentrate on the business at hand when he kept cracking on the duo on the other side of the table.

It had taken some doing to convince Thane to go to the proper authorities to take care of Mae and Belle. He had wanted to send them to another dimension to be tortured of all of eternity. As much as Dallas detested the two women, that sounded a bit extreme.

Leannan, they tried to kill you! Thane could not figure his woman out. Despite being able to stare death and danger in the face without blinking, Dallas had a soft heart.

Instead of leaving the next morning as Dallas had wanted, they had taken a week getting to know one another. He had

pulled every trick in the book to keep her in the bedroom. Thank the gods his woman was highly responsive. His reasons had been two-fold. He really did want to get to know his intriguing little human better. He also had read her intentions. She really did want to let the proper authorities take care of this despicable woman and her demon spawn. That was not going to happen.

He had had to wait until Dallas was asleep each night before diving into the deep to arrange for a proper sort of punishment. The attempted murder of a selkie's mate was serious business. They were a dying race of beings.

For the Otherworld who had lost so many, such a thing could not be allowed to stand. The council had agreed with Thane wholeheartedly; these two must be made an example to all who dared to mess with the Otherworld. He had no idea who was about to walk through the door of the conference room in which they sat, but he knew they would not be human F.B.I. agents.

As far as Thane was concerned, a mere human jail was too good for the likes of them. Had they succeeded in killing Dallas, he would have been cursed to live a solitary life without a mate. The thought sent a shiver of pure terror down his spine. He could not imagine living a single day without nibbling on those soft lips, or burying himself between those succulent thighs. Stifling a moan, Thane shifted in his seat, trying to hide his growing hard on.

This is not the time or place for that. Dallas had probably meant that to be some kind of rebuke, but Thane detected more than a little desire in her thought. Just to push her

buttons, he purposely projected images from last night. How she had looked to him on her knees, legs spread for his pleasure. *I mean it, Thane* .

"Must we be subjected to this, this *Euro-trash* pawning you? It is bad enough you drug your own family in here like common criminals," Mae sniffed indignantly.

Thane was shocked to see his hand playing in Dallas' hair.

"My fiancé is affectionate," Dallas retorted. "And you didn't act like family when you threw me overboard."

"If you had any evidence of that, we would have been arrested!" Mae snapped. Then obviously remembering she was supposed to be laying the part of the wronged but understanding and loving aunt, she quickly changed her tune. "I mean really, Dallas. You are my niece. Why would I do something so horrid?"

Dallas rolled her eyes at the saccharine tone, but said nothing. She wasn't about to give 'Aunt' Mae the pleasure. The bitch was mad if she thought she was going to get away with what she had done. She didn't bother to let the older woman know she had the upper hand in this game. She much rather watch her sweat it out and let her break down then to let her know what was coming next.

Mae had no idea Dallas didn't ingest any of whatever it was that was in the vial Belle had poured into her wine.

"For all I know," Mae went on, "you met this-this *man* on the ship and conspired with him to frame me ... us."

Dallas felt momentary sympathy for Belle when the girl noted her mother's slip of the tongue with a cringe. *Yeah, your mother cares for no one but herself*, she silently noted.

But then, Belle was a full grown woman. A young one, but a woman nonetheless. She should have known better.

"Why the hell would I do that?" Dallas asked instead of saying anything to Belle. There was no point, she had made her bed.

"Because you knew about the new will?" Belle asked snidely. "You knew Mitch-Daddy hadn't cut us out of his will, but left everything to Mama."

Dallas blinked at the younger woman in absolute awe. The poor thing believed that. Dallas knew for a fact there was no other will. Uncle Mitch hadn't made the will read after his funeral until his last round of chemo hadn't killed the cancer.

"There was no other will, Belle."

"Of course there was!" Mae broke in, grasping her daughter's hand. Her beady eyes darted everywhere but directly at Dallas. "It was found when we finally started clearing Mitch's things-after we returned from the cruise. I could not stay aboard that boat after you disappeared."

"Did you see this will, Belle?" Dallas noted Belle was getting increasingly agitated. More and more interesting.

"Of course she has!" Mae answered for her.

Dallas was about to explore this interesting little development further, but the doors opened and two F.B.I. agents walked in. A buzzing awareness swamped Dallas' brain, the hairs on the back of her neck stood straight up. She was all too aware two things at once; the first was, those were no mere F.B.I. agents, the second was that her 'mate' had some serious explaining to do.

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Chapter Ten

Thane knew he was in trouble. He could practically feel the molten heat of Dallas' anger radiating in waves off her body. Mentally rubbing his hands together in glee, he leaned back with a grin. There were going to be some serious fireworks in the bed tonight.

You are so dead.

No yelling, no screaming, just a softly thought threat. Thane's cock jumped. Dallas was at her most formidable when she was well and truly pissed.

Nae, luv. I am quite alive. More so than he had ever been in a lifetime.

Who, or should I say, what, are they?

Thane glanced at the duo who had walking through the door. Both beings stood about seven feet tall, heavily muscled with fierce expressions. The crone Mae started visible shaking and her cow of a daughter stared slack jawed as the huge men made their way to the table.

They carried themselves like warriors set about a serious task. Although Thane had to admit while he found the situation most serious, he was more than a little unnerved at the two. Not that he would ever admit it. Their physical appearance was meant to inspire fear and trepidation.

Berserkers.

Dallas jerked her narrowed gaze from the two men who looked a hell of lot more like linebackers than F.B.I. agents to her man. Did he just say berserkers? Did such a thing even

exists? *Well of course they do*, she thought to herself. *If seal boy here can exist...*

Woman doona think I will nae spank you right here in front of the old crone and her cow.

One of the men must have caught on to their unspoken conversation. He paused at the head of the conference table, his brow arched as he watched them mentally bicker. Dallas decided right then and there she had had just about enough of the whole mystical being thing.

"Look," she said out loud completely unmoved by the berserkers implicate power. "I don't know who asked you here, but I think we can let the normal human justice system take care of these two." Waving her hand in Mae and Belle's general direction.

"What in world are blabbering about?" Mae demanded. "You brought us here!" Immediately seeing how she might work the situation to her advantage. "Belle!" managing to clutch both her still open mouthed daughter and her chest at the same time, she did a parody of a faint. "That man has done something to her mind! He has brainwashed her. Something is wrong I just know it."

Both men ignored Mae outright, focusing their attention on Thane.

"Your woman is bold."

Dallas would have told the red headed one off, seeing as how he was the one who had spoken, but Thane placed a firm hand on her arm. Not a mental warning, not a word, just one hand. It spoke more than words ever could.

"She is," was his only reply.

Turning their attention back to the other two women, the blonde spoke in a slow measured voice.

"Mae Craig, you have been found guilty of the attempted murder of a selkies's mate. For such a crime, death is too much a mercy for the likes of you. An example must be made. You are hereby banished to the frozen tundra for a thousand years. You will be chained about the neck and exposed to the Elementals. The wind shall whip at your flesh, your blood will run cold, yet you will not die. At the end of your confinement, you will spend a thousand years in the desert plains. Such will be the pattern of your existence forevermore."

The red head turned to Belle. His voice was neither slow nor measured. It was deep and dark, sending a chill through every person in the room. "You will be trained."

"What the hell is going..." Mae never got to finish her sentence. She disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The redhead held out his hand to Belle. "Come."

To Dallas' shock, Belle went. The three walked out of the room just as calmly as you please.

"Thane, I am so going to kick your ass."

Thane smiled, slowly climbing to his feet. "I look forward to it, lass."

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Epilogue

Months later...

Dallas could have sworn she could hear the sea with her head resting on Thane's chiseled chest. She loved it here in the Scottish Highlands. Most of all, she loved it here in her man's arms. His hand idly stroked up and down her cooling flesh, lulling her to sleep.

I'm sorry, Dallas, for what my mother and I did. I hope one day you will forgive me?

Dallas jerked upright in the bed. "Belle? Damn! How could I have forgotten? What the hell happened to Belle?"

Right after her 'cousin' had been escorted out of the F.B.I. conference room, she and Thane had gotten into a heated argument that ended the way all their arguments ended, with her legs in the air and his cock stuffed deep inside her. Right there on the table, until Thane had whisked them back to her apartment.

Thane smiled softly, pulling her back into his arms. "She is fine. She is-reformed."

"You heard it to didn't you?"

"Aye."

"Where is she? Where did they take her? Is she all right?"

"Shhh, lass. The cow is fine. Happy ensconced in Finland with her berserkers."

"Wait, more than one? How come she gets two and she tried to kill me and I only get one?"

"Because lass, I am a thousand regular men. Surely I am two or three berserkers. Ye are blessed."

"You are the most conceited..."

Thane cut her off the only way he knew how. Much, much later, he rolled over, pulling his woman with him. "See, lass? I told you. All the selkie you will ever need."

The End

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A little bit about the author:

www.sharaazod.com

I am a graduate of Trinity University with a B.S. in Business Administration, served in the Navy for four of the most interesting years of my life, and once got arrested in Mexico (wouldn't you love to know why?). I have traveled extensively.

My favorite destination is of course Paris, followed by Bahrain, Hong Kong and Sicily.

I fell in love with romance after reading *The Flame and the Flower* at age 13.

My first attempt at romance was three binders of an ongoing saga of Duran Duran, specifically John, Simon and Roger and myself. I decided to become a writer after I got busted with said notebook, and grounded for the explicit sexual content.

My parents wouldn't believe I had actually never had sex, just read about it. I figured it must have been partly believable.

I married a cowboy from Illinois and have two of the most intelligent, gorgeous children in the world.

I met my husband in Japan, we had our first date in Hawaii, and got married in San Diego. I have lived in Southern California, Chicago, and Sicily and currently reside in the South. I love to hear from fans, so feel free to email.

Peace and Love,

Shara

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Dark Waters Anthology
by Shara Azod, RaeLynn Blue, Aliyah Burke

A Love Reborn

By

RaeLynn Blue

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Chapter One

Kikomo's puffy eyes landed on her father, Cosmo's dark chocolate complexion, ruddy beneath and chapped by the sea's stripping wind. His mouth pulled down at the corners as those same honey brown eyes burrowed into her red-lined and swollen ones. Sorrow swarmed her heart. She rolled her eyes away from his frustrated expression and out the window, where the afternoon's wind licked violently at the waves. A thick misty green hue covered most of the land beyond the beach's shore, but out to the waves, the wind reigned supreme.

Not again, not any more. She silently pleaded to the waters for salvation.

"...I know you loved Takuma, child, aye, even one as blind as I had been about him, can now see your love. But the sea claimed him for herself, as her own. Swallowed up the icy hungry waves of the Aquantis Sea. Ye must be like the seagull and seek other morsels to fill your belly, er, heart..." Comso explained, his usual tone severe.

"No." She winced at the name of her lover, her *dead* lover. She knew her lips formed the words, but she failed to actually hear them. Didn't he know or even bother to understand? Filling her proverbial nets with another man ranked low on her list of duties. He, he *she couldn't think his name, it hurt much too much* satisfied her so completely that his death left a huge hollow emptiness in her being.

The hole where her heart had been continued to weep in anguish. Oh how it paralyzed her with pain, surging suffering every time someone spoke his name or when she thought of him. A blinding, white-hot agony seared through other emotions, leaving only a cold numbness in its wake. Now, months later, the hole festered and seeped misery into her soul, leaving nothing but a husk of her former self.

"Kikomo, child, it's been a year..." Cosmo said softly, grabbing her hands in his calloused ones. "You, you should live, grief is but a hindrance to life."

"I live," she replied, her cadence automatic.

Cosmo squeezed her hands in his damp ones and sighed. His eyes struggled to hold her gaze, and she had already closed them at the burning sting of tears. When she opened her painful lids once more, she saw her father's piercing gaze had not wavered.

"Eating, drinking, sleeping, isn't really living," her father's said, voice heavy with sorrow. "You're breathing, thank the siren, but not living, really, *living*, child. Ye exists. 'Tis not the same."

She continued to look at the gray sea, and she pulled her hands from his sweaty paws and tucked them into her sweater's pockets. The seaside community of Aquatrimon resided just off the Aquantis Sea and even in the warming months, like now, the wind blowing in from the north brought chilly breezes and cool evenings. Since *his* death, Kikomo never felt warm, not even with several layers of blankets or thick sheep's wool sweaters. She'd stop believing she'd ever feel again.

"No, papa. 'Tis not the same, not any longer."

Yes, that one came out a little more audible than the last.

"Yes," Cosmo yelled, his hands in the tufts of white hair.

The grayish white splattered afro circled his head like the fog rolling in from the dark, morning waters to the shore. "Damn the sirens, Kikomo! Takuma is dead! I'll not lose my only daughter to a no good..."

"Don't."

She raised one finger and pinned her father with her glare. That one single word weld so much fury, Cosmo fell silent, his mouth gasping at the expression on her face. His smoky eyes flitted about her face, struggling to understand, but he didn't. He couldn't.

Her mother's death had occurred so long ago, her father's heart had long since stopped feeling anything, to which Kikomo could identify. Perhaps that is why her father struggled and clawed at her to open her heart to someone else. What he had forgotten in the long years since her mother's death was that Kikomo had no heart to give to anyone. Where hers once sat, full and happy, beating gleefully to the sweetness of *his* voice, sat only a weeping hole of her grief.

"Don't speak ill of, of *him*. I won't listen to it," she said, aware of how shrilly the words resounded in the space. Pushing her wooden chair back and slowly getting to her bare feet, Kikomo tossed her raven braid over her shoulder. The screeching of the chair's legs against the floor made her teeth chatter. "I won't listen to it!"

Her heart pounded out her fear, her torment as her father leaned across the table and snatched her hands tightly in his. His chair crashed to the floor in the violence of his movement. He invaded her personal space and bellowed, "You can't even say his name!"

Gesturing to the kitchen window with his chin, where the choppy waves danced about.

"Aye, he be gone, Kikomo. GONE! Say his name; be done with him. Takuma! Say it. Takuma is dead!"

Kikomo trembled, but she folded her arms over her chest in defense. The hole in her torso flamed in irritation, burning distress through her body. She squeezed her eyes shut and the world swayed. By the siren's call couldn't he leave her be? She harmed no one, performed her chores, and greeted those who greeted her. Why was her father assaulting her with his will?

"Kikomo! Kikomo!" Cosmo yelled, but it sounded so far away, down the long corridor and beneath the icy waters of the sea.

Takuma's grin melted her at her deepest core. White teeth shone against the tanned golden brown of his sinewy body, Takuma's dark hair surfed the breeze and whipped about his angular face as if hungry to touch him. Each strand continued to lick with enthusiasm. The boat's gentle way rocked her into his arms. He beckoned to her with his lips, puckering and waiting, holding the position for her lips and with his smooth fingers, he lifted her mouth to his and locked on with starved fervor.

Oh, how wonderful his lips felt latched onto hers. Weak, her body collapsed into his, falling ever further into love with him. When at last she pulled back, Kikomo sighed in bliss. Her dark skin lay pressed against the lighter, recently tanned brown of his and the contrast stirred a deep resounding hum inside of her. His normal olive skin had been kissed by the sun's rays often from his many days upon the sea.

"Aye, Kikomo, the air smells of rain and of you," he said, rubbing his nose against hers in affection before pulling back. He playfully kissed her ear, tickling her. "I have something I must tell you."

The playful smirk continued to flint around his lips. The wind whipped up and tossed his raven strands about, making him look the golden god of the sun-stripped sand sea. His voice sowed the seeds of hope in her heart and she popped up from her seat on the boat's polished deck and kissed him. Brown eyes sparking, he put his hands on his hips, lacking a shirt, his body glistened in the water's spray as their boat skipped across the waters.

Shroud in the refreshing breeze, Kikomo stood close to him, inhaling him in deep breaths and sighs. She tucked a rogue curl behind her ear and met his almond-shaped eyes with expectation riding her heart and her pulse racing with the boat.

"What has you smiling like a shark who's stolen a meal from the shore?"

"You, always you," he replied, grinning at her. "No one else makes me so happy as to smile like this."

The waves grew more urgent, but he seemed not to notice. He got down on both knees, kneeling before her. He lowered his face to the sea washed wood and kissed the ground before her, paying respect to her.

No, she couldn't believe it. This formal act of respect only happened before weddings and funerals, before...

"On this day before Trigon and his hundred nymphs, I ask you, Kikomo Aguilera, to be my bride, my wife, my mate for this life and beyond. Will thee be my shipmate for eternity?" Takuma asked, the dampness turning his hair into a black lacquered with midnight slick against his tanned flesh. His honey brown eyes met hers in earnest and he beamed, but hesitation hovered behind those beautiful eyes. "Kikomo?"

"Yes!" she squealed, leaping toward him. He shot upward to a standing position in time to catch her in his embrace. Stumbling as the boat's rhythm rose to rocky, Takuma managed to spin Kikomo around in his arms. "Yes! Takuma, I will love thee for this life and beyond! Forever!"

The word seemed wholly inadequate for the budding joy spreading throughout her spirit and her body. Nothing could ever capture the zeal coursing through her. She locked her arms tight around his muscular neck and held on tight as he spun her around, laughter spilling from him like crabs from their cages—hurried and with great, startled excitement.

"Yes!" he shouted, carefully placing her down. "I love you."

"And I do you as well," she replied, her eyes closing as she drifted closer to him for yet another kiss. Her heart soared like birds above the sea. Now if she could convince her father

to extend his blessings to her fisherman lover, her life would indeed be bliss.

"Cosmo won't like it," Takuma whispered against her ear, as if reading her mind.

"I don't care what he likes," she said fervently. She clutched him tight to her body and whispered as his lips came with a breath of hers. "Takuma, this is such delightful news. I, I..."

Whatever she had wanted to say was swallowed up by his hunger. Greedy lips latched over hers and sucked her tongue free of its cavern. Massaged and stroked by his blunt tongue, hers soared with a rival yearning all her own. She snatched a fistful of his hair into her hands, noting how soaked they'd become and drew him closer to her still, allowing their mouths to meld together in a mesh of insatiable need.

When they parted, panting and grinning at the other, Kikomo stumbled from the boat's brief leap into the air. Tossed about by the now rolling waves, she grabbed the sail's mast.

The craft's more pronounced sway failed to dislodge Takuma from the starboard. Nor could the approaching dark angry line of the storm clouds seeping in from the northern part of the open sea displace his infectious smile.

"Your father will be furious, but I'll ask for his blessings as is custom."

The tiny tickle of amusement drained away as worry fed into those words. Takuma's eyes had cut to the sky where a shadow fell over them.

"Let's head back," Takuma said, all hints of glee gone. In his face where amusement had softened his sun kissed features, now a stern visage of determination aged him. "This is going to get ugly."

An experienced fisherman, he understood the sea's moodiness. Still, Kikomo couldn't displace the feelings this had caught him off guard. He hadn't expected the gale to rage in so quickly. Perhaps he hadn't anticipated staying so long with her. She didn't know.

She would never be able to ask him.

"Get below!" he shouted, the wind stole the rest of his words. Plucking them from his mouth as if sweets for a child, it swallowed them without hesitation.

"Not without you!" she screamed, scrambling to get to him, not tying herself to something solid. She didn't care about her safety if Takuma remained above deck, she would as well.

"Get below! Tie down!" he shouted, his voice again swept away like sand from someone's foot.

Kikomo ignored him and remained on the starboard, watching him maneuver the sail, against the squall assaulting them with its whip like rain. She struggled to keep from being swept overboard. She wrapped her arms through the two u-shaped iron anchors on the deck used for tying the boat to shore.

Takuma staggered, slipped, and fell often, but he fought on, playing a tug of war with the wind and rain.

A war the sirens had destined he would lose.

The rolling black mass hit without slowing down to drop in waves. Tossing the boat like a toy in its huge waves, Kikomo was tossed from side to side. Enormous waves leapt over the sides and crashed into their sailboat, and into her.

Takuma's hair looked like an eel crawling the length of his back, but he heard her screams not. He glanced over his shoulder, perhaps feeling her eyes, or checking on her well being, Kikomo didn't know, but she could see him still, a statue against the storm, almond-shaped eyes merely slits in his serious expression. The boat's bow canted up into the face of a ferocious wave, but he dragged the sails, trying to position them to ride with the wind instead of against.

"Kikomo, get below!" he ordered yet again.

"No! Not bef—" the force of the wind punched the breath from her lungs.

She gasped just before he threw his arms up to protect himself from the crest of a humongous wave, which broke and thundered over the side of the sailboat. It smashed into him, blowing him backward and over into the sea.

He was there.

And then he simply wasn't.

"Takuma!" Kikomo screamed but it was sliced off by the salt water washing into her mouth and filling her lungs. She reached outward to him and tons of water knocked her hard against the mast.

And into blackness ... a cold, numbing dark, to which even when she awoke, would remain like tar over her heart.

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"Takuma!" she shouted, voice straining against the salt water lodged inside her mouth, her lungs, her body.

"Takuma!"

No reply. Only the roaring rush of wind and rain, water and whispers of love left unfulfilled.

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Chapter Two

"Kikomo! Kikomo!"

Kikomo smiled as she heard *his* sweet voice call to her. It rang in soft, velvety echoes through her mind, reverberating through her soul. Bless the sirens, she *loved* this man.

The boat was drawn to its right, nearly rolled over into the sea, say it wasn't for Takuma's steering. She would have been tossed into the sea after him. He'd saved her.

"Kikomo!" Cosmo's gravel voice bellowed, blowing apart her tormented slumber. "Wake child! Wake! Odell, I'm going to ring the celestial siren if she doesn't come to in a moment."

But I am awake.

"Give her a moment more," came the coarse bark of Odell Waler, village merchant of fish and sea goods and her most recent suitor. If he sat with her father now, it meant the evening had come and supper had yet to be supplied. Everyone in the village discussed how Odell had sought her hand in marriage and would tonight ask her father to bless their union.

Kikomo burrowed further against her father's warmth and his embrace. Somehow she had ended up on the kitchen floor. The warm terracotta tile met her feet and her father's soft pot belly cushioned her like a great pillow. Saddened to be parted from *him*, Kikomo didn't want to think about his death again or relive it. If she opened her eyes to the reality of the pockmarked and smelly Odell, suitor of slime, she

would go screaming from the cottage. He frightened her more than her nightmare of *his* death.

"Wake, Kikomo, or I will call for the siren," Cosmo said, without threat or anger. Weariness saturated his voice and tone, weighing it down until it rumbled like a far off thunderstorm.

There's little choice now, is there? The siren would sing her awake or into madness. Somehow the woman could never be sure.

"No!" Kikomo bolted upright, scrambling to a sitting position. "No!"

Cosmo sat back on his heels and gave her a small smile as if he'd known all along how long she'd been awake. Almost apologetic, Cosmo shifted his eyes to Odell, who stood over her, gazing down at her with his beady black eyes.

"You remember Odell's visit tonight. No?" Cosmo said, grunting as he got to his feet. He patted the equally wide and nearly as old gentleman with a soft one, two pats on the back. "Yet, he be kind enough to wait for you wake."

"Thank you," she said to Odell, bowing at the waist.

"It no consequence," he said, licking his fat lips as if he meant to taste her. Large nostrils flaring, he glared down at her as if he meant to devour her and toss her bones to the heaps. "I am a kind man, a wealthy one, and a considerate man. As you will find out, beautiful Kikomo."

Feeling exposed, she clutched her gown's opening to bar his inquisitive eyes from scurrying further down her bosom. She managed to suppress the shudders racing through in repulsion. Instead she bowed again, excused herself and

disappeared into the rear rooms of the cottage in the guise of refreshing herself for supper.

She'd already made the stew and baked the bread hours ago, when the day was still cool. All that remained was a reheating of the stew and the setting of the table. Her father had forced her to clean the floors, for if Odell wanted her hand, he had to ask formally just as he, *he* had done on board that sailboat a year ago.

She rinsed her face in the porcelain basin in her room, pouring in the water from a pitcher. The cool liquid rinsed off any remaining residue of her nightmare about *him*. Still no amount of water would ever be able to rinse the black grief staining the hole in her chest, making it ache and leak out her unhappiness, as it did now. Moving as if through thick wet sand, Kikomo changed her dress to something formal and light for the supper. As the mayor of Aquatrion, Cosmo and his family held the respect of the people, but it also fell to them to uphold customs and traditions. A chore Kikomo despised.

She wrapped her now loose brunette curls up into a series of falling waves, like a waterfall. Dipping a thin wooden needle into a vase of water where dozens of flowers floated and mixed their scents, she applied the scented solution to her neck, behind her ears and at each wrist. Adorned with a bracelet of pearls and a necklace of a single shell, *all gifts from him*, she stood unwilling to meet her fate.

I am hardly ready for such a life as one married to Odell the awful. I would walk headlong into the sea if it meant I would be with him, but the sirens forbid slaying oneself. In

doing so, I would go to the darkest depths and I am sure he is not amongst those lost souls. Even in death I would not be with him. So, here I must do this. Marry this misery and perhaps die in child birth, and be sped straight away to you, Tak—

Her mind locked down and the room swam as she tittered at the edge of losing it. Her hand managed to slap down on her bed's post and she grabbed the smooth surface for dear life. The surging anguish in her chest nearly forced her knees to buckle. Gasping and panting she clutched her chest and begged for the torment to pass.

"Kikomo, it's time for supper to begin," called Cosmo as he peeked into her room. "Kikomo!"

He hurried to her, and guided her to the bed.

"What ails ye? You're as sickly green as the moss on the rocks!" he muttered, feeling her head and wiping the sweat from her face. "Ye, speak."

"I, I'm fine," she croaked. "Fine."

"Ye not been fine for a year," he mumbled, hugging her tight. "Odell is a good man. A bit older than ye, but a good provider. Other women in the village talk about what a wondrous catch the man is..."

"Yes, father," she retorted with all the enthusiasm of being chained and sacrificed to the Kraken.

He moved her to a sitting position and looked her square in the eyes.

"I know he ain't what ye wanted," he said, eyes watering and glistening with unshed tears. "Ye don't think I want for

you want me and your momma had? I do, Kikomo, I do. But he's gone, child. Like ye momma, into the endless sleep."

She nodded, not wanting to debate it with him anymore and not wanting him to say *his* name again. Only now had the pain of her nearly thinking *his* name begun to recede a little. The hole rimmed in dark grief continued to seep its anguish out into every living part of her person.

You never married after her death, and yet you expect me to marry this man out of obligation.

He seemed to sense her thoughts because he rubbed her arms.

"Do not be like me, child, alone and foolish," he said, not meeting her eyes now. Something in the woven rug held his interests, though perhaps he saw his life in retrospect cast upon its many color. "Lonely and having let life leave me when she did. Do not make mistakes I did. Live, Kikomo. Life is worth living, even when something horrid happens to ye."

Kikomo held her peace. Saying anything contrary would upset the nets and she didn't want that again tonight. This confession was new to her and she peered at her father with new eyes. Had he regretted not marrying after her mother's death? It sure sounded like it, but were these words to cajole her into marrying Odell, or were they authentic?

She knew not.

"I, I only want what's best for you, Kikomo," Cosmo said, kissing her cheek and leaning back. "Odell is good."

Not best, though father? Only good.

"Thank you, father," she said sweetly, and kissed him in return on his cheek. Even to her ears the hollowness rang like

a bell through to the other side of the island. Surely he heard the false ring, the clatter clang of the lack of sincerity. Seems neither of them was willing to put aside the masks they'd worn for the last year and talk honestly. Would he even be able to hear her if she had been ready to speak of her heart's great wound that never healed? Could she discuss his equally painful loss and how he managed? No, she thought not. But then, her father had always heard only the roaring of the sea in his ears and the laughter of his wife, too long since departed for her own bedding at the great resting place at the edge of the world.

"Come," her father said gently, helping her to her feet. "Odell and a delicious supper are waiting."

She rose with him and forced the smile she didn't feel onto her face.

"Ye look delightful, child," he said warmly.

"Thank you, father."

She bowed.

The circle of loss in her chest continued to rotate in anguish each step she took toward the kitchen. Seated like a walrus stuffed into a chair sat Odell Waler, his gruff sun burnt face stony as she entered. Once he saw her, the cracked lips broke into what he must have thought was a smile.

He labored to his feet and patted his overlapping belly.

"Ah, you did refresh," he said, rubbing his stomach. "And you look most divine."

"Thank you," she said, feeling as though she would never speak anything else again, she added, "It gives our family great honor that you have come to dine with us this evening."

She spied a small smile on her father's face. Yes, that made him happy.

"Kikomo is a wondrous cook, Odell," her father added, moving to the stove. "She makes a succulent stew. It includes everyday items such as kale and shrimp, but there's something special she adds to it. She won't tell me what..."

"My mother's secret," Kikomo explained, drawing another smile from her father. If she couldn't be glad tonight, she could at least attempt to be the daughter her father wanted her to be. At least for tonight, because come morning, her life would be on a one way passage to hell. Bless the sirens, it would be, and she'd be powerless to stop it. "I cannot reveal it on penalty of death."

Odell snorted and her father cast her a curious scowl. He erased it before getting the wooden bowls from the cabinet and placing them on the table. She hurried to catch up with him and finish placing the napkins, the spoons, and the mugs of ale. Water being her drink of choice, she picked the chair closest to the door and to her father. She placed her mug there. The middle chair she had set as her father's and Odell opposite her, but at the other end of the table. She could bear to watch him eat, but she could not bear for him to touch her.

Scooping the stew into the bowls, she sat them each down in the respective spots.

I may be saved yet from this supper and this wretched fate.

"Oy, Odell, sit next to Kikomo," her father said jovially. "I am sure ye have much to discuss."

Kikomo sank into her seat, a stone in her stomach. She hadn't wanted to be anywhere close to Odell. Something about the way he leered at her made her flesh crawl about like crabs. Nothing to be done as Odell shot her a wide, open grin and plopped down in the chair beside her. He leaned forward on their ancient table. The wood moaned under his girth, and she had to look away from the layers of excess bulging beneath his clothes.

"Smells heavenly," Odell said, and began to shove in spoonful after hot spoonful into his mouth. At times he pudgy fingers bumped the spoon and it dribbled down his many chins or splattered across the corners of his mouth. He neither reached for, nor used his napkin. "Delicious."

All right. I cannot watch him eat. Kikomo's stomach boiled in hot nausea. She closed her eyes and when she opened them, she kept them steady on her own bowl of stew. The slurping and guzzling noises of the man beside her told her plenty about him.

"I do love a good cook," Odell proclaimed.

"She is quite the baker too," her father declared as if discussing the attributes of a new boat.

Kikomo burrowed further into the numbness. Her life before had drifted into the background of this wretched reality and she clawed her way mentally back to the time when her happiness knew no limit and each day beckoned with another surprise. Returning to these memories upped the sharp pain in her chest and as the tears stung her eyes, she swallowed the mouthful of stew with difficulty.

They talked about her as if she had left the room.

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And for most of the meal, she pretended she had.

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Chapter Three

That is until Kikomo felt the first fat calloused finger drift lightly over her thigh, skirting the thin fabric as if it belonged amongst the folds of her dress.

She swatted the digit with fury nearly blinding her, not fully realizing it was a finger and not say a garden snake gliding across her thigh until the porky plunderer to her right barked out an "Ow".

"Ow!" Odell exclaimed again, sucking the finger between his blubbery lips. Face flushed from either the soup's heat or the actions, he blew out a fast, hot breath. A wet smack accompanied the finger's exit.

"Ye all right there?" her father asked, rising up from his seat, concern staining his weather features. He shot Odell a smirk. "Sometime in this heat we get a few spiders scuttling in for cover from the storms. Couple of snakes, a few biters, too."

Odell gave him a greasy grin and said, "No, no, I bit my tongue that's all. I'm fine."

Her father laughed and sat down again in his chair. In moments, his spoon brimmed with stew and he ate heartily once more. The matter apparently forgotten. "Ye already on your third bowl, Odell. Ye may need to take ye time with this one, and not chew through ye cheeks."

Odell forced a laugh. "Yes, of course."

Satisfied that all was well, her father started again about the low count of fish in the sea this season and the cost to the

village in regards to trading with the neighboring landlocked villages further up toward the north. They depended on trade with them for other foods, supplies, and goods.

But it seemed Odell wasn't quite satisfied.

He grabbed Kikomo's thigh under the table in a vice-like grip and squeezed. With his eyes locked on to hers, he dared her to scream. If she did, she'd have to explain to her father his guest's roaming paws.

Would he believe her or him? She wouldn't put him in that position. Not with the wealthiest merchant in town at their home, but then Odell probably knew that too. He understood the power his money brought him and somehow he had confused that power with having his way with her.

"Father, I, I do not feel well," Kikomo explained, pleading with her eyes for her father to help. "Father, please, may I be excused."

Old enough to occupy her own cottage, Kikomo could've left the table, but formality required she adhere to traditions. As long as she lived with her father, she had to obey his rulings and governing without argument or debate. Hence why she had to ask to be excused from the kitchen table.

He stopped talking and frowned. "Again with the fainting? Or is it something else?" Both bushy eyebrows rose in question.

"I feel ill," she explained, tensely, shoving her bowl away from her. "Very ill."

"Ye gonna make me call forth the siren, Kikomo," he warned, pointing at her with his wooden spoon. "She can read the scrolls of the flesh, child. No lies."

"No lies, father," she whispered, feeling more and more sickened by the second as Odell's hand inched up her thigh.

Beneath the table's protection, Odell's fingers shoved upward into her crotch and proceeded to try to stroke her most intimate love button. She swallowed the squeal of disgust back down into her stomach and smacked his hand again, the impact muffled by the thick wooden table. He snatched her hand into his, and jerked her roughly forward. She bumped against the table's edge. It appeared to her father she really was about to blow chunks of stew onto the table and his guest.

"Kikomo, if ye are certain ye don't feel well, then go lie down," her father said, his eyes still narrowed in suspicion. "Bid Odell farewell."

Revolted, Kikomo's hand was pressed against a raging monster of an erection. Odell had placed her hand there and held it as she tried to yank it free. The stony phallus bulged as if excited by her touch. She couldn't release her palm from his steel grasp. Appalled and disgusted, she opened her mouth to scream for deliverance, when Odell suddenly let go.

Her father caught part of Odell's actions and asked, "Odell, are ye all right. Ye seem to be touching ye stomach there. Does it hurt? I can call up a siren or the soother."

"No, no, thank you for your concern," Odell said smoothly and he coughed out a rattling bit of phlegm. "I am adjusting my shirt as the meal was more than wonderful. If I keep eating like this, what will I wear? It was delightful, wasn't it, Kikomo? Impressed?"

"Ill," she retorted coldly, meeting his mean little eyes.

Never in her entire life had anyone violated her in such a vile manner. As if he had already owned her body. That's what he thought of marriage. As a vehicle to manipulate and use her body as he saw fit? Yes, she saw the answer in his pit-like eyes as they roamed over body, undressing her with cold hunger.

She stood, knocking her chair over with the speed in which she got up. Though she longed to run from Odell's evil eyes, she had to keep her composure. Battling back the urge to stab him in one of his many chins, she straightened her back, met his gaze, and said, "Father, I am going to rest."

"Good evening, Kikomo," Odell said, waddling to his feet, perhaps not liking how she towered over him. "May the siren's song serenade you into sweet slumber."

"I bid thee fare well in all your journeys," she said, but then lower so that only he could hear. "To hell."

Odell coughed, and covered his mouth with his napkin, but his eyes met hers. They twinkled as if he found her anger amusing.

"May the siren's song serenade ye to slumber, child," her father said, kissing her cheek as she bent down for the ritual. "If ye are no better come the morrow, I will call the soother."

"Sounds good, father," she said and without looking back stalked from the kitchen.

Her entire body quivering, she headed down the short hallway and paused. Her father's voice silent before resuming its normal cadence. He hadn't suspected anything and that scared her the most.

Odell had fooled him.

She couldn't even blame Odell's actions on drunkenness. He hadn't touched his ale, only the stew. He liked to keep control, no doubt. Ale would loosen his tongue and his inhibitions as it did all men.

Another shudder shot through her as she thought of Odell without inhibitions.

The feel of his porky fingers on her crotch sent shudders of revulsion through her and she ran then, out the cottage's side door and into the full moon lit night.

Tears blurred her vision, disgust propelled her forward, but she ran, stumbling over jutting rocks and loose kale, through brush and beach to the sea. When at last she came to the area of the sea sectioned off by a series of rock formations behind her cottage, she climbed upon one of the rocks closest to the waters.

She bent forward on her knees, watching her reflection ripple across the dark surface as she'd done many times before. As calm as a millpond, the waters, the fury to which she capped in the kitchen erupted from inside her. The huge hole heaped rolling wave after wave of torment through her eyes, shoving tears into the tranquil pool.

"You took *him* from me! Only to give me the fat walrus with too many hands!" she screamed at the water, at the sea, at the sirens who had sung Takuma's slumber song much too soon. "Why? Why?"

As his name flashed across her mind, she wept with bitter, harsh suffering, grief ripping across the temporary scabs on her spirit. Flaming anew, the tears fell into the water, seven

in all, before she rolled onto her back and pulled her legs up to her chest.

"Takuma!" she howled to the full moon's reflection drifting along the surface, a pale disk floating on inky waters.

"Takuma!"

Kikomo's anguish forced her to roll into a ball across the rock's flat surface. She rocked herself back and forth, wishing for his arms to hold her again, and knowing by the seeping grief, he was no more.

A rushing of water caught her ear and she bolted upright. She gazed down a few short feet to the water's edge where a beautiful seal slid forward onto the sandy beach. It flapped around and Kikomo, hole's ache receded a bit. It twisted around to gaze back at the sea as if pondering how it had come to be on land.

"Are you lost, fella?" she asked, temporarily forgetting her pain and climbing down from the rock.

She made her way down to the beach and slowly approached the seal. Now that she was closer, she noted how it hadn't beached itself, and could easily glide back into the sea. She didn't come too close for she didn't want to startle it. Her feet met wet sand and she figured she'd gone far enough.

"That's home," she said gently, smiling at its kind, bottomless eyes and the way it wiggled its whiskers at her.

"That way."

She pointed out to the tranquil sea.

"Home."

The seal twisted this way and that as if unsure of which direction to go. From the tepid, waist deep waters a mist

licked it way onto shore and the seal was soon enveloped by it.

Strange, there are no clouds and no hint of fog prior to this.

The thick heady mist dissipated as soon as it arrived, or so it seemed to Kikomo.

"Home, you cute thing, is that way," Kikomo said to the spot where the seal had been.

"Home is wherever you are," came a voice through the thinning grayness that sounded much too much like *his*.

The sheer beauty of *his* voice couldn't be copied or duplicated in any way. Not even the sirens could mimic it to the point where she would mistake the copy as his.

"Kikomo," called the voice again and her heart stopped. So did the endless ache of loss rotating in spirals around the hole in her torso. The spot where her flourishing love for Takuma had once been.

"No," she whispered as the last strands of mist vanished. "By the sirens..."

Takuma stood naked beneath the moon's full radiance. Takuma's body glistened beneath the pale moonlight's kiss. Droplets gleamed like gems along his skin. Twinkling and taunting Kikomo to come taste the salt mixed buds from his flesh. Those long nipples beckoned, catching her traveling gaze and holding it captive. Her mouth twitched at the thought of planting her lips over them once more.

He smiled at her. Folded over his arm, a silvery skin of spotted black glistened. His dazzling strands sparkled beneath the moonlight, but his eyes, they held Kikomo fast.

For they held the same bottomless beauty as the seal's.
"It cannot be."

She reached for him, and her hands trembled. Her quivering caused her words to wobble.

"Yet it is," he said and stepped toward her, eyes already aflame with heat. "It is I, Takuma, Kikomo, your husband-in-waiting."

"Takuma?" she whispered too afraid to believe, but wanting with all her being to accept this unearthly illusion as truth. "'Tis truly you?"

"Yes."

Every fiber of her body called out to him in familiar acquaintance. His flat tongue's blunt bumps against her little furnace fire between her legs, those warm, rough hands squeezing her breasts, and rolling her nipples between his thick fingers and thumb, and his sweet, salt brushed lips dropping kisses up and down her abdomen, all this and more did her body rise forward to experience again.

Yes, this was her love, Takuma.

Before she could gasp his name, he closed the space between them in three long strides.

In a second she'd been scooped up into his arms and his lips once more latched over hers. Heaven had been set upon the earth and for this moment, Kikomo let go and gave into the rush of love pouring from him.

"Oh, Takuma, oh, bless the sirens," she bemoaned into his hairless chest, feeling the recognizable hard muscles beneath his skin flex and shift as he moved.

"Kikomo, I have missed you these long months in the sea," he said, his words like silk against her ear, making her nipples tighten and her hunger grow damp between her legs.

All doubts disintegrated beneath the roaring fire Takuma's stroking hands caused inside of her. This was him all right and Kikomo wouldn't let him go again.

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Chapter Four

Aye, she could ask a million questions, but she does not. She stares at me with her eyes at half mast, those pillowy, perfect lips wet with anticipation, awaiting mine again, as before, as it shall always be...

Takuma's mind raced ahead in a score of thoughts, but once Kikomo pressed her smooth, dark hand against his chest, his heart leapt and all those whispered words of worry receded into the locked box to which they'd come. She accepted him, as if he'd never gone away, without fear and without question.

This action, this love, he could never repay, but would cherish forever.

He lay he pelt beside his feet, and guided Kikomo down to the sand, a bit back from the lapping water's reach. On his knees, he gazed up at the beauty to which he longed to spend eternity beside.

Her arms' smooth, richly brown skin had been graciously left uncovered. The dress she wore revealed the swell of her breasts, rich coconuts pressed tightly together as if an offering to him, and the fabric's fall spotlighted every dangerous curve. Kikomo's body reminded him of the treacherous round at the edge of the bay, where many a ships, if their captains judged too poorly, may meet the sirens sooner than expected.

Many of the village found her strange, darker skin a bit off putting, and when her hair was loosened from its braid, it

blossomed into a halo of hair so curly they seemed like smoke. He loved losing his hands in it and as he wrapped his arms around her narrow waist, they glided upwards toward her braid. She dropped her head back, and shook it a bit, knowing what he desired and giving it to him.

"I have missed you," she breathed, gasping as his hands smacked her ass.

"And I you," he said in a hush back, his throat thick with lust, he coughed to clear the hunger. It didn't work. "Kikomo, come here."

She dropped to her knees in front of him, and leaned in to kiss him once more. They had been lovers prior to his, departure, and as lovers, she knew him, intimately as he her. She pressed her pelvis against his stony phallus and he moaned while still kissing her. She hummed in response, parting her legs to allow for his naked member to press further into her dress's gauzy fabric.

His fingers snaked around the back of her neck and gently tickled the hairs there. She released a sigh and allowed her own fingers to scamper across his torso, flicking his nipples and forcing his already stiff cock to hardened more with need. She smelled of flowers and fresh baked bread. He guided her gently to him, and his hands lifted the dress up, up, and over her head. She smiled at him for now she too was nude beneath the moon's watery light.

By the sirens, she's so stunning. She rivals even the loveliest of nymphs. And she is here for my love. I am undeserving...

"Takuma," she breathed, her eyes closed.

She wrapped on soft, delicate hand around his cock and he felt the entire air whoosh from his lungs. In slow, deliciously slow actions, her hand glided up and down his shaft. As if he needed more stimulation, as if her beauty and love weren't stirring enough.

"Kikomo," he replied, and together they lay side by side onto the sand.

He no longer felt the grit and dampness, nor the heard the cool lapping of the water. All he saw was the storm gray eyes and the way her bottom lip slipped between her teeth when aroused. He bent down and sucked a nipple into his mouth, relishing how hard the pebbled peak had become. Flicking it with his tongue, Takuma teased little moans from Kikomo, and they turned to music in his ear.

She scratched her nails across his back, rousing his lust to spike. He took her other breasts into his mouth, giving the other manual stimulation from his hand. By the sirens, he wanted to take his time, to love her as one would if he had all the time in the world, but he did not. He had until the sun crested over the horizon before he had to be back into the sea.

"Yes, yes, please," she pleaded into his hair, to which she'd planted one of her hands. "Takuma, love me."

He removed his mouth from her nipple.

"I do."

She pushed her brown fuzzy pussy want against his cock and he sucked in air to keep from plowing his member into her heat well. It had been a year and loving her would have to be slow. He had to stay focused on not hurting her, or

injuring her in anyway. With tenderness, he lifted her sexy, long leg, bending it at the knee. Automatically, she clasped her hand around her knee, keeping it elevated. Her eyes remained closed and she licked her lips anxiously.

"Do you know how truly sexy you are right now?" he asked, aware of the awe in his tone.

Those creamy brown lids rose a tiny bit and she said, "No."

"Let me show you just how incredible you are, to me, Kikomo."

He steered his phallus that was weeping anxiously to the moist heat coming from beneath fluff of dark curly hair. Despite the wickedly dim light, he knew his spot, for he'd been here often. She opened up to him readily, greedily and arced forward so that his cock slid all the way inside her without the unhurried manner to which he had planned.

"Ah, Kikomo!"

She released an "ahhh" of her own and he swept the lead from her, setting the pace. If he allowed her to continue to control their speed, he'd break within minutes and that was too soon. Much too soon for his taste, for he had until dawn and he planned to use every second of it.

"Look at me, Kikomo," he demanded, his ecstasy nearly stealing his ability to speak words.

She lay on her side, facing him, matching his thrusts with her own forward rocking. When her eyes slid open, he found such sensual longings and pleasure pouring from her his cock grew longer inside her and his hips thrust faster. She held his gaze and they stared into each other's eyes, never wavering, as they made love.

The look boosted his desire to please her and each time the approaching wave of their pinnacle threatened, he'd slow down, prolonging her pleasure, her torment, and her peaking. Not only hers, but his as well, and once his balls began to ache from the constant pressure, he leaned forward and drew her lips to his. He closed his eyes out of habit.

The deep kiss seemed to wrench his soul from its long lost place of darkness, out into the light of her undying love. His body faded into enormous pleasure to which he'd ever experienced before. When he opened his eyes to the gorgeousness in front of him, Kikomo's eyes had remained open, and her legs still folded and held high.

"I, I, cannot, please, Takuma, please," she whispered, one hand rubbing her taunt nipple over and over again.

"Takuma..."

"Yes," he answered, knowing what she wanted, and desiring it too. "Let's ride the wave together."

"Yes," she hissed as her hips held on and matched his cadence.

Faster, faster, harder, deeper, he plunged and she followed until they both shrieked. Bodies tensed when the hot flames of lust erupted across their flesh, searing their mutual affection and love into place once again. Takuma quivered in the aftermath of his erupting seed, spilling within her hot cavern. Greedily her muscles pillaged his phallus of its pleasure package.

"Takuma," she purred rolling into his arms, and locking her leg around his waist. Still inside, her cock throbbed in contentment. "I love you."

"And I you," he said, kissing her forehead, her eyelids, her nose, its tip, and her mouth.

She coiled beside him, her eyes drifting downward and stifling a yawn.

Drowsily, she asked, "Don't leave me. You won't go?"

He sighed. *This is what I have dared not speak of, Kikomo. Still, you must know before dawn. Confusion breeds misery and you've had your fill of that.*

"Takuma?" the question in her voice an ice pick against his heart. "Did you hear?"

"Yes," he said quietly, rubbing her back in soothing circles. Drawing breath to reply seemed to take all the remaining strength he had. "Kikomo, I must leave at dawn."

She raised her head then, eyes wide open, sleep chased off by her fear. Wide eye, the flaring her nostrils did, the twitch of disbelief at her lips, oh, yes, Kikomo was afraid.

"At dawn. Why?" Tears unshed, but springing up from her sorrow caused her eyes to glisten.

"Please," he said, kissing her cheeks. "Do not weep. I shall return each night to you, but during the day I must return to the sea. As this is a full night, your sorrow of seven tears has called me forth from the sea. Yet, that is where I must now reside," Takuma explained, attempting to answer and erase the frown on her lovely face.

"Why? You're here now," she asked, the scowl deepening instead of lifting. Sitting up in a dispirited slump, she asked. "Don't you love me?"

"With all the heart I still possess," Takuma said, "I love you. I am selkie now."

Selkie. Even as he spoke it, his hand shot forward, behind Kikomo, to the black and silver pelt pooled there. Yes. It still remained where he had laid it. No one had taken it, nor had the tide snagged it.

"Selkie," Kikomo gasped, drawing away from him. "Tis myth. Seal myth. Rubbish and roarers, none of that is true!"

Takuma mourned her absence as soon as she vacated his embrace. He closed his eyes at her loss, but he had to be sure she understood. He'd not lose her again. So, he tried to explain. He'd not leave her with confusion and befuddlement.

"I am no myth," he shot her a wide grin. He sat up, resting his elbows on his knees. His dwindled cock seemed to take notice of her nudity and began to throb once more. "You've felt me. I'm real."

She blushed, mahogany cheeks burning brighter. Her gray eyes traced his body downward, and he watched as her eyes widened at his semi-erect member. As if embarrassed, she scooped up her dress and yanked it over her head. Takuma's heart fell, sorry to see her luscious body covered up.

"Selkie," Kikomo whispered, twirling the end of her braid in her fingers. "You were the seal."

"Am. I *am* the seal," he corrected, leaning over and grabbing his pelt.

Instantly the hesitation he had been feeling fled. Once he had his hands on it, his entire spirit quieted. Even during his lovemaking session with Kikomo, the pelt stayed in his sight. Still, being able to see it hadn't been enough. Until he touched it, the mutterings continued. Now silenced, he slung his pelt over his shoulder.

"But how?" Kikomo folded her arms over her bosom and hugged herself. "Takuma."

"I drowned," he said bluntly, feeling he had to get the nasty part over first. "I, I died trying to save you, and it was then the sirens plucked me from death and changed me into a seal, an innocent of the sea. My death had been sacrificial somewhat, but those who drown at sea are changed."

Kikomo squeezed her eyes shut, but her tears continued to fall.

"Then I shall never be yours unless I drown in the sea?" she asked thick with misery. Her throat bobbed in misery. She shrugged in a defeated gesture. "Shall I walk now into the waters?"

Takuma got to his feet and stalked over to her. He snatched her roughly to him, she bounced off his chest. "NO! I never, ever want you to speak of drowning again! Never! It was the most horrible, painful..."

He stopped yelling for Kikomo had crumpled into his ears, her heart wrenching sobs clawed at him, and had he been wearing clothes, they would nothing more than rags by now. Her hands held him with so much strength, he would surely bruise.

"If you were to kill yourself," he said, calmer, gentler, caressing her back, "then you won't be changed. You'll be lost."

He raised her tear stained face to up to his.

"And I will not lose you again."

With those words, he held her closer ... so much so she melded into him. He could no longer tell where he ended and she began.

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Chapter Five

Two weeks later...

Kikomo once believed the sun's brilliant rays lit up any dreary, mean little place. That belief had been sorely tested as her father paces about the kitchen, his bushy white eyebrows knitted together above his battered features. An angry silence took up most of the space and air in the room. Cosmo wiped his damp hands onto his apron and turned back to the skillet resting over the flame. The scent of bacon wafted to Kikomo's nose, but her appetite had been banished by her father's carelessness.

"All I'm sayin' to ye, is he came callin' again," Cosmo explained, removing the sizzling and popping meat from the flames. "Ye weren't ye room again, and I told him to come this morn, perhaps he'll catch ye."

"You didn't even bother to ask me," Kikomo said. "I hate him! He's a pig!"

"Eat," her father ordered. The word flat against her ears as he slid a bowl with two strips of bacon over to her. Thin lipped he added, "He'll be here by midday. Ye're not to go anywhere."

Kikomo slid the bowl away from her, the scent of cooked pork making her ill.

"It matters not," she said, not shouting but she punched steel into every word. "I won't marry him."

Cosmo, who had set his bowls brimming with breakfast before him at the table, froze above his chair, his rear end

jutting outward as he was about to lower it. He looked up and over to his daughter.

"Ye marry who I say ye marry."

"No." Fierce resolve spat the word before her mind could even think of what to say. Mortified, she hastily added, "Sir."

Avoiding her father's angry eyes, she stared at the dinged and scarred table.

Why can't you leave me be? Takuma is alive, father, alive! The hole in my chest has begun to heal and I am warm again. You do not ask where my sweaters are. Do you not see my glee in the evenings? The rush of love upon my face? It is not for Odell the awful...

"Ye not marry Odell, ye not be marrying anyone," he said at last, bitterness making his words crackle over the whip of the wind. "Ye sneaking off to see someone, and ye don't think I know it. Ye not be marrying some bastard the fishermen drag here or worse, like Takuma, some mutt mix. Ye be hitching to someone above deck, not below."

She dared and shot him a glance. He smiled at her. It was a parody of his usual normal grin.

Takuma may have been a mixture of several families, but his heart rang truer than any of those wealthier, purer lines you bend over and cast nets for.

"Above or below, it matters not," she mumbled.

"Eh?" her father inquired, cocking his head sideways.

"Speak up, child."

"I am not sneaking off with anyone of the village, sir," she said, knowing it to be true. Takuma had been of the village,

but no more. He belonged to the sea. "You may call forth the siren."

Her father caught her smug tone and glanced up to meet her eyes. He continued to shove food into his mouth as he studied her, seeking a crack or fault in the words she spoke. She thrust her chin forward as if daring him to peel back her words and scavenge all he wanted. They were true.

"Ye playing with a dangerous person," he said, eyes dropping back to the bowl. "Odell will not take no for an answer, child."

"You are the mayor," Kikomo said with a sternness of a parent. "Honestly, father!"

Her father made a gargling sound from someplace deep in his throat seconds before he slammed his fist onto the table. He glared at her, mouth crunching on the bacon.

"Ye believe this be about my position?" he shook his head. "This be about money, child. And Odell Waler be the wealthiest of them all. He could furnish ye children with more than I ever could give ye."

"It shouldn't be about money, father," she shouted, bolting out of her chair. "I am a girl, a person, and I should be able to marry for love!"

Her father laughed.

"Love? It don't keep ye fed. It don't house ye. It don't do a damn thing, but set ye up for heartache and a belly full of nothing. Ye think ye would know it by now. Been a year. What did love give ye, Kikomo?"

With hands balled into fists, she stalked out of the kitchen, feeling every bit the urge to punch him as she had Odell the

night he touched her. Love had made her whole, she wanted to tell him, but then giving up her secret about Takuma wouldn't be wise.

Though for two weeks she'd snuck down to the edge of the waters behind her house, nestled away from prying eyes and casual fisherman, she and Takuma made love, talked, and played in the cool water. Just as they had done when he was all man.

They carried on until the sun's yellow light rimmed the horizon and then, he'd don his pelt, return to the sea, gone for another long stretch of day.

Kikomo pushed through the cottage's side door and headed, almost habitually, to the minuscule alcove. Her father's fury had angered her in return.

How dare he attempt to force her to marry because of wealth! Money lacked real significance in her life. After all it could not bring happiness. Aquantis lore swelled with tales of greedy fisherman getting their comeuppance time and again. Reared with these moral ideals, how could he think she would now abandon them for the sake of his word?

Up ahead the sun and salt-whitened wooden craft came into view. A few steps more and she would be there—her sanctuary, her love nest, and her peace. Marching waves splashed against the shore, and she climbed up to her slab of rock, folding her legs in front of her, she stared out into the sea. Wind whipped about her face and shoulders, as if attempting to tear her clothes from her body in stages.

She inhaled the salty breeze and released, feeling her entire body relax into memory. Closing her eyes, she could

smell him, yes, salt and sea. Takuma. Even before he became selkie, he smelled of the waters' spray. His breath tasted like kale, and his body felt like the boards they sometimes surfed the waves with.

She let out a slow breath and folded herself into the memory of last evening...

Quaking as Takuma's breath hot at the back of her neck, right at the line where her hairs drew downward, Kikomo hands clutched her naked breasts, twisting her nipples and howling a bit. His kiss went down between her shoulder blades, down the slope of her back, and right there, between her cheeks. She screamed as he bit and nibbled her ass, groaning as he occasionally smacked her cheek, making it jiggle.

"Yes, ah, beautiful," he whispered lovingly to her ass, as if worshipping it. He kissed her still smarting cheek as if it were her mouth, tenderly, and with a great deal of his flat tongue pressing swirls against it. "By the sirens!"

Kikomo loved hearing the thick slab of lust come spurting out of his mouth. She slid her fingers to part her aching pussy lips and found her clit stiff in arousal. Throwing her head back, she slipped her fingers over it and downward, dampening them on her wet tunnel and then working it over her mound, wetting it and her love button until all she did was moa in heat.

Takuma's rough hands parted her cheek, slapping them and the inside of her thighs to force her to spread her legs wider. Sirens, if her father saw her now!

So caught up in the building climax of her fingers on her throbbing button, when Takuma's wet tongue pushed through her anus, she instantly screamed—in pleasure.

"Takuma!"

Breathing a tight, hard thing, Kikomo grabbed his wrists.

"Relax, Kikomo," he said, and she heard his need stripping his voice down to something animalistic. "Trust me, beloved."

And she did.

She bent over a little, and he glided her hands around to hold her own ass apart. Satisfied, Takuma took one of his fingers and gently entered her pussy's waiting and dripping heaven. Then, with his tongue still wet, he pressed against her anus, making her whimper. Though not from pain, sirens, Kikomo had never experienced anything so sensual and so incredible.

That is until he shoved his tongue further in, and all acts of composure melted into sobs and absolute loss of control. Between his tongue and his fingers—for he had to add more as she came screaming as if she had been slaughtered, buried deep inside her, Kikomo had been railroaded by desire and her libido blasted off into the deepest, furthest reaches of the sea.

Her pinnacle wasn't reached, it landed on her with such intensity, Kikomo had believed she'd never regain her voice or her mind. Trembling, sobbing, clutching Takuma for dear life, Kikomo remembered him rocking her as he stared out into the sea, whispering words of love, eternal love into her ear.

"I did not mean to hurt you," he said, voice streaked with regret. "I only meant to show you pleasure, beloved."

"I am not hurt," she replied, kissing his cheek. "It was so, so..."

Even now, hours later, she could still find no words for how he made her feel last night. Muscles ached in her body where she didn't even know she had them. She pulled her dress up to her knees and allowed them to fall open.

The sun's rays warmed her skin and she broke out in a sweat. Her desire had been ignited by simply thinking about him. The dress's hem lay around her waist, and her nude sex lay within the sun's view. With its heat on her clit, and her mind still savoring her rather explosive early morning with Takuma, Kikomo licked two fingers of her five and set about releasing the mounting amount of tension in her body. Her clit hardened beneath her manipulation and her pelvis rotated in harmony with her fingers' rhythm. She could not wait until tonight when Takuma would visit again. Perhaps this evening she would do to him what he had done to her.

Surely he would want the same explosive pleasure as he gave her.

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Chapter Six

Kikomo's cries for more reached Odell's ears with ease, slicing through the clean, quiet air like a hot knife through warm butter. He could scarcely believe it. His woman in waiting had been bent over at the waist, holding on to the sun bleached wood as a man rammed his manhood into her again and again. In. Out. In. Out.

Something Odell wanted as his own. He scowled, and with fat fists he punched the air. How could she give it away to this, this person? What he'd rightly negotiated? Kikomo's flesh, especially the sacred heaven between her thighs had been secured in writing by her father.

He'd waited, patiently, for over a year to ask for her hand. He'd been polite, and formal as was custom in Aquatrion. This is how she repaid his kindness, by leaving him sweating profusely in that box of a kitchen waiting for her return.

Embarrassed, but making no excuse for her, that clumsy oaf, Cosmo left the cottage, stating he had business and duties to attend to, his daughter's will be in her own hands.

Wait until the council hears about this, Cosmo. They'll vote you out of the mayoral seat as fast as a summer squall. Then what purpose would your insignificant life have beyond fisherman?

Leaving him to his own devices in the kitchen, Odell had lumbered out the side door and into the expanse of the land beyond Cosmo's rather secluded cottage. The kitchen seemed

to shrink in on him, and the little boxy place never cooled, so hot, he'd fled to the much soothing outside air.

Kikomo's peal of laughter fractured the silence once more and Odell's black mood plummeted further.

How dare she embarrass me? Use me in this manner?

"I've given your father money, contributed to his cause and championed him at meetings. All for your hand, for a chance to taste the sweetness between your thighs. And this is how you repay my efforts?"

Odell drew himself up and with eyes blazing headed toward the two intertwined lovers. Someone would pay for this rebuttal and savage rebuke of his affections. He recalled how she bristled when he touched her beneath the table weeks ago.

That night, he'd comforted himself with the knowledge that perhaps little Kikomo wasn't that kind of girl—innocent and pure. He even warmed to the notion she was untouched and ignorant in that field. When his nights ran long, he envision himself teaching her the joys of lovemaking, but now, it seemed she had found his touch not good enough.

Yet this, seal, this animal which comes from the sea is worthy?

He'd watched it all unfold. It began fun enough with his voyeurism fed by watching Kikomo's beautiful, gleaming body as she toyed with her pussy on the rock's flat surface, beneath the sun's glow. Odell had taken his own pudgy phallus into his hands and matched her rhythm, fantasizing he and she were together instead of separated.

When she screeched out in pleasure, he came also, splattering his seed across the vegetation beneath his overlapping belly. He'd hastily adjusted his pants, and ducked lower behind the thick foliage. Had she heard his grunting release?

It appeared not. He waited to see if she performed again. One eyeful of her lustrous body failed to be enough. He hungered to see the show again, but the sun sank into the horizon and night fell over the village. Odell expected her to go back to the cottage and had in fact turned to go, when the splashes of water and a squeal of delight from Kikomo caught his attention.

What he saw when he turned back to her stunned him. She playfully patted the head of seal, her body nude beneath the moon's light. In moments, a thick heady mist rolled across the little nook, but once the gray haze receded, where the seal had been, stood a man. A man to whom Kikomo knew intimately and she raced into his arms. Oh, when they kissed each other, Odell's veins bulged in fury. The scarlet of his anger blotted out everything else, but his swarming hatred of the man who had been seal and the girl now wrapped in his arms.

Asleep after such an exhausting romp, the two lovers heard him not as he approached. Thankfully, this quiet nook didn't contain shells on the beach, but wet sand which cushioned even his great girth. The glistening pelt captured the twinkling white beam of the moon.

Selkie. The male is a selkie. Damn the sirens! Selkies were superior lover and devoted to the sea and their one true love.

*The ancient scrolls had spoken of their affection and loyalty.
Their skills in lovemaking and in devotion to their one mate.
It is said one selkie may wait many lifetimes for their soul's
mate. Fine. If this one thought Kikomo was his soul's mate,
he would have to look elsewhere. I'd take that pelt and if the
scrolls rang true, he can't go back into the water as a seal.
And he must do so by morning or perish.*

Odell swiped the pelt into his sweaty hands, grinning coldly
at the two sleeping lovers. *Enjoy your cooling embrace now.
It will be your last.*

With a gleeful smile, he headed back for the cottage. The
wind whipped up about his face, and he glared forward
without blinking away the tears the harsh breeze conjured.
Now, she'd come to him and she would be his at last.

The selkie be damned.

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"It's gone!" Takuma's shouted, his voice breaking in panic.
"By the sirens, it's gone!"

He searched around the nook, even splashing his way into
the waters, but the pelt, his way home, had gone.
Disappeared. Vanished. He sniffed the night's air and the
scent surrounding them had been marred by someone else.
Someone else had been here.

Dressed once more, Kikomo gazed at him, a haunting look ghosting her features.

What to do? Search for it. Yes, perhaps a crab carried it off by mistake. They move slowly. But, the scent, yes, another human has been here.

"What do we do now?" she asked, squeaking with fear.

"We search for it. It must be found by dawn," he said, the words came out as if spoken by someone else. "If I do not reclaim it and return to the sea, I shall die."

She paled beneath her usually warm dark brown skin, and set about the nook searching frantically shoving things aside. They moved outward and upward from the sea, digging through brush, lifting rocks and searching through crannies.

"It has to be someplace. Pelts don't simply vanish into the sea stained air," Kikomo said, hands on her hips, surveying the area around them.

"Someone has taken it," he said at last, not meeting her eyes. Someone had followed her, or worse had stumbled upon them by mistake and swiped the beautiful coat as a gift, prize, or for money.

"No one knows anything about..." Kikomo stopped, hand over her heart. Her eyes met his and her face fell. "Father!"

"Your father?" Takuma asked, face mashing into confusion. "What?"

"My father mentioned to me that he knew I came here nightly, but he, oh, never mind. There's no time!" she shouted. "Stay here. Takuma, please forgive me."

"I have nowhere else to go, Kikomo," he said, strangely sad as he sat down on the sad. "I have but one way to return

home. As for forgiving you, baby, there is nothing for me to forgive."

She reached down, touching his face. "I love you, Takuma. I'll not lose you again."

He kissed her hand, and her fingers. "Let us both pray the sirens do not have other plans."

With that she raced up the path which snaked back into the thicket of trees and to the cottage.

He watched her go with despair zipping up his back.

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No, no, please, father, the pelt is sacred. Don't burn it!

Her father may be a comely man, but a fool he wasn't. If he followed her down to the nook and saw her with Takuma, he'd know her lover had become selkie. He would also know the pelt would be Takuma's vessel back to the sea. If Takuma lived, he would visit her again. Cosmo wouldn't allow that to continue if he wanted to keep his alliance with Odell Waler. All of this Kikomo knew as the cold knowledge weighed down her heart. Fear, icy and sharp, gripped her being as she burst through the side door.

"Father!" she screamed.

Running through the tight hallways, she collided with an object, stumbled over a fallen shoe and nearly was thrown to the ground by a wayward chair. Her father never left his

house messy like this. It was almost as if someone had gone through it searching for something. Or they had been robbed. Papers, scrolls, and books had been tossed about and discarded without care. She stopped running and walked, her pulse jumped in her throat as if seeking freedom. Her blood roared in her ears, drowning out the usual evening magic of crickets and frogs.

"Yes?" he asked calmly from the living room. "Be well past time ye came home."

When she entered the room, she found Odell Waler seated on the sofa, nearly tipping the piece of heavy furniture over. There in the pale, fat grip of Odell's right hand, was the pelt. She didn't hesitate or even ask; she leapt toward it and tried to tear it from his repulsive hands. Hands to which he'd tried to violate her, take from her. He was unworthy to touch anything that belonged to Takuma, and that meant her!

"Whoa! Nope!" Odell moved the garment around as if she was only a young child. "Let go, child."

She laid hands on it and tugged, but Odell laughed all the more at her efforts.

"Stop it, Kikomo!" Cosmo ordered.

She let it go, but kept her eye on it.

"What is going on?" he demanded, his weather beaten features. "Explain yeself!"

"I will explain," Odell sneered, swinging the pelt in front of her face. "Your daughter has been having relations with a selkie, one that resembles the young Takuma."

"No, by the sirens," Cosmo gasped, looking at her with new eyes. "'Tis true, child? A selkie? They can't be trusted.

Heartache awaits the woman a selkie binds to him as mate. The stories, ye already know child. 'Tis true what Waler says?"

"Yes."

She cared about nothing but getting that pelt back to Takuma before the sun's rise. The myths, the stories, the lifestyle of women who were said to be mates of selkies—all this she had thought about during the days she sat alone overlooking the waters. She would gladly give up her life for Takuma's. She loved him and their souls had been joined forever. Her father and Odell would at some point have to get over it. It didn't surprise her that Odell knew of her lover and the nook. The sneak bastard probably waddled around prying on everyone in Aquatrion.

Cosmo's face fell and tears leaked from the corner of his eyes.

"I suppose it was going to happen. Ye mamma ran off with a selkie male. Went nightly down to the nook ye go to now and met with him. He bound her to him and dragged her into the sea, never to be seen again. 'Course the villagers all think she drowned, but I tell ye, her selkie lover took her from me, from us that very evening. Selkies are demons," Cosmo continued to explain, grabbing her with both hands and shaking her. "Tis not really Takuma out there, but death. Death, child!"

"I don't care," she said, pinning him with her eyes and wretched her arms free of her father. "I love him."

"Demon or not, love or not," Odell said, grunting as he got to his feet. "She marries me or the pelt goes into the fire. It

matters little of what you speak, Kikomo. A simple yes will save your lover from the scorching rays of the sun."

He waddled over to the flame where a small cauldron of water boiled for tea.

"No!" she screamed and leapt at the portly man. "No!"

"The pelt for your hand," Odell said with heavy scorn in his voice. "Agreed?"

Cosmo frowned at him. "Wait a second there, Waler..."

"Shut up!" he thundered at Cosmo, face flushed into a sickly scarlet. "You failed to keep your wife from diving off with a seal. I'll not have my name slurred with such weakness. I am sick of your uneducated chatter!" His many chins wobbled and he reeked of old sweat. His beady eyes rolled over to Kikomo's again and he smiled. "Your answer."

With throat burning in disgust, Kikomo held her hand out for the pelt. If this meant Takuma would live, then well, at least one of them will be happy. She never said she would be faithful. One day while boating she would somehow fall into the sea and once drowned, she would be with Takuma again. Surely once she denied Odell enough times, he would kill her. Anything to save Takuma now. She'd do anything not to have the hole inside her chest reopened and festering at the loss of him again. Feeling that pain and anguish once more would utterly destroy her.

"Agreed."

Odell laughed and threw the pelt into the fire, but not before Kikomo leapt for it. He meant to use his girth to bar her access to the fireplace, but Cosmo dove into him with elbow thrown forward, shoving the massive Odell back a few

feet, giving Kikomo room to whisk the pelt from the flame and scurry out of the house. The smoke trailed after her, leaving a thick scent of burning on the air. She patted out the flames, folding the pelt into the folds of her dress to smolder the fire. All of this she did while running.

She had not looked back.

The smoke rising off the pelt meant some of it was singed, but magic could resolve that. She hoped. She prayed to the sirens, calling forth on their duty to protect all who love the sea. No one cared more for the sea than Takuma.

Let my lover be healed and alive when I reach the shore.

The sky blushed as the sun's rays readied to break the horizon. Takuma's back was to her, but as she approached, he turned, his face lined with deep sorrow.

"Kikomo?" his face split into a wide grin when he saw her raise the pelt above her head.

"I've got it!" she squealed. "I've got it!"

She reached him and thrust the pelt into his hands. Her heart ached for she would never be with him again, and she had to tell him about her marriage to Odell the awful, but all of it had to wait. Right now he had to get into the sea before dawn.

He gazed lovingly at her.

"Kikomo, I love you."

He bent down to kiss her, but she grabbed his face, popped him a quick peck and said, "There's not time. The sun!"

He glanced over his shoulder toward the sea, and immediately slipped the pelt around his shoulders, stepping

backward into the water. At once the mists rolled in from nowhere and only the splash of his flipper told her he'd successfully made it back into the waters.

"NO!" came a roar with such hatred and fury, Kikomo placed both her hands over her ears as she spun around to face Odell. He'd waddled down behind her, and in her haste, she'd ignored all signs of his following her. What had he done to her father? What did he plan to do to her?

"NO! He cannot live!" Odell spat, spittle flying. He had somehow managed to make it down to the nook with his harpoon gun. Not nearly as large as those used for whales, this gun was for one purpose only—shooting seals and walruses. Many used it for the seal's pelts and the walrus's other uses.

He climbed onto the flat rock Kikomo used to overlook the sea and to pleasure herself. He leaned his massive heap against the rock's surface, getting down on one knee. He aimed at the diving animal cutting through the waters. "You'll not be sneaking down here nightly to give away what I have paid for!"

Kikomo couldn't stand by and watch him slay Takuma. She threw off her melancholy and ran up to the rock's flat surface. Not able to move as quickly as she, kicked him and Odell swatted at her, his harpoon gun clutched tightly in one fist. He punched at her, but while unbalanced with the gun, he missed her.

"Leave. My. Lover. Alone!" she grunted out her warnings.

"Argh! Bah!" Odell bellowed back and tried to rid himself of the pesky girl. He squatted at her and grew angrier by the

second. She saw how impatient and reactionary his kicks and hits became. No longer trying to hit her, Odell was simply swinging his arms to get her to move back.

She clawed his face, but this required her to get in close to his person. In doing so, she came within his arm's reach and his left hand backhanded her so hard across the face, she rolled over on the rock with a *thud*.

Head spinning, mouth aching, she struggled to her knees.

She peered through the throbbing pain to see Odell take aim again. She rushed him once more, but this time he was ready. He swung the harpoon gun horizontally and the butt of the weapon caught her in the abdomen. Disoriented and in flaring pain, Kikomo twirled around and slipped over the rock's edge.

"Ahhhhh!" she yelled, felling the wind whip about her ears as she fell.

Falling, falling, falling into the waters below.

I love you, Takuma.

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Epilogue

On the full moon nights when the weather is warm and the fireflies dance about, if you sit upon the edge overlooking the Aquantis Sea, the locals say you can see selkies in the sea. Two of the selkie seal pod, are said to be young lovers once taken in by the hungry sea. They play in the black waters, rubbing noses and splashing in blissful glee. If you listen closely, they will whisper words of love and loss and of lessons learned.

The End

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RaeLynn Blue is the author of numerous titles of erotic romance and science fiction. A humble scribbler of tales, RaeLynn is actively writing another story of lust, love, and romance. Join her at raelynnblue.blogspot.com

Red Rose Publishing:

Ménage a Valentine

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Soul's Kin (Phaze)

Whispers

Speed Demon

Sand Storm

Dragon's Heart Romance:

Thy Neighbor's Wife

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Faith's Tears

By

Aliyah Burke

To Clarke and Valan,

I miss y'all so much.

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"Do you know a cure for me?"

"Why yes," he said, "I know a cure for everything. Salt water."

"Salt water?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said, "in one form or another, sweat, tears or the salt sea."

~Isak Dinesen

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Chapter One

Isle of Skye

Faith smiled as she opened the door to her hotel room. She had never imagined Scotland would be so much fun, despite the draw she'd felt to come here. She'd gotten up early and taken a lovely walk immersing herself in the sights and smells of the pre-dawn morning surrounding them. Then she'd spent a bunch of time with Sean exploring some of the local attractions, she'd fallen in love with a bunch of the Celtic jewelry they saw.

He'd cried off early saying he had a headache but told her to keep exploring. And so she had. Faith had found a lovely secluded area off the beaten path, leading to a rock outcropping that overlooked the smooth dark water of the Sea of Hebrides. She had taken some time to herself.

The room was dark and she kept quiet thinking that Sean must still be sleeping. Her fingers tightened around the bag holding the soup she'd brought him to eat. A low moan reached her ears and she padded quietly toward the door of the bedroom. It swung in on silent hinges and the light filtered past her to land on the bed. Her gasp of shock filled the room as the bag fell from nerveless fingers, dropping to the carpeted floor. The thick liquid seeping through the bag and into the carpet.

Sean was in bed, but he wasn't alone. His naked butt rose and fell as he thrust between the near translucent thighs of the woman in the bed with him.

"Sean?"

He looked at her over his shoulder. His face was covered by a sheen of sweat and the passion in his eyes cooled to be replaced by insincere concern. "Faith, baby," he stuttered. "It's not what it looks like." His caramel body rolled off the pale one of the woman beneath him and he grabbed a sheet to cover himself.

"What exactly do you think it looks like?" she snapped. Her gaze speared the woman who tried to blend in with the crisp whiteness of the bed linens. Faith recognized her as the daughter of the inn's proprietor.

Sean stood and stepped toward her, reaching out one hand. She backed away, and narrowed her eyes at him, astounded by his audacity. Like she'd want his damn hands on her. "Please, I was sleeping, she just slipped in. I thought it was you," he babbled.

"Shut up, Sean. Don't insult me." Faith glared at the young girl. "Enjoy him. I sure as hell don't want him anymore. I'll send for my things." With all the dignity she could muster, Faith Henderson walked out of the room.

As she heard the finality of the door behind her closing she bit her lower lip, so hard the metallic tang of her own blood filled her mouth. Keeping the threatening tears at bay, she moved to the front desk to speak to the elderly lady who stood there cleaning the counter.

Before she could say a word, the woman shook her head and clucked her tongue. "You'll be leavin' us then dearie?"

"Yes ma'am. I'm sorry, I truly love it here, but..." Faith didn't even ask how she knew what had transpired.

"I tell you what. You stay at my cottage up the road tonight, and then tomorrow we'll find you another place."

"I couldn't impose." Tightening her fingers around her purse, Faith sent the woman an encouraging smile. "I'll be fine."

"Nonsense. That lass is nothin' but trouble. Not sayin' your man was any better, but she is nothin' but trouble. Ever since her ma passed..." she trailed off. "I'm done here for the day, so you'll come with me and I'll have them bring your stuff to my home."

Faith gave Mrs. Macleod a grateful nod. "Thank you."

"Faith!" Sean's deep voice reached her from the hallway. "Faith, wait. We need to talk about this."

"Out the back, dearie. Let's go. Mr. Ackers is already here." The gray-haired lady placed a hand on her arm and led the way into the back of the inn.

"Faith!" the call came again. At her slight hesitation, Mrs. Macleod tugged on her arm and kept them moving.

The air left her lungs in a rush as she stepped outside into the late Scottish afternoon. Her body shuddered as the events rushed past her. She allowed herself to be pulled along and she sniffled back her tears as Mrs. Macleod showed her to a small room.

"You can stay here, Faith. Why don't you take a walk, or a nap. I'll send for your things and get to work on making some dinner."

"Thank you," she sobbed.

"There, there, dearie. He wasn't worth it and isn't worth your tears." She enclosed Faith in her embrace.

Suddenly embarrassed, Faith stepped out of her arms and tugged on her clothing. Mrs. Macleod smiled and tipped her face up to meet her gaze. "Take a walk, Faith. Allow the spirit of the Isle to work its magic on you."

"I'll be back in a while." Faith headed to the door.

"Take your time, dearie. I'll be here whenever you decide to return."

Faith sent her another smile before walking to the door. Without conscious thought, she headed for the back of the small home and toward the path that followed along the jagged coastline. The breeze that flowed up off the Sea of Hebrides dried the tears that fell from her eyes.

Scenarios on how she could have handled the situation with Sean moved through her mind. She could have yelled, fought, any number of things. But she didn't. She never did. Faith was the good one, the quiet one, the one who never did anything impulsively, never did anything wrong.

Other people she knew would have probably beat the shit out of both of the cheaters. But she never did. Confrontations weren't her thing. It's not like she didn't care, because she did, but Faith had long accepted that she was non-confrontational. She would nurse her wounds in private. Coming upon the outcropping she'd discovered earlier, Faith sat down on the rock, dangling her legs over the edge, the height not a concern. She'd never been scared of them before. No point in being scared of them now.

The waves crashing into the rocks below her sent up a cold spray up to splash on her bare legs. She shuddered as another surge of tears threatened. One by one they slid down

her face only to be swept away by the wind and dropped unimpeded into the sea. After a bit, she got to her feet and headed back toward Mrs. Macleod's home. The wind stopped and shifted direction seconds before her feet left the wooded path to step on its graveled counterpart.

A cold chill flowed over her, goose bumps popped up all over her skin. Without thought, her hand reached up to grab the pendant she always wore around her neck. As her thumb ran over the familiar and worn markings she felt her body release the sudden tension it contained. This necklace had had that effect on her ever since the day it was placed in her hands by a tall young man named Rowan.

For the longest time, the markings had stumped her until she took it to a professor to ask him what they meant. It was beautifully crafted out of a piece of willow wood and it had a silver chain. There was a symbol on the back from the Celtic Ogham alphabet that was the letter "R" burned into the wood.

The front of the pendant had the Nordic rune for water, called Logr or Laguz by some, in deep green, and something in black the professor had called a bindrune and the closest translation he could come up with was, *"To win the love of a woman"*. And placed all around the edge of the circle were more small symbols, two different ones and they alternated all the way around.

She was told they meant, *"Protection against evil forces"*, and the sign of magic, somehow they were made out of pearl. The professor had offered her a great deal of money for it, but there was no way she was going to sell it. Not to anyone.

Feeling better, Faith took a deep breath, placed the pendant back under her shirt to lie against the warmth of her skin, and continued on to the cottage. Mrs. Macleod welcomed her with a brilliant smile. "Feeling better I see, lass."

"Much," Faith said with a smile of her own.

"'Tis the magic of the Isle," she said with a firm nod.

I don't believe in magic. "Yes, ma'am," Faith responded.

"I know these things," she reiterated.

Faith stared at Mrs. Macleod as she gestured to the kitchen table before she moved back to the stove and stirred the contents of the large black pot. Without protest, Faith ambled over to sit down. "Can I help with anything?"

The woman glanced over her shoulder and stared at her. Faith was struck by the myriad of emotions in her medium brown eyes. There was more than just motherly sympathy; there was a vast amount of wisdom and even a hint of humor there.

"Well, normally I'd say no, but we're not at the inn and so here, you're family. Go to the counter there and pour the batter into that tin after you line it with parchment. I've got the beef stew covered." She gestured with the spoon and turned her attention to the stuff before her.

I'm family? Faith got up immediately with a contented smile and walked to the counter where she found the roll of parchment paper she would be using. Before long, she was scraping the bowl with a spatula making sure she got all of the batter out and into the loaf pan. The smell was making her mouth water, and it hadn't even been in the oven yet.

"Anything else?" Faith asked as she put the dishes she'd just washed in the drainer and wiped her hands on a nearby towel.

"No, lass. We're good here. Just sit down 'n keep an auld woman company."

"Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Macleod."

"I liked you from the moment you walked into the inn, Faith Henderson. And I know the magic of the Isle will heal your heart."

More of that magic talk. She smiled. "Scotland is too beautiful to let me dwell on Sean." Despite her words, a lance of pain shot through her at the memory of his betrayal.

"The Isle of Skye has much to offer those who open their eyes to see it. And I think you are one of those."

The wind picked up and rattled against the cottage. Faith looked out the window and saw the moon had begun to rise and the last light of day was retreating.

"Can I ask you a personal question, Faith?"

"Go ahead," she answered immediately.

"What brought you here? To the Isle especially? I mean as opposed to going somewhere like Edinburgh."

Faith wrapped her fingers around the mug of coffee she held and ran her tongue over her teeth before answering. "To tell you the truth, Sean wanted to go there, he'd have preferred not to come here at all. It was my decision to come here. When we were deciding where to go, the moment I saw this on the map, I just felt like I had to come here. I can't explain it."

Mrs. Macleod put a cover on the pot simmering on the stove and claimed the seat across from her holding a cup of coffee in her hands. "And have you had experiences with anything Scottish before?"

Rowan Kilgour. The memory of his name alone brought a smile to Faith's face before she could stop it. "No, not really. In high school there was a student who was from here. Well, Scotland in general, I am not sure where exactly." Her smile grew wider as his dark brown eyes stared down at her in her mind's eye.

"Ahhh, a young lad then."

Composing her face, Faith met the amused stare of Mrs. Macleod. "He was nice."

The older woman nodding knowingly. "I know that look. Even to this day, he brings you fond memories."

"He does. He was a senior when I was a sophomore. His parents were military and so he left after that year, but, his memory remained with me from that day." Faith wasn't sure why she was being so candid with Mrs. Macleod but it felt good to talk about Rowan.

Mrs. Macleod got up and dished them up both bowls of the steaming rich beef stew and placed a large chunk of warm bread beside them as well. Then she looked at Faith and said, "Tell me more about this man."

"I met him, officially, on a Sunday. I was walking into town and had cut through the park, he was standing near his truck listening to some music with a group of seniors. When some of them teased me, he defended me. Then he escorted me

into town the rest of the way. He was very gentle. There was a quiet strength about him."

"And how handsome was he?" Her hostess asked with a smile.

"Very," Faith responded with a grin. "Oh so handsome." She closed her eyes and immediately his image appeared to her. "I remember him as being tall, well compared to me many people were tall. Strong, he played most sports we had and he had dark brown eyes and hair that was so dark it was almost black."

"Och, he sounds yummy."

Faith laughed. "I thought so. Most of the girls at school did. But I don't remember him going out with any of them."

"Not even you?"

A burst of laughter escaped. "Oh no. I was just a sophomore, and not a very popular one at that. But ever since that one day in the park, it was almost like he appointed himself my guardian. No one bothered me again." Faith polished off the rest of her dinner. "I haven't seen him or heard from him again, not like we were going to be pen pals or anything. But before he left, he stopped by and gave me an amulet, a farewell gift he said."

"An amulet?" Mrs. Macleod asked as she rose to take the gingerbread out of the oven and set it on the table between them.

"Yes, ma'am." Faith pulled it out from where it sat beneath her shirt. "This one."

Something foreign flashed in Mrs. Macleod's eyes as she looked at the pendant Faith held. Her hand reached out

toward it but didn't touch it; she pulled back before she did. "And there's a mark on the back as well." It wasn't a question.

How'd she know that? "Actually there is." Faith turned it so she could see. "I was told this was—"

"Ogham for the letter 'R'," Mrs. Macleod interrupted her, wrapping shaking hands around her mug.

"Yes. I took it to a professor and had him translate the front as well, since I didn't understand it. So he told me."

"I wonder if you truly know what it means for you," she said softly.

The tone so low, Faith wasn't even sure she heard her correctly. She decided to answer her anyway.

"Kind of. I mean, I have the translation but I can't figure out why he would give me something with those meanings." Faith bit her lower lip. "I used to create one, but, it makes no sense. I haven't spoken to him since the day he gave it to me and that was over fifteen years ago."

"But you still wear it," Mrs. Macleod stated.

"Makes me feel safe, you know kind of like he's still watching over me. I know it's silly but it gives me courage at times."

"Not silly at all. It makes perfect sense to me." Mrs. Macleod cut two slices of the hot gingerbread and placed them on plates for each of them. "It will make more sense to you."

"Perhaps." Faith took a bite and groaned in pleasure. "This is so delicious. The whole meal was just absolutely wonderful. Thank you for allowing me to stay in your home."

The smile Mrs. Macleod sent her was kind and yet Faith sensed there was something else in it, concern perhaps. Her eyes drifted back to the amulet around her neck and Faith fought back the urge to hide it from her gaze. It was like the woman knew more about it than she was letting on. And part of her wanted to ask, but part of her was steadfast against doing just that.

* * * *

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The hunger grew within him. She was near and she'd called him, he couldn't ignore it any more than he could ignore the beating of his heart. Moving slowly he strode across the beach and headed for town as darkness gave way to the first light of morning. The moisture covering him dried in the wind.

He fought down the urge to go find her now, claim her, the second her tears hit the sea he knew. Knew it was her and she was calling him. Pleasure rippled along his skin as he imagined seeing her again in person. Seventeen years was a long time. *Too long*, he thought as he continued on his way. Would she remember him?

Entering a small establishment that served breakfast he picked a table that faced the door and was by the window so he could watch the street. The day had progressed along as

he walked to this town and it was already bustling with people.

"Morn," a waitress said. "What can I get ye?"

"Coffee please. I'm not sure what I'll be eating yet."

"Right away and take your time." She sashayed away.

He chuckled as he turned his attention from the over-exaggerated walk to look back out the window. She was pretty enough, but he was waiting for one woman and only her. The tinkling of the bell over the door pulled his attention away from the view outside the diner and his breath caught as he found himself staring into a pair of brown eyes he hadn't seen in many, many years.

Mrs. Daracha Macleod stood there holding his gaze before waving a greeting to someone behind the counter as she strode over to his table and sat down without invitation. Her eyes narrowed as she said in a low tone, "Rowan Kilgour."

"Aunt Dara," he responded. "It's been a long time."

She remained silent as a cup of coffee was placed in front of her. Once they were alone again, she spoke, "Since you went off to America and gave your pendant to a young girl."

"You knew I gave it away, I told you that. Why the frown?"

"I've seen the woman you gave it to, Faith Henderson." Her gaze was straightforward and cold.

His body prickled at the mention of her name. "You've seen her? So she is here." He smiled and tamped down his need to run off and grab her into his arms.

"Why her?"

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

His Aunt Dara didn't seem at all intimidated by his glare, instead of backing down she responded in kind. "No hidden meaning, why her?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I like her and I don't want to see her hurt."

That stopped him short. *Hurt? I couldn't ever hurt her.*

"Why would you think I'd hurt her? I love her, I could never hurt her."

Disbelief filled her eyes and in that moment, Rowan knew why she was asking. His uncle had not been faithful. He had slept around more times than he could count and Aunt Dara had formed her opinion of the males of his kind. And it wasn't a good one.

Reaching across the table, Rowan covered her hand with his. "I swear to you, Aunt Dara. I will *not* hurt her. I've waited this long for her, I'm not about to do something stupid. I've waited a long time for her to return to me."

Aunt Dara arched a brow at his words. "I did a lot of swearing myself when I saw her take the pendant from under her shirt."

"She's wearing it?" Rowan couldn't stop the grin. "I didn't think she'd wear it." Still, that bit of information made him extremely proud.

"Gainnes Jewelry."

"I'm sorry?" He blinked and tried to focus on his aunt instead of visions of Faith.

"That's where she is. Gainnes Jewelry."

His breath caught in his throat and his pulse increased. She was so close. Ignoring the rest of his coffee, he tossed

some money down on the table, smiled at his aunt, and headed for the door. Before he opened it, he turned around and strode back through the establishment and pressed a kiss to his aunt's cheek, her surprise obvious. Then he walked out and headed up the street to Gainnes Jewelry.

Rowan almost tripped over his feet when he saw her walk out of the store and step into the street. The morning sun shone down upon her, glinting off her hair which now had dark copper highlights in it. Even though he hadn't seen her in many years, Rowan knew her like he knew himself.

Her skin, a stunning shade of rich cloves, shone with good health. She had kept her figure but there were decidedly more curves available to his naked eye, she didn't downplay her looks anymore. He was both grateful and disconcerted by that. She wore slip-on shoes, white shorts, and a t-shirt.

He licked his lips as his eyes continued to relearn her form. He'd missed her so much, not seeing her every day, not hearing her voice in the halls had been painful. They'd even had the same lunch period and he'd spent many a day watching her through lowered lids admiring the serenity she portrayed amongst the chaos of the lunchroom. She'd sat with her friends and he'd been witness to her brilliant smiles, husky laughter, and the dimple in her right cheek that he wanted to lick more than anything.

Shifting his weight, he walked toward her hoping his erection would dissipate by the time he reached her. Before he got to her, another man stopped beside her and reached for her arm. Rowan's eyes narrowed as he watched her pull away and the man follow. He could hear her breathing

accelerate and the man's low angry words. He could feel her displeasure and hurt toward the man.

Rowan moved until he was beside her and then he spoke. "Hello, Faith."

The man glared at him, but Rowan was unconcerned with him. All that mattered was Faith. Her light brown eyes met his and his heart caught in his throat. Recognition was there instantly and a smile turned up the corners of her mouth. Not enough so he could witness her dimple, but it was better than a frown or no recollection at all.

"Rowan," she sighed in a way that made him think of bedrooms and her exhausted and sweaty from making love. Then she looked down as if embarrassed by her actions.

He pulled her into his arms and shuddered as her familiar and long missed scent embedded itself back into his pores. "It's so good to see you." Rowan drew back and brushed his lips against the softness of her cheek and bit the inside of his cheek to keep his moan contained. "You look wonderful." Her eyes met his.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

Now that she was in his arms, Rowan had no inclination of letting her go. He ignored the question and asked her one of his own. "How are you doing?"

"Faith!" Her name was said in a disapproving tone.

Rowan watched defiance flash in her eyes before it was totally masked. "This is a man I went to school with, Sean. Rowan Kilgour." Faith hesitated briefly before she removed herself from his arms, and looked between the two men.

It hit Rowan then. What if she had a man? The thought made him frown and snap his gaze to the man who had been touching her. He was good looking enough, but in his eyes, Rowan saw a darkness he didn't want anywhere near Faith.

"We have something to discuss, Faith, and I think it should be done in private." Sean reached for her again.

Rowan felt her withdrawal and hesitation rather than saw it. Immediately he stepped forward, blocking her from the one she'd called Sean, his protective instincts as strong as ever with her. Black eyes glared at him, and all Rowan did was arch a brow. For a moment, Sean held his gaze and then backed down. He kept his eyes on him as the man stomped off, his displeasure obvious. Then he turned to face Faith.

"Are you okay?" he asked, cupping her cheek with one hand.

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Chapter Two

Faith couldn't believe it. He was here, right before her, flesh and blood. Rowan Kilgour. He'd aged very well, if possible he appeared even handsomer than she recalled from her memory.

His body looked just as strong, but she could still sense the quiet serenity she'd always felt coming from him. His thick dark brown hair was unruly and moved in the early morning breeze. It touched the collar of his shirt. A shirt that covered a powerful chest, hugging his biceps and torso like a lover, like she'd done in her many fantasies about him.

The charcoal gray color blending nicely with his natural sun kissed skin. Her gaze traveled lower and took in the tight blue jeans he wore which were molded to rock-solid thighs. With a mind of their own, her eyes dwelled upon the zipper of his pants, until she realized what she was doing and jerked her gaze away. And up.

His eyes, that reminded her of dark chocolate mousse, burned with a passion and intensity she couldn't recall ever seeing from him before. He blinked one time and she was met by the eyes she recalled from her past, friendly and slightly protective.

"Done checking me out, Faith?" he asked in a teasing tone.

She felt the blush race up over her skin. Licking her lips, she held his gaze and nodded with more bravado than she felt. "You've grown up nicely."

"As have you," he purred in a low seductive tone that sent shockwaves along her synapses. Faith was nervous. She was torn between fight and flight. As if he sensed her confusion, he stepped closer and reached for her hand. "Come have a drink with me. Or breakfast, if ye've nae eaten."

"Coffee would be nice," she muttered as she tried not to collapse in a puddle at his feet. His sexy voice with the Scottish accent had always affected her, and now it only seemed to tug more on her. She felt the moisture pool between her thighs. *If only things were different.* "I wish I could, Rowan, I truly do. Unfortunately there is something I really have to take care of." Faith sighed and looked over to where Sean stood a distance away staring at them. "This has to be done."

"Does that man have something to do with the fear I'm detecting in your voice?" Rowan spoke quietly, for her ears only.

"Is it fear?" she asked, not really requiring an answer. "I don't know; I'm just ... just..."

"Are you sure everything is okay?" he asked, gathering her into his arms and holding her against his chest.

She sobbed once, twice, and a third time before the tears just fell. Faith didn't care this was a man she hadn't seen in years, didn't care she was standing in the middle of the street in a town in Scotland, it just felt right to let go. In the back of her mind, she heard him speaking to her in a quiet tone, words she didn't understand but her soul did.

Pushing back, she furiously wiped her hands across her face. "I am so sorry; I don't know what came over me." Faith

looked up and she shivered from the intensity of his stare. It was more raw and primal than she'd ever seen a look on a man. Despite the tearstains on her face, her pussy convulsed, almost bringing her to her knees. *Jeez. Get your mind out of the gutter. He's just a man like any other.* The moment she thought it, she knew it wasn't true. Rowan Kilgour wasn't like any other man she'd ever met. He sent her a smile that made her wonder if she'd blabbed that out loud.

"Yes you do. You know why you feel so safe in my arms, Faith. Don't lie to either one of us about it."

Worrying her lower lip, Faith couldn't hold his gaze. There was too much truth in them and she wasn't ready to face it yet. She placed her hands on his forearms and tried to get him to let go of her. Electricity jumped from his skin to hers and she nearly yelped from the surprise of it. His words both soothed her and scared the hell out of her.

"I have to go. It was really good to see you, Rowan." She stepped back even further so he was no longer touching her. "Goodbye." Skirting around him, she headed off toward where Sean waited, her heart feeling heavy and empty the further she moved from Rowan.

This isn't goodbye, Faith. The words skated across her skin and she fought down the urge to look over her shoulder at the tall handsome Scotsman she walked away from.

"Faith, wait!" Sean's voice reached her and she realized she'd moved past him as well.

Without any intention of waiting for him, she kept on up the street and as she rounded the corner Faith broke into a run. She headed toward the one place she knew Sean

wouldn't find her, for he didn't know where it was. As she ran to the edge of the rock, she gasped for breath. There was no need for her to clear anything up with Sean, he'd made his bed and he could lie in it. The thing that was concerning her now was her reaction to seeing Rowan Kilgour again. And his words of that she knew why she did what she did.

He's right. You know why you allowed him to offer comfort. She couldn't explain it, it was like when he touched her for the first time in a long time she felt complete. Like he was the other half of her soul.

"That's just crazy," she muttered. "It makes no sense at all why a man I haven't seen since I was a sophomore in high school could have that affect on me."

"If it helps, you have the same affect on me, Faith," a deep voice flowed up from behind her and wrapped her in its sensual softness.

Faith didn't jump, it was as if her body had already known he was there. "Seventeen years is a long time, Rowan."

"I know," he said in a graveled voice. "Trust me, *leannan*, I am well aware of how long it's been."

Squeezing her eyes tight, Faith wet her lips with her tongue then opened her eyes. She refused to turn around, unsure if this was just another dream or a cruel hoax. "What do you want, Rowan?"

"You know what I want. The same thing I wanted when I first laid eyes upon you. You, Faith. I want you."

He said it with such finality and conviction, for a moment, she almost believed him. "Then why didn't you come get me?"

"I had to wait for you to call for me." His footsteps echoed throughout her body.

"I didn't call you. I didn't even know you were here." She felt him sit beside her and watched as his jean-clad legs entered her peripheral sight.

"I've never been away, Faith. Not while you've been wearing my pendant."

How'd he know? She gulped. "It was pretty."

"Look at me, Faith," he commanded in a low rumble. When she did he continued, "Why don't you ask me why I gave it to you."

She had a feeling she already knew. "Why did you?"

"So everyone would know you were mine."

Faith bristled. "I don't belong to *anyone*, Rowan Kilgour. It'd serve you well to remember that."

"How is it you feel comfortable enough to argue with me, but don't feel worthy to do it with anyone else?"

"What are you talking about?"

His eyes were a mixture of kindness and amusement.

"How you let people take advantage of you and you never stand up for yourself."

"I do so stand up for myself," she insisted.

He shook his head. "And with Sean, you just let him go without a fight?"

She frowned. *How did he...?* "How do you know anything about that?"

"You experienced it, I felt it," Rowan stated bluntly.

He reached out and traced along her jaw line. Faith drew back and sent him a glare. "Now you're just talking crazy."

"No. I'm telling you the truth. The pendant, you've found out what it means?" With two long fingers he skimmed along her skin sending shockwaves through her, under the chain and he pulled the charm out from under her shirt. His eyes never let go of hers.

Suddenly it felt like she was sitting in the middle of a desert instead of along the crags. She gulped and tried to form a word, but her mouth was too dry. It took three tries before she could answer. "Yes. He said something about protection, love, and water."

A sexy grin filled his face and she bit back a whimper as her body responded. "Just something? Not anything like winning the love of a woman?"

"Why would you give me something like that?" she asked watching how he ran his fingers across the pendant. It was as if the pearl shone extra hard just for him. "And do you want it back?"

"No, this is for you." With care, he placed it back against her skin. Then his fingers moved around to the back of her neck and he drew her closer. "So long," he whispered, "so long I've waited to feel your lips on mine." Then he kissed her.

His lips were gentle as he moved them over hers. A yearning she'd never felt before sprang up in her lower belly. Faith moaned in the back of her throat as his tongue slid between her lips and stroked hers. He tasted like nothing she'd ever experienced. It flowed through her and embedded itself in her soul.

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Rowan forced himself to remain in control of his emotions. The sweet taste of her sent him into overdrive. She was more than he'd ever imagined she would be. The husky mewls she emitted were driving him crazy. His entire body was harder than the rock they sat upon. Deepening the kiss, he placed his other hand along the side of her face.

Nothing he'd been told had prepared him for this. He'd been told many things, but from the moment he'd met Faith Henderson the knowledge she was going to be the only one for him had made itself known. He didn't and couldn't understand how his uncle could have cheated on his aunt; since he met Faith there'd been no other woman for him. He spent most of his time out at sea, just waiting for the moment to be reunited with her. And now he had been.

When she began to slide her tongue along his, his cock jumped in the confines of his jeans. Moving toward her, he pressed her back against the rock and groaned in pleasure as her soft form cradled him. He positioned himself between her spread legs and ate her whimper as he thrust against her juncture. The spicy smell of her arousal filled his nose and permeated his skin.

A low growl rose in his throat as her hips undulated beneath him. Her fingers were sliding through the hairs at the back of his neck. Full breasts pushed against his chest, their

softness crying out to him. With one hand he traveled down her side and pulled up the shirt she wore. Rowan slid his hand back up, loving the feel of her silken skin beneath his palm.

"Please," she gasped.

He could feel the burn that had overtaken her. And he knew she could feel the passion raging within him as well. Rowan tugged off her shirt and his cock surged again as he looked at her breasts contained in the simple white cotton bra. No frills on her, but nothing had ever taken his breath as fast as seeing it against her rich skin. He kissed the valley between them before swiping his tongue across the exposed parts of the mouthwatering globes.

Covering her mouth with his, he plundered the depths searching all recesses as his fingers undid the snap on her shorts. She arched to meet his touch as he moved his hand down the inside of both pants and underwear. He purred in pleasure as his fingers slipped through the hair covering the heat he was searching for. She moaned as he trailed them across her damp slit.

"Rowan," she begged. "Please."

He looked at her, her skin flushed with pleasure, nipples visible through the white of her bra. "Lift your hips, Faith." She did and he removed her shorts. Her underwear were plain as well, nothing fancy, just white high cut bikini ones. Her long legs were as smooth as water gliding across his skin.

Rowan bit the inside of his lip as he tried to control the desire raging through him. She looked so perfect lying there. He pressed a kiss to her belly before moving up across her

breasts until he reached her mouth again. "Mine, Faith. You. Are. Mine!"

She shivered beneath him and it didn't take him long to strip out of all his clothing. Then he turned his attention back to the woman lying on the sun-warmed rock. He flicked open the clasp on her bra, groaning in pleasure as it fell away leaving her breasts exposed to his gaze. The nipples looked like chocolate kisses and he wanted to taste them.

Faith whimpered as he covered one with his mouth and sucked on it. Her back rose up, pressing more of her breast into his mouth. The hands in his hair tightened and held him there. He laved at it with his tongue, swirling around the pebbled tip and grazing it with his teeth. Her gasps and purrs were music to his ears. He moved to the other breast and gave it the same attention he'd showered upon the first one.

"Rowan, please." She pulled his hand out from her panties and led it to her belly. "I'm burning, please. Make it stop."

Releasing her nipple with a pop he rose up from her body and stared down at her. "I will, Faith. I promise." He slipped her underwear off and licked his lips. A patch of black hair was neatly trimmed over her glistening pussy. "You're so fucking hot, Faith." Rowan dragged his hand across the dampness that shone in the sun. Her hiss of pleasure made him shudder.

Lowering himself over her, he placed the head of his cock at the entrance of her pussy. He had to force himself not to slam into her. She spread her legs wider and he groaned as the tip of his erection slipped into her heat. Slowly he pushed

in until he was encased totally inside her. Heat. Velvet heat wrapped around him.

He dropped his head so their foreheads touched. "Perfect." Rowan shook with the need to dominate the succulent woman beneath him. "Are you okay?"

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Was she okay? Faith had never felt this full before. It wasn't just his size, it was more than that. She felt him in her soul. What he was feeling as he sat buried inside her. It increased her awareness exponentially.

"Perfect," she repeated his word back to him. Dragging her eyes open she watched him staring down at her. His eyes swirled with emotion, they were the usual dark brown but there were flecks of silver in them. She'd never seen that on him before.

His lips brushed over hers. Once. Gently. He withdrew until only the head was left inside her and then he slid forward. Her synapses went haywire. *Was it possible to die from pleasure?* If it was, she'd be willing to give it a go.

In and out Rowan moved. Slowly and very deliberately. So many times she was on the verge of exploding in pleasures when he would slow to a stop. From the soles of her feet to the top of her scalp it felt like she was on fire. It was as if flames flowed through her veins.

He thrust into her, placing his head by her ear, he muttered things she couldn't understand. His accent heightened her arousal, his touch skyrocketed it. Everything about him increased her pleasure; his smell, and the feel of his skin against hers.

Rowan moved faster, she dug her fingers into his bared shoulders and latched her legs around his lean waist, arching her hips to allow him deeper penetration. She bit her lip as he powered into her.

The intense feeling began in her feet and swept up through her, overtaking her as it erupted. As he continued to drive deeper and deeper into her, Faith screamed to the air, "Rowan!" Pleasure skated over her as he grunted low in his throat and came with a powerful rush. She could feel his seed filling her womb.

Their hearts were pounding in rapid succession as he collapsed on top of her. Skin was covered in sweat, cooling them off was the breeze blowing over them from the Hebrides. Faith closed her eyes and just enjoyed the feel of him on top of her. This was unlike anything she'd experienced before and she knew that no other man could give her the feeling of such completion.

"There will be no other man for you," he growled by her ear. "By the gods, Faith, I won't share you."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded wondering how he knew her thoughts.

"I thought my explanation very clear, Faith." He pulled out of her and kissed her before rolling off of her body.

"I didn't say anything out loud for you to need to say anything." She reached for her shirt and tugged it on after she refastened her bra. It didn't take her long to finish dressing and she refused to look in his direction as she shoved her feet into her shoes.

Faith felt him behind her before he even put his arms around her. "Faith," he muttered against the side of her head. "We need to talk about this."

Her body went cold. Stiffening, she found the strength to jerk away from his touch. "There's nothing to say. No need. I know this was a onetime thing and if you'd been thinking it through you wouldn't have done this at all. I've heard the speech, I don't need it from you, Rowan. Please don't tell me this was a pity fuck."

She gasped from the speed in which he spun her around back to face him. Faith noticed he was dressed as well, but it was the angry set of his jaw and body that gave her pause. His eyes were as hard as the rock they stood upon.

"A pity fuck?" he seethed. "Is that what you think of me? That I stayed away from you all this time and now I want a pity fuck?" Rowan stepped closer and lowered his face to hers. "I didn't tell you that I wouldn't share you with any other man for nothing. Damn it, Faith. I thought I was doing you a favor by staying away from you. I thought you deserved a chance to live your life, experience things."

"I don't understand," Faith said quietly.

His entire form seemed to relax. "I didn't want to force you to grow up before you were ready to." Rowan stroked the side of her face. "We're meant to be, Faith. I knew that the

moment I laid eyes on you. But, I also wanted you to be able to go to school and go through the early stages of your life without me hovering over your shoulder. And I did, as much as it killed me to feel your reaction to another man's touch. But no more, no man will touch you again."

"I ... you ... you barely talked to me. Didn't pay any attention to me. Why would you think we belong together?" *I feel like I stepped into an episode of The Twilight Zone.*

"I watched you way more than you think. I wanted to mark you, tell others you were mine, it was so hard not to. But the pendant marking seemed to do the trick. For the most part." He frowned and stared down at her. "It tore out my heart when another man dared to lay his hands on what was mine."

Faith shook her head. "That's the second time you've mentioned knowing that someone touched me. How is this possible?"

"Because of the pendant I gave you. It joined our souls, allowing us to feel what the other is as well as reading thoughts."

Pursing her lips, she cocked her head and looked up at him. "Is that why you said what you did earlier? You could read my thoughts? And can I read yours?" She sighed and added, "And why isn't this making me totally freak out?"

His deep chuckle flowed over her, and instead of irritating her, it actually made her feel much better. "You know that what I speak of is the truth."

Faith couldn't explain it. Somewhere deep down inside her she knew he was right. Still, it was one thing to know it and

something completely different to come to terms with it. "This is all a bit much, Rowan," she said with a sigh. "I mean I'm standing here listening to you talk but really, you *knew* I was the one when I was a sophomore and you couldn't tell me because you wanted me to experience life, but all this time, you've been able to feel what I feel but you couldn't come "claim" me until I called for you. Does that about sum it all up?" She lowered her hands from where she'd made the air quotes.

He licked his lips, an action which gave birth to heat in her belly. He had the cutest, most sensual, bow shaped lips she'd ever seen on a man. *I just want to lick them.* His grin told her he'd picked up on that.

Lick them if that's what you want. His deep silvery voice flowed through her mind. Caressing her. Tantalizing her.

She gasped at the pulsing her pussy did at his words. His eyes never left hers and his lips didn't move but it was like he'd whispered in her ear. Goosebumps popped up all over her skin and she tried to hide her shivers but failed.

"Listen to me, Faith. There are some things we need to discuss. Some things I have to explain to you."

She shook her head. "You don't owe me any explanations, Rowan. Really. I mean, even with the trick of whispering so it is like it's in my head, you still don't have to explain yourself."

"I think you'll change your mind," he said softly.

"Why do you say that?" Faith questioned as he stepped flush against her.

"Because of what I'm about to do."

"What's that?"

"This." His mouth landed over hers with a ferocity that hadn't been there before. One hand landed on the back of her neck and as his tongue mastered over hers she felt her skin under his palm heating up.

She whimpered and tried to pull away from him as it began to hurt. His fingers tightened in her hair and his hand refused to move and wouldn't allow her to move either. Faith pushed against his chest and found it was like trying to move a mountain. His free hand rested on the small of her back keeping her flush against him. The intense heat snaked across the back of her neck and she shut her eyes against the pain.

Rowan's mouth gentled and the heat across her skin slowly dissipated. As his lips left hers, Faith opened her eyes. His eyes were colored silver with brown flecks and as they started at one another they changed back to dark brown like she recalled.

That's freaky.

"What the hell just happened?" she demanded, stepping back from him.

"I marked you. I'm sorry it hurt, but I wasn't going to let you go without my mark on your any longer."

Reaching for the back of her neck, Faith sighed with relief when she found her skin smooth and familiar. "What did you do to me?"

"Marked you."

"The heat?"

Rowan touched the side of her face. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Her eyes narrowed. "What is this mark thing you keep mentioning?"

His gaze burned hotter as he stared at her. "It says you're mine."

There rang such arrogance in his tone and Faith longed to knock him down a peg or two. Clenching her jaw, she sneered, "I *belong* to no man. And I never will." Without another word, she spun around and marched away, ignoring her body telling her how wrong she was. Faith refused to look back, although she did feel his eyes burning a hole into her back.

Don't do this, Faith. We've been apart long enough.

The voice in her mind was darkly sinful and created all sorts of images in her mind. Her steps faltered as the urge to run to him and engage in a repeat of what they just shared flowed through her. Her hands balled into fists before she regained her lost stride.

Stay out of my head, Rowan Kilgour! She yelled at him in her mind, not positive he would hear her. Masculine laughter filled her head before she heard him again.

You're so fucking hot when you stand up to me, leannan.

His phrase caused heat to well up inside her. Her pussy throbbed and she had to bite back a moan. Her nipples hardened and her heart rate increased. Swallowing, Faith kept going. More amused laughter echoed inside her mind as she continued on.

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Chapter Three

Rowan stared after her long after she disappeared from sight. Everything about her intrigued him. He hated how she'd thought he'd slept with her out of pity.

"Damn woman has no clue how desirable she is," he muttered as he walked to the edge of the rock and stared down at the water.

Out in the water, he saw a seal bobbing among the waves. Without thought, he headed down the near non-scalable descent. As his feet touched the damp sand there was another man waiting for him.

"Rowan," the man said by way of greeting.

Rowan stared back at the man before him. He had some gray in his black hair, giving him a distinguished salt and pepper look. His body still in good shape and didn't show him as being in his mid-sixties.

"Lachlan," he said.

"Didn't think you'd be returning here," the response came.

"Or you. What are you doing here?" Rowan asked.

"What's with the questions and the hostility? I'd think you'd be more excited to see your uncle."

"Ecstatic," he replied sarcastically. "Why are you here?"

"I want to see the woman who managed to pull you from the sea."

His uncle's philandering history reared up before him.

"Stay away from her, *Uncle*," he warned.

"Surely you don't think I'd poach on your territory, do you?"

"Your record is less than clean, Uncle. Head my warning, I'll forget you're family if you so much as look at her sideways."

"I won't bother her."

"You do and it won't just be me you have to answer to. Aunt Dara thinks very highly of Faith."

Something foreign flashed in his uncle's eyes before it was masked by humor. "Dara's here? I thought she lived in Aberdeen."

"She lives here now." Rowan looked up toward the rock where he'd loved Faith and was filled with the need to see her, hold her, and be surrounded by her gentleness.

Faith? Faith? Faith, answer me, damn it!

Rowan frowned. There was no response.

Faith!

Damn it, Rowan Kilgour. I told you to stay out of my head. I'm busy trying to enjoy my fucking vacation!

Rowan smiled. His body responded to her husky tone in his head. *I could get used to this, leannan. Your voice is so damn sexy, I just want to strip you down and love you from head to foot.*

Leave. Me. Alone.

For now, leannan. Only for now.

Rowan fought down another smile as he returned his attention to his uncle. "Anything else, Lachlan?"

His uncle shook his head and sighed. "Don't hate me for what I've done."

"I don't hate you. I don't understand how you could have done what you did, but I don't hate you. Goodbye, Lachlan. There's somewhere I have to be." Rowan turned and headed for the sheer cliff side he'd just descended earlier and began the long climb back up. There were some things he had to take care of before he saw Faith again.

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Faith stood over her final bag. She truly didn't wish to leave Mrs. Macleod's house. It was so cozy here and friendly. The seaside town was a place she could easily spend the remainder of her vacation exploring.

"Faith?"

She turned to the door and put a smile on her face when she saw the kindly face of Mrs. Macleod watching her. "Yes ma'am? I'm almost done, it'll be just another minute."

"Stay."

"I'm sorry?" Faith asked, setting her shirt in the duffle bag. "Stay?"

"Yes. Stay here for the remainder of your vacation if you want. Please consider it. I love having you here and would be honored if you would stay with me."

She didn't know what to say.

"Please, Faith. I know you booked a full week at the inn. Stay here. Be *my* guest, be part of my family. I work during

the day so you can just come and go as you please." Mrs. Macleod closed the distance between them and said, "Faith. This place is good for you."

"How can I ever repay you for showing me such kindness?" Faith questioned.

Mrs. Macleod wrapped her arms around her and squeezed. When she stepped back, she whispered, "Just be strong." Then she left the room.

Faith sat down on the edge of the double bed and smiled. *Could this day get any stranger?* With a decision made, she got up and headed out to the kitchen where, Mrs. Macleod was peeling apples.

"Will you stay?" Mrs. Macleod asked.

"On one condition," Faith said.

"What's that?"

"You let me help you out around here."

Mrs. Macleod pursed her lips, glanced down at the apple in her hand, and nodded. "Deal. Now help me peel this bunch of apples."

"Gladly," Faith remarked as she walked to the sink and washed her hands before rejoining Mrs. Macleod at the table.

"And you have to stop calling me Mrs. Macleod. You can call me Aunt Dara."

"Yes ma'am." She flushed. "I mean, Aunt Dara." Grabbing a knife, she began peeling an apple. "What are we making?"

"Apple and Bramble Crumble."

"Bramble?"

"Blackberries I think you call them."

"Sounds delicious."

"I think you'll like it."

As the crumble was put into the oven, Dara looked at her and said. "Go on with you and go explore. I've got everything under control."

Faith smiled, grabbed her purse and headed out the door with a wave over her shoulder. She glanced up at the fluffy clouds that floated overhead as her steps took her back the short distance to the town where she wanted to visit more shops.

It was early evening as she walked into a shop/post office combination only to be met by a myriad of looks. Not suspicious ones more like surprise and amazement. Her heart rate tripled before she realized it was all okay. The proprietor smiled at her and welcomed her into the shop.

Leannan, *are you okay?* Rowan's voice echoed in her mind.

Her pulse slowed down only to speed up courtesy of his silvery sexual voice. *Yes.*

You're scared. What's wrong?

I'm fine, Rowan. Get out of my head. Faith walked up to the man behind the counter and smiled at him. "I'd like a coffee please."

"Of course, lass. Have a seat at a table and I'll bring you some immediately."

"Thank you." She walked past a display of postcards and picked out a few to send back to family and friends.

The older man brought her a large mug of coffee and set it down before her. Then he placed a large muffin beside her as well. "Here you go, lass. I'll just add the postcards to your bill if you'd like."

"That would be wonderful. Thank you, especially for this muffin as well," she responded picking up the cup and taking a small sip of the hot brew. It felt so good going down her throat. She broke off a piece of the muffin and placed it in her mouth and it melted like butter.

Oh damn, this is good. She followed the bite with another swallow of coffee. Faith looked out the window she sat by and smiled as she watched waves crash on sharp rocks. *Life doesn't get much better than this.*

Oh, but it can.

Faith shook her head to try and control her body's reaction to Rowan's voice. It didn't work. Moisture pooled between her thighs and she squirmed on the red vinyl seat. Her skin prickled and her nipples hardened to almost painful points. Determined to pretend he wasn't turning her into a walking sex addict, she dug in her purse for a pen and began filling out the postcards.

When the man stopped by later to refill her coffee, he said, "Name's Angus, lass."

"I'm Faith."

"Pleasure to meet you, Faith." His gaze moved over her. "Are you staying long?"

"Rest of the week." She glanced outside and smiled at the creatures she saw resting upon the rocks. "What are those?" she asked glancing back to Angus.

"Seals." He looked out the window and back at her. "Seals just waiting for a maiden to come close enough so they can carry her away."

Faith chuckled. "Really? I'll make sure to stay away from them then."

"Safest if you do, lass. It's safest if you do."

"I'll remember that," she said with a smile as he took his leave and saw to some of the others that sat there drinking coffee and chatting amongst themselves.

Sean was waiting outside the shop when she left. Faith swallowed as she stared at him. "Get out of my way, Sean."

"Hear me out, Faith. Don't be like this, come back to the inn. I'll forget about this whole thing."

She gaped at him. Faith knew her mouth moved but no sound came out. He would forget? Him? The one who did the cheating? Taking a step back she glared at him, still unable to form any words. When he grabbed a hold of her upper arm, she found them.

"Get your hand off me, Sean." She jerked her arm, trying to free herself from his grip.

"Don't be like this. That was nothing. Just forget it, she didn't mean anything." He maneuvered them off the main street and out of the way of prying eyes.

"I can't believe you think that makes it any better." Faith pulled again. "Let go of me."

Faith? I'm coming to you. Rowan's voice immediately calmed her nerves. It was as if he stood beside her sending her silently his strength.

I'm okay, Rowan. I can handle this.

I know you can. But I'm still coming.

Rowan's belief in her made her feel invincible. "We're finished Sean. It ended the moment I walked through that

door and saw you with that ... whore." She narrowed her eyes at him and hissed, "Now, take your hand off me before I scream."

Sean looked startled at her vehement outburst and did as she'd commanded. He licked his lips and shook his head. "Would it make you feel better to sleep with another man? If so, go do it and put this whole thing behind you. We came here together and we're leaving together."

"We aren't leaving together. We aren't doing anything together anymore." She rubbed her arm. "And if you really want to know the truth, I have slept with another."

Sean's eyes narrowed and he lowered his face to hers. "You bitch! It was that one you said you knew from school wasn't it?"

"Yes it was. Now, if you'll kindly get out of my way, I have to help prepare dinner." Not giving him time to respond she shoved past him.

"I'm not letting you go, Faith," he whispered menacingly after her. His words made her belly clench.

She never looked back, just glanced up at the sky and sighed. *What is it about today that has turned my life upside down?*

Dinna fret, leannan. Everything will be revealed to you. Are you doing okay?

Just confused. I'm okay. Faith sat down on a rock outside Dara's cottage and cradled her head in her hands. *So confused.* She got up and walked inside the small house. Her nose was bombarded with the wonderful smells of food that floated on the air.

"Faith?" Mrs. Macleod's brogue reached her before she stuck her head out of the kitchen. "Everything alright lass? You look frail."

Sending the older woman a semi-forced smile, she shook her head. "I'm fine. Just let me go put this with my stuff and I'll be right back to help you with dinner."

A knock came on the door as Faith was pulling out dinnerware. Mrs. Macleod went to answer it. Faith's skin broke out in goose bumps. *What is wrong with me?*

"Faith," Mrs. Macleod said, "you have a visitor."

Frowning, she placed the plates on the counter and headed for the living room. Air left her lungs in a rush. Standing in the doorway near Mrs. Macleod stood Rowan. Taller than life, powerful, sexy, and so much more. A thick lock of brown hair fell forward over his forehead and she longed to reach up and push it back. Licking her lips, she opened her mouth only to shut it when he spoke.

"Hello, Faith. I told you, I would be back." Sinfully smooth and arousing, his voice flowed over her.

Unsure, she glanced between Rowan and Aunt Dara. Dara had a glower on her face as she looked at Rowan. "I'll set another place for dinner. I'm assuming the two of you have things to discuss," Aunt Dara announced before she disappeared.

"What are you doing here, Rowan?"

"Our place is with one another. Can't you feel it?" He stepped toward her and she was helpless to resist as he drew her into his arms. His lips caressed her temple sending shockwaves throughout her body.

"I don't know what's happening to me. I feel different."
She inhaled the scent that seemed to float around him. It was the crisp scent of the sea.

"What you are feeling is your heart telling you what your mind may not be ready to accept."

"Why does it hurt if I'm not close to you?" she blurted out.

"The mark. I feel the same way," he told her.

Shoving away from him, she glared up at him, determined to ignore the silver flecks in those dark chocolate mousse eyes. "Take the damn mark off then. I leave in a few days, I can't be feeling like this all the time."

"You marked her?" Dara's voice was sharp and unforgiving.

Faith noticed a faint blush skim across his skin. "Yes, Aunt Dara. I told you, Faith is mine and I won't share her with anyone." Despite the tint his skin held, his words were hard with conviction.

"Wait? You know each other?"

Dara sent her a sympathetic smile. "Och, lass. There's so much for you to learn. Dinner will wait, Rowan, you explain everything to her. And I mean everything."

"Aye." Taking her hand, Rowan tugged her to the door. "We'll be back soon, Aunt Dara."

Faith didn't have time to say anything before she and Rowan were out of the house and he was leading her up the path and to the road.

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Rowan wasn't sure of the best way to handle this. He could feel the tension and uncertainty pouring off Faith's body as she walked beside him. He'd allowed her to pull away from him but he was pleased she was at least walking with him willingly.

"I believe you have a hell of a lot explaining to do, Kilgour," she snapped.

"So I do," he amended.

Placing his hand at the small of her back, he guided her to a small playground and gestured to a bench. She sat and shot an impatient look at him. Rowan carefully sat down at the other end and turned so he faced her.

"Everything I told you earlier was true, about the mark, being joined, all of that."

"None of it makes sense, Rowan," she said. "Logically speaking you can't 'join' with a person, much less because of an amulet."

"There is magic in the world, *leannan*. Surely you believe that."

"Magic? Are you serious? Rowan, come on. What kind, like white magic, black magic, witches, warlocks, spells, or fairy dust? No. I don't."

He couldn't believe it. The other half of his soul didn't believe in magic. Was this possible? "Magic exists everywhere, Faith. It's all around us."

She nodded, lips pursed in blatant disbelief. "This doesn't explain anything. What is going on here? And why am I involved?"

"You're involved because you were the one created to match my soul." He took her hand and interlaced their fingers.

"You are really serious about this aren't you," she stated, staring at him in the waning light.

"You have no idea, Faith. I've waited so long for you. I know this is new and probably scary but trust me, we'll get through it together." He kissed the back of her hand. "Let me show you the Isle tomorrow, spend some time with me."

"Tell me something, Rowan."

"Anything, *leannan*."

"If you are magic, or have magic, what is it you are, or do?"

"I'm a selkie."

Her eyebrows rose and she stared at him blank faced.

"What exactly is that?"

"The best thing that will ever happen to you, lass," another voice broke in.

Rowan narrowed his eyes as he saw his uncle standing there, leaning against a tree arms crossed over his chest.

"Lachlan," he growled.

An evil gleam sparked in his uncle's eyes as he pushed away from the bark and moved toward them. "Be nice, nephew, and introduce me to this lovely woman."

Faith tightened her fingers on his and her words skated through his mind. *Who is this man?*

My uncle, Lachlan.

He's creeping me out. He keeps staring at me like I'm a piece of meat and he's a hungry wolf.

I won't let him hurt you, leannan, I swear it. Rowan felt a growl of anger well up within him. He'd warned his uncle.

"My name is Lachlan Kilgour," his uncle said in a smooth voice, and Rowan knew he was turning on the charm that usually would get him any woman he wanted. His dark eyes were fixed firmly upon Faith and Rowan despised him for it.

"Faith," she responded indifferent to his applied charm remaining coolly polite instead of gushing all over him and only shaking his hand briefly.

"So, you're the lass to drag this nephew of mine out of the sea."

"Excuse me?" Faith questioned.

"Lachlan," Rowan warned.

His uncle paid him no heed. "I bet the sex with him was unlike anything you'd experienced before. We selkies are known for pleasuring women. *Lots* of women."

He could feel Faith's uncertainty. Glaring at his uncle, Rowan stood and helped Faith up before they walked away without another word. "Pay him no mind, Faith. He's just a bitter old man."

"That may be," his uncle hollered after them, "but I am honest. Selkies are sexual by nature. We both know it, Rowan and you shouldn't lie to her about it. One woman won't keep you satisfied. What's she going to do when the sea calls you home?"

Rowan tightened his grip on Faith's hand and stopped walking. "He's wrong, Faith. You are all the woman I need." He tipped her face up toward his. "The sea will never be as much of a home as you are." Lowering his head, he placed his lips on hers. Slowly his tongue sought entrance into her mouth.

You are my everything, leannan.

She whimpered and pressed against him, her fingers gripping his shirt, pulling him closer. *Rowan!* Her back pushed her breasts further into him and his cock throbbed with desire. There was no one else aside from them.

Their tongues dueled with one another. His hand slid across the softness of her shirt and held her closer. His skin prickled and he longed to lower her to the ground, or take her against a tree, he just wanted to be buried deep inside her velvet heat and in a world where nothing was wrong. Faith's responses to his touch were electrified and Rowan had never been so close to shaming himself fully clothed.

Slowly he released her mouth, but continued to place small butterfly kisses all around it. When he stopped, he glanced down at her, nearly drowning in her light brown eyes, and whispered, "Let's get going."

She nodded before loosening her death grip on his shirt, stepping back and slipping her hand into his. "Dinner should be ready for us," she announced and Rowan picked up on the slight tremor in her voice. He knew she was desperately trying to digest everything she'd just heard and not lose her cool.

They walked and his uncle still followed behind, never ceasing in his litany of reasons that Faith would be hurt if she had a relationship with Rowan. Each step, each accusation that poured out of his uncle's foul mouth incensed him further. His free hand clenched into a fist and just before the cottage, he spun around and bit off in a cold voice, "Shut up, Lachlan! Or I will shut you up."

"Why so feisty, Rowan? Am I getting to close to the truth for you? She needs to know what's in store for her."

He dropped Faith's hand, spun around and punched his uncle right in the face. With a crunch, blood spurted and Lachlan Kilgour fell back onto the ground. Eyes narrow with rage, Rowan leaned over the prone body of his uncle. "Unlike you, Lachlan, I have it in me to be faithful. There will *never* be another woman for me. And if you keep spouting off like you're doing, I will kill you." He could hear the surf pounding the crags below them with increased intensity.

Faith laid her hand on his arm and immediately he was calmer. "Don't do this Rowan. Please."

Glancing down he saw the blood covering his knuckles and frowned. This was no way to protect Faith. He wanted to hold her, but refused to sully her with his uncle's blood.

"Let's go inside," he said softly, ignoring the adult lying on the ground, blood still running from his nose.

She was silent as she walked beside him. Rowan could feel her slight trembling but she didn't say a word as he reached out and opened the door for her to Dara's cottage. Apparently her expression told Dara all she needed to know. For his aunt glared at him and pulled Faith into her arms, muttering softly

and rubbing her back. Rowan headed for the sink to wash his uncle's blood off his hand, his anger at the man still flowing high and strong. He remained in the kitchen among the wonderful smells of the food that just waited to be eaten and sent an inquiring thought along the link to Faith.

Are you okay, leannan?

Just confused. Are you coming back into the living room?

A smile teased the corners of his mouth. Her desire to see him was easily picked up on. And it made him feel like he was on top of the world. Instead of answering, he wiped his hands on the towel one more time and walked into the living room to see Dara and Faith sitting on the couch, knees touching, and holding hands.

"Time to eat," Dara said and stood.

Rowan immediately took Faith's hand and once she'd regained her feet, tucked her against his chest, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her temple. Looking over her head at his aunt, he mouthed 'thank you' to her as she turned and walked into the kitchen.

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Chapter Four

Faith sat in the open window of her room. Dinner had been interesting, her mind wheeling around most of what Lachlan Kilgour had been spouting earlier. Her mind was a jumbled mess and the odd thing was it actually comforted her to be able to speak with Rowan in her mind.

Freaky, but comforting. She stared at the moon as it rose above the towering trees around the cabin. The cold breeze from the Hebrides flowed over her and cooled her flushed skin.

Inside she hurt, she wanted to be with Rowan and it was driving her crazy. Every move she made, her body responded as if he were there with her. She was primed for a long night of loving and all by herself. Dara had made sure he left. Shifting on the windowsill she whimpered as her clit throbbed, crying out desperately for attention. Each breath she took pressed her tight nipples against her bra, teasing and tormenting her.

"Might I hope that whimper is for me, *leannan*?" Rowan's deep sensual voice poured through the night.

"Rowan," she gasped, surprised and yet not to see him there.

He leaned in and brushed their lips together before leaning against the windowsill beside her. "I thought we should finish our talk."

Talk? She didn't want to talk. Taking his chin in her hand, she turned his face toward her and kissed him. Faith poured

all her pent-up sexual energy into her kiss. He opened his mouth and allowed her entry; she slid her tongue along his before thrusting it deep. She stroked along the roof of his mouth loving how he tasted. A heavily addictive masculine taste.

She could feel the power rippling along his skin, but he never took over, just allowed her to set the pace. His hands cradled the side of her face and he turned more into her. Faith wanted him naked, wanted him slipping in and out of her. Without conscious thought, she reached for him in her mind. *Rowan. I need you.*

All you had to do was tell me, leannan.

She lost control of the kiss. Rowan dominated her and she felt herself melting under the assault his tongue made on her mouth. Flames licked along her skin that the night air did little to cool. Her belly quivered with need and her pussy throbbed insistently.

"Inside," he rasped. "Get inside, Faith."

A low moan of frustration escaped her but she listened to his directive and scrambled off the sill and headed through the dark room to sit on the bed. Her gaze never left him as he vaulted up in through the open window. His body so large it seemed to block out the moon behind him. As he moved toward her, he pulled off his shirt and dropped it on the floor, she heard his shoes hit the floor and the sound of his zipper being lowered made her body thrum with desire. Faith swallowed and tried unsuccessfully to slow the rapid beating of her heart.

Framed by the gentle moonlight, Rowan's face appeared before her as the bed dipped underneath his weight. He moved over her, pressing her back into the double mattress. His lips teased her jaw as he murmured in Gaelic.

"We need to get you undressed, Faith."

She smiled softly as he pulled off her oversized t-shirt leaving her only in panties.

"You're so wet for me baby," he crooned as his fingers trailed over the juncture of her thighs and teased the edge of her panties.

Spikes of pleasure rocketed through her. Her hips moved against his fingers, but a low chuckle escaped him and he refused to let her keep contact. She hissed in frustration. He clucked at her as he reached up to the top of her panties and drew them down. Faith lifted her hips and bit her lip as the anticipation nearly crippled her. She wanted him inside her.

His warm naked body covered hers and she squirmed beneath him. "Rowan," she whispered, not wanting to wake up Dara.

"Yes, Faith?" he asked, teasing her with the head of his cock.

"Please," she panted. "I need ... I need ... I..." Slowly, ever so slowly he pushed forward and filled her up. "Ohhh," she moaned.

Rowan released a groan as well. Faith tightened her muscles around him, wanting to keep him there forever.

In and out. Rowan began to move within her. Slowly at first, a nice erotic pace that kept her on edge the entire time.

A long slide in and a leisurely slide back out until just the head of his dick was left in her wet body.

"So tight and wet," he praised as his hips continued the unhurried thrusts.

A fire raged within her, desperate to be put out. But she was pinned beneath his weight and he didn't seem inclined to pick up his pace at all. Her hands landed upon his back and she dug her nails in as the fire burned hotter and hotter.

Rowan!

Yes, leannan? Do you burn for me?

There was something sinfully hot about not only hearing but also feeling the sensual heat of his voice moving through her body. His mouth was on hers, kissing her like she was his last chance for life.

Yes. Rowan, please.

Tell me what you want.

His mouth moved down to suckle upon one breast and she jolted up with a gasp. "Yes, oh God, yes."

Tell me what you want. His mouth was relentless as it tugged and pulled on her nipple. *You taste like chocolate, baby. The finest in the world.*

Forming a word was nigh impossible for her. Her body screamed for release and yet Rowan kept her just on the edge, not quite allowing her to find it. "Please," she muttered.

In and out he stroked. Faith tried to arch her hips into him but he shook his head and chuckled, the vibration tantalizing her nipple even more. Then he moved to the other one and paid homage to it as well.

Slow, leannan, we do this nice and slow. I want to make love to you.

Faith grunted in frustration. She didn't want slow. She wanted to be allowed to reach her peak. Her toes began to curl as the pleasure spread. Rowan kept switching his attention from breast to breast. Moving her hands from his shoulders to his head, she pulled on his hair.

His eyes were a gorgeous mix of silver and brown, the colors blending it was hard to tell where one started and the other ended. He kissed her lightly before whispering, "Tell me what you want, Faith. If you want it faster, say so."

"Faster, Rowan. Stop torturing me, please. I need to come."

"All you had to do was ask, *leannan*."

He moved faster. She groaned happily. New pleasure washed over her. He lessened his weight allowing her to move with him and in seconds they had a perfect rhythm going.

In. Out. In. Out.

Rowan left her breasts and moved back up to her mouth. He nibbled along her lower lip. Faith shut her eyes and dug her fingers into his shoulders. She undulated her hips and encouraged him onto greater speed. He complied in seconds.

"Oh. Oh. Oh!" she panted as he drove home into her.

Low grunts from him echoed in her ear as he continued to plunge in and out of her wet pussy.

Come for me, leannan.

His command echoed throughout her body and she did just as he had ordered. She buried her mouth into his shoulder so

her cry of release would be muffled. Faith came in a shower of bright light and brilliant colors. She felt Rowan thrust twice more before he erupted inside her. He collapsed on her and she loved the feel of his weight on him. Turning her face she pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Rowan pulled out of her and rolled to the side, cradling her against his chest. Pressing his lips to her forehead, he closed his eyes and just enjoyed the moment. Ever so slowly their breathing found its way back to a normal speed. Stroking her skin with his fingertips, he learned the shape of her outline. Faith sighed and snuggled deeper into him.

"I have to leave before Dara wakes," he whispered. "She'd skin me alive if she found me here."

"What's a selkie?" she asked quietly.

"It is one who can shift from human form to that of a seal." He waited tensely for her response.

"Okay," she responded.

"That's it. Just okay? Nothing else you have to say about it?"

Faith yawned. "Not at the moment." She draped a leg over his and kissed his chest.

Unsure of what to think, Rowan just brushed his lips over her forehead. He'd expected a lot of reactions but her falling asleep wasn't one of them. Closing his eyes, he muttered in Gaelic, "You are my woman, Faith. And I'll never let you go."

Her soft snore was the only response.

Rowan remained there as long as he could and just before he knew his aunt would be waking, he slipped out of the

cottage. He didn't stay away long for he was back and waiting for Faith by the time breakfast was ready.

"Good morning, Rowan," Faith said with a slight blush.

He grinned at her and winked. Today she wore loose jean shorts and a sweatshirt. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail, leaving a tendril hanging down on each side of her face.

"Morning, *leannan*," he responded. *I'd love to take you over the kitchen counter, Faith. Have my dick plunging deep into that wet pussy of yours as you scream out my name.*

He watched her shiver and he smirked.

Stop it, Rowan! She snapped in his head.

Rowan couldn't help it. He loved seeing her flushed and aroused. *Are you wet for me, leannan? Are you craving the relief only I can give you?*

She glared at him across the table all the while keeping up a conversation with Dara. *I'd be pleased about you staying out of my head, thank you very much.*

I'd appreciate being buried balls deep in your pussy.

Faith narrowed her eyes at him. *Don't play this game with me, Rowan. I can play dirty too. I've been good and not telling you how delicious you look. Or how much I'd love to have your cock in my mouth.*

Rowan shifted in his chair. Damn, she's good. His erection pressed against his jeans at the image her words gave him. Reaching for his juice he swallowed a healthy amount as he shook his head at her. *Not nice, leannan.*

She didn't respond, just got up and walked to the counter for more bread. Aunt Dara's voice grabbed both of their attention. "I can't believe you marked her, Rowan."

"She's mine," he replied easily, watching Faith's body tense as he said that.

Faith looked over her shoulder and looked at his aunt. "You can see the mark?"

"Yes, lass. It matches your pendant, the markings that are on the edge." Dara held up her arm, exposing her wrist and Rowan knew Faith could see the mark on her skin. "Although, it stands out more on my pale skin," Dara added.

Rowan watched Faith walk over and look closer at the thing that bound his Aunt Dara to his lecherous, philandering uncle. He kept his eyes on Faith the whole time, gauging her reaction. She smiled softly at his aunt and retook her seat.

That man who claimed to be your uncle, is he the one who did this to Aunt Dara? She ate a bite of her eggs as she asked.

He knew he couldn't lie to her no matter how much he longed to deny his uncle. *Unfortunately yes, leannan, he is. I see.*

That was it. That was all she said.

After breakfast was cleaned up, Rowan took Faith to the car he'd rented and held the door for her.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you sightseeing. Just get in the car, Faith," he said.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked again as they left the town and headed out into the country.

"Kilmuir. Duntulm Castle to be exact."

She was silent for a bit and he thought her sleeping or absorbed in the landscape when she questioned, "Is it true, what your uncle said? About all the women?"

"For him it was. Not for me." He pulled off the road into a passing place and waved the other car by.

"And last night, were you serious about that whole shifter thing?"

Rowan looked over at her but she was steadfastly keeping her gaze out the window and away from him. They rode in silence except when he pointed out items he thought she may be interested in. When they reached the parking lot for the castle, he shut off the engine, got out, and opened her door for her.

She was quiet on her way up the muddy trail toward the castle remains, but he could feel her excitement. "Yes. Faith, will you look at me?" She turned toward him, her gaze full of uncertainty. Her light brown eyes met his and he just couldn't find the words. "Just be careful here, even though areas are marked off it can still be dangerous."

"Sure thing." Faith put her attention back on the place he'd brought her to see.

He walked beside her as they explored. Each passing moment, Rowan fell deeper in love with her. Her joy at being here was obvious and it was infectious. Every smile, every sparkle in her eye made his heart clench. And yet, he knew she was still worried about what had happened between them. Catching his breath, he watched as she stood with some other tourists and chatted with them.

Looking around, he found Faith standing alone looking out over The Minch unaware of other things around her. Walking softly, he approached her. Stopping behind her, Rowan slid his arms around her and rested his chin on the top of her head.

"What are you doing, *leannan*?"

"Saying goodbye."

His heart skipped a beat. Goodbye? "Why are you saying goodbye?"

"I don't think I'll be back here. And it truly is beautiful."

Rowan wasn't sure what to say. After a few moments he spoke quietly, "Come on, I want to show you some more places." He held her hand on the way back to the rental car.

He showed her Kilt Rock and the three hundred foot high Mealt Waterfall. In a secluded area of the waterfall, Rowan made slow love to Faith. On the ride back to his aunt's cottage, he asked, "Are we okay, Faith?"

She turned in the seat and faced him. "If not for all this magic talk, Rowan, I would think I was dreaming. Being here, seeing this beautiful place with you, has been more than I could ever have hoped to experience. Even now my body desperately wants to be near yours, I hear your voice and I want you. I don't understand what it all is but this is my best vacation ever. For that ... I thank you."

Rowan reached across the interior of the car for her hand. "You are mine, Faith. Just as I am yours."

She pulled her hand away. "Until what? Another woman grabs your attention? Or cries seven tears into the sea? Yes, I asked about selkies today and according to everything I was told, your uncle is how you are."

"Not all parts of lore are true. My uncle is the way he is. Not because of what he is, aside from an asshole. If that were the case," he glanced at her, "Sean would have been faithful." Rowan regretted it the moment he said it. Making her feel bad wasn't on the agenda.

"I suppose you're right."

"This isn't ending after your vacation is over, Faith."

"I have a life to get back to, Rowan. A job. Bills."

He pulled up to the cottage and shut off the engine. "I can take care of you."

Faith didn't wait for him to open her door. Instead she got her things and got out. Rowan caught up with her at the front door.

"Faith?"

"Thank you for today, Rowan." She smiled at him, diminished the distance, and kissed him. Her touch was light and she placed one hand over his beating heart. "Sleep well."

Rowan stood in silence as she entered the cottage and closed the door on him. For a moment, he debated following her, but he realized it may not be best. Faith needed some time to come to grips with what was happening.

Goodnight, leannan.

What does that word mean? Her question came quickly.

I wondered how long it would take you to ask. It means sweetheart or lover.

Cocky aren't you?

He smiled. *You'd know.*

Arrogant ass.

And all yours, Faith. He felt her laughter through to his soul. Dream of me, leannan.

Good night, Rowan.

Rowan blew a kiss in her general direction and headed for the path leading to the water.

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Faith lay in bed, wide awake and stared at the clouds that floated by in the night sky. She ran over everything she heard about selkies and tried to imagine Rowan as one of them. Was such a thing possible? She dealt with facts, numbers, things she could see and follow the logic of. Not make believe, legends, and magic.

And yet...

Here she was, able to talk to him in her head. Even though it made no sense, there it was. Reaching for the pendant, Faith closed her hand around it. Her thumb traced over the Ogham letter on the back. Why her? What reason did Rowan have for picking her? He had his choice of any woman.

Because you are my life's breath, Faith. Stop doubting yourself and your worth.

Grinning in the dark, Faith lay on her side and continued to stare out the window. *Don't you have anything better to do than eavesdrop on my private thoughts.*

Not when I'm not with you. There are things I'd love to be doing to you right now.

Her body responded, telling her it was ready for Rowan to make good on his word. *Where are you?*

Looking out over the sea. He was silent for a moment before he added in a more serious tone. *Get some sleep, leannan, I'll see you in the morning.*

Goodnight. Faith closed her eyes and burrowed into the down pillows. The cool breeze flowed over her and she sighed as she waited for the sandman to visit her.

The next morning Faith found Rowan waiting outside for her, sitting on the bench out in front of his aunt's cottage. Her heart beat erratically as her eyes skimmed over his casual attire. He had on a polo shirt and his biceps strained against the material. Nobody had the right to wear jeans the way he did. He looked poured into them and all it did was make her want to strip them off and have her way with him.

His dark chocolate eyes sparkled as he grinned at her. "I'm all yours, *leannan*, if that's what you want to do."

She flushed. "Stay out of my head, Kilgour."

He rose out of the seat and moved toward her. Flowing just like water, knowing nothing could stop it. She licked her lips but held her ground. Rowan stopped before her and tipped her face up for a kiss. He tasted like rich coffee. Purring she arched against him. This truly was what fairytales were made of.

"Ready to go, Faith?" he asked stroking the side of her face with his knuckles.

"And where are you spiriting me off to today?"

"Thought you might like to hike around in Cuillin Hills."

Faith leaned into him, loving how he easily supported her. "I just want to spend some time with you. I'm going home tomorrow." She could feel him tense at her words.

"Let's go," he said in a low tone.

As he drove, Faith watched him. Watched how the morning sun glinted off his hair and kissed his skin. Without thought she grabbed a hold of the pendant and skimmed across the markings she knew by heart.

"Is it true you can create storms?"

He glanced at her briefly before putting his eyes back on the road. "Yes."

"Have you done it?"

He nodded. "Yes. And not for a long time."

She just licked her lips. What could she say?

"You don't believe any of this do you?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know what to believe."

"Do you believe how I feel about you?"

Faith reached for his hand and intertwined their fingers. "Partially. I want to but there is a part of me that isn't quite there." As she watched, his shoulders fell dejectedly.

"I love you Faith. I have since the day I laid eyes on you. And I will love you for all eternity."

Tears pricked her eyes and her heart skipped a few beats. That was a phrase she hadn't been expecting. For all eternity? Faith kissed the back of his hand unable to say anything.

Hand in hand they walked and explored Cuillin Hills. Faith took numerous photos of the area, of Rowan, and of the two

of them. This was a vacation she never wanted to forget. At least not the part that included Rowan Kilgour.

Rowan moved behind her and pressed against her, allowing her to feel his erection. She smiled even as she shuddered with anticipation, her pussy crying out for his touch.

"I want you, *leannan*," he whispered before his tongue traced the outer shell of her ear. "I want you right now. Right here." He gently bit her earlobe. Faith couldn't have refused him if her life depended on it. Her legs were almost mush and the way he kept grinding into her had put her on the fast track to total surrender.

"Yes," she moaned, dropping her camera and pressing back into him. Her body burned for him.

Rowan undid her jeans and pushed them over her hips and to the ground. She shivered thanks to the breeze. Or perhaps it was the lips trailing along her collarbone. His large callused hands skimmed over her belly and headed to her panties. Long fingers teased her pussy through the damp material.

"You're so wet for me, *leannan*."

"Touch me," she rasped, her hands gripping his forearms.

"I am."

"Rowan—" Her moan of frustration turned into one of satisfaction as he slipped two large fingers under the bikini underwear and into her wet channel. Her eyes rolled back into her head and her muscles felt like jelly. His strength held her up.

In and out his fingers plunged. Each stroke sapping more and more of her strength. In her hear he muttered things she couldn't understand. It didn't matter it was his voice that did.

"Please," she begged, needing more.

His arm was around her waist and he removed his fingers and turned her toward him. His mouth landed upon hers with a ferocity that took away what little breath she had left. Faith heard the rip and felt her panties fall away, but Rowan didn't stop the assault on her mouth. He swept through it like Niagara Falls, touching all he could and not stopping for anything.

She gasped as he lifted her up and lowered her back upon his rigid cock. She sighed into his mouth as he filled her. Faith looped her arms around his neck and sank her fingers into his hair. Her legs locked around his waist, allowing deeper penetration. Up and down he lifted her, each stroke bring her closer and closer to euphoria.

He pulled away and stared directly into her eyes as he continued to pump within her. "I love you, Faith." She bit her lip, not wanting to talk about that right now. He slowed his thrusts and took one hand, laid it on the side of her face. His eyes were brown with silver swirls and so gentle and full of love. "With everything I am. I hope you believe me on that. And I will always come back to you."

"Rowan—"

"Shhh, Faith. I don't expect you to say anything, I just wanted to tell you."

His thumb swiped across her lower lip. It was no longer a desperate need to grab a quickie in the woods, his words

turned it into something much deeper. A joining of souls. His hips picked up speed and soon she was once again hovering near the pinnacle she sought. She rested her forehead against his and stared in his eyes as he piloted her to a mind-blowing orgasm. Tipping her head back, she released a scream to the air and shuddered around him. Moments later, he exploded within her.

Panting and out of breath, he carefully placed them both on the ground. The soft grass cradling their exhausted bodies. He stared at her, a small smile on his face. "You're going to kill me, Faith." Grabbing her hand, he placed it on her heart. "Feel how fast it's beating."

Leaning in she kissed him. "I need to get dressed." He moved a hand over her bare butt cheek and winked at her.

"Are you sure? I kind of like you like this."

Stifling a laugh, she smacked him on the shoulder. "Stop."

Rowan was more of a hindrance than anything as she tried to get dressed. Her underwear was useless but he seemed overly determined to keep her pants down.

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Chapter Five

Rowan led her out onto an outcropping, similar to the one by his aunt's house, but this one didn't drop onto the beach but directly into the sea. Together they stood looking out over the Loch. He kept his arms around her, not willing to let her go for anything.

"Thank you, for sharing this with me, Rowan."

"Spend the night with me." He glanced down at her while he waited for her answer.

"Yes. But I need to get word to Dara."

"We'll call her." He brushed his lips over her temple and said, "Let's get going."

"Where are we staying?"

"On the Outer Hebrides, Western Isles. We have to catch a ferry." He loved the sparkle in her eyes as she smiled at him.

He kept an eye on her as he drove them toward Uig to catch their ferry. Her skin glowed in the late afternoon sun. Once they were on the ferry, she remained out on the deck, allowing the air to kiss her face as they headed across. She watched everything, absorbed it all as he drove them toward the bed and breakfast they were staying at. He'd called his aunt on the ferry and explained the change in plans. So now, all that needed his attention was Ms. Faith Henderson.

"I think each part of Scotland that I see is more beautiful than the last," she said on a sigh.

"Would you consider living here?" he asked.

"I would love to live in Scotland, but that's not going to happen." She looked out the window at the jagged coastline.

"Never say never, *leannan*."

With a chuckle, she reached for her hair and took down her ponytail, shaking her head so it cascaded around her face and the interior of the car smelled like sugar cookies. His cock jerked in his jeans and Rowan swallowed to keep his mind on driving them to their destination. Finally the small bed and breakfast came into view and he pulled into a parking space and shut off the engine.

They were walking up to the door when she grabbed his arm. Surprised he looked down at her and had to fight the urge to kiss her pouty lips. "What?" he asked instead.

"I don't have any clothes with me."

"Well, I guess I'll have to keep you out of those so they don't get any dirtier." He winked and grinned, which earned him a smack in the chest.

"Be serious, Rowan."

"Oh I am, *leannan*, I most certainly am." He grabbed her around the waist, pulled her close and kissed her until she sagged against him. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he led them inside and got them checked in.

They had a light dinner and headed out for a walk. They stood near the edge of the cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, a small beach down to their right. Off in the distance storm clouds rolled toward them. His arms settled around her, drawing her into his chest. "Thank you," he whispered.

"I just have to be back in time to make my flight."

A growl of anger grew in the pit of his belly and rose up his throat. How could she still be talking of leaving? Didn't she understand they wouldn't survive separated? Dropping his hands he stepped back from her and walked closer to the edge.

"Why are you thinking this is just a vacation fling?" he asked as he stared out over the ocean.

"Because she knows I'm not letting her go." A low angry voice answered for him.

Rowan turned in a flash and his heart dropped as he recognized the man standing there holding a gun pointed at Faith. It was Sean.

Faith spun when she heard the cold malice of Sean's voice answer Rowan's question. She blinked rapidly a few times to make sure she wasn't imagining him there. He was and he was holding a handgun. His eyes were bloodshot and wild looking.

"What are you doing here, Sean?" she demanded. Fear for Rowan rushing to the surface.

"I told you, Faith. I wasn't letting you go. But if you are so determined to leave me, I'll make it so no one else can have you either." He ran a hand over his forehead before shaking his head and waving the gun. "Uh uh. You stay over there, Scotsman," he sneered.

Faith's heart skipped a beat when Rowan ignored Sean and stepped in front of her. *Rowan what are you doing?*

Protecting you, leannan, like a man should protect his mate.

I don't want you hurt. She pulled on his arm, trying to get him to move back but he was like a rock and wouldn't budge.

"Step away from her," Sean growled.

The sound of a cocking gun filled the air and Faith whimpered in fear. *Please do as he says, Rowan. I don't want you hurt and I don't think he'll shoot me.*

Leannan. His voice was a low rumble in her mind.

Please, Rowan.

"All right. Just don't hurt her." He put his hands out to the side and slowly stepped away from her.

"Further," Sean ordered.

Faith watched Rowan move further away from her. Her heart pounded erratically and her legs felt more like jelly than anything else. Rowan kept his eyes on Sean as he inched away but she could feel his presence in her mind and it offered comfort.

"Better." Sean kept the gun more on Rowan than her, but she was looking up the barrel a time or two.

"You don't want to do this, Sean." She tried to reason with him.

"I think I do. I don't like being left, Faith. I tried to give you a chance to come back, but instead you shack up with this ... this..." He waved the gun toward Rowan and she bit the inside of her lip so hard she tasted the metallic tang of blood.

"I made a mistake," she said ignoring the hurt that shot through her at those words. "I just wanted to get you back for what you did. Please, Sean, you have to know that." She walked toward him.

Faith! Stay away from him.

I can't let him hurt you, Rowan.

An evil smirk filled Sean's face and he moved toward Rowan. The gun aimed directly at his chest. "I think you need to leave her alone."

"I can't do that," Rowan said. "She's mine. I love her." Thunder rumbled above them and rain began to fall. The waves crashed harder into the crags and on the beach.

Are you trying to provoke him? she demanded.

Anything to keep his attention off you.

"She doesn't love you. And she'll never be yours," Sean hissed as he kept approaching Rowan, pushing him back toward the edge.

"Oh she's mine. She's mine in ways that she'll never be yours," Rowan taunted him. *Run, leannan, get out of here.*

I won't leave you.

Go!

Rowan ... I...

Get to safety, Faith. "I've loved her more thoroughly and completely than you could even begin to imagine."

"You bastard," Sean ground out.

Faith backed up slowly and quietly. She looked at Rowan but he was keeping his eyes on Sean. *Rowan?*

I love you.

She turned and began running.

"Hey! Faith get back here," Sean yelled. "No!"

A shot rang out and with a scream, Faith turned around. Pain lanced through her chest. Rowan's face was filled with

pain. She could see the red blood staining his white shirt, spreading out further and further.

"Rowan!" she hollered and began running back toward him. Sean turned to her and raised the gun again. As if it were in slow motion, Faith watched as Rowan reached out for Sean, gripped his wrist and fell back over the edge taking Sean and the gun with him.

"Nooooo!" Lightning jagged across the sky as her shriek reached the heavens. Scrambling toward the edge, Faith flopped on her belly and looked over. Nothing but waves crashing against the rock. She didn't see any sign of either of them.

Rowan? Rowan? Answer me. There was nothing. She couldn't feel his presence either and it created such an emptiness within her.

The skies opened up and released a torrential downpour. She lay there for a moment, hollering their names. Straining to see through the darkening night and rain. Nothing. Clambering to her feet, Faith ran all out back to the inn and yelled for help. The inn's proprietor told her that they couldn't go looking in the storm and it was very unlikely that they would have survived the fall.

Unable to accept that, Faith ran back out there but went to the beach instead and tried to see if she could see anything from there. She was soaked, the wind whipped her wet hair around stinging her eyes.

"Rowan!" she screamed his name until she was hoarse. She waded out into the freezing water and pounded her fists on the choppy surface. The rain washing away the tears that

streamed from her eyes. *I never got to tell him I loved him.* Teeth chattering, Faith went back to the beach and sat beside a large piece of driftwood. She wrapped her arms around her legs and sat there in the downpour.

Faith cracked her eyes open and slowly moved her stiff body. The rains had stopped and she was still on the beach, in the same position. Standing, she looked over the water. The cold wet sand sticking to her in places she didn't want to think about. A blue mist seemed to hover over the calmer surface. She searched desperately for any sign of him but got nothing.

Turning her back on the sea, Faith headed for the path to lead away from the beach. At the foot of it, she faced the sea one more time. The fog rolled away allowing her to see some dark shapes bobbing in the water. Her heart sped up until she realized it was a pod of seals. A tingling sensation ran up her spine and she took a step closer to the water. One dark head broke away from the rest and headed in toward shore. Another seal followed.

The waves crashed up against the rocks that were further out in the water but lapped gently against the sand. The fog had moved away so that she could easily see the surface of the water. The early morning over the Atlantic was a beautiful sight but to Faith it hurt. She tucked a damp sandy strand of hair behind her ear as the first seal dipped below the waterline.

When it came back up her heart caught in her throat. No longer was it a seal. Her mouth dropped open as a shirtless Rowan Kilgour strode through the water toward her. All he

had on was a pair of skintight black pants. The cold water didn't seem to bother him and his sliced through the last few feet until his feet hit the sand. He stood there, water running off his body and being soaked up by the beach.

Her mouth moved but no sound came out. The morning light gleamed off his wet half naked body, making his skin appear golden. Faith's knees began to knock as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. She moved toward him, slowly at first until he looked at her and she stared straight into those eyes of dark chocolate mousse and argent flecks. At that moment she knew.

"Rowan!" she screamed as she ran all out toward him, throwing herself at him and crying with relief as his familiar and strong arms encircled her. Legs anchored around his waist, she cupped his face in her hands and began kissing him. All over, cheeks, lips, nose, eyes, anywhere she could reach.

"I told you, I'd always come back to you, *leannan*." He kissed her, his tongue sliding into her waiting mouth. He tasted like heaven, he tasted like her future.

"I thought I lost you," she sobbed. "I thought I lost you before I got a chance to tell you I love you."

His thick lashes dropped down before he jerked his head to stare at her. "You love me?"

She nodded. *I love you, Rowan Kilgour.*

"And what I am?"

"What you are, is the man that I love. Nothing else will ever change that," she vowed.

"*Ta gra agam ort, leannan.*" He kissed her lightly. "I love you, too." Rowan put a hand over the pendant and kissed her again. Her chest grew warm, but she didn't struggle, just trusted in what he was doing to her. The heat subsided and Rowan stared into her eyes and said, "Marry me, Faith."

She looked down and came face to face with a silver pearl ring. On the band, she could make out all the markings that had been on the pendant. There was a message inscribed on the inside of the band. It read: *beyond eternity, leannan, I will love you.* Inlaid in the pearl was the Ogham letter R and another one she didn't know. Faith reached for her chest and didn't feel the necklace there anymore.

"Yes. It is so beautiful." She sighed as he slipped the ring on her finger. "But ... where'd the necklace go?"

He brushed their lips together. "Things aren't always what they appear to be."

That's putting it mildly. "What is this new mark? I don't recognize it."

"That is an 'F' for you, Faith." Rowan kissed the hand wearing the ring.

"Is this a dream, Rowan? Are you really here? Or am I imagining it?"

"I'm flesh and blood, *leannan*. And I am right here before you."

She leaned into him, holding him close and fought back the tears. "How did you survive?"

"I am more powerful in my other form. As soon as we hit the water, I shifted. I'm sorry I couldn't come to you sooner. The healing took longer than expected."

"I was so scared. I didn't know what to do. I tried to get help, but they said it was too dangerous to try a rescue attempt with the storm. So I came back here and waited. Don't leave me again, Rowan."

"Never, *leannan*, never. My place is beside you." He put her on her feet and smiled down at her. "No matter where you want to go, I'll be with you every step of the way."

"What do you do, Rowan? What about your job?"

"I don't have one. I'm disgustingly rich."

"How?"

He winked at her. "Sunken ships."

A noise behind him cause her to look around him. She gasped. There were five more people standing on the edge of the water. All the men were very handsome and the two women were absolutely beautiful.

One of the women, a tall dark haired woman, wearing next to nothing, stepped forward. "Is this the one, *macan*?" her question flowed across the air like velvet.

"*Sedah, màthair*." He put a hand on Faith's back, his touch immediately calming her. "Faith, this is my mother, Mairead Kilgour."

She swallowed before sending her a nervous smile. It's not like she was clean and at her best. There was dried sand all over her and even in her hair. "It's nice to meet you, ma'am."

Mairead moved toward her, each movement elegant and beautiful. "You love my son," she said, staring at her with eyes like Rowan's.

"Yes, I do." Faith didn't even hesitate to agree.

A serene smile filled the elegant woman's face. "Welcome to the family, *nighean*."

Rowan? What did she call me?

Daughter.

Tears pricked her eyes for the umpteenth time today.
"Thank you."

The slim arms that surrounded her were surprisingly strong. "Take care of my baby."

Faith hugged her back all the while she smiled. A great many words came to mind when she thought of Rowan. Baby, wasn't one of them. "I'll do that."

Mairead let her go and looked at her son. Faith watched as they spoke rapidly in Gaelic. The love they shared was obvious as she kissed his cheek and turned back to the water. By the time his mother reached the edge, Rowan was beside her. Together they watched as the five people walked back out into the Atlantic. One minute they were there and the next five seal heads poked up and they swam off.

Faith shook her head in disbelief. She had so many questions to ask she wasn't sure where to start. Glancing at Rowan, she witnessed a bit of sadness in his eyes. Sadness which vanished when he looked at her to be replaced by infinite love. He smiled at her and cupped her cheek in his hand which despite the fact he was shirtless was warm.

"Ready to go?"

Snuggling against his palm she asked, "Where?"

"Well, I figured you'd want to clean up before we catch a plane."

We? "We?"

"Yes, we. You said you wanted to go home, and so we shall."

Wrapping her arms around him, she kissed him. Her tongue danced with his and their bodies pressed closer and closer together. Faith purred and arched against him, moaning when he lifted her off the ground. The kiss was hungry as her legs locked around his waist. Questions could wait until later.

Her eyes closed as he walked them back up the path and she didn't open them until he stopped. They were in front of the bed and breakfast. He opened the door and walked in, ignored the stunned looks of those who happened to be there and headed for the room he'd secured for them. Without slowing he strode to the bed and lowered her on it.

Lying on her back, Faith looked up into the face of the man above her. She pushed back a wet lock of his hair and trailed her hand down his cheek. "I love you, Rowan."

"And I you, *leannan*."

"Love me," she said, tracing his lower lip.

"Beyond eternity," he whispered as he helped her out of her clothing.

As he slid his erection deep within her, Faith knew her life would never be the same. She didn't care, as long as she was with Rowan.

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Rowan lay there holding Faith. This was heaven. Even if he was never allowed to skim across the water again, he wouldn't trade anything for the woman in his arms. "*Ta gra agam ort*, Faith." There was no response from the woman beside him, but he hadn't expected any, she was exhausted and sleeping the sleep of the dead draped across his naked body.

Seventeen years it had taken but finally she was his. Rowan leaned over and kissed the top of her head. He'd just had to wait for her to need him. All he needed to complete his destiny was ... Faith's tears.

The End

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Red Rose Publishing

A Little White Lie

An Unlikely Encounter

Zora's Chance

Trix or Treat—Coming Soon

Author House

A Knight's Vow

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Sealed with a Fist

By

Jeanie Johnson and Jayha Leigh

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Dedication:

For Stephanie D., chick we salute you for doing the damn thing;

For our very own Mackenzie for being the pattern for so many of our favorite ebook daddies;

For Von and Rolanda for holding it down;

For Alcira, Charley K, and Chandra for being the kind of readers that make it worth it;

For C and R for being the pattern for so many of our characters.

The characters Mae Craig and Mitch Craig are property of Shara Azod and used with her permission.

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Chapter One:

How it all went to Hell in a Hand basket

Somewhere in the Middle of No Fucking Where, 1995

One glorious day, Laverna and Rience Craig were going to die. When they did, there would probably be one heck of a fireworks display, because assuredly they were going to burst hell clean open. There was going to be a special place set for her imposter aunt and uncle, and that place would be smack dab in the middle of that som'bitch. If Fate was kind, then there would also be a comfy spot in Hell's Anti-chamber for the spawn that Laverna had birthed and set loose on the world.

That might be a strong statement, especially considering her actions in the last twenty-four hours, but it was a statement that she was going to stand by she thought as she closed her eyes and tried to get a handle on her pain.

Her back was on fire and her self esteem and pride hurt right along with it. She was not the best-looking female, but she didn't want to even consider what she looked like, so instead, she thought about how she came to this point. As always when thinking about any given moment, it was best to start at the beginning.

* * * *

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Yonder Austin was many things; a misfit, a catastrophe just waiting to happen, a pre-menopause surprise, and a genius. She could read at four years of age; she was fluent in Russian by the time she was seven; she could drive small cars and pilot boats by the time she was eight; she could assemble an engine by the time she was nine; and, before she'd even reached the age of ten, she'd already outgrown the need to go to school. Taking the SAT exam, she'd scored a perfect 1600 ... all three times.

Yes, Yonder Austin could be called many things ... including a millionaire heiress. Though Frontier and Meridian Austin had originally thought that she was nothing more than a bad case of stomach flu, when she'd slid into the world *feet first of course* they'd loved her the best they could, which was unorthodox to say the least. Adventurists at heart, they never bothered enrolling her in school. Instead, they hired a tutor to teach her so that it wouldn't disrupt the endless adventure that was their lives. It was a strange lifestyle, but at least they'd taken her along for some of it.

By the age of nine she'd already logged tens of thousands of miles of traveling. Oh, she didn't do Paris, London, or New York. No, she'd spent her travels visiting places such as Australia's Uluru (Ayers Rock) ; Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro, *which Ernest Hemingway described as 'wide as all the world'* ; Mosi-oa-Tunya (Victoria Falls) which the Kololo Tribe referred to as the smoke that thunders; South America's Andes Mountain Range; and swam in Africa's Nile, South America's

Amazon, and China's Yangtze Rivers. She experienced Gauguin's Tahiti *without the sexual exploitation of women*, Mark Twains' Mississippi River *without the denigration of African-Americans*, and Ray Charles's Georgia *without the segregation*.

For all of the places that Yonder did visit, Frontier and Meridian visited places that were far too dangerous for her to be able to accompany them. During those times—which were increasingly frequent and lengthy as she got older—her 'live by the seat of their pants' parents entrusted her to the care of Torix. Torix was a man of unspecified origins who did an unspecified job for her parents.

Having a voice that reminded her of the steady thrum of a train traveling over tracks, underneath his t-shirts and cargo jeans, he had the looks of a henchman. Still, he was nice to her. He let her tag along everywhere with him and he watched out for her. He always held her hand when she went to cross the street, he always cut up the food on her plate, and made sure she had on a hat in the hot summer sun and made sure no one picked on her.

When she'd outlived the need for a tutor, he'd taught her all the cool things like hunting, cooking food over an open flame, and most importantly, how to drive. If it had wheels, then Yonder could drive it.

She had a good life, even though she spent most of it outside of the confines of her family. In theory, she should've missed having her parents around, but in reality even the few months a year that they were around, they really weren't. So one day, when they went on an adventure and never

returned, she wasn't surprised. Since there were no bodies, she wasn't sure if they were dead or had simply lost track of time for years ... like they had that time when she was five. They'd gone off to Singapore and hadn't returned until two years later.

Things had been rolling along just fine until the family intervened and brought evil into her life in the form of the Craigs. The Craigs were distant relations—really distant. In fact, the only ancestors that they seemed to have in common were Adam and Eve.

Still, for some reason, her father acknowledged Rience Craig as a pseudo-brother, which made Rience her pseudo-Uncle, his wife Laverna her pseudo-aunt, and Soroka—the demon spawn that was their daughter—her pseudo-cousin ... *heavy on the pseudo*. They'd simply waltzed into her home and taken it over like it was their name on the deed, and spent money like it was their inalienable right to do so. Being that her parents were millionaires many times over, their spending didn't even put a dent in their funds, but their presence had put a dent in Yonder's life.

Laverna Craig was appropriately named, as was her spawn Soroka. In ancient mythology, Laverna was the goddess of illegally-obtained money and the patroness of charlatans, con men and thieves. Soroka was simply a Russian surname that meant 'magpie'. Never in all of her years had she heard a being who could talk so passionately and at such length about absolutely nothing. And then, there was her Uncle Rience. Like the king in Arthurian legend, Rience was power hungry. The actual brother of the billionaire Mitch Craig, he was still

miffed because he didn't get access to Mitch's money after his untimely death. But as mad as he was, it didn't come close to describing how Laverna felt about him not getting access to that money. Laverna Craig was the sister of Mitch's new wife, Mae, and never had there been two more money-hungry, unscrupulous individuals as Laverna and Mae Craig.

Yonder's parents might've been flighty, but they weren't stupid. African-Americans that accumulated as much money as her parents had rarely were. Her parents were worth far more than the fifty million dollars that was reported. Her parents had a net worth in the hundreds of millions. What they lacked in parenting, they more than made up for in speculating, investing, and paranoia. They'd always remained mum about their means. A bulk of their money was hidden in secret accounts, stashed in various places around the globe—just in case something jumped off. A blind trust paid out monthly, which covered household expenses and the like; so while the Craigs could live well as they had. There was no house or car payments, like most Americans, they lived month-to-month. But unlike most Americans, a hundred-thousand fifty thousand dollars a month wasn't enough for the lifestyle that they wanted.

They'd tried to get money by every conceivable means, but the blind trust *the kind of financial situation that allowed O.J. to keep the bulk of his money even after the civil lawsuit* that her parents set up couldn't be broken, and the shell corporations and offshore accounts couldn't be located. But Yonder had to give it up to them, they'd tried. They'd begged like Keith Sweat, lied like used-car salesmen, and presented

their case like hosts of late-night infomercials. Hell, by the time they'd finished presenting their case, even she was about ready to give them the money ... almost.

Having long ago learned the fine art of eavesdropping, she'd gone high-tech and jerry rigged the intercom system to pump in sound to her hiding room, she'd heard them talking with her parents attorney. After what had to be their fifteenth interruption, Mr. McDyess had rather gleefully informed them that they wouldn't get even one cent more than specified. Giving them a moment to digest that bit, he'd then delivered the proverbial nail in the coffin. He'd informed them that if she were to die, then they'd have twenty-four hours to vacate, and that every single thing that was held in trust for her would be sold and be split between the accredited HBCUs, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, of the Atlanta area, homeless shelters and women's resource centers.

Everything the Craigs had tried had failed. Every door that they'd entered had been slammed shut. They'd burned bridges that they didn't even know that they would have to cross. Soon, they became the laughing stock of Atlanta's elite but they had no shame. Regardless of what people thought, they still had an address in prestigious Buckhead, and though they didn't own it (Yonder did), they still had access to all of her parents property including the beachfront home in St. Simons Island, GA, the villa in the south of France, the timeshare on the yacht, and the private jet.

Laverna and Rience had so much more than most people, but it wasn't enough to people who wanted it all. They'd

wanted everything and instead got a glimpse into everything that would never be theirs. Instead of fifty million in cash and assets, they'd instead gotten custody of a little girl who would have access to it all in just under a decade.

They also got Torix. Technically, they weren't required to keep him on board, but getting rid of him came with a hefty price tag—a price that was more than triple their monthly stipend. Like the properties, he was a fixture in the Austin household. Though his job was officially listed as butler, he pretty much got to choose his duties and his days off.

That had been the proverbial last straw for the Craigs. Rience pretty much spent his time ignoring her; however Laverna had spent her time tormenting her. Laverna had done every nasty thing she could to cause her pain, including enrolling her in school on the pretense that she needed to be around children her own age.

School was the kind of hell that she could've done without. There weren't enough academic challenges to keep her attention or enough adults to police her classmates. There was hardly a moment of the day that went by that someone didn't refer to her a derogatory name or say something that chipped away at her self-esteem. She was an unsightly girl with a funny name.

Deep down, Yonder knew why her classmates *and Laverna* picked on her, but that didn't stop their words from hurting. Already freakishly tall for her age, she was rail thin to go along with it. She was nothing like most of her peers in even temperament, circumstances, or appearance.

After hearing all manners of insult at school, she got more of the same at home. Laverna not only called her names, she attacked her situation, reminding her that her parents hadn't really wanted her. If she didn't know better she might've thought that her name was Ugly Bitch, Ungrateful Fucking Cunt, or Stupid Mistake.

The time with her aunt had changed her. She went from being a happy child to a bitter, terrified, angry girl who skated on the edge of all out paranoia. Now she was referred to as a problem and her school files were filled with comments such as *'doesn't apply herself,'* and instead of the A pluses she should've received her record was laced with incompletes.

But that wasn't the biggest change. The biggest change was that her body was riddled with bruises that Laverna had put there. Sure, she was a whole head taller than her aunt but alas she was growing taller at a much faster rate than she was growing wide. Whipcord thin, she didn't have enough body to get the creases out of her clothes.

The first time Laverna had struck her she'd been so startled that it was all that she could do to keep her wits about her but she'd had enough wits to stay out of arm's reach of her aunt. She'd threatened to tell Torix, but all that she had gotten for her trouble was more trouble.

Her aunt had grabbed her hard and told her that if she said one word to Torix, she'd see to it that Torix was arrested for any and all manner of things. Laverna might be all kinds of a liar, thief and a con artist, but in that moment Yonder knew that she spoke the truth and she grew angry.

Yonder was angry at everyone and everything. She was angry at her parents for loving their wanderlust more than they loved her. She was angry at God for allowing people like Laverna to exist. She was angry at Laverna, not for being greedy, but for making her fearful. She was angry at Torix for not knowing even though she hadn't told him. She was angry at herself for caring.

Distrusting everyone, she foolishly kept her pain and fear to herself. Her heart a cauldron of anger and fear, she closed her ears to the insults, hardened her heart, developed faster reflexes, and counted down the years until she'd be free of the vipers that had infested her life.

Surreptitiously, she watched the imposter family to see what, besides greed, drove them. After watching them she realized that nothing else drove them. The Craigs were simply greedy. She'd quickly concluded that her mere existence incensed them, because her presence made it impossible for them to pretend that the wealth that they enjoyed was truly theirs.

She couldn't very well disappear, so she did the next best thing. She made herself scarce. She confined herself to her room, the service areas of the stately house, and to the front seat of the limousine. She kept to herself, making as little noise as possible and dressing in drab colors so that Laverna and Soroka could stand out in their jewel tones and Rience could feel comfortable dressed up in his delusions of grandeur. Her acts didn't make Laverna treat her any better but at least she didn't treat her any worse. And Torix was safe.

And then came summer. Laverna and Rience had hired a one hundred eighty foot yacht to spirit them around the Caribbean Sea and North Pacific Ocean for the summer. With a crew of fourteen, the yacht had everything a millionaire could want, including an assortment of toys and a helicopter pad. It was obvious that no one wanted her along, but as much as it irked them they couldn't very well leave her home. Not when they were living it up off of her inheritance.

Besides the owner's stateroom, there were three cabins and one twin cabin. Yonder thought that she'd at least have her own room, but Laverna and Rience had invited friends along and thus she was relegated to the twin cabin with Soroka ... and that cat of hers.

Reluctantly, she'd resigned herself to sharing a room with her cousin though she spent as little time as possible there. Most nights, she snuck out and simply spent the night curled up in some inconspicuous place going through the stack of books that Torix had brought along for her to read.

That was her routine most nights, but there were those nights that her aunt and their friends were too drunk for her to be out amongst them. The other night had been one of those nights so she'd reluctantly gone to the twin cabin she shared with Soroka and prepared for bed.

Having a body without the first hint at femininity, Yonder had taken extra special care of her hair. Though she kept it pinned up and tucked under a baseball cap, she'd reveled in brushing out the thick curls and feeling the length cascade down her back. It was a ritual she completed every night but

one she may never get the chance to perform again, thanks to Soroka.

The one thing that had kept her from being outright ugly was gone—well most of it. She'd looked in the mirror but what she'd seen had caused her to do the one thing she'd rarely done. She'd cried. She'd cried so much that she couldn't even see past the misery of her situation, but at least she didn't have to see all of the hair that kept falling from her scalp. It wasn't that she was attached to her hair; it was just that she didn't want to look like a boy so much.

She was so angry that she'd run to Laverna crying at what Soroka had done to her while she'd slept. And what had Laverna done? Hardly anything. Not even bothering to check for chemical burns, she didn't even look up at her when she threw out her advice. Put on a hat she'd told her as she went right back to reading her magazine. Retreating from the apathy with which her aunt greeted her pain, she ran past a laughing Soroka on her way to the shower.

She was tired, and so tired of being tired. Laverna, Rience and their spawn had busted into her life like the Gestapo and though they couldn't get their grubby hands on her inheritance, they'd wrecked her peace of mind, taken the one thing she'd been proud of and threatened the only person that she loved.

She was angry at them, but also at herself. She'd let down her guard and gone to sleep in the presence of the enemy. As punishment, she'd woken up looking as if she'd escaped from a leper colony.

Seeing her hair come out in clumps she thought that the day couldn't get any worse but then once again she'd underestimated the enemy. Even through the haze of her misery she'd heard the door open and the soft meow of the only thing that Yonder hated more than her cousin.

She didn't like cats all that much to begin with and she liked this particular cat even less. It could've been because she was allergic to it, or perhaps she was simply allergic to its owner. Either way, the last place she needed it to be was in an enclosed space with her. She'd barely got that thought out when the first sneeze shook her thin frame causing another chunk of hair to fall to the shower floor. That chunk of hair was the final straw. Something in her had simply broken.

Jumping out of the shower she'd grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck, dumped it into the toilet bowl and flung it at her cousin knowing that cats always landed on their feet. Stopping to grab a t-shirt and some shorts, she set a new world record for dressing. So quick that her cousin didn't have time to get away. Ignoring the clumps of hair that fell around her like petals from a flower, ignoring the hives fast forming on her skin, she locked in on Soroka. Never having struck another person in her life, she'd bitch-slapped her with every ounce of strength she had in her body. And then she'd put her hands around her throat and closed her hands tighter and tighter and tighter.

She would've kept squeezing but Laverna had rushed to her daughter's aid. Laverna had jumped on her back and pulled her off, but crazy had taken over her and she'd been

filled with a surge of power. She'd bitten, scratched, kicked and yelled before Rience had arrived.

For a moment she thought that Rience was going to strike her but then she saw Torix and she knew that regardless of how fucked up she was, whatever injuries she had would be the extent of it. Torix looked dangerous and everyone in the room backed up from him. He'd reached out for her but before she did she had her *The Color Purple* moment with her playing Whoopie's character and the Craigs playing the role of 'Mister.' She didn't know what was going to happen, but she knew that if any of them ever touched her again she was going to kill them. She didn't mean metaphorically, she meant literally—and she said as much.

Taking a deep breath she exhaled the frustration that had been building since the Craigs had arrived in her life. Looking Laverna and Soroka in the eye she made a decree. "You win. You wanted to break me and you have. You've turned me into something more evil than you. My God is not money, and flossing isn't my vice. Maybe I don't have a God anymore. I used to but you drove God away just like you drove the last bit of goodness in me away. Hate me. Revile me. Ignore me. Envy me. I don't care how you feel about me, but a word of advice, you should fear me. I know that you won't kill me because my very existence pays for your lifestyle. You might make my life more miserable but know this. Eighteen is only seven years away and the first thing that I'm going to do when I get my money is to hire someone to kill you and seeing what you'll do for a mere 1.8 million a year for eight

years imagine what someone will do for thirty million dollars payable all at once."

And with that she walked away. She felt empty. She felt sad. She felt alone. She felt defeated.

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Chapter Two:

Exhaling

Yonder didn't know what to expect from anyone anymore, not even herself. She simply knew that she couldn't take another year like she just went through. Turning from her aunt and uncle she walked away every step tasting like freedom and every other step tasting like dust. She was walking away from her tormenters but she didn't know what she was walking to.

Where was she going to go? How was she going to survive the next few years? And then she ceased wondering where she was going to because the answer walked to her. Torix stood before her looking like a place to rest. Scooping her up in his arms, all she'd felt was his strength.

Torix had taken her to the kitchen where he himself had washed her hair again to insure that all traces of the chemical hair remover were absent from her head. He'd tenderly checked her scalp for chemical burns and then he'd conditioned the half a head of hair she had left. And then he'd sat her down for what she was sure was going to be a lecture about death threats, felony charges, and foreign prison. Instead, he'd gently reprimanded her for not coming to him about the treatment she'd suffered.

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"Didn't you trust me?" he'd asked as he knelt before her. Seeing the hurt in his face had caused her heart to trip. "I didn't tell you because I love you."

"You are never to subject yourself to injury for any man."

"But you're not any man. You're Torix."

"And you're the baby I never had," he'd said as he hugged her.

Lifting my chin up, he'd pulled back and looked me in the eyes. "Did Rience touch you?"

"No. He spent most of his time ignoring me."

"I sense that you're telling me the truth, but I'm still taking you to the doctor when we get home. Now tell me all of the places that you're hurt," he'd demanded as he picked up a jar of mint-colored goo.

Telling him, she sat back and allowed him to rub the minty balm into the skin on her back, arms, and hands in time to what was assuredly cussing. Finishing that task, he sat her on a stool and tended to her hair. Carefully trimming the damaged side of her hair, he took his time braiding it into an intricate style all the while reminding her that she was beautiful. He was lying through his teeth but she couldn't help to love him more.

Handing her a mirror, he let her look. She didn't want to but he made her. She felt like that character from Batman—you know the one with the two faces.

"Why didn't you just cut it all off?" she'd asked.

"Because you always keep the good regardless of how much bad surrounds it. The good reminds you of the reasons you fight. The good things in life are the things that keep you hoping. If you cut down those things, you cut down hope with it. In the fight of good versus evil, we sustain injuries even whilst we achieve great success. Today, you did both. Now come, let's get you tucked up into bed so that you can rest."

Knowing that she didn't want to spend any time in the vicinity of the vipers in the guest rooms, he'd given her his room. It was small but it was clean and it had all of her books and no cats, no Craigs, no worries.

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It was amazing what threatening to kill everyone did for one's disposition. Though the Craigs were still vipers, they stayed away from her—far away from her. No police were called in, Interpol wasn't bothered, counselors weren't called, and mental health facilities weren't put on alert. Nope, she was left to herself; meaning that no insults were hurled, no names were called, and no threats were made. Having one hundred eighty feet of yacht meant that there was a lot of room for all of them. They got the sun deck; she got the upper aft deck. They got the upper saloon; she got the saloon.

They got the gym; she got the observation. She let them keep the master suite and she got the double cabin and Torix got the one next to her. What happened to the guests that were previously occupying them she had no idea, nor did she care. She only knew peace and she needed every bit of it for the past year had taken its toll. True, she'd accomplished a lot and seen a lot by the time she was nine, but damn, age ten had been a rough year, and here she was just a few days away from being eleven and she'd already planned her first felony.

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Torix was just a man, but he was not a man with which one should fuck. A simple man, he had more have-nots than he had haves. That is, he didn't have much of an education. He didn't have any kind of special training. He didn't have any kind of clout ... or particularly good looks ... or charisma. Hell, he didn't have patience ... or grandiose plans ... or any kind of mercy in his grayish-colored soul for those who preyed on children, women, or the aged. In fact, he had none t'all.

What he did have, however, was a past. He'd spent most of his youth in places that he never wanted to think about again. Today, when he'd looked into Yonder's eyes, something in him had broken because he knew that

regardless of her being tucked up in one of the swankiest neighborhoods in the entire U.S., she'd voluntarily taken up residence in the place he'd run from: fear. She'd lived in fear ... all because she loved him.

In all of the time that he'd known the pesky walking encyclopedia, he'd witnessed her many moods. He'd seen her resigned over the fact that her parents were who they were. He'd seen her mulish like when he made her hold his hand as she crossed the street—he didn't care if the street that they were crossing was a dirt road on private property. Dammit, she could get hurt. He'd seen her ecstatic like when she'd finally got the footwork down and was able to drive his manual transmission truck. He'd seen her sad when other children had picked on her. Oh, if he'd only had younger siblings; he would've sent them out there to give those kids a sound thrashing for hurting his Yonder's delicate feelings.

Like he said, he'd witnessed many emotions cross her visage but today he witnessed two emotions that were so pure as to be blinding. Today, he'd seen fury and then he'd seen love. Her fury was a white hot, molten thing so strong it singed all in its vicinity. Though it wasn't directed at him, her fury nevertheless burned him. The calm in which it came wrapped in gave no clue to its intensity. Nevertheless when she delivered her decree to her aunt and uncle all knew that she spoke the truth.

Never would he have guessed that he would be more perturbed by her fury than by her fear, but alas he was. Fear could be overcome, but her fury would take her places that he never wanted her to visit.

As much as he despised the Craigs he'd never allow Yonder to have their blood on her hands, and he knew that if he didn't step in, she would, without a doubt kill them. Taking a life was a cross too heavy for any human, much less an eleven-year-old girl with a heart as beautiful as hers. It mattered not that Yonder had the mind of tenured college professor; she was a baby—his baby.

And while he was still reeling from her fury, he'd glimpsed her love. When she looked up at him with those big, beautiful eyes and told him that she'd kept her fear hidden away because she loved him, it broke him. It broke him like no torture from rogue government agencies ever came close to doing. It ripped open the scars in his soul yet instead of hurting him it healed him.

Her love and goodness had seeped into every wound he'd ever had and made him brand new. And somewhere in her love he saw the God that he'd ceased acknowledging and he saw the limits to which he'd go for that little girl and knew there were none. There was no place that he wasn't willing to go for his baby. No place at all and both Yonder and the Craigs were getting ready to find that out.

Interlude: Let Me 'Splain You Something

Archipiélago de Colón was the official name of the Galápagos Islands. A province of Ecuador, the islands straddled the Equator. The Galápagos Archipelago was tiny. Mostly bits of rock and small inlets with a handful of primary islands sprinkled in, the 4900 square mi (7880 sq. km.) of land was spread over an area 28000 mi (45,000 sq. km.) ... officially.

Unofficially, it took up double the space. See there were the Galápagos Islands known to man and then there was Galápagos Island Proper known to no humans at all. Being that its nearest neighbors were mainland Ecuador which was 600 miles (970 km) to the east and other small islands, most of which the average human couldn't map, there was plenty of room to hide things. And being that humans were busy searching for things such as youth and gold, it wasn't all that difficult. The strong currents that surrounded the islands that made navigation weren't simply coincidence.

Due in part to its physical beauty, the Galápagos Islands known to humans was frequently referred to as "The Enchanted Islands." The volcanic geology of the Islands only added to its splendor. The flora and fauna of the island delight nature lovers and scientists. The few thousand humans that were blessed enough to consider the Galápagos Islands home lived in one of the most biologically diverse regions of the world. Most of the animals that inhabited the islands have only been seen by many humans on nature documentaries. Twenty-three species of land reptiles (three types of iguana, seven types of lava lizards, nine types of geckos, three types of snakes and one species of giant tortoise); and sixteen hundred species of insect and mammals including bats, rats, and sea lions roamed the islands.

The known Galápagos were no doubt glorious but the whole Galápagos Islands were truly enchanted. No humans lived there, but what did live there was truly magical. Ambrosia grew wild. And along with the animals such as the magnificent giant tortoise, Galápagos sea lions and Galápagos

bats lived all of the animals that had ever roamed the earth. There were Tasmanian wolfs and tigers, quagga (half zebra-half horse), Steller's sea cows, Irish deer, Caspian tigers, aurochs (large cattle), great auks (type of penguin), cave lions, dodo birds and even Tyrannosaurus Rex. They were all impressive animals and made even more so by the fact that a disproportionate amount of the animals that inhabited Galápagos were shifters.

Though it's commonly believed that there aren't any indigenous plants or species to Galápagos, that's a simply not true. Galápagos existed before most things were even thoughts. Conversely, Galápagos will continue to be long after most things cease.

Galápagos is not simply a place. Galápagos is the title given to *She Who Rules*. Since the beginning a woman has ruled Galápagos, and the person who currently saw to the Islands was Galápagos Rule. Like those before her, Rule embodies justice, wisdom, strength, and beauty. But unlike those before her, Rule also embodied passion. Rule was married and not simply to any male; Rule was married to Din Eidyn.

Din Eidyn wasn't just any Selkie; he was Emperor of all Selkie, king to all magical water creatures, and democratically-elected president of all water-dwelling creatures. Born in Musselburgh, which is considered to be one of the oldest—if not the oldest—town in all of Scotland, he wasn't just a Scot; he was all of Scotland. Descended from the Votadini, people of the Iron Age in Great Britain, his family made the seven mile trek to Din Eidyn, as Edinburgh

was then known, and made it theirs. And hence, they took the name of the town. Every male of their line had the same stats: height in excess of seven feet, eyes the color of Scotland (a blue green); hair the color of sand and a will that was relentless.

Din Eidyn would have remained there but for one thing, he'd met Rule. And he'd spent years swimming all of the oceans of the world in an effort to find her. He could scent her yet he couldn't find her, so he searched. A decade later Rule took pity on him, and nine months later, she birthed their first children. She'd given the Emperor twelve children ... everyone of them boys. And then a full decade later, she gave him one more ... also a boy.

Like every one of his brothers, Aonghus Fulgencio Din Eidyn was beautiful. But unlike his brothers Aonghus had all of the powers of his father, all of the powers of his mother, and some that they were still figuring out. And as the youngest child Aonghus, also had a bad case of taintiness—which meant that he was spoiled beyond all freaking belief. He was spoiled something fierce, and his taintiness, combined with his sense of adventure and power was a potent mix. Only ten years old, Aonghus was more of a handful than all of his brothers combined.

Rule and Din Eidyn were going to address Aonghus' disposition, but first they had to stop their parents from giving him everything that he wanted. Of course, like all good solutions, it would take time to implement. And if they could only figure it out, they would implement it. Frustrated as they

were, they didn't rush a solution; they waited for it to come to them. And it would, Rule was quite certain of that fact.

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Chapter Three:

Are You Freaking Kidding Me? Piling on

Even though she had a beautiful cabin, Yonder was once again looking out over the railing from her perch on the upper aft deck. Her book long discarded, and Torix having long ago succumbed to sleep, she was staring up at the sky listening to his snores and the lapping of the water competing with each other for dominance. Busy getting lost in the sheer beauty of the night sky, she attempted to count the twinkling stars that decorated the sky. A futile effort to be sure, but nevertheless one she enjoyed.

"Ah, once again I find you sneaking about on the aft deck when you could be much more comfortable on the sundeck. Don't you think you'd be more comfortable on the loungers on the sundeck?" the voice of the Captain spoke a few feet away.

She turned her head to look at the man dressed from head to toe in white as he carefully approached her. Ever since Torix had said/done whatever it was that had resulted in her being moved to a separate cabin she'd noticed that everyone approached her carefully. And most importantly, none of the Craigs approached her at all. Though no one disturbed her peace, she noticed that there was always someone nearby looking after her.

"Probably not, sir," she answered respectfully. "Too many vipers up there while it's nothing but miles of oceans and an endless sea of stars out here."

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The Captain smiled at the young mistress of the boat he commanded. From the pile of books that she always had around her, he knew that she was intelligent way beyond her years. Still, it was unusual to see a child so unspoiled by her intelligence and wealth. True, he didn't exactly know a lot of children—especially eleven-year old girls—but this one ... well; there was just something about her. She reached inside of your person and stirred up the protect genes.

Here he was, a seasoned seaman whose mistress was any boat that would have him at the helm, and yet instead of fussing over his boat, he was out here worrying about her. Of course, he wasn't the only one he thought as he spotted the ever-present Mr. Torix fast asleep in a deck chair. Ms. Austin was a lovely girl and it had pained him to see her treated so shabbily by the people that masqueraded as her family.

Aware of the tragedy that surrounded the little girl's life, he thought it was a damn shame the way the 'family' ignored her. Sure, they'd taken her in, or rather taken in her inheritance, and reaped every benefit that was involved in being the guardians of Yonder Austin, but that was all that they'd done.

Laverna and Rience Craig might be her official guardians, but it was woefully apparent that they were more about

usurping her lifestyle than actually caring for the little girl. Though they were only a few days into the seasonal sea journey, he hadn't yet witnessed them spending any time with her. Of course, they hadn't really spent any time with their own daughter, but at least they acknowledged her existence.

The way they ignored Ms. Austin was a damned crime if ever he'd seen one. The little girl was smart, cute, intelligent, funny and helpful. Not only had she offered to help him pilot the yacht, she'd offered to assist Chef with the meals, the wait staff with the dishes and the maids with the laundry. Of course, they'd all declined her offers of help but unlike her 'family' they didn't decline her company. In fact, the staff went out of their way trying to please her.

Chef took her aside every morning and made her some goody or another and dammit, even he had gotten roped in by her intelligent eyes and inquisitive nature.

Before he'd known what he was about he'd found himself showing Ms. Austin how to operate the luxury yacht and damn if she didn't take in everything he said. He wouldn't be surprised to know that she could operate the damn thing on her own should the need arise.

As he said, she was helpful. Not only was she completely without conceit *she'd repeatedly told them to call her Yonder instead of Ms. Austin*, she kept her state room tidy. She changed her own sheets and made her own bed. Thinking about how she tidied up after herself caused him to simply shake his head in disbelief. *A kid who was tidy? Who would've thought it?*

He knew that she wasn't trying to win favor with the staff. Hell, she was paying their wages. No, she was merely lonely. Not counting her "family" who would only meet a sunrise if they were stumbling in from some kind of spending spree, the little girl only had Mr. Torix for company—not that she seemed to mind. Mr. Torix did an excellent job entertaining her but it was clear that the little girl was in desperate need of some female company.

Dammit, he abhorred Ms. Austin's circumstance. A male he might be, but he saw the envy in her eyes when she looked at other families. And though she concealed it well, there was something in her eyes that he couldn't place but it had disturbed him.

It had disturbed him enough that he had instructed the staff to make Ms. Austin their first priority ... over every other duty that they had. Seeing that Mr. Torix was the only one that seemed to care for her on her own merits, he'd approached him and let him know that his staff was available to do whatever was necessary to make this a fun trip for her.

And they had made it fun but they couldn't change the situation. They couldn't make the Craigs include her and though they could protect her from anything untoward from the Craigs guests, they couldn't protect her from the envy of her cousin. Damn, he'd hated what the mean-spirited girl had done to Ms. Austin but more than that he'd hated the disregard with which the Craigs had addressed it.

With every passing minute his and his staff's hatred of the Craigs grew. And that moment when they'd witnessed Ms. Austin calmly deliver her swan song had been the cherry on

top of their hate. They'd all hated what the Craigs had done to that little girl. It was in that moment that they realized just how bad the situation had been, though it was definitely improving since that horrible day. Things were not yet as they should be and as much as he'd wished things were different, he could not change them although he had certainly enjoyed watching Mr. Torix start the process.

He couldn't help but smile recalling the sight of Mr. Torix informing Craigs' guests that they were no longer welcome aboard Ms. Austin's yacht. He'd enjoyed that, but he especially enjoyed watching Mr. Torix inform Craig that while Yonder might be content to wait until she was eighteen to deal with them, but that he wouldn't wait past this week.

Out of respect for their young daughter, Mr. Torix had informed them that he'd allow them two weeks to decide where they were going to live whilst they mooched off of Ms. Austin. Right after that he warned them that if any of them ventured anywhere near Ms. Austin that there was going to be a misunderstanding that would result in the need of their next-of-kin to hire forensics experts and a search team so they could scrape up enough DNA for a burial.

Mr. Torix had made his threats without even bothering to make eye contact with the Craigs. His voice never rose in pitch but with every word he spoke it dripped with more and more venom. Feeling dread creep down his spine with each word, he'd walked away stunned at the danger emanating from the man.

He might simply be a man, but he was not a man that he'd ever want to piss off and from the look of fear that crossed

the faces of the Craigs, they knew that sooner or later *and probably a whole helluva lot closer to sooner than they'd wished* Mr. Torix was going to bring all manner of unpleasantness to them. He didn't need to know Mr. Torix to know that; he only had to witness the tenderness with which he treated young Yonder. Mr. Torix might not have many feelings, but all that he had was reserved for that little girl.

Hearing her sigh he pulled himself away from the memories of those recent events and looked at her.

"Wouldn't you rather go to the saloon and watch television perhaps?" he asked still not understanding why she'd chosen the aft deck rather than the sun deck when she'd divvied up the yacht with the Craigs. Knowing her, she had her reasons though.

"No sir. The night is so clear it would be a waste of good star-counting time," she answered with a shrug as she turned her face back up to the sky.

"How long do you think it will take you to count all of them, Miss Austin?" he asked as he watched the little girl's forehead crinkle as she considered her answer.

Another thing that he found astounding about the little girl was the way that she truly thought about what she would say rather than simply blurting out the first thing that came to mind. Who was he kidding? There were many things that amazed him about Yonder Austin. Not only was she never demanding like most of the guests who hired the yacht; she was always thinking. She treated this vacation like it was a learning experience. Having witnessed her eyes light up when

they passed through the Panama Canal had been the highlight of any voyage of which he'd been a part.

Hearing her clear her throat, he listened for her answer knowing that it was going to be a doozy.

"I think that it would take the whole of all of Creation to count the stars in the sky being that the universe is endless and alive."

Yep, it was a doozy, he thought as he sat down beside her and Mr. Torix and enjoyed the night sky with her.

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The luxury yacht floated on the peaceful warm waters of the Pacific Ocean. No one aboard suspected that anything was amiss, and even if they had, things probably would've played out the same. You could always prepare for things but life was guaranteed to throw you things that you simply couldn't plan for and there was no way that any of them could prepare for what happened next.

One moment the night was calm and balmy. The next a cool breeze had swept in along with a fog. Seeing Mr. Torix suddenly sit up and hook an arm around Ms. Austin before pushing her behind him, he knew that he was right to be worried. From out of nowhere, and he meant out of nowhere, he saw a sight that made his blood run cold. Surrounding

them was the unmistakable sight of eighteenth century pirate ships ... flying the obligatory skull and cross bones.

Counting at least four three-masted, square-rigger ships, before he and Mr. Torix pulled Ms. Austin to the wood floor of the deck, he knew they were in trouble. And they would've been in more trouble if Ms. Austin was like most people and would've selected the sun deck. They were virtually hidden on the aft deck, and even more so by lying on it.

Seeing that they were as safe as they could be for the moment, he took a moment to consider their situation and quickly concluded that their situation was totally fucked. Unlike the single-masted sloops, which were favored by pirates and smugglers alike for their agility and smallness, which allowed them to navigate shallow waters and hide in caves, the three-masted ships, which were comparable to Navy Frigates were built for one thing: battle.

The men who manned these ships weren't concerned about quick escapes or hiding because they didn't have to worry about such things. Big enough to hold two-hundred men and outfitted with a grip of swivel guns, he was more than sure they could outrun them. What he was also sure of was that the many canons that the ships were outfitted with would put more than a dent in their giddy up. And considering that there were more than one of them and they were in the Pacific, he wasn't ready to chance it. There were times to fight and times to flee and right now he could do neither. Hopefully, they only wanted valuables, but he wouldn't count on it.

Having evaluated their situation he looked over at Torix and Yonder, knowing that the time for civility had passed. Right now they had to plan to get Yonder out of here. From the look in Torix's eyes he felt the same.

"We need to get her out of here," he said.

"What are our options?" Torix asked.

"We can give them a reason to blow a hole in this boat and we take our chances being shot or eaten by sharks. We can hope that this is simply coincidence and want nothing more than the jewels that they think are on board. We can think worse-case scenario and get Yonder off of this yacht."

"I'm going with any choice that gets her away from here," Torix said.

"Okay the only decision we have to make is whether we put her on the tender or one of the wave runners."

Knowing that Austin wasn't stupid, both men turned to her. "What do you think, Yonder?"

"I think that regardless of what I say that you're going to get me off of this boat, so I'm voting for the tender and I'm glad that you taught me to drive, Torix and I'm glad that you taught me to drive this yacht, Captain. And also, if I get out of this, I think that I'm going to come back and kick some pirate behind."

Nodding at her, he and Torix worked their way forward. Using great stealth, they were able to wake the crew. They didn't bother waking the Craigs knowing that they'd offer up Austin without even a smidgen of remorse. Careful planning allowed them to get to the tender. With kisses and hugs from everyone they settled a teary-eyed, but stoic Yonder into it

before indicating that the female staff should go along with her.

Ah, but his female crew were as ornery as he was and refused to go. Instead they'd handed Yonder their weapons and provisions and asked him where he needed them. Dammit, he loved those women and after cussing them out, he told them so. So that Yonder could have a real chance at escaping, they created a series of distractions before all hell broke loose. Getting shot at with canons really wasn't on his agenda. Being that this was a luxury yacht and he ferried around the super-rich, he had a stash of weapons and most of his crew was well-trained on how to use them even if they were using them on men riding authentic eighteenth-century boats.

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Two days later—that felt like two years, Yonder was one hundred percent lost. Still, she was alive and those on the yacht and sacrificed themselves for her so she was going to shut the fuck up and be glad that she was alive. Taking a few moments she enjoyed the beauty of the Pacific Ocean. She didn't know where she was going; she simply knew that she was on her way. So many things could've gone wrong. After all, she was who knows where, out at night, with only meager provisions to sustain her and her determination to keep her

going. Not bad for an eleven year old, not bad at all she thought as she drifted off to sleep unaware that the North Pacific Ocean was getting ready to get rocked by a storm the likes of which hadn't been seen in a long, long time.

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One week later

Yonder fucking hated animals. Yeah, she knew that she shouldn't cuss but you know what, she was hot, wet, hungry, thirsty, tired, and her hair looked like shit, so dammit, she was entitled to a cuss word here and there. And she was still lost ... with land nowhere in sight. Did she mention that? And she hated animals. She hated animals so much that she was going to have to invent new words to describe her hate. Spitting out yet another mouthful of salt water she threw back her head and screamed. Dammit, she hated animals and she hoped that they all fucking died.

Yep, she hated animals and you know what else she hated? She hated *El Niño*, *La Niña* ... you know what, she hated weather and the weather channel. They didn't say jack about the sky opening up and lightning splitting the earth in two. When she'd heard the first boom of thunder she had to check to see if her eardrums still functioned, but then she'd seen and felt the most frightening strike of lightning and

laughed her butt off sure that was Laverna, Rience and their demon spawn bursting hell wide open just as she'd predicted.

Her laughter was short-lived though because then things had really started to suck. The weather did things she'd never seen or read about it doing. She was pretty sure she saw a tornado doing the moonwalk across the waters right before getting body-slammed by what was most assuredly a tornado from some kind of rival tornado gang. And then there was the rain drops that left dents in her skin when they hit. And then there was the Thanksgiving turkey-sized hail ... and then the snow. And when she saw the spurt of red belching from the waters in the distance, she was pretty sure there was some kind of underwater volcanic eruption.

Right after she got her wits about her, she and old *El Niño* were going to have words. As soon as she got access to her money she was going to build a secret lab and she was going to create an army of anti-weather things and sic it on anything even remotely resembling weather. Dammit, she was from the south where bad weather meant that either the locals ran to the store and bought up all the bread, or that the baseball game was cancelled due to a rain delay.

She'd come through the storm just fine although she had no idea what was what anymore. After being attacked by pirates and seeing a weather cage match, and having jacked up hair, she was entitled to a few moments of stupidity and a minute or two of self pity. But nooooooooo, the lesser animals in the Animal Kingdom just couldn't leave her alone. Birds had shit all over her, all over the boat, pretty much all over Creation. And then she'd sliced her hand open on one of the

fins of the catfish that she'd caught. And then she'd found out that just as she was allergic to cats she was also allergic to catfish ... but she didn't find out that relevant bit of information until after she'd cleaned it, cut it up and cooked it over the flame of the lighter that she'd found in her little stash of tools. Oh yeah, and after her lips had swollen up along with half her face and her hand.

Then after surviving all of that, she'd sailed/limped into a territory of freaking whales who wanted to play bumper cars with her boat. Her tiny twenty-two foot boat wasn't jack in comparison to a full grown blue whale which were twenty-five feet long and six to eight tons AT BIRTH and about eighty feet long and eighty to one hundred twenty tons as adults.

For a minute she was wondering if God had sent one of them to swallow her but she was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to be a prophet. After the whales had bumped her boat one too many times, it'd finally turned over and the whales had swum off ... with her boat! Well, they didn't jack it and drive off into the sunset as much as they'd used it like a beach ball swatting it back and forth between them.

She didn't speak whale but she was pretty sure that they were laughing their whale asses off and if she did speak whale she would've cussed them out good and proper. She was so adding them to her list of things that should be extinct.

She was so pissed but then the real fun had begun. The blood *hers and the catfish* had attracted sharks that'd apparently started some kind of turf war with the dolphins.

She was scared but the dolphins had straight kicked ass on the sharks and run them out of Dodge.

While she'd been busy cheering on the dolphins a Portuguese Man-of-War who'd floated away from its swarm had snuck up on her and stung her. Okay maybe it wasn't a Man-of-War but the red, stringy welts that covered her arms said it was. Yep, she was adding Man-of-War to her list of things to annihilate from the face of the earth.

She'd been stung, shit on, scratched up, capsized, and her hair was ugly and she was lost. It was almost enough to make a girl cry. But she didn't cry because her eyeballs hurt. Oh well, at least she was nowhere near Aunt Laverna she thought as she let go. If she had to go, this was the way to go. She hoped she'd see Torix on the other side. She hoped there weren't any animals there because if there were she was going to go on some kind of spree.

Second Interlude: A Whole Bunch of Stuff

The great joke in the Animal Kingdom was humans' perceptions of themselves. Gifted with dominion over all creatures and entrusted with naming them, humans mistook that to mean that they were better than all other creatures. Of course this was laughable being that humans could barely govern themselves. Consider the way that they fought to control the land even though oceans covered seventy percent of the earth's surface.

While humans bickered, killed, schemed, and fought to be president, prime minister, emperor, king, and/or czar of bits of terra firma; they ruled only because the earth allowed it. Mountain, water, plains, forest, grasslands and such were the

planet and though humans had conquered some of it; they didn't come close to even controlling, much less conquering the oceans.

Billions of animals and plant life dwelled in the oceans and they were under the dominion of the ocean itself, and the oceans were impressive creatures indeed and similar to other living things birthed their own rulers—one male and one female.

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Pacific was a beautiful specimen and how could they not be? After all they were water creatures. And they weren't just any water creature; no, Pacific was one of the elite among water creatures. Along with their siblings Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, and Southern, Pacific was the embodiment of the body of water that they were named after. And being that their ocean was so vast, their power was far-reaching. Their rule spanned both North and South America on the west and Asia and Oceania on the east and spread out over sixty-four million square miles.

Like Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, and Southern, Pacific was a set of fraternal twins. However, unlike their siblings, Pacific possessed a mercurial temper.

Perhaps their temper wouldn't have been so bad if they weren't also plagued by hyperactivity and the 'starting all

kinds of shit' gene. You could always count on Pacific doing something that would entertain the world. In fact, Pacific was the proverbial drunk uncle at family reunions. Their play was unlike any other. They hurled thunderstorms at each other and countered with tropical depressions; They threw lightning and fielded hurricanes.

They did all of that but they were most famous for their pranks such as organizing the first oceanic 'Cannonball Run.' Their pranks had caused all kinds of phenomena such as the opening of other dimensions, tears in the space-time continuum, and the disappearance of entire civilizations. The King and Queen of Atlantis still gave them the cold shoulder and the temporary restraining order that they'd had taken out prevented any of them from being within a thousand miles of them. They meant everything in good fun but sometimes their pranks spilled over into the mortal world. This was why Yonder found herself in such dire straits.

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Fix loved being a merman. In fact, he loved everything about it—except those damn tuna nets. More than once he'd found himself caught up in one. It wasn't that he couldn't escape them; it was merely the insult of having to do so. And he found himself having to do so because of the antics of Pacific.

They'd had a damn house party that had totally gotten out of hand. There he was minding his own damn business when the thump of house music had shaken his underwater home. Getting up to tell them to turn that shit down, he'd been overtaken by a rogue wave. Now here he was, a hundred fucking miles from his home caught up in a tuna net. He was so going to have something to say to the Council about this.

His mind on revenge, he nearly missed the human that floated right by him. Well, sink-floated. If it wasn't dead it soon would be from the looks of it. He was going to let nature have its way with it when he realized that it wasn't simply a human; it was a child.

Fix hated humans for the most part but he had a soft spot for any creature in need and this one was definitely in need. Clearing the seaweed from its mouth and nose, he checked it over. The human was in need of healing but being that he was a literature major not a science major and thus had received a D- in human anatomy he didn't know how it was broken; he only knew that it was broken. Being so far from his home he couldn't get his healer sister to help it.

What to do? What to do? Spying some dolphins he called them to him. After explaining the situation the dolphins agreed to take it to the nearest piece of land, which was the Galápagos. The human might not make it, but at least it wouldn't die alone he thought as he turned and swam for home.

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Dolphins were beautiful creatures, and strange creatures in that they had an affinity for humans. Of course, the humans thought that they were studying them when in reality it was they who were the subject and the dolphins who were the scientists. Most of the water creatures simply shrugged at their behavior but the sharks took it personally and would attack humans given the chance.

In their opinion the dolphins' behavior made them the weak link. This is why they'd gone after the human when they spotted it and this is why the dolphins had run them off. Being called by the merman who'd draped the human over their backs, they made for the nearest bit of land, which just happened to be the enchanted island of Galápagos Island Proper. Rules be damned, this human needed help. It might be ready to die, but they weren't ready to let her die without a fight.

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Chapter Four:

I'll be Your Shelter

Galápagos Island Proper, in the royal castle

Rule had felt uneasy all night. Rising from her bed she ventured to the balcony that overlooked the northernmost waters surrounding Galápagos. She wasn't even out there for a minute before she felt the presence of her husband behind her. Din Eidyn might be Selkie but he knew her like no other. Wrapping her in his strong embrace, he rested his head on the top of hers. He didn't break the silence, he simply held her as they both looked out at the beauty that was Galápagos. Rule liked that about Din Eidyn; he never rushed her.

"I feel something. Something, no someone is coming but I cannot locate them."

"I am at your service," Din Eidyn whispered directly in her ear.

And he was. Though a ruler in his own right, Din Eidyn placed her needs before all else regardless of how small that need appeared to be. She truly loved this man. Turning in his arms she laid her head over his heart enjoying the fact that he was so much bigger than her own 6'6". Sighing, she reveled in the love and strength that poured from him. Leaning her head back she pulled him down for a kiss—and then she felt it. Something was on her beach and that something was in pain.

Not even bothering with sandals, she rushed to the shore. She didn't even need to look back to know that Din Eidyn was not only behind her but that he'd summoned the guards to accompany them. He never took chances with his females. Of course, she was his only female being that he had no sisters and they had no daughters. All of the men in his family had only fathered boys and he was no different.

A few minutes later she waded through the waters watching as a pod of dolphins made their way to her shore carrying something. She was about to swim out to them when her husband's hand on waist stopped her.

"I will not risk you; allow the Selkie to serve you," he said.

Though he'd whispered it, she knew it was a command. He would not allow her to blindly swim out to whatever it was the dolphins were towing in. Nodding, she bowed to the Selkie under Din Eidyn's command and waited. Rule watched as the Selkie brought the unconscious being to shore. Not sure what it was under the bruises and swelling and seaweed, whatever it was it was a mess. Of course, few things ever looked their best when half-dead. And that hair cut didn't help. She had knowledge but she had no idea what she was looking at. She knew it was human-ish just not how much. What she didn't know about this thing was fast mounting but within all of the uncertainty was one thing she did know: she was going to save it.

Instructing the Selkie to take the thing to the healing chambers, she and Din Eidyn shooed everyone out but the guards and those she instructed to remain a goodly distance away. She knew that their first concern was for her personal

safety but she trusted Din Eidyn who was at her side, to protect her. Rule wasn't careless with her safety or that of her people but something in her recoiled at the thought of anyone looking upon this broken creature as if it was a circus attraction.

Making a quick inspection, she surmised that this was definitely a human. Checking its teeth, she estimated that the boy couldn't be more than ten or eleven years of age. It was a baby. Carefully, she began removing the tattered rags that covered the baby. With each piece of the exterior that was revealed, a wealth of injury was revealed with it. Bruises, cuts, and welts covered his thin frame. Being a mother herself and having a son who was nine, she couldn't stop the tears that fell from her eyes. It was clear that this boy had suffered greatly at the hands of the sea, the creatures that filled it and from the black eye from the humans that he was assuredly running from.

Leaving the last scrap of cloth that protected the boy's modesty; she waited while Din Eidyn picked him up and placed him into the warm, bubbly water that filled the massive tub. Gently scrubbing the filth from him, she tended to all of the hurts before removing the last scrap of cloth. And that's when Rule got the shock of her life: he was a she. The woman in her wept; the ruler in her demanded vengeance; but the mother in her celebrated. She now had a little girl.

Rule knew that she was blessed. Mated to a strapping Selkie, there wasn't a shortage of children in their home being that Selkie tended to father multiples. Though she'd only been pregnant three times, she had thirteen boys. Her

first pregnancy had resulted in seven fine boys; her second in five; and her last pregnancy a decade later had resulted in Aonghus. She loved her boys but a part of her longed for a daughter. And now Fate had delivered her one. Sure, it came in the form of a human but she didn't care.

Wrapping a clean towel around her, she tenderly dried her although the tears that fell from her eyes left trails of wetness over the battered little girl. Soon enough, she finished her task and fully aware of the statement that she was making, she removed her robe and wrapped it around the little girl. She knew that her actions had the desired effect after hearing the chorus of gasps that followed.

Taking a heaving breath she turned to her husband ready to fight him if need be, but even through the red haze of anger that filled his eyes, she glimpsed his approval. And when he tore a piece from his kilt and placed it over the girl, she knew all would be well for Din Eidyn was also on her side.

This girl called to her heart and she was keeping her regardless of the upheaval that it would cause. Galápagos Island Proper was home to multitudes of species, and though it had taken millennia, it was now home to its first human.

She was keeping the girl and anyone or anything that attempted to thwart her would taste banishment right before death. They might not fear her physically, but if they had even a modicum of intelligence they would know to fear Din Eidyn who regardless of his many titles was at heart a Scot and the last thing anyone needed was 8'1", 320 pounds of pissed off Scot coming after you with his army of sons who though only in their early twenties were already well over

seven feet and just as ornery when it came to protecting their mother.

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Din Eidyn was a man of few words *unless he was encouraging his mate to take her pleasure from his body*; Din Eidyn was a man of action. Feeling his mate's distress he was prepared to protect whatever the sea had washed up as long as it wasn't a threat to his family. He felt sick to his stomach upon learning that it was indeed a human underneath the debris and multitude of injuries.

However, when he discovered that it was a female child, anger had overcome him. Females and children were to be protected and someone had failed miserably at protecting this one. A patient man, he was vowed to find those responsible and deal with them.

Seeing Rule wrap the little girl in her robe he knew that she worried that he'd protest the action. He also knew that as much as she loved him Rule would not back down from what she felt was the right and proper action. She'd fight him and all the world if need be and she would surrender her life before she surrendered what was right.

He loved that about his mate and everything that she loved in turn. Tearing a strip of his plaid he placed it atop the robe before hefting the slight bundle in his arms and reaching

for his mate's hand. His plaid may've said that they he claimed the human girl but his demeanor spoke louder. His demeanor promised death to any who'd attempt to hurt either of his females.

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The warm water felt absolutely heavenly to Yonder. She must be almost dead because most of the pain had disappeared from her body. The bites no longer itched. The cuts only stung a little. She could feel her tongue again and her eyeballs didn't itch. Even the pain in her head from where the boat had slammed into her was now a bearable thrum rather than a throbbing, donging feeling that made it seem like her skull was going to implode. She felt so much better. Since she was better she guessed she was journeying to Heaven rather than Hell.

Figuring it was a journey that one only took once, she opened her eyes to see what the road to Heaven looked like even while wondering what she'd done to warrant Heaven.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Though she could see, something seemed to be wrong with her focus. All she could make out were the blurred figures moving around her. Judging by the soft handling of her person she guessed they were angels. Smiling at the thought of angels caring for her

she closed her eyes and succumbed to unconsciousness once again.

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Rule stared down into the girl's face as she slept. Half of her hair was gone and the rest hung in straggly strands on one side of her body. Though she was sure that the girl felt some discomfort she sensed that she was at peace in her slumber and smiled. She hadn't had a lot to smile about in regards to the girl.

Gently smoothing her hair from her forehead she opened her senses and had to quickly close them once she tasted bile. Every time she opened her senses she was assaulted with pain. The pain was of such magnitude that not even she, with her great power, could stand to open them for more than a few moments. She caught the fleeting images of scornful acts that had been placed upon the child by humans and lengthier, more vivid images of her recent struggle.

Regardless of not having the entire picture it was clear that whatever had happened to her out there in the ocean had been a nightmare for it caused her physical pain merely to view the small snippets from her mind.

"It's ugly," Aonghus' voice crept into her musings.

Rule turned to him before responding. "No darling, she is merely sea swept," she corrected as she bent to kiss the

golden cheek of her youngest. She watched as his Mediterranean-blue eyes frosted over when he looked upon the girl.

"Its hair is funny."

"Darling, you mustn't judge so harshly and especially using appearance as the only criteria. Are not all creatures great and small God's creation?"

"Maybe God was having an off day when creating this ... *thing*," he spat.

Rule's patience fled in the face of her son's meanness.

"Aonghus Fulgencio Din Eidyn, you know better."

"Mate, what has this young one said or done to raise your ire?" Din Eidyn asked quietly as he stepped into the healing chambers.

"He is failing to show any of the fine rearing he has had," she spat.

"I'm sure that he will correct that. Meanwhile, how is our young charge doing?"

"I know not, husband," Rule answered honestly. "Though cleansed and healed from the ravages of the sea, the child has yet to waken."

"Maybe you shouldn't touch it, Mam," Aonghus stressed the 'it' part of his sentence.

"She's a little girl, honey; not an 'it'. And she needs caring touches especially as the seas have been so rough with her."

"Well, it's an ugly girl and I think we should throw it back," Aonghus spat.

"Aonghus!" both she and Din Eidyn reprimanded simultaneously.

"What? Do you want me to lie?" he asked sulkily. "She was ugly when we didn't even know what it was. Now that we know what she's supposed to be she's still ugly."

Rule was livid. In all of his nine years she'd never had the urge to hurt her child but she was about two seconds away from snatching his lungs out through his back. She couldn't believe the meanness emanating from her angel. As a mother she'd expected some jealousy, but what she hadn't expected was his venom.

Ever since he'd spotted the little girl wrapped in the robes of the royal family, Aonghus had decided to hate her. The soft gasp of the little girl caught her attention. She'd wished that the little girl would awaken and now that she had, Rule wished that she'd slumbered a little longer once she saw the tears that spilled from the haunted, dark eyes of the child. Though Din Eidyn, six of her sons and her personal guards occupied the room, the little girl looked directly at Aonghus.

"Apologize!" Din Eidyn roared before the first syllable fell from her tongue.

"No," Aonghus argued petulantly looking anywhere but at the little girl.

"Aonghus, come," she softly instructed.

She watched as he reluctantly stepped forward. Once he did, she encircled him in her arms and forced him to face the girl. Catching a tear in her hand she gently took her son's hand and dropped the little girl's tear in it.

"The sea has battered her but this is what you've done," she said. She didn't say anything more; she didn't need to.

Aonghus might be jealous and distrustful but he was a Din Eidyn male and they protected; they didn't hurt.

"Sorry," Aonghus apologized half-heartedly before stomping from the healing chamber.

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When Yonder first woke and felt no pain she was sure she was in Heaven. And when she opened her eyes and saw the beautiful woman sitting beside her, she was sure of it. The woman had gentle hands and a gentle voice.

But then she'd seen that horrible little boy and thought for a moment that she just might be in Hell. He'd called her ugly for no reason at all. Before she could stop them tears filled her eyes and rolled down her face. Though she cried silently, the lady had known she was crying. After shaming the boy, she'd quickly pulled back the covers and lifted her onto her lap. Before she could ask if she was in Heaven or Hell, the lady pushed her face into her bosom and rocked her.

Although Yonder had been around women, and even hugged one or two, she'd never had a woman take her in her arms and hug her with such love. The lady not only hugged her, she rubbed her back and smoothed her soft hands over her messy hair.

Yonder couldn't help it; she snuck her arms around her and hugged her back. She only stopped hugging when she

felt the wetness on her back. Pulling back, she was surprised to glimpse the tears running down the woman's face. She was even more surprised when the giant man next to her approached and pulled both the lady and herself into his arms.

"Crying is not allowed," he said in an accent that reminded her of Scrooge McDuck. Though his voice boomed with authority; his touch was gentle.

"Dear heart, we mean you no harm. Aonghus is young and though it is of no use to you he will learn that his prejudice is wasted energy. In spite of my son's ill manners will you tell us your name?" he asked.

"My name is Yonder, Yonder Austin," she responded as she looked up at him.

"Yonder like the direction?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she whispered waiting for him to make fun and tell her that she had an ugly name which befitted an ugly girl.

"Ach, I'm sure that there was a good reason for that but you're too beautiful a girl for such a plain name. I'm going to call you Caraid Cridhe," he said as he settled both he and his wife on his lap.

Did the giant just say that she was beautiful? Maybe he was too tall to see her properly or maybe he hadn't seen the other bit of her hair. Maybe he hadn't but the look in his eyes was friendly and she kinda liked the name. Even though she couldn't pronounce it, the name made her feel special. And she liked the way they treated her.

"Okay," she whispered.

"Now that you've tried to take her over, can I get in a word?" the beautiful lady asked.

"I am not taking her over. I'm merely seeing to her," the giant groused as he kissed her cheek.

"Are too," the lady said before turning back to her.

"Now Caraid Cridhe, since my husband has taken it upon himself to rename you, without your permission I might add..."

"It's okay," Yonder interrupted. "I like the name even though I cannot pronounce it."

"The English equivalent is Dear Heart. It's probably difficult for you to wrap your tongue around Caraid Cridhe because it's Gaelic. The Spanish equivalent is much more beautiful in my opinion but since you're okay with being renamed by my mate, Caraid Cridhe is who you shall be.. Now that we've got that settled, let's do introductions. I'm Galápagos Rule and this fine man is my husband, Din Eidyn. You've already met Aonghus but please don't hold his behavior against us. We have twelve more sons running around here somewhere and I promise you that they're a lot more mature than Aonghus—a little bit anyway."

She couldn't help but laugh at Ms. Rule. She was funny.

"Now how are you feeling?" she asked.

"Much better, thank you," she whispered.

"Good then. We've called for food and while you eat it you can tell us how you ended up in the ocean all alone."

Not trusting anyone with all of the secrets of her heart, she'd told them the glossed over bits. She'd left out the abuse from Laverna and Rience; she'd left out her threats to kill

them; she left out all the horrid details of her time in the Pacific. Even so, Mr. Rule's visage grew cold and Mrs. Rule's didn't look any better. Gathering her courage she asked them if she could use the phone.

"Oh, honey, we're already sending someone to check on your Mr. Torix and the Captain. Is there someone else you need to call?"

"I was just going to see if someone could come get me so I won't be bothering you anymore—"

Mrs. Rule interrupted her before she could finish. "You're so funny. If you think that I'm allowing you to go back to whatever hell you came from you are sadly mistaken, daughter. I found you; that makes you mine. Hmm mmm, yep. It does. And though I sense you're quite intelligent I hope that you don't think that I'm buying that cleaned-up version that you told me. Now we're going to look for your Mr. Torix. Meanwhile, you're going to stay right here and relax."

"But," she began.

"No buts. You will like it here and you will love us. I have decreed it," Ms. Rule said. "Now welcome to Galápagos and to our family."

Decreed it? She actually decreed that she would love them? If only she could've seen inside of her heart she would've known that her decree wasn't necessary; she already loved them more than she'd loved everyone else except for Torix.

"Are you angels?" she asked.

Ms. Rule smiled and smoothed the back of her hand gently against her cheek before answering.

"No, dear heart, although we're different from you, we're not angels. Now, we're going to move you out of here into a room more suitable to being our daughter. And then you're going to get some a little sunshine on your face. You've been cooped up for way too long."

Mam and Da, as she'd been ordered to address them, had carried her up to a huge room that had a row of French doors taking up an entire wall. Seeing it, she was overwhelmed. It wasn't the bigness of the room or the beauty of it that had overwhelmed her; it was the fact that they that she was worthy of such a thing. It was also the view. She'd traveled so many places and nothing, nothing had even come close to Galápagos.

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Torix had been found as well as the crew off the coast of Colombia. It seems that Pacific's horseplay had caused some kind of dimensional rift, hence the pirates and hence the yacht being blown so far off course. Laverna and Rience wouldn't report Yonder missing since that would've immediately cut off their money.

Not caring about the ramifications of his actions Soroka was given something shiny to play with while Torix had

beaten Rience Craig to within an inch of his life and instructed the Captain and crew to head back out into the Pacific. When Laverna had dared to object, one of the female crewmembers had bitch-slapped her to sleep. After that bit of violence the Craigs had kept their mouths shut while they went about the business of finding Yonder. They'd torn up the Pacific looking for her. Of course, they never would've found her if the Selkie hadn't found them.

They all met up at the human Galápagos. Though she'd known that Torix wouldn't cease searching for her, she didn't expect him to take such drastic measures nor did she expect the Captain and the crew to help, especially when it could mean their jobs. Regardless of the ramifications all the crew was nice to her.

In fact, they'd all hugged her so hard her ribs were sore. Her new family had liked Torix and the crew immediately, well, actually everyone liked Torix but as soon as he'd spied the Craigs he'd lost it. Mam had to hold him back, which had been hilarious since the entire royal guard had had to hold her back. Though they'd succeeded in stopping her mam from killing them; nothing they did or said could stop her from exacting her revenge.

"Since you like that yacht so much you can stay on it for the rest of your miserable little lives," Mam had said.

And then they'd all watched in disbelief as Galápagos Rule demonstrated why beings didn't fuck with her. She put on a revenge clinic. Using her great strength, she literally tossed the Craigs onto the sundeck. Closing her eyes, she fisted her hands into each other and chanted in a strange language.

When she ceased chanting and opened her eyes, her eyes were solid white. They shone so brightly that none could look into them, but none wanted to. She directed a blast of energy at the water surrounding the yacht lifting it into the air. Holding out her palm, she pulled the yacht closer, shrinking it as she did so. When it could fit into the palm of her hands she stopped it mid-air. Taking sand from the shores she made a glass bowl. Then taking water from the Pacific she filled it. Tossing the boat inside of it, she sealed it, set it on a base of rock and shook it.

Yonder couldn't help but gasp upon realizing what she was seeing. Not only had her mam had made a snow globe and put them into it. Her shaking it had made the environment a perpetual storm. Before she could wonder what her mam would do next, she watched as she hurled the globe into the Pacific. Wow, she was so never going to piss off that woman she thought as she watched Rule stomp off cussing about people daring to mistreat her daughter.

With a demonstration like that no one was about to say anything. Calls were made and justice was served. The Craigs were reported missing. Attorney McDyess was on his way to Galápagos with papers that would give custody to both Torix and Rule and Din Eidyn. The Captain and crew were given new positions on *The Wild Blue Yonder*, a 194 foot mega yacht, which was a surprise eleventh birthday gift from her parents that they'd commissioned a year and a half ago. That was great but the best thing was that she got to stay with Torix and the Din Eidyns.

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Torix breathed out a sigh of relief upon seeing the Selkie. Even though they looked like men, he knew what they were, just as he knew what particular family they belonged to. They were Din Eidyn Selkie. A Scottish clan of Selkie in the middle of the South Pacific meant one thing: they were in the service of Galápagos Rule and his baby Yonder was safe. In fact, she couldn't be any safer. Galápagos Rule was one being that he didn't want to cross and her mate Din Eidyn was kind of son-of-a-bitch that you crossed continents to avoid.

He'd crossed many realms in his many lifetimes, but the realm of Galápagos Rule was one that he could not cross without an invitation. Like many beings, he knew of the realm, but not how to access it. Atlantis was easier to access despite the fact that it changed location every few hours after that unfortunate incident back in the day.

Seeing his baby had caused him to do something he hadn't done in a long, long time: he smiled. Even beneath the fading bruises, the messy hair, and the haircut, his baby was so beautiful. Holding her on his lap, he listened as she whispered to him about how pretty Rule was and how nice Din Eidyn was. It was clear that she had no idea how powerful Galápagos Rule was and how deadly Din Eidyn was. She didn't see their power, their wealth, or their legacy. Yonder had no idea that no humans had ever set foot in the place

that she raved about. Nope, all his baby saw was the fact that they loved and accepted her. And he knew that they accepted her by witnessing the tenderness with which Galápagos Rule touched her and the softness in Din Eidyn's eyes when he looked upon her.

Though the bulk of his attention was on Yonder, Torix hadn't failed to notice the fact that the royal guard also guarded Yonder. He also hadn't missed the fact that the twelve grown sons of Galápagos Rule and Din Eidyn surreptitiously watched his every move. The thirteenth son, who'd one day be the most powerful Selkie known to history, wasn't even being discreet about his watching. He'd settled himself right in front of him and stared a hole in him whilst holding on tightly to his dagger. Ah, yes, he liked this young Selkie. He liked him a lot. And given time, the youngest Din Eidyn would understand that Yonder Austin was the only female in the world for him.

Looking down at the precious baby in his arms, he took a moment and sifted through her memories. Though he was powerful in his own right, only his extensive training allowed him to hold back the fire in his eyes and the growl in his heart. Yonder was safe he reminded himself over and over and over. She was safe, and more than that she was finally at the place where she belonged. Still, later he was going to have a word with those fucking Portuguese-Man-of-Wars ... and the sharks ... and Pacific, especially Pacific.

Twelve years ago, he'd wondered why in all of Creation he'd ended up in Atlanta, Georgia. And then he'd met Frontier and Meridian Austin. And a year later, he'd met Yonder Austin

and known. Oh, he'd tried to deny it. He'd come and gone, but try as he might, he wasn't able to stay apart from Yonder for very long and Yonder wouldn't let him. She'd gotten to him despite all of the shields around his heart.

Before he knew it, he was hanging streamers for her birthday parties that only he and the staff attended; he was in the home improvement stores with an armful of laughing Austin and her favorite toys matching paint; he was sewing throw pillows in Carolina blue, her favorite color, to decorate the custom-made king-sized canopied bed that he'd spent months in his woodshop making for her. Even though her sadness had made his heart bleed, even though duty had made it impossible for him to guard her twenty-four hours a day, even though her admission of love had made him painfully aware of the vulnerable parts of himself, it had all been worth it.

After witnessing Galápagos Rule's vengeance on his baby's behalf, Torix exhaled. And before he was done exhaling, Din Eidyn's thirteenth son approached him.

"Are you coming to live with us, too?"

Before he could tell the spunky young Selkie that he was not, Din Eidyn himself stepped forward and clasped his hand in the way of warriors.

"Of course he is," he answered right before Galápagos Rule raised her arms above her head and transported them all to the royal estate on Galápagos Island Proper.

"Welcome to Galápagos, Overlord Vercingetorix. Though I have read about your kind, until now I have never met one of you. We are honored by your presence."

"Thank you for having me," he said overwhelmed, although not altogether surprised that Galápagos Rule knew what he was.

"We could do nothing else but welcome you; the rest of your destiny is here."

"What?" he asked and before it was out of his mouth good, the royal chef walked out. He could do nothing but stare at the Polynesian woman that had haunted his dreams every night ever since his pride had allowed him to let her go. No wonder he couldn't find her for she'd been tucked up in a place that was unfindable.

Before he could speak his baby jumped up. "Torix, you're smiling and not just with your lips but with the entirety of your soul." Then turning to the woman who'd lit up his heart, she asked. "You should marry my Torix. He's a good man. Do you have a husband? I can make him extinct if you do because I want you to marry Torix. Ooh, then you can cook for me too. Torix, ask her to marry you, quick."

And before he could stop himself he dropped to his knees before that woman and did just that. Of course it meant travelling to her queendom, which meant crossing galaxies and sifting through realms and such. Doing the calculations in his head, he estimated that his journey would take years but seeing Yonder's double thumbs up, he knew that it was a journey that he was going to take. And that's how Torix found himself sharing a baby with Galápagos Rule and Din Eidyn.

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Chapter Five:

Tell Me What I Did to Deserve This

Aonghus Fulgencio Din Eidyn swam like a Selkie possessed. He was tearing up the Pacific in order to get home. It wasn't that he hadn't been home in a long time; it was that he hadn't been home when Yonder Austin—now Yonder Austin Din Eidyn—was present. Yonder was due home today and he was anxious to see her—not that he'd admit that.

As always he crinkled his nose upon thinking of her name—not that any except for him called her that. The only name his mam and da called her was *Caraid Cridhe*; pretty much everyone else called Yonder Din Eidyn's daughter. And she was. Da loved her just as fiercely as his mam, though he was under the misguided impression that he was "hiding" his feelings for the human.

Yonder had him and every Din Eidyn male wrapped around her little finger—except for him. While his da and brothers had accepted Yonder straight away, he'd had a hard time doing that. It wasn't that he disliked her in particular; it was that he'd disliked humans that much. And despite being a vulnerable little girl, she was human.

Though only a boy of nine summers when he'd met her, he was far wiser than his years. Having Din Eidyn and Rule as parents he'd always had a wealth of knowledge at his fingertips. Even at such a tender age he was already well-

versed in mathematics, languages, astronomy, oceanography, and history. That is why he knew all about humans. Humans were dangerous. Even before they'd discovered fire they'd been dangerous and once they got their science humans had become deadly.

He'd scoffed at the fact that they'd actually dubbed one of their periods 'the Age of Reason' as he saw very little reasoning in the things that they did. In fact, their ignorance increased in direct proportion to their technological gains. They got a little bit of knowledge and suddenly they thought that they were equal to God. They considered the earth and everything in it a thing.

Hell, many of them considered each other things, thus they looked upon the earth as something to conquer and each other as commodities. They maimed for amusement; they enslaved each other to build up their egos; they killed simply because they could; they destroyed entire cultures for their convenience. Human history was filled with great sorrow and tragedy, the overwhelming majority which had been self-inflicted.

The dolphins spoke of the many decent human beings. They'd pointed out all of the good things that they did; all of the good fights they'd fought, but Aonghus couldn't see the good past the great mountains of pain that they'd constructed. No, he couldn't see the good; he merely saw the dangers that humans had represented to his kind.

That is why he'd hated Yonder. It wasn't because she was African-American; it wasn't because she was a girl; it wasn't because of her southernness—the horrible accent, her affinity

for a drink called sweet tea, the way she inserted y'all in every other sentence. He'd hated her simply because she was human.

Thinking back on his first sight of her had caused him to turn up his nose. He could do nothing but stare distastefully at the thing that was brought onto the majestic Island he called home. Whatever the bedraggled, kelp-covered mess was, it had been decidedly out of place here. Its ugliness was in stark contrast to what was most assuredly the most beautiful Island in all of the world.

When it'd been cleaned up and he'd found out the thing was not only human but not even a full grown human, he was horrified—and scared. If humans would do this to a little girl surely they'd destroy his kind given half a chance. He'd been thinking of a way to get rid of that thing when he saw it wrapped in the family robe and had a bit of his da's tartan draped over it. He knew what that gesture meant: it meant claiming. The only other thing that came close was a male Selkie presenting his mate with his pelt.

"What are you doing?" he'd asked.

"Protecting her, son," his parents had answered.

"It's a *human*," he'd said the word with such venom you would've thought that he was speaking of a pile of whale feces.

"Yes, she is," they'd said in that way that let him know it'd be best for him to hush. He had hushed and he'd also stomped from the healing chamber disgusted with the both of them. *How dare they put their family in danger for something that not even the humans had wanted?*

Being that his mam had spent the bulk of her time in the healing chamber with that thing, he'd of course gone down to sneak peeks at it and to make sure that it didn't harm his mam. He'd taken his dagger along just in case. The thing might be a good deal taller than he was but he was wiry and stealthy, and he wasn't going to let his mam's soft heart put her in danger. Of course, neither was his da or the royal guard going to let her be in any danger.

Then there was the fact that his mam was an impressive fighter herself. He'd seen her sparring and was glad that he'd never have reason to be her opponent. Galápagos Rule Din Eidyn might not be as scary as her mate, Din Eidyn, but his mother was meaner and carried a grudge far longer than any ruler he knew.

He'd continued to sneak peeks into the chamber on and off for two weeks and nothing had changed except the worry in his mam's eyes. The thing still hadn't awakened. He didn't know much about healing but he knew that the longer it slept the more messed up it was. At this point the human would either wake up or it would never wake again. It would pain his mam but it would keep the whole of Galápagos safe.

He didn't recall what had made him fully enter the chamber but he soon found himself at his mam's side. Standing close to the human he'd taken his time looking it over. Its face was covered in bruises and scratches as was every bit of exposed skin, which wasn't much being that his mam had tucked the covers tightly around it. And its hair was funny, which he'd said right after informing his mam that it was ugly. His mam of course wouldn't hear of such thing and

he'd grown increasingly frustrated seeing his mam touch that strange thing with gentleness and love. So like the spoiled nine-year old that he was, he'd amped up his insults ending with a dissertation on its ugliness.

He'd only stopped when he'd seen the look on his mam and da's (who'd walked in during his tirade) face. Although his parents had never raised a hand to him they'd both looked like they'd wanted to give him a good hiding. But as frightening as the looks of anger and impatience was on his parents' faces nothing had affected him like the look of hurt and pain that was on the human's face. It physically hurt him to look at her and when his mam had dropped one of its tears in his palm the human's hurt had burned his very soul.

That tear had connected them in a way that he'd told no one about. Every time he even thought about being mean to her a glimmer of her past would float into his subconscious. In the past thirteen years he'd spent a little bit of each day in the nightmare that was her reality before arriving at Galápagos. He was there with her in the Pacific. He was there with her on the yacht. He was there in the mirror when she'd first glimpsed her ruined hair.

Funnily enough he was only able to travel back to the moment on that yacht and no further. It'd taken him years to figure out why he couldn't go back further: it was because there was nothing for her to go back to. Despite whatever else Yonder had been, she'd been first and foremost lonely.

He'd changed his mind about her even before his da had come to him. At first, he was going to tell his da that he'd

changed his mind but then his da had started talking and he'd been too in awe of what his hero had said to interrupt.

"The day your mother gave birth to you was one of the greatest days of my life," Din Eidyn said and the truth of his words was echoed by the joy on his face and the love in his voice. His father's thick Scottish brogue was always pronounced when he was emotional.

"Your mother and I were so nervous. Aye, we already had twelve boys but you were the first bairn that was a single birth and we wanted to be the right parents for you. The love a father feels for his child is uncompromising and never ending but tis frightening also. When I first held you, you were so tiny, barely as big as my forearm but you had the strength to bring tears to my eyes and joy to my heart. And nothing about that has changed. Though my body will deteriorate with time, the part of me that loves you can never be broken. Aonghus, I will love you forever, son no matter how many bairn we have.

Aye, we have thirteen fine boys, but now the Creator has seen fit to bless us with Caraid Cridhe and though she is human, she is meant to be ours. I know that I have always taught you to be wary of humans as they are destructive; but they are also fragile—more fragile than you or I or any of those that live amongst us.

I think I have done you a disservice. In trying to teach you to be wary, it seems that I have taught you how to hate. Hate is wrong, Aonghus. Hate is what allows all sentient beings to destroy—if not others, then themselves. Be wary, yes; but do not waste your time or your life hating. It hurts me and your

mother to hear you speak ill of Caraid Cridhe. I know that she has some strange ways, and I'm guessing that if she is anything like your mam, then she will be able to throw some sharp barbs your way, but the fact remains son, that she is a little girl. She's a human little girl who was abandoned in the worst way when all she needed was love and safety, which is something you have always had.

Son, I am about to ask an important task of you. I can think of no other that would be better able to do what I am about to ask of you being that you are closest in age to Caraid Cridhe, but you must be of clear heart and mind when you agree or everything will be for naught, Do you understand?

Son, I need your pledge to help keep little Caraid Cridhe safe. I need to know that when your mother and I are not present that you will stand in our stead and protect her from anything that would harm her—even herself. Can I depend upon you, my son?"

He'd said yes. There was simply no other answer. Aonghus had felt such guilt at hurting her that he'd pledged to protect the human even before his da had asked.

A lot had happened during those first seven years. Of course there was the constant bickering between them. Never had he met any being who could find new ways to insult him so fully. In all that time he'd never won an argument; never had a better comeback.

He couldn't even pick on her name for the one time he'd tried she'd put her hand on her non-existent hip, thrust out her non-existent chest and laughed her non-existent ass off

after pointing out how jacked up his name pairing was. Okay, it wasn't everyday that you met a man with a stereotypical Scottish first name paired with a Spanish middle name. Still, it hadn't been *that* funny.

Other than the bickering, there were the constant "adventures". Having somehow been dubbed her unofficial bodyguard by his father, which meant that he was her official bodyguard, he'd been dragged any and everywhere by her. Most mornings she'd wakened him by diving on his bed and singing '*The Name Game*' or '*The Banana Song*' over and over until he got up. After realizing that she wouldn't stop until he did get up, she'd never made it past 'bo bangus' before he dragged himself out of bed.

Getting into stuff had pretty much filled her agenda being that she hadn't attended school. Being as smart as she was, she hadn't needed to. The private tutor on the human Galápagos had nothing more she could teach her. Then there was the unfortunate incident that had led the principal to suggesting that Yonder never come back, which was fine by everyone in their family, especially Yonder. Yonder got to hang out with his-their mam and da and do all kinds of fun things until he got out of school. After that, it was him and her having fun.

If you saw one of them; you saw both of them. Everyone expected to see Yonder and Aonghus together. And of course everyone expected to hear them arguing about something or another. That's how it'd been for the first seven years and then she'd been sent off to human university when she'd turned eighteen. Being that he was sixteen he'd been sent off

to Scotland for Selkie Boot Camp. Though she'd come home during breaks and for summer; he'd spent the whole of the last six years in Scotland learning his duties.

Training was intense for Selkies and even more so for Selkies who served as protectors. And then there was the training that the Din Eidyn Selkies underwent. There was no 'good enough', there was only perfection. You got an A plus or you repeated every lesson until you attained an A plus. With Galápagos Rule as his mam and Din Eidyn as his da he could do nothing less than excel.

He'd spent six intense years training and in that time a lot had happened. First and foremost, he'd hit his Selkie growth spurt. Unless Yonder had grown another foot in height, he'd finally be taller than her so there would be no more hearing her call him 'shrimp'. The last time he'd seen her she was 6'4" and still bone thin even though eating was like her second-favorite thing to do. Though he still had some growing left to do, currently he stood 7'9" and weighed 295 pounds. Yep, now he was going to call her 'shrimp'.

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Chapter Six:

Are We There Yet?

June 2008

Yonder was going home, for good this time. She'd busted her ass and overloaded on classes and had shaved a year off of the amassing of her degrees.

Now after a long journey, she'd had all of the degrees that she was going to get. Loving a challenge and needing to get back into school shape, she'd chosen the Landing School in Arundel, Maine where she'd earned her diploma in boatbuilding. Right after that she'd trekked to MIT and earned her Bachelor's as well as her Masters in Mechanical and Ocean Engineering.

And now it was done, finished, over.

It wasn't that she hadn't liked university; it was that she hadn't appreciated being away from Galápagos and all that it entailed. Sure she'd spent all of her vacations and every summer in Galápagos. And sure her mam and da came to see her at least once a month while she was away at school, but it wasn't the same.

As beautiful as they were, neither Maine nor Massachusetts was home, and neither was Atlanta after the past thirteen years. She'd packed up her parent's house saddened a bit by the fact that it had really never been her home nor Frontier and Meridian Austin's for that matter. It was a beautiful home

and it deserved to be loved. The closest it had come to love was when the Craigs had coveted it.

Giving it a final walkthrough she said a prayer to the house hoping that one day it would be filled with the laughter and love of a family. Her wish might come true for not even a month later she'd sold it to a nice man from Liechtenstein of all places. Wulf Altenöder coached soccer, but she forgave him for that being that he'd bought her some Teuscher Champagne truffles. It was love at first bite and the first thing she'd done was to make a standing order for those things.

Saying bye to Atlanta hadn't been hard. It was a great place, but she was a different person now. So saying, she'd talked to Mr. McDyess and bought properties in the human part of Galápagos and in Hawaii. And then she'd done something really crazy: she counted up all of those zeroes that had grown into more zeroes and she'd bought up tracts of land. She'd bought a forest in Africa; some rainforest in South America; thousands upon thousands of acres in Alaska; some wetlands in Florida, even a few islands in the Atlantic. All of that for some freaking animals, which, for the record, she still hated. Still, humans had poached on their territory and it was the right thing to do. Even after all of those purchases, she still had a few hundred million.

She'd changed a lot in thirteen years. Not only had she grown a few more inches in height, she'd grown some hips and booty to match it. Soroka had said it was due to that diet of soul food. As always, she smiled thinking of Soroka. Damn, she'd hated her, but later when she'd had the benefit of

having a loving family, she couldn't help but feel sorry for Soroka.

All she had was Laverna and Rience and they damn sure didn't love her; they showed her off like an apple pie at a state fair. Going to her mam and da she'd asked them to let Soroka out of the snow globe. As she expected, that request was met with all kinds of 'hell no's' and 'you must have lost your minds' from her fiery mam and a frown from her fiery da, but she'd reasoned with them. After all, it wasn't as if they couldn't put Soroka back into the snow globe if she acted the damn fool.

There'd been no need to even threaten to put Soroka into that globe. Soroka had come out of that globe apologizing and she hadn't stopped since. After finishing up her GED, she'd gone to community college and then attended Georgia State before joining her at MIT.

Soroka was brainy and fierce and could do the shit out of some hair, thus her hair was always looking tight. Right now, she sported braids. It had taken Soroka a full day to put them in but dammit it had been worth it. Along with the hairstyle, Soroka had dragged her shopping for some clothes that befitted a young, hot woman. At first, she thought Soroka was talking about herself when she said 'hot' woman, being that Soroka was freaking 'start a Greek civil war' beautiful, but she'd soon learned different. Soroka had meant her.

Before she could protest her, sweat pants, jeans, bulky sweaters and the like had been washed, pressed and donated to good will. Her plain white bras and the men's tighty-whitey's that she preferred had been set ablaze with

wayyyyyyy too much glee on Soroka's part. She'd cussed Soroka out and threatened her with all kinds of things but when Soroka had told her that she'd rather spend more time in the snow globe than to see her in any more 'Old Man and the Sea' attire, she knew it was time for a wardrobe change. Due to Soroka's meddling, she had a brand new wardrobe full of booty shorts, feminine spaghetti-strapped tops, sundresses, feminine sandals, ass-hugging jeans, and suitcases and suitcases full of silky lingerie.

Walking out in one of her new outfits, Soroka had said whistled and made catcalls. Smacking her ass, Soroka had pronounced her 'bootylicious.' Though she wasn't exactly sure what that had entailed it must've been good because her brother had taken one look at her, threw a '*I will fuck you up*' scowl on his face, grabbed her hand, and stayed closer to her than her own shadow. Maybe she did look better, she thought as she boarded the yacht that was taking her home.

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Eochaid Din Eidyn looked at his baby sister—his only sister—and growled. When the hell had she started wearing clothes that fit? And where in the hell did those *things* and that other *thing* come from?

She couldn't prance around in shorts and a t-shirt that actually fit. Nope, she needed the old shorts she used to wear

that came down past her knees and were two sizes too big and she needed to go back to wearing the oversized t-shirts.

This wearing clothes that fit and showed that she was a female had to come to a quick end lest he or his brothers be forced to kill a whole bunch of these human males.

Dammit, here he was holding her hand and looking like the dangerous, protective older brother and males were still looking. If he wouldn't have had to let go of her hand he would've battled them all right then and there. He couldn't get off of the plane and onto the yacht fast enough. It was a good thing it belonged to his sister else he would've had to beat the shit out of the male passengers. He didn't have to worry about the crew because they knew their parents and they weren't trying to do anything to garner his mam's wrath.

He looked down at the sleeping Caraid Cridhe and smiled. He couldn't help but smile when looking at her. She was a welcomed blessing in a household full of males. Though they'd all grumbled at the thought of a girl coming in and disrupting their lives, she'd managed to sneak into the hearts of every Din Eidyn male. Caraid Cridhe was so loved, that guarding her was a privilege that it had become routine for Selkie to request the privilege—years in advance. And they should for Caraid Cridhe was a being who had the power to sneak into almost anyone's heart. Closing, his eyes he thought of the moment when he realized that she'd snuck into his.

He'd been standing quietly by his father's side watching the little girl play with the Tyrannosaurus Rex that she'd decided was going to be her best friend because he looked

lonely. Well, of course he'd look lonely. He was a carnivorous beast, which he'd told her. Of course the beast being a carnivore hadn't fazed her any more than his being over fifteen feet and height and thirty feet in length.

She'd merely kissed the dinosaur on what would be its cheek and announced that she was calling him Meatballs. The dinosaur looked like he might've objected but one look from his father had nixed any protest that the dinosaur might've formed. Apparently having the mate of Galápagos Rule gesture that he was going to slit your throat in your sleep would do that.

"She is strong like Mam," he'd remarked as he watched her wrestle the dinosaur. Of course, she pinned Meatballs every single time.

"Aye, and reckless like you boys which scares years off my life," Din Eidyn said as he'd dramatically placed a hand over his heart causing him to laugh out loud.

His laughter had gained her attention and instead of running after her best friend, Meatballs, she'd switched directions and ran to him throwing herself into his arms which he'd held open to her.

"ECHO!" she'd screamed loud enough to deafen him. Still, all he could do was smile as he caught her in his arms and threw her above his head before snatching her out of mid-air. Her giggling was infectious and he'd soon found himself giggling with her.

"Ah, Caraid Cridhe, what mischief are you making that's making Da sweat as such?" he'd asked the beautiful vibrant

little girl he loved like he'd known her all of his life instead of four weeks.

"Nothing," she'd sing-songed, which loosely translated meant that she'd gotten into way too much mischief to keep track of.

Before he could question her on her answer she'd wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on both cheeks. "Do you want to come exploring with us?"

"And what are we exploring?" he'd asked.

"I want to go to the cliffs," she'd said with eyes wide with mischief.

Of course he'd shaken his head 'no' straight away but he made the mistake of looking into her eyes as he did it. It was as if the sun dipped behind the clouds as her smile disappeared. Immediately Eochaid had felt him change the direction of his nod. His change of heart was rewarded by beauty. She smiled and the sun came out again. Before he could wonder what happened he'd set his little enchantress back on her feet and she skipped off to get her dinosaur.

He'd had no idea what had happened; he was just glad that she wasn't an enemy.

"Get used to it, son," his father had said.

He hadn't gotten used to it and after thirteen years he doubted he ever would.

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His little sister was so beautiful and had no idea. Hell, most of the time she didn't realize that she was a girl, or a fragile human. She'd damn near given them all full heads of grey hair with her stunts. She was always trying to jump off of something, climb something, and try something. She was a true adventurer, and though they liked her spunk, it gave them all heart problems.

Half the royal guard had come back with a case of the shakes after being out guarding her. It was a good thing that she didn't swim very well or no telling what kind of trouble she would've gotten into. Of course she didn't swim because of that awful time in the Pacific. A growl filled his chest whenever he thought back on how she'd looked. His mam had given them an abbreviated version of what had happened and that had been enough to sicken him.

He and his brothers had personally gone to the Portuguese-Man-of-War and run them out of most of the Pacific not caring about where they were to go. They'd recommended hell but they hadn't been too fond of that idea so they'd suggested Portugal being that was part of their name.

Of course the Portuguese Selkie and the Atlantic Selkie had protested the entire Portuguese-Man-of-War population relocating there, especially when the Pacific Ocean was by far the largest. They still hadn't cared but in fairness to other water creatures they'd allowed them back as long as they kept a thousand miles away from Galápagos and never, never touched Caraid Cridhe again. If they did, they wouldn't have

to worry about where they'd live as they'd hunt those motherfuckers to extinction.

When Caraid Cridhe had first come to Galápagos she had no idea that her very presence had the entire nation up in arms. All she knew was that someone loved her. And there were things that he doubted but one thing that he didn't doubt was his parent's love for the strange-looking and strange-acting human girl.

She'd been taken into the ruling family of Galapagos without any discussion whatsoever and though rulers from around the whole of the world may wish to 'discuss' the situation of the human presence on the mythical isle, Eochaid knew that they would be wasting their time. Galápagos Rule and Din Eidyn had found and claimed the human child and there would be a whole lot of pain involved if anyone/thing decided to mess with that decree. And he would help deliver that pain.

He was pulled from his memories by her soft voice. "You're growling again."

"I never growl; I'm merely trying to wake you up, lazy bones as we're nearly home."

"Yessssssssssssssssssssssss!" she'd whooped with joy as she pushed her hair out of her eyes and ran to the connecting master bath to freshen up.

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Once again, Eochain was goaded into growling. Males were looking. What the fuck was wrong with them? Hadn't they ever seen a beautiful woman before? Dammit, she'd been beautiful the entire time but her habit of wearing oversized clothes had blinded them all to the fact that she was becoming a woman. She might be a woman, but first and foremost, she was their sister and any male thinking he could point his eyeballs in her direction had better get that thought out of his head with the quickness.

The only male that was going to be looking at her was Aonghus. Caraid Cridhe was going to be Aonghus' mate, just as soon as they both realized that they were too ornery for anyone else. Though Caraid Cridhe and Aonghus had both acknowledged that they shared the exact same parents and the exact twelve brothers, they'd never looked upon each other as siblings. As far as his little sister was concerned Aonghus was simply that other Din Eidyn boy that no one accept for her better try and mess with. It was the same with Aonghus.

They'd both been too young to question why and even if they had figured it out, they were still too young to do anything about it. Caraid Cridhe had to go to human university and Aonghus had to go to Selkie Boot Camp. They'd seen neither hide nor hair of each other for close to six years. He wondered if they'd recognize each other. Being that his brother had grown about two feet in height and his little sister had grown into her height, he was putting his clams on no.

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"Stop fussing. We have a meeting tomorrow involving rulers from all over the universe and yet you aren't the least concerned about that."

"Because I know that you can handle it. After all, you are Galápagos Rule, and I hear that you have that handsome, virile Din Eidyn as a mate."

"That is true," she smiled. "Although I don't see why the great Emperor of all Selkie, king to all magical water creatures, and democratically-elected president of all water-dwelling creatures is in a tizzy simply because our children are coming home. You act as if it hasn't been four weeks since you've last seen Caraid Cridhe or three since you've last seen Aonghus," Rule admonished her husband as he once again paced to the balcony and stared out over the waters.

Walking up behind her man she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head against his heavily-muscled back. Sighing, she thought about the moment she'd decided that she was keeping Caraid Cridhe. Din Eidyn had supported her decision without asking for even the first word of explanation. In truth, she'd expected his support, but when he'd torn off a piece of his plaid, she'd nearly cried from joy. What for him had been a sense of protectiveness for the child had quickly turned into love. She couldn't help the smile that spread over

her face upon recalling Din Eidyn's admission of loving the little girl. *You feel as a father of a little girl should*, she'd said right before making gentle love to him.

"I just want everything to be perfect for our little ones," he said unapologetically.

Though he included Aonghus in the reason that he was worrying, Rule knew his anxiety was all due to their baby girl. Like all of the Din Eidyn men, he worried something fierce over their daughter, as he should. As strong as she may be, when it came down to it, Caraid Cridhe was first a female, and then human.

"And it is. Our daughter wants for nothing especially when her Da and brothers are always spoiling her," Rule said without heat in her voice.

Din Eidyn chuckled before bending his head to press his lips gently to hers.

"Says the woman who does more spoiling than all of us put together," Din Eidyn teased.

Rule simply laughed at that and held her husband tighter.

"She's coming home for good, husband, and won't be leaving us again," Rule sighed happily. "It will be a race to see which of our children arrives first: Caraid Cridhe or Aonghus."

Din Eidyn smiled then went right back to scoring the horizon for signs of the yacht that was bringing his baby girl back to Galápagos where she belonged. Rule couldn't wait to see her, especially as Soroka had called and told her what she'd done to Caraid Cridhe's wardrobe. Apparently her daughter was looking 'bootylicious' and her brother Echo

hadn't liked that one bit, even going so far as to offer to purchase her a coat even though it was June. Oh, this was going to be so much fun. She couldn't wait to witness the moment when her daughter and her son locked eyes on each other for that first time.

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Home at last, home at last, thank God All Mighty, she was home at last. And she did thank God. Though she was quite comfortable in America, like that chick with the glittery, red shoes in that one movie about tornados had said, there was no place like home. Stretching her arms above her head, she thanked God and only then did she allow her arms to drop. Turning, she took a good look at the mystical island-nation that she was blessed enough to call home.

There was no place like this. Not even the known Galápagos, which was just over the way, came close to being this beautiful, this perfect, this amazing. God had brought the freaking amazing stuff when making Galápagos Island Proper. Here, the sky was bluer; the grass was greener, the mountains more majestic, the clouds fluffier, the sun more lemony in color, the air sweeter. As always, she felt a tingling whenever she was close to home and when she was home she felt—buzzed all over her body.

Standing on the shore, Yonder couldn't believe that it'd been almost thirteen years to the day since she was first dragged upon the shores. She couldn't believe it, but she was oh so glad. Shaking her head full of braids, she smiled feeling the ends brush the top of her generous ass. How the hell had she gone from a size 'biology classroom skeleton' to a nice size twelve in just under six years?

Oh well, she might've put on some weight but truth be known, she liked the way her breasts filled out her top and the way her ass jiggled. Before she'd left the States, Soroka had shown her three things. First, she'd shown her how to make her booty clap. She wasn't sure why she'd ever need that bit of knowledge but it didn't stop her from grinning her ass off once she'd done it. Then, Soroka had shown her the clip from *The Queens of Comedy* where the comedian Sommore talked about the hula hoop ... and then she'd shown her how to use it. She'd been going around making that shh-shh sound all fucking week but damn if she couldn't work the shit out of a hula hoop, which is why she'd bought a whole grip of them home with her.

As soon as she saw Aonghus, she was going to challenge him to a hula-hoop off. Later, when she convinced her mam that she needed a secret lab she was going to make one big enough for Meatballs. A breeze came in and tickled her nose and she smiled knowing that it was a greeting from her mam and da.

Ah, her parents spoiled her. Her mam had taken her over and cared for her. She'd taken care of her femaleness. That is, her mam had made sure that she'd had the softest robes,

the softest sheets, the sweetest-smelling bath salts, and that everyone treated her like spun glass. It was a new experience for her but she'd loved it. Of course, she'd go out and play rougher than all of the boys combined according to all of Galápagos, but Yonder was sure that they were exaggerating.

Then there was her da. Her da loved and spoiled her just as much as her mam but where her mam took care of her femaleness, her da took care of her protection. Nobody protected like Din Eidyn. Not only had he doubled the royal guard and relegated half of it to protect her, he'd made it clear that there was always to be a Din Eidyn male with her at all times. Most of the time that Din Eidyn male was Aonghus as they were closest in age but many times he himself or several of her older brothers accompanied them on their adventures.

She recalled the time when her mam had decided that she needed to go to school. That had been a Lucy and Ethel stunt-gone-awry episode in the extreme. She'd only been at school for half an hour when she'd spotted her da hiding in the bushes outside of the school.

Of course, he might've been more successful at hiding if he'd selected a bush that was higher than his ankles to hide behind. Shortly after, all of the foliage surrounding the beautiful school had seemed to come alive with Din Eidyn males. It might not have been so bad if she'd been the only one to notice but they weren't exactly easy to hide being that the shortest of them was 7'6".

Before she could groan in embarrassment, Aonghus had repelled down from the roof. She had twelve Din Eidyn

brothers hiding in the foliage on one side of her classroom, and that other Din Eidyn—who was the brother to her brothers but not her brother—with his face plastered against the glass looking all crazy on the other side of the classroom.

And then the real fun had begun. Thinking that no one had seen them, each of her older brothers had sauntered into the classroom on the pretense that she'd forgotten her lunch. Aonghus had simply walked in and plopped down beside her saying that he was there to bust some skulls if needed. And then he'd rummaged around in her stack of lunch bags and helped himself to cake.

A few minutes later her father came in and simply scooped her up saying that she didn't feel well and wouldn't be back until he decided she was well enough. Apparently, she'd been too sick to attend school for seven years because she hadn't gone back although she'd gotten a shiny diploma from her tutor that said that she was qualified to go to college.

After the school fiasco, she thought for sure that there was no way in all of Creation that her da would be able to handle that, but then she forgot what he was like. Encouraging her to go, she hadn't been surprised when no less than two of her brothers moved in with her.

On top of that, she had a contingent of Selkie who just hung out, which hadn't been all that bad, especially in the boatbuilding class as there were times that they'd had to go out on the water. Those times her brothers had been in the water, just waiting in case she needed them. Though she could dog paddle, she still sucked at swimming.

Now that she was home there would be no need for the amped-up security, then again the very fact that she was home meant that she had amped-up security.

Wow, she loved her crazy-assed family. She even loved Aonghus, even though he wasn't her brother. She'd see them in a few minutes but first she had to see Meatballs because once she got into the castle her parents wouldn't be letting her go in a hurry, as if they hadn't just seen her last month.

Hearing the chirping of birds nearby caused her to think about animals. Though she had a long list of animals she was planning on making extinct, starting with those fucking Portuguese Man-of-War, and ending with guppies, she loved her Tyrannosaurus Rex. Meatballs may be one of the most-feared animals, but he was simply misunderstood. Smiling, she threw her head back and whistled for her best friend.
"MEATBALLS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

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Finally arriving on Galápagos, Aonghus changed back into human form, slipped into the castle and donned clothes. By clothes, he meant that he donned the Din Eidyn kilt. Being that it was always warm on Galápagos there was no need for anything else although he'd have to adopt formal dress for tomorrow afternoon's meeting of rulers.

Aonghus knew that he should've greeted his mam and da but he'd wanted to see Yonder first. He didn't have anything to prove to his parents as they loved him unconditionally. Yonder, on the other hand, liked him more than Portuguese-Man-of-War, but less than food. He might not have anything to prove to his parents, but he damn sure had something to prove to Yonder.

"Who is *that*?" Aonghus asked Oron, his hand-to-hand combat instructor, best friend, and partner in all mischief. Though Oron was a powerful being, he was quite casual about it. The big man of African descent had a smile upon his lips that managed to be both mysterious and smirky all at once. It was a smile that others had attempted to imitate but to no avail. That smile belonged to Oron and Oron only. Oron's trademark, it was a smile that tended to piss others off—Aonghus included.

"Of whom do you speak, Aonghus?" Oron asked with a raised eyebrow as he turned just his head to look at him.

"Her!" Aonghus exclaimed as he pointed to the full-figured woman who stood with her toes in the sea and her head and muscled-arms raised to the sky. A riot of braids fell down her back but he couldn't make out her face as she was looking in the opposite direction. Oh well, he still had plenty to look at. The beauty was wearing a delicate blue spaghetti-strapped shirt that outlined breasts the size of cantaloupes and blue denim shorts that hugged hips that he longed to hold onto, and an ass that was begging to be spanked. Damn, she was beautiful, so beautiful that he didn't know where to look first.

"Before I start lusting too hard over her, she's not one of your females is she?" he asked.

"No," Oron said being all helpful with the information as was customary for the man of few words.

"Is she one of the mermaids that are coming to the meeting?" he asked.

"Ah, no, that is not a mermaiden," Oron answered with a chuckle.

He was about to stalk off and discreetly inquire who the woman was when she leaned her head back and hollered for all to hear:

"MEATBALLS!!!!!!!"

Oh fuck, he thought as Oron threw his head back and laughed his ass off. Stomping off to confront the woman that had the unmitigated gall to a) look so fucking beautiful; b) look soooooooooo unbelievably fucking beautiful; c) fucking ignore him, the thirteenth son of Galápagos Rule and Din Eidyn; and d) act like she could just prance about wearing such revealing attire. It wasn't that Yonder was dressed inappropriately; she was simply too fucking beautiful to be wearing that. Either she was going to have to go back to her old style of dressing or they were simply going to have to move Galápagos

Island Proper closer to one of the poles so that she'd be forced to cover up that beauty.

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Yonder laughed as her pet T-Rex gently tackled her to the ground and wrestled with her. Even though she had a master's degree, suddenly, she was eleven years old again. Having a T-Rex as a best friend was just one of the perks of being the adopted child of Galápagos Rule and Din Eidyn.

She was playing hard out when she heard her da's booming voice.

"Where's your Da's hug, young lady?"

Dropping a kiss onto Meatballs cheek before scrambling to her feet, she made her way over to her da who was flanked by two men she didn't recognize. Ah well, if they were that close to her da and hadn't been killed then they were obviously okay. She immediately put them in the 'things to consider much, much later pile and jumped into her da's arms. Enveloped in one of the biggest, tightest hugs of all time, she hugged her da back just as hard. Of course, her da didn't simply put her down when he was finished hugging her, he swung her about like a wee bairn. Laughing, she encouraged him to swing her faster, which he did. Only when they were both breathless did he put her down.

"Welcome home, Daughter," Din Eidyn said softly. "And by the way, you're never allowed to leave your old da again."

"Thank you, da, and by the way, I don't plan on going anywhere else without you and mam," she said as she laid her head against his chest.

"Speaking of mam, where is she?"

"She's inside waiting to welcome her only daughter home properly. I got a little anxious," her da admitted.

"That's because you know that I brought you treats," she smiled as she took her da's hand and skipped right between the two men who stood silently behind the King without so much as a 'hello.'

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Yonder had laughed so much in the last few hours that her face hurt. Ah, but if you had to have pain this was the way to go about it. Both she and Aonghus had been passed between their relatives for hugs, kisses and pats on the back. Her ribs had hurt being hugged so much and she was sure that Aonghus' back had hurt from the hearty thumps their brothers had placed upon his back. They'd both made many trips around the room before mam had finally put her foot down and demanded her daughter.

"Hold, hold, pass, dammit. It's my turn," she said sounding all ruler-like.

Yonder had simply smiled and dived into her mam's and da's arms and been hugged damn near to death, and as always, she felt as if she was encompassed by love.

I love you's were said over and over until it seemed that their breaths were in time with the waves that rolled onto the spun sugar beaches that surrounded their home.

It was a long time before she'd left the comfort of her parent's embrace and even then her mam kept her and Aonghus tucked between them for the longest while.

She'd enjoyed those hours with her family even though it had been difficult to sit next to Aonghus. Damn, it was a good thing that he wasn't her brother else she'd need all kinds of therapy with the way she was lusting after him. She'd changed, but mercy, Aonghus wasn't looking all kinds of fine ... not that she cared about that.

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Aonghus had just spent six years learning discipline yet a few moments around Yonder and all of that discipline went straight to hell. He would definitely have something to say to her but it'd be later. Right now their family was busy taking turns hugging and kissing them both.

He appreciated the congratulations and well wishes but dammit, they all acted like they didn't see that Yonder was half-fucking-naked. He was sure that his da would have something to say about that, but so far nothing. And his brothers were just sitting there like ... well, he didn't know what the hell they were sitting there like, but it was pissing him off. If no one was going to do anything then he was. And sitting next to her was killing him. You'd think that they didn't

have a sprawling palace the way that mam and da were squeezing them together.

They were so close together that he wasn't sure that there was room for air between them. Waiting until his family was distracted with something or another; he calmly leaned over and spread some of his plaid atop her lap.

"You look chilled," he said proud of the way he managed to sound all nonchalant. No one else noticed his agitation, but of course Yonder just couldn't let it be. Grabbing his plaid, she pulled him even closer to her.

"How is that you think that I'm chilled, yet you're walking around here all shirtless."

"Perhaps because I'm me and you're you."

"You fuck seals. By the way does seal pussy taste like chicken?" she asked.

"Once again, I am a Selkie, and I do not fuck seals."

Okay, but do you eat chicken?"

"You're insane," he said.

"Oh, like you're not?"

"No, I'm not insane, but I'll tell you what I am, and that's taller than you, *Shrimp*," he smirked as he stressed that last word.

"Well great, you're finally taller than me but guess what Aonghus Fulgencio Din Eidyn? I'm way more bootylicious than you," she said before getting up and walking her fine ass out of the room, which was a good thing because his cock had never been harder.

Gritting his teeth, he stalked off in the opposite direction. He wasn't really going anywhere; he simply needed to put

some distance between him and Yonder. He also needed to convince his cock to settle down. Though Yonder was exasperating as always, at least he'd kept his feelings concealed.

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Though Aonghus might've thought that he'd kept his feelings concealed, he was so wrong. All of his brothers knew that he harbored a strong passion for Caraid Cridhe, as did Oron. And of course his parents suspected ... as did Meatballs, the entire royal guard, and everyone all of aforementioned knew. The only person who had no clue at all was Caraid Cridhe.

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Chapter Seven:

No, You Motherfuckers Didn't

Although everyone else was busy gussying up for the big meeting involving pretty much everybody, Yonder simply threw on a t-shirt and pair of shorts and raced downstairs. Having almost fallen down the last flight of stairs, she decided to lace up her running shoes before continuing on her adventure. Stopping by the kitchen, she grabbed food to go before heading outside to find Meatballs.

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Galápagos Rule was becoming agitated and when she became agitated Din Eidyn tended to start fucking beings up. It was his way, and she loved him for it. This gathering had been set for over a year and everything was running as planned. That is, security, hospitality, medical, translation services ... all of it was running like clockwork. What wasn't running like clockwork however was this meeting.

There were various items of concern on the agenda but from listening to her fellow rulers speak, she suspected that it was a ruse. And though Rule didn't mind disagreement; what she did mind were fucking lies. They had all come here—to

her realm—to complain about her daughter. While she would listen to legitimate concerns she would not listen to anyone or anything speaking of her daughter thusly. She tuned out their wild accusations, their suppositions, and their sneers. It wasn't that she didn't care; it was that she was busy plotting revenge. *How dare they concern themselves with who or what she allowed in her realm—especially when the who that they were speaking of was her beloved daughter.*

Galápagos Rule kept things simple. That was why she was such an effective leader. There were, however three things that she would not tolerate: treason, fucking with what she considered hers, and the wasting of her time. Right now, almost everyone present was guilty of at least two of these things.

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Din Eidyn listened to the various rulers and representatives with half an ear. None of them concerned him, unless they fucked with his family. In spite of the status of most present he wasn't all that concerned about what they'd do.

If he hadn't witnessed Rule's power over the decades, he might be concerned about how they were going to dispose of so many bodies once Rule decided to eliminate them all, but being that he was her mate for over two glorious decades

he'd had a while to grow accustomed to her eradicating enemies from the face of the earth.

While it might bother many males that their mates were more powerful; it had never bothered him for he wasn't interested in her power. He was only interested in her. That is why he'd left his beloved Scotland and made Galápagos Island Proper his home. There was nothing that he wouldn't do for his mate regardless of who or what became his enemy as a result. It was clear he was getting ready to have many more enemies at the end of this day then he'd had at the beginning of it.

Feeling his mate stiffen beside him, he brought the soft hand that he'd been holding up to his mouth. Prying her hand open he dropped a kiss in her palm before closing it and pressing it against his heart. He felt, rather than saw Rule smile and he smiled in return.

Hearing the accusation of 'animal hater' yelled out, he stiffened. While it was true that Caraid Cridhe did not care for most animals, the venom with which the accusations were hurled pissed him off. While it was unfortunate that though his daughter would not permit any other animal within her space, with the exception of Meatballs, that in itself was not a crime.

Caraid Cridhe knew what she liked and what she didn't like and what she didn't like, for whatever reason, was animals. He knew this to be a bona fide fact because it was one of the two things that she'd made perfectly clear when she'd arrived.

"*I hate animals—all animals,*" she'd said. And then she'd said it again just to make sure that they'd understood.

And she'd meant it. She didn't spare puppies a glance. She completely despised house cats. She ignored the beautiful birds that inhabited the island, as well as the species that were unknown or extinct in the human realm. Even the dolphins that had saved her and brought her to Galápagos were barely spared a glance but that was her right. Their only rule was that she was not to harm animals and as far as he knew, Caraid Cridhe had abided by that rule.

Standing up, he fixed the room with a 'try me at your own peril' look.

"When has my daughter harmed any of you or your kind?" he asked. "Tell me."

"Well, it isn't that she has harmed anything *per se*; it is the danger that she represents," a quetzal shifter spoke.

"Tell me what danger she represents then," he countered.

"She's oft been overheard threatening to extinct entire species," one of the sea creatures spoke. "So far she's threatened to extinct butterflies, guppies, white-tailed deer, bunny rabbits, pretty much all birds, sharks, and of course the Portuguese Man-of-War."

"And she does have the knowledge," one of the big cat shifters threw in.

"So you would condemn my daughter because she hurts your little feelings by not liking you? You would condemn my daughter because she has knowledge? You would condemn my daughter because you are scared of her?" he asked. "Did you ever consider that she might be scared of you? And with

good reason? What about the fact that many of you have the knowledge to bring humans to extinction?"

"We wouldn't need to use such knowledge, Din Eidyn. Humans are fast facing extinction from their own actions."

"That may be but Caraid Cridhe is not one of those humans. She is my daughter. This is her home and this is where she shall stay," he said. The rest of his speech was interrupted by a high-pierced squeal. Before anyone could move, his daughter came swinging by the window—hanging upside down off of the wing of a giant raptor.

"Woo hoo!" she screamed in what was pure joy. "Daddy, look at me," she said right before she somersaulted off of the back of that thing that was about to be extinct as soon as he found his heart and put it back into his chest.

"Caraid Cridhe!" he roared. "Present yourself now!"

He sat down hard in his chair scared at his baby's antics. His sons had never scared him thusly, but his daughter scared years off of his life every day.

"Din Eidyn, clearly it is out of control. The human has run completely amok," something said.

"Perhaps you should marry her off," another said.

"Yeah, marry her off to something far, far, far away from Galápagos," another said.

"Who in all of Creation would want to marry that?" a dove asked.

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Hearing her da's roar, Yonder made her way into the palace with the quickness. She was so quick that she beat the palace guards in. She was proud of her trick, having been practicing it in her head. Of course, she'd had to wait until she got home to put it into action.

Sure, it may have seemed dangerous but Meatballs was on the ground, threatening to extinct the giant raptor should it allow her to fall. Even if she had fallen, Meatballs would've caught her. Worst case scenario she would've broken a few bones.

She was sure that as soon as she explained that to her da all would be forgiven and she could go right back to playing.

Skipping into the meeting room she slowed her steps upon hearing the yelling and carrying on. She was about to slip in and take a seat when she saw the ruckus. Representatives were standing, pointing and making accusations. At first, she was overwhelmed by the noise and then she heard her name—well, her species.

The word 'human' was said with such malice that it may as well have been a racial slur. And in the next few moments she heard herself called every kind of thing, most of it revolving around her humanity and her hatred towards animals.

It seemed that calling her an 'animal hater' was popular, which was fine by her because yeah, she totally hated animals, except for Meatballs and he really wasn't an animal. He was her best friend. Being called a human in such a mean tone had stung but it was the dove's comment that had hurt.

The dove had called her an 'it' and then asked who in the entirety of Creation would want to marry her. Unbidden, tears filled her eyes and tracked down her face. Despite having a masters degree; despite being all bootylicious now, despite her hair being long and thick, despite having a family who loved her, suddenly she was ten years old in a classroom of kids all pointing at her and hurling insults at her.

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Aonghus was going to kill all of them. How dare they even intimate that Yonder did not belong on Galápagos? How dare they strum their vocal cords to even speak her name? How dare they breathe the same air as her?

Growing angrier by the second, he breathed deeply in an attempt to keep from jumping up and killing rulers, especially as he saw his mam and da struggling to keep from doing the same. His mam's eyes were going white, and his da's hand was clenched so tightly that his knuckles were white. None of his brothers looked to be faring any better. All of them wore looks of rage.

He took another breath in an attempt to calm down but then the dove had to go and break his control. The dove called Yonder an 'it'. Remembering the pain that had sliced through him upon seeing her face when he'd called her that

thirteen years ago a rage had blossomed through him such as he'd never felt before.

Standing up, he threw back his shoulders and called out the dove. "War! I declare war on your kind. How dare you refer to Yonder Din Eidyn, daughter of the house of Galápagos Rule and Din Eidyn as anything other than beautiful? How dare you speak of her with anything but reverence? Gather your army doves because I, Aonghus Fulgencio Din Eidyn, demand justice for Yonder."

He would've said more but his palm starting burning and he had a vision of Yonder's past pain. Turning to the door he saw her there and before he could consider his next actions, he grabbed her hand and stomped from the room.

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One moment Yonder's heart was breaking; the next moment Aonghus had her hand and had dragged her from the room. Walking at a fast clip and now being much taller, Yonder was sort of dragged along behind him. Up and down stairs, around corners, through seldom-used passageways they walked.

She wasn't sure if he was walking so fast because he was angry or because they were running from something but she kept her mouth shut and kept up with Aonghus the best that she could. Though in truth it felt as if they'd walked the whole

of Galápagos, in truth they'd only walked to a more secluded part of the palace.

She wasn't sure where they were going, but fuck it; she was always up for an adventure. Perhaps they were going to the battlements to plan their siege. That'd be fun; she'd never besieged anything before. A moment later Aonghus was dragging her into an empty sitting room.

As soon as the door was closed Yonder found herself being walked backwards. Before she could ask what was going on she found her back up against the wall and Aonghus' big body up against hers. Wow, that felt good she thought right before he bent towards her and buried his face in the curve of her neck. She waited for him to do ... something, but he just leaned over her sniffing her. The whisper of his minty breath on her skin sensitized it.

Though she was rarely at a loss of words, for once Yonder couldn't think of anything to say because Aonghus finally broke the silence.

"So good, you smell so good," he growled against her skin.

Yonder frowned. Of all of the things she could've guessed that he'd say that wasn't it. "Well, I showered—"

"No," Aonghus shook his head. The movement caused his lips to brush against her skin. Yonder shivered, never having felt like this before. Just the touch of Aonghus' lips and the feel of his big, hard body against her made her hot all over. She felt so many things all at once and she couldn't explain it.

"You're fertile," Aonghus said as he squeezed her ass. Moaning, she arched into his body.

"I'm sure your sperm are strong swimmers," she said thinking that they were about to embark on a discussion about reproduction. She wasn't a science major, but she could handle herself in most academic discussions, although why Aonghus was concerned about fertility was beyond her.

Aonghus was in the process of kissing her neck when she commented. She felt him smile then heard his chuckle before he leaned back and looked into her eyes. His eyes were swirling with emotions. There was wonder and lust and something else that she couldn't identify, but nevertheless it was that unidentified thing that made her smile. When he brushed his lips against hers she closed her eyes and reveled in the sensation that was like none other she'd ever felt.

"Oh, *anam seis*, you are my everything," Aonghus said as he looked into her eyes.

Yonder didn't know what he'd called her nor at that particular moment did she care. She simply wanted Aonghus to continue holding her like to him as if he was never going to let her go.

Right now, there was nowhere else she wanted to be. Standing on her tiptoes so that she could touch her lips to his, she was snatched even closer right before Aonghus ground against her. The feel of his cock against her caused her to emit a moan. Aonghus was big all over.

"Aonghus," Yonder sighed as he groaned and dropped kisses over her lips and along her jaw and neck.

"Yes, *anam seis*?" he questioned as he continued grinding into her.

"I think someone's coming—"

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Both Galápagos Rule and Din Eidyn stood at the same time. Galápagos addressed the crowd. Din Eidyn had her back.

"How dare you? How dare you come here to my home and accuse my daughter, especially when it is the very creatures you've listed who've harmed her? Portuguese Man-of-War is lucky to be alive and the rest of you are getting precariously close to death every moment you remain in my presence. You want to know about threats? You all are a threat to her. You want to bandy about accusations, then allow me to bandy about my own," she said as she raised her hand to the ceiling and filled everyone's mind with the horrors of Yonder's memories from her week spent in the sea. It had taken Rule thirteen years to be able to withstand the onslaught of pain that her daughter had suffered but she'd done it. She had to, especially when she realized that her baby was still suffering.

Everyone had wanted to look away but she filled their eyes with the sight of her daughter's battered body. All in attendance had wanted to shut off the part of them that made them feel but she made them feel every bit of agony that her daughter had felt. They'd wanted her to make it stop but she didn't. She let fear, hunger, thirst, desperation, desolation, defeat, and anger fill them equal to what her baby

had felt. And to make it seem real, she'd made them feel it like an eleven-year old would feel it. She made them endure it all. Using her power she made one minute feel like one day and at the end of her presentation she made her decree.

"It has been you that have attacked her without cause and without revenge on her part. What has she done besides make threats? I'll tell you what she's done. She's purchased forests, wetlands, and rainforests. She's bankrolled nature preserves and respected your boundaries. In turn none of you've respected her but you will before the end of this day else I will not only take your power; I will take your realms. And then, the real fun will begin. I'm going to find my baby, meanwhile consider the bounty that you are to pledge to my daughter and then consider the consequences if you fail to deliver."

And with that, she took Din Eidyn's hand and left the room.

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Before Yonder could complete her sentence, the doors to the sitting room were kicked open and her da strode through followed by his guards. Her da's wild eyes swept the room finally locking in on them. The look on his face clearly stated his displeasure at finding her and Aonghus locked in an intimate embrace. Pulling them apart, he thrust her behind

him moments before punching Aonghus so hard that he went sprawling across the room.

"How dare you!?" Din Eidyn bellowed.

Aonghus got to his feet whilst fingering his jaw and stared at his father. "She is mine," Aonghus growled.

"Then you damn well approach my daughter with the respect that is her due!" Din Eidyn yelled.

"Um ... Da," Yonder attempted to interrupt.

Aonghus and her father ignored everything except each other. Everyone else ignored everything else except for them. Taking their battle-ready stances as a sign that she should leave, she spoke.

"I promised the mer-dudes that I'd meet them for a drink so I'll just be going then," she said as he scurried out of the room.

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Not about to break her ankle running about the palace, Rule took her time getting there. Rounding the corner, she heard the commotion that was occurring in the sitting room and winced. That didn't sound good. Hearing her mate and her youngest son roaring at each other she amended her statement. That sounded like some shit was broken or about to be broken. Considering the brouhaha taking place in the

sitting room she was surprised to find her daughter striding calmly out of the actual room.

"Where are you going, Caraid Cridhe?" she asked her daughter as she came to a stop in front of her.

"I promised the mermen that I'd meet up with them for drinks," Yonder answered happily.

Rule was momentarily stunned. Her youngest son had declared that Yonder was his for claiming but here Yonder was about to 'meet' with the studs of the sea world? She didn't know what had gotten mis-communicated or how but it was obvious that these kids needed help.

Already forming a plan, she smiled a smile that made her adversaries shiver. But of course neither of her children were her adversaries—per se. Still, they were holding up her plans to have some grandbabies. Linking her arm with her daughter's, she began walking in the direction of Yonder's bed chambers.

"Well, being that you promised to meet the mermen, let's get you ready then, *eh?*" Rule said.

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Oron had watched the exchange between Aonghus and Din Eidyn but he had to admit that the exchange between Galápagos Rule and her daughter far outshined the prior. Even considering the consequences, he couldn't prevent the

mirth from lighting his dark eyes. Returning to the sitting room where father and son were facing off, he wondered how long it would take for either man to notice that Yonder was no longer present.

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"She's mine, and I refuse to give her up," Aonghus said.

Din Eidyn eyed his youngest son. Aonghus wasn't a bairn but a formidable Selkie entering his first prime. Shaking his head he wondered how he'd missed that. Aonghus excelled at all he tried his hand at, he possessed intelligence, respect, and manners. True young Aonghus was all of those things and more, however his youngest son was still a male who was wanting his daughter.

"Caraid Cridhe is not the type of female with which you simply dally," Din Eidyn said softly.

He said nothing more; he simply anticipated his son's answer, knowing that if it wasn't good enough he would be forced to hurt his boy.

"That she is not. She is my *anam seis* like Mam is yours. Yonder Din Eidyn is mine to treasure, to love, and to protect and I will do anything for her, even fight you, Da."

Though neither man spoke loudly, it was their powerful words that spoke volumes.

"You'll not win against me, son," Din Eidyn goaded. He was not trying to be mean; he was merely stating a fact. Though Aonghus was strong; he was nowhere near his full power. Even though a Din Eidyn, he was young and would face many challenges.

"Then I will battle until I do. Yonder is mine, Da, and nothing is going to change my mind."

"Do you love her?" Din Eidyn asked quietly.

"Of course. Is that not what I am saying to you here, now?"

"Does she return the sentiment?"

Aonghus nodded. "I believe that she does and if she doesn't I will dedicate my life to doing whatever it takes to make her return it."

"Caraid Cridhe..." Din Eidyn called for his daughter. Turning around he found that she had disappeared.

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Oron watched as Father and son both looked through the crowd for Yonder. Of course, they both came up empty. Taking pity on them he spoke up.

"I believe she is meeting with the mermen."

Wearing identical looks of confusion, Din Eidyn and Aonghus turned to him. Though it took a moment for his words to sink in as soon as they did the looks on both father

and son's face changed from confusion to danger. Before Din Eidyn could call out any further orders Aonghus bolted from the room yelling for the entire royal guard.

"To arms, we have fish men to deal with!"

Oron hurried after them. This was going to be good and he wanted to be sure that he had a good view of the goings on. He had a feeling that this was a story that he'd be telling his great grandchildren years from now.

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Chapter Eight:

That's One Way to Go About It

Aonghus was going to kill a whole bunch of people and right after that he was going to have a "discussion" with Yonder's royal guard. Yes, his woman warranted an entire royal guard by herself. Not even his mam required such a thing but then his mam had Din Eidyn by her side so an entire royal guard wasn't necessary.

As similar as Yonder was to his mam in strength, determination and intelligence, Yonder was not his mam; and as similar to his da as he was in strength, power, and sheer wily bastardness, he had a long way to go until he was close to being the legend that his da was. Yonder would never possess even an inkling of his mam's power but one day he would be equal to his da and anyone who dared speak ill of his woman would be made extinct.

Being in Yonder's royal guard had become a bit of a rite of passage. Only the best of the best and sometimes even they weren't good enough, which is why his brothers had interrupted their training to watch over her. Even a half-trained Din Eidyn was better protection than a fully-trained anything else. He and his brothers had watched over her and damn near growled anything down that even looked like it was going to hurt Yonder. It didn't matter who or what it was that posed the threat.

Low-hanging tree branches, thunderstorms, bunnies darting in and out of the meadow, mountains that grew too tall, they didn't care; they'd fuck it up. Tree branches could grow elsewhere, thunderstorms could move over some other area where Yonder was not, bunnies could find other meadows and mountains that she wanted to climb could just kneel the fuck down. And if any living thing didn't know all they had to do was to ask the Portuguese Man-of-War—if they could find them. Yeah, they'd run those bitches out of town.

Yonder was too adventurous and too beautiful to not have an entire guard. So far, they'd kept her alive but that was only half their job. The other half of their job was to keep the rest of the known world safe. The day was nowhere near over and already he'd had to declare war on those fucking doves and now he was going to have to decimate the world's supply of mermen simply because the guard had allowed his woman traipse off and have 'drinks' with the pretty boys of the water.

After that, he was still going to have to extinct whatever the hell it was that she'd been hanging off of as she sailed past the window. While he was at it he might go ahead and destroy the entire cotton crop for daring being spun into garments that showcased her loveliness. Scenting his woman, and scenting the many males surrounding her, he knew that he was definitely going to have to have a talk with her personal guard. But first, he had to go grab his woman from the clutches of the mer.

With his superb hearing he could hear his woman cussing. He could also hear the pleas of her best friend Meatballs,

which could only mean one thing: Yonder was doing something dangerous. Despite what the Council had intimated and outright said, he knew plenty of males that would enjoy marrying his woman.

Of course, they wouldn't live long enough to enjoy it. Yonder was his and her quirks only made her more desirable to him. Well, all of them except for the ones involving other males. She might cuss like an entire army. She might act like a lunatic but dammit to hell she was his cussing, crazy woman and if those fucking mermen thought any different they could get the hell over it—while they were recuperating from their various injuries, he thought as he grabbed the island priest by the scruff of the neck and headed outside.

"Stay behind me," he ordered as he let the priest go and began cutting a swath through Galápagos bigger and wider than the one than Attila had cut through the Balkans.

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Yonder couldn't help but rub her long legs against each other as she sat on the poolside table. Her mam, who was like the Houdini of making one's self extra bootylicious in like twenty minutes flat had her freshly waxed, buffed, scented and dressed lickity-split. Of course, she hadn't appreciated the waxing when she had a perfectly-good razor but now that felt just how smooth her legs was she totally appreciated it.

She'd worried that she was going to be late for her lunch date with the mer-dudes but her mam had assured her that they would wait for a princess such as herself as she finished wrapping her in a sarong. Paired with a white off-the-shoulder Caribbean style top that showed a bit of her midriff, the silky, short sarong was knotted to the left making a tantalizing split in the already scandalous sarong. Though it covered everything, it tantalized.

The royal print saved the sarong from being x-rated, but the way her hips and ass fit into it took it real close. The sarong was so airy that even her lacy underwear was too thick. Smiling like it was an everyday thing to send your daughter out looking vamp, her mam had handed her the tiniest and thinnest pair of underwear that she'd ever seen. Still, she'd put them on and did a practice booty clap just to make sure that everything would remain in place. It had, and so with her braids brushing the top of her ass, she threw on her sneakers and skipped off to see the mer, confident that she looked every bit as good as they did.

Oh fuck, mermen were boring. Sitting at the beautiful outdoor dining area, she tuned out merman number six and enjoyed the natural beauty of the area. Damn, Galápagos was beautiful. Though there was never a time when its beauty failed to move her, today it was like it was showing off extra. The beauty of the island was interesting unlike the merman who were getting on her last freaking nerve. Were all mermen in love with themselves?

Sure, they were a good-looking species but they were shallower than a kiddie pool. She'd spent the last half hour

listening to them talk and had yet to hear anything of interest. Not able to stand one more long-winded dissertation on how beautiful they were, she was about to brain merman number twelve or six or whatever the hell he was.

I mean damn, who could tell them apart being that they all wore that same look that hinted that they had a dream car and a dream house and a boyfriend named Ken—not that there was anything wrong with that.

They were so overly-dressed that she couldn't look at them anymore so she looked everywhere else. She looked behind her to see if anyone else noticed this shit. She looked in the forest to see if Meatballs was about.

She looked over the ocean for the pink dream yacht that would hopefully come and spirit the vapid bits of fluff away. Sure they were buff, cut, and tanned, but they didn't have blue-green eyes and hair the color of wet sand like Aonghus. Oh shit, where the hell did that come from? Who cares, her body asked. Aonghus was lighting us up in the sitting room. Yes, he was.

She was just getting into her fantasy when merman number three interrupted her.

"Um, Princess, are you looking for something? You keep looking around," he whined.

Thoroughly fed up with them, her manners completely fled her. Almost blinded by the sheer number of jewels upon their persons, she snapped. "Yeah, I'm looking around for a nine-foot Baldwin grand piano and candelabra. Look, unless you're getting ready to bust out 'An Impossible Dream' or 'Love

Letters in the Sand', you need to drop the Liberace routine because you're nowhere near as talented or entertaining."

Seeing their mouths drop open from what she assumed was shock, she continued her tirade now that she was good and pissed off about them interrupting her Aonghus-laced fantasies. How dare they not be Aonghus?

"Look, you know what? You guys need to talk about something other than yourselves because you're really not that interesting. You basically sit around and look pretty and any inanimate object can do that but at least most inanimate objects have a function. Take a hula hoop for instance. Hula hoops come in pretty colors and they're fun."

As always, when she thought about something hard, it appeared as if out of thin air. She liked to think that she was powerful but she knew that it was the magic of the island. Snatching her hula hoop out of the air, she wondered briefly that if she thought of Aonghus and his big, hard body, if he too would appear.

Jumping up on the table she clapped her hands to get their attention *completely unaware that she already had it*. See this is a hula hoop and see what it does," she said as she demonstrated it. She thought of more hula hoops and like magic they appeared. Before long, she had all of the mer in a hula hoop off. Of course, she was straight kicking their ass being that she had the best hips. She was really into it when she spotted Meatballs.

"Meatballs!" she called. "Come here, hurry," she said whilst tossing a hula hoop around his neck.

"Come on, Meatballs, work it," she encouraged as she worked hers suddenly aware of the silence.

Looking over her shoulder she noticed the mermen all back up.

"Princess ... that is a dinosaur," Merman number five said helpfully.

"Yes, to be precise Meatballs is a Tyrannosaurus Rex, and my best friend so you better not even think about insulting him," she warned.

Wow, what pussies scared of one little twenty foot tall, forty-foot long carnivore. Meatballs was the best. Sure, he was a carnivore but dammit people shouldn't make judgments. Still the mermen had completely stopped hula-hooping and had backed up as far away from Meatballs as possible. Meanwhile, Meatballs was doing nothing more than watching them with a look of boredom. Or maybe he was sizing them up for a snack, but she didn't think that he ate fish.

Turning her back on the mermen, she concentrated on Meatballs while she hula-hooped in time to that that new Chris Brown joint. Damn, she loved that song. So caught up in it that she almost missed the commotion down the beach.

Something was definitely going on but being that Meatballs hadn't moved, she supposed it wasn't dangerous and didn't concern her so she went right back to hula-hooping not even realizing that the mermen went right back to watching her hips and ass.

Yonder didn't become interested until she realized that it seemed that things were being thrown bodily into whatever

was nearest them be it a giant redwood or the side of the palace. From the chorus of groans lots of things were being tossed about. It wasn't until she saw the first Merman picked up and tossed into the water—which was a good hundred paces from where they were sitting—that she realized who was doing the battering.

"Oh my," Yonder gasped as she watched Aonghus, who was at the front of a battalion of men wearing nothing but kilts and pissed off looks, handing any and everything in his way its ass. Wondering what had his panties in a bunch, she simply looked on as he hefted merman after merman out of his path.

Though her father and her brothers smilingly flanked him and kicked just as much mer-ass, for some reason her eyes kept straying to Aonghus. He was fucking magnificent. A scowl on his face, sweat dripping down his rock hard chest, biceps bulging, lips pulled back in a snarl, he looked *hotttt*. Maybe it was just her but it seemed that he was making his way to where she was ... *and wait, was that a priest in the midst of the battle?* Oh, they were going to be in so much trouble later, she thought right before going back to her ogling of Aonghus.

Not realizing that she was holding her breath, she simply watched Aonghus. And dammit, if even in the middle of battle Aonghus wasn't watching her back. Heaving any male he came upon to the side, into the ocean, wherever he could heft them, his eyes were boring into hers. He didn't take his eyes off of her even when one of the mermen punched him in the ribs.

The punch didn't even slow his steps. He merely lifted the merman with one bulging arm and threw him away from him. Feeling a rush of moisture flow from her, she finally stopped hula-hooping so that she could press her thighs together.

Never before had she ever been excited by violence. As much as she talked it up, she'd never actually carried it out. Watching Aonghus however had rendered her speechless. Her mouth was dry but her panties were wet—very, very wet! Aonghus looked wild and untamed. He looked good but never had he looked so amazing. Completely turned on, Yonder hugged herself. Her skin felt like it was stretched too tightly over her entire body. Aonghus had never looked so amazing.

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Aonghus finally reached his woman. He was breathing hard but not from exertion; he was breathing hard from fear. His heart was beating so hard against his ribs that he worried that it might beat out of his chest. Seeing Yonder surrounded by mermen had snapped something inside of him. She was his *anam seis*. They were made for each other so if the sea world's ultimate flirts thought that they were going to take his woman, they'd better think again.

He felt no guilt as he took out anything male that was in his path. His woman was fertile, she was in the midst of too many men, wearing too little clothes and shaking those

glorious hips and ass that belonged to him. Anything with a dick that stood in his way, that attempted to keep him from Yonder would be felled.

Nothing was going to keep him away from her. Running full speed from the palace, he focused on nothing else but Yonder. After many minutes of battle, he finally stood before his woman. And irony of ironies, he found that he didn't know what to say ... so he didn't say anything at all. He merely reached behind him and grabbed a hold of the priest's collar and dragged him forward.

Having secured the priest, he then snatched his mate into his arms and kissed her breathless.

"Mine, Yonder. You're mine," he breathed as he fisted his great hands into her mass of hair and took her lips so hard that he also took her breath.

Widening his stance, he bent her over one arm as his other hand settled on her hip and pulled one of her long, muscled legs around his waist.

Though he could speak to his da or his brothers telepathically now that he'd undergone Selkie training, he didn't for it would require him to open his senses and he wasn't about to let any other male feel what he was feeling with Yonder. It was private and it was his. Sure, he might be ravishing her in the middle of the palace grounds but the way she made him feel, the way she set his body on fire, the way she took his control was between them and no one else.

Lifting his lips from hers in order to get some air, he didn't even bother to turn around as he addressed his da, "Is mam here?"

"Yes, son, I am here," she answered.

"Priest, begin," he ordered as he once again took Yonder's lips.

He heard the priest babbling but he couldn't even bother to pretend to listen when his arms were full of his future. With his family present as witnesses he was sure that the priest wouldn't say anything amiss, just as he was sure that his da would alert him when it was time to pay attention. Aonghus didn't know how far they were into the service; he only knew that the priest had better hurry or he would be in danger of consummating this marriage right here. Hefting Yonder fully into his arms he fitted her sex atop his raging, hard cock ... and his knees damn near buckled.

His mam cleared her throat so he backed off a little and listened to the priest.

"Do you forsake all others," the priest asked.

"I have since the moment that I met her," he answered.

The priest then posed the same question to Yonder. Pulling her down tighter to him whilst rocking his hips into her, her answer was a gasp and then a cry to the Creator. Though it pleased him mightily he needed her to respond properly. Pulling his lips from hers, he whispered against her ear. "Say yes, *anam seis*."

"I've been saying 'yes'. Yes, dammit, yes," she screamed as she dug her nails into his arms and attacked his mouth with hers.

Aonghus was once again lost in the gloriousness of her body when he heard the priest yell. "Do you take this woman?"

"Damn straight I do," he interrupted.

"And do you take this man?" the priest asked Yonder.

"Yonder, baby. Do you?" he asked as he gently bit her ear and squeezed her ass.

He watched as his *anam seís* raised her head. Fire shot from her eyes but she answered. "Yes, motherfucker yes, and if you ask me one more fucking thing before your cock is stuffed into me so deep that I can feel you in my throat, I'm going to extinct you. Now shut the fuck up and get back to kissing me."

He did just that but first he had to hand over his pelt. Calling it from his body, he held out his hand and draped the sleek pelt over her.

"For you, *anam seís*," he said.

"Great, throw it on the ground, lay me on it and fuck me."

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Yonder didn't know what the fuck Aonghus was doing but she knew that he had about two seconds to get her on her back. Oh goodness, the way his body was rocking into hers. He felt so good, so good, so ... right. Never had she been so turned on by anything ... well maybe those champagne truffles, but as good as they were they didn't compare to the taste of Aonghus. How in the hell did this fine motherfucker taste like sweet potato pie and iced tea?

She felt like singing that singing that Jill Scott song about the soul food because damn she wanted to eat Aonghus up and then she wanted to put it on him. She felt like such a wanton slut and never had she felt better. Though she wasn't sure why she was wearing a coat when he was running full speed into the palace with her, she simply held onto it and ground her pussy harder into his big, hard cock.

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Hearing the couple make their way into the palace, everyone waited a few moments until they heard the definite clanging of the great palace doors before breathing. Finally, eyes were raised and bodies were turned in the proper direction.

Though none of them could block their hearing as they had to actually hear the couple exchange their vows, very early on into the ceremony people averted their eyes when it became clear that the couple was engaging in foreplay.

The priest had sprinted through that ceremony with the speed of a big cat. He'd spoken the sacred words so fast that he sounded a bit like an auctioneer.

Galápagos Rule finally looked at her mate and emitted the laugh that she'd been holding back. Doubling over from mirth, she held onto her husband and continued laughing until she was out of breaths. It was several moments before she could

regain her composure and when she did, she smoothed her hair back, straightened her shoulders and looked Din Eidyn right in his astounded eyes. "That is your son," she said before flouncing off.

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Carrying his mate in his arms, Aonghus stepped over the threshold of the room that would share from now on. Staggering to the huge bed, Aonghus slowly set his precious *anam seis* onto her feet before taking a step back. He was breathing hard and not simply from the pre-wedding battle, the mad dash up the stairs or the foreplay; he was breathing hard because he'd waited so long for this moment.

He might've remained in that spot simply staring at his gift if Yonder hadn't held out her hands to him. Going to her, he knelt so that she could reach him. He sighed feeling her thread her fingers through his hair knowing that she was about to kiss him. Yonder's kisses were like sweet water and he was dying of thirst. She brought his head down to hers and although she kissed him gently, their desire quickly rose as their bodies melded together. Though they touched from breast to chest, the clothes that separated them bothered him. He needed to be skin-to-skin.

"Let me undress you," he whispered as he pulled back from the drugging kiss that he shared with his woman. He watched as Yonder smiled and nodded her consent.

Though his hands were shaking, he made quick work of her top and the strapless bra that she wore underneath before untying the sarong that was held together by a knot and a promise and watched in rapt attention as it fell. It reached her feet only moments before he did. Naked, save for a pair of scant panties he gazed upon the wonder that was his woman. Yonder was a sight to behold he thought as he knelt at his woman's feet and slowly raked his eyes up her thick legs that would hold his body in a few moments.

He stared at the skimpy barrier of her panties before pressing his face into her stomach and breathing in the scent of her arousal. The scent sent a message to his cock and he felt it pulse, demanding her body. Though he wanted nothing more than to spread her beneath him and spear her body with his thick cock he held off as he wanted their first time to be what legends were made of. He needed his woman to know how their lovemaking would always be.

"Ah, is everything okay Aonghus?" Yonder asked him softly.

Aonghus raised his eyes to meet those of his future and smiled.

"Anam seis, everything is as it should be," he said as he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her panties and ripped them from her body rendering her completely naked before him.

"Thank you, oh Creator, thank you," he whispered as he kissed Yonder's stomach. With his eyes still closed, he leaned his cheek against her belly and sighed knowing that their children would soon rest there. Their daughters would be as beautiful as their mother; their sons would have the strength of the Din Eidyn males. Ah, and they'd love them all in this palace that was always just the right size for their family.

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"Don't I need to do something?" Yonder asked Aonghus, worried that she wasn't doing anything except running her fingers through his thick hair.

Glimpsing the heated look that he directed to her once he raised his head had her wanting to fan herself.

"You're doing everything that I need you to do," he said softly as he got to his feet.

"But I'm not doing anything," she protested.

"Yes, you are. You're here, now hush," he said as he stepped away from her.

Okay, away from her is not what she wanted. She wanted Aonghus right up on her, all up in her personal space ... now. Before she could voice her objections his hands went to the waistband of his kilt and he began to undo. He watched her the entire time. When the material fell to the bedroom floor she gasped. Aonghus was one beautiful specimen.

"Tell me what you want, Aonghus," Yonder pleaded wanting something, everything, all at once.

"I want you to show me what makes you feel good. Touch yourself for me," he requested.

Yonder smiled. If he wanted to watch her get herself off, she could do nothing but comply. Raising her hands to her breasts, she cupped their fullness in her hands and gasped at the pleasure that coursed through her body.

"That's it, baby..." Aonghus's voice rasped along her tense nerves.

Yonder closed her eyes as she pinched her nipples.

"Keep your eyes open," Aonghus commanded.

Immediately, she opened her eyes and what she saw tore a moan from her throat. With his feet slightly spread, Aonghus had his big, hard cock in his hand and was priming himself as she pleased herself. They devoured each other with their eyes even as they slowly stroked themselves. Yonder bit her lip almost hypnotized at the sight of Aonghus slowly stroking his hand up and down his rigid flesh.

"Damn," she whispered as she continued to squeeze and pinch her breasts and nipples. Feeling a fresh flood of moisture between her thighs, she arched her hips and threw her head back.

"Run your hands down your body, baby," he whispered hoarsely.

Yonder slowly slid her hands down her body. Trailing her fingers over her stomach, she stopped at the nest of soft curls that were practically drowning in her cream.

"Dip a finger inside for me," Aonghus said in a strained voice.

She immediately obeyed and was rewarded with the growl that was torn from his throat. Feeling the pulsing heat of her pussy envelope her finger, she grazed her finger over her clit and gasped from the pleasure.

"That's it, baby," Aonghus whispered.

Yonder watched in wonder as his cock seemed to grow even larger in his hand. She wanted it and she wanted it now.

"I can't..." she whispered brokenly.

"Trust me, *anam seis*. Our time is so soon; just give me this gift ... please," he pleaded.

Yonder smiled as he once again took hold of the cock that now belonged to her and began stroking, and handing out instructions. She liked this side of Aonghus. And her body really liked it.

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"Add another finger, baby," Aonghus ordered and then just about choked as his sassy woman did just that. Hearing her moaned in pleasure as she thrust her fingers inside of her dripping pussy almost had him throw caution to the wind and throw himself on his woman, but he held off; he had to. He'd learned discipline whilst away in Scotland and he'd be damned if he threw away all of his training and simply rutted

away at the woman he loved before insuring that she was as out of her mind for him as he was for her.

"Slow it down. That's it. Circle your clit, baby," he whispered as his eyes remained riveted to the nest of curls that would welcome him home really soon.

He watched as Yonder moaned and threw her head back and knew that she was close to coming again.

"I'm going to come," she gasped as she circled her clit like he'd ordered.

"Then come for me, baby. Show me how beautiful you are when you find your pleasure."

Yonder shook her head, "I want you with me this time," she whispered.

"Oh baby," Aonghus groaned even as he walked towards her with his thick cock jutting out from between his thighs. Looking down into her eyes he saw love there.

"I'm yours, Aonghus," Yonder whispered.

It was as if she'd opened the floodgates with those three words. His heart skipped a beat and offering up a prayer he covered her soft, silky body with his bigger, heavier and rougher one. Bending down, he proceeded to kiss her, slowly, languidly as if they had all the time in the world. Though Yonder was doing everything she could to make him hurry, he took his time knowing that they'd only have one first time. Still, he teased her by brushing the head of his cock against her pussy.

"Aonghus!" Yonder gasped as his hard cock brushed against her clit. Feeling her response to the small gesture Aonghus began to slide his cock to and fro against his

woman's clit. He listened as her gasps became deeper and her panting became louder, yet he still didn't let up. He gasped feeling Yonder's fingers dig into the muscles of his forearms she sang out her climax. Hearing her sing a chorus of his name made him smirk like the Din Eidyn male that he was. Leaning down closer to her he told her how much he loved her, needed her, cherished her, and still he did nothing more than tease her with his cock. She'd found her pleasure but he was waiting for her to want all of him, not simply his cock.

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Yonder didn't know why Aonghus was torturing her like this. All she knew was that ever since, you know before, she'd been turned on by him and she couldn't turn it off. He'd had the fucking nerve to go around looking all hot and in turn getting her hot and bothered. She'd never needed a male like she'd needed him and yet here he was being the biggest fucking clit tease in most likely world history. Later, she'd look it up but she was pretty fucking sure that she was right.

Looking up into his eyes, something in her settled. Any other man would've just thrust that big cock into her pussy with the way she'd been begging and demanding; yet it suddenly became clear that Aonghus was not any man. Hell,

he wasn't even a man; he was Selkie, and not simply Selkie but a Din Eidyn Selkie.

As hard as his cock was and as much as she knew that he wanted her, Aonghus took his time. He'd given her a flood of orgasms yet he hadn't claimed his own. It was as if didn't rush because he knew that they had all of the time in the world. Settling down, she removed her hands from his hair and touched him the same way that he was touching her. That is, she touched him with gentleness and reverence instead of with impatience.

Looking into his eyes, she pulled him to her and pressed gentle kisses to his mouth and peppered his jaw with kisses and his neck with gentle nips. Working her way back up, she pulled his head down but she didn't demand his lips, she simply tucked his head into the space between her neck and shoulder and caressed him.

Running her fingers along his heavily-muscled back, she twined her legs around his and simply reveled in the moment. Using her hips she pushed him to his side and she faced him. Never ceasing her stroking she looked at this male and closed her eyes thanking the Creator for him, for this moment, for his gentleness. Brushing his shoulder-length hair back from his face, she looked him in the eye.

"Did you have many lovers, Aonghus?"

She wasn't sure why she wanted to know; suddenly she just did. And though just moments before she was begging for him to fuck her, she needed to know the answer to this.

She was surprised when Aonghus pushed her onto his back and settled himself between her thighs, but she was even more surprised by his response.

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Aonghus smiled at Yonder's question. Now that he knew that they were in the same place, he could give in to his body's demands. Rolling his woman onto her back, he settled himself between her thighs. Holding his weight on his thick forearms he made sure that he had her full attention before answering.

"I would never dishonor the woman that I love by making love to another woman," he said before slowly entering her made-for-him body.

Aonghus was harder than titanium and he was positive that he could crush boulders with his hard cock but he held back knowing that Yonder had known no other male. How could she with his brothers and his da-and of course him—as her protectors? The gift of her virginity was not something that he would take lightly just as the gift of his virginity was not something that he gave lightly, which is why he'd saved it for her. Together, they would learn the ways in which to pleasure each other and if the Creator was willing they'd have many years in which to learn those lessons.

"I need to be inside you," he whispered against her succulent mouth.

"Then come home to me," Yonder whispered back.

"It will hurt, *anam seis* but pleasure will come to you soon after. Do you trust me?" he asked softly as his cock lay poised at the barrier to her innocence, her heat already scorching him.

"Always," Yonder whispered as she arched her hips up to meet his forward thrust.

Aonghus was as gentle as he could be as he tore through the fragile membrane that signified her innocence. When he was finally seated to the hilt, he held himself still and simply kissed his woman.

"Breathe baby," Aonghus begged as he rested his forehead against Yonder's. The tearing of her hymen had brought tears to both of their eyes, but he kissed away the salty remnants from her eyelids, holding his body still in order to give her time to accustom herself to the intrusion.

"I'm okay, Aonghus," she finally whispered as she opened her eyes and gazed up at him.

He gave her a smile that he hoped showed her all of the love that he had for her.

"Thank you, baby." he said as he slowly slid from her body. Hearing the little gasps were testaments to pleasure, he thrust forward again seating his body deeply inside of his woman, going slowly to insure her pleasure.

"Yes! Yes! Aonghus!" Yonder lifted her hips to him.

Thrusting slowly but deeply into her gripping pussy, they both gave into their pleasure and pushed their bodies closer.

"So tight ... so very ... tight," Aonghus muttered as he kept up the measured strokes of his cock.

"Harder, Aonghus. Oh, I'm nearly there," she said as she gored grooves into his forearms with her nails. Feeling her inner muscles flutter and clutch at his cock, turned him on, but still he continued with his steady strokes. Only when her words turned base, when she moved from pleading to outright demanding, did he power into her like his body demanded.

"Harder, Aonghus! Yes, yes, yessssssssssss!" she screamed out her pleasure and came all over his cock.

Though the heat from her pussy felt so good he was not through. He continued to pound into his woman so fast that his hips were almost a blur. Lifting one of her amazing legs over his shoulder, he dug deeper with his cock and Yonder came again. Still, he didn't let up.

Ramming his cock harder and faster insides of her, he didn't let up until finally, her pussy gripped him in a strangle hold and the muscles inside of his woman's body demanded his release. Gritting his teeth at the pleasure, he threw back his head and roared his pleasure as he filled his soul mate with his seed.

"I love you," he whispered as the final shudders of his climax rocked his body. Kissing Yonder, he rolled onto his back and pulled her atop him. He gave her a kiss that left them both gasping for breath. Stroking her back, he watched as she gave him a weak smile before promptly passing out.

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Yonder slowly floated back down to earth. The words that Aonghus had whispered to her had pleased her as much as his magnificent body. Opening her eyes, she looked into Aonghus's smirking face and immediately wanted to smack that smirk right off. She didn't being that he'd given her such pleasure.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered.

"That's not what you said the first time we met."

Aonghus looked pained for a brief moment and Yonder wrapped her arms around his waist and held him tightly to her.

"If I could take back that moment from time I would. As much as my hurtful words pained you, know that they pained me as well. I pray that we are blessed with many days so that I may show you the love that I have for you. I offer you my soul, my heart and all of my tomorrows until the end of time. I give you my body that has known no other woman and yet has craved for you through these years. Will you accept this, *anam seis*?"

Yonder felt tears prickling her eyelids. "Yes, Aonghus, yes," she said as she took his lips in a gentle kiss.

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Epilogue

The sun shone brightly in the clear blue sky over the Island of a gentle warm breeze stirring the palm trees the colorful birds twittered and sang softly as the heavily-pregnant daughter of Galápagos

Rule and Din Eidyn waddled into the dining room where her family sat eating breakfast. As was customary, every male stood upon her entrance. Seeing the sad look on her face, however prompted a growl to spill from the throat of every male. None took their seats, instead waiting for her to give them the name of the motherfucker who was about to be extinct.

"Come here, Caraid Cridhe," Din Eidyn said as he opened his arms to his only daughter. She moved as fast as her distended belly would allow, which wasn't very fast at all. Once in the circle of her da's arms she sighed and made a production out of laying her head on his massive chest. Her da smoothed the tiny braids off of her face and made her look at him.

"Tell da what has brought this sadness to you?" he demanded softly.

"I'm fat, really, really fat," Yonder spoke on a whisper.

"Nay! Who dared to insult you, Caraid Cridhe?"

"That man that everyone insists is my husband even though I don't recall getting married," Yonder said.

"Can I marry someone else, please?" she asked.

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"No, you may not marry someone else. You are my mate," Aonghus Din Eidyn said as he walked into the dining room.

Every eye in the room went straight to him and if he wasn't mistaken, every one of those eyes looked angry.

"What?" he asked confused.

"How dare you call Caraid Cridhe fat!" Eochaid yelled from across the table.

Aonghus shook his head in denial but witnessing the sight of his mate in the arms of their da he knew what had transpired, especially considering the look of pure anger on his da's face. Luckily for him their mam sat beside Din Eidyn. Ever watchful of her children, she wouldn't let his da kill him.

"Mam, Da I have never, nor would I even think to call my mate fat. She positively glows. Her beauty is unsurpassed by any, and I love her more today than ever," Aonghus spoke quickly as he made his way to the side of his parents and mate.

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"It's his fault I'm fat anyway," Yonder grouched as she rubbed her cheek against their da's chest and snuggled as far as she could into his embrace. She felt Din Eidyn kiss her forehead and smiled.

"You are not fat; you are full with my darling grandbabies," Rule said firmly as she kissed her cheek.

Yonder sighed dramatically. "And I'm a freak. Who the hell gets pregnant the first time with five babies?"

"Mates of Din Eidyn males," the entire room said in unison.

Yonder couldn't help but laugh. It was the standard answer for the question she'd been asking ever since finding out that she was pregnant. Of course, she'd discovered that she was pregnant long before she found out that she was married. It was only after her mam and da had found her crying in Meatballs' arms about being pregnant and unwed that she'd discovered the truth.

Since no one had bothered to tell her that she was mated, she wasn't telling anyone that Aonghus had broken the pattern of Din Eidyn males fathering only sons. Not only did she carry girls, all five bairn were female. She couldn't wait to see the reaction of the Din Eidyn males. She wondered how many more royal guards they would acquire after that.

"I'll take my mate, thanks Da," Aonghus said firmly as he plucked her out of her da's lap.

She protested like mad, but eventually allowed herself to be moved to her customary seat—a whole foot away—from her da. Eating her breakfast, she was thinking of some new shit to get into. Perhaps she'd set Soroka up with that hot ass

Oron. She was already knee deep into her plans when Aonghus leaned over and whispered into her ear.

"Whatever you're thinking, no. You'd be wise to conserve your energy being that I plan to spank that beautiful ass of your raw before I fuck you so good and proper that our kids could be born early," he said with a nip on her earlobe.

The End

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*****J&J*****

Thank you for reading. We hope that you enjoyed the tale as much as we enjoyed writing it. Jeanie & Jayha

Praises, compliments, adulation and the like for Jeanie and Jayha can be left at:

www.jeanieandjayha.com

HOME PAGE URL: www.jeanieandjayha.com

SHORT AUTHOR BIO:

Besides being intelligent divas who pen kickass prose, Jeanie and her momma are dessert-eating, take-no-shit, tell-it-like-they-feel instead of tell-it-like-people-want-to-hear-it women. They are women who have brains and aren't afraid to use them; feelings and aren't afraid to express them; and, middle fingers which they'll happily use to salute out of line peeps. Independently, both are forces of nature that leave you begging for mercy or begging for more ... depending on your level of tolerance. Even better, when they're in cahoots, they transform into the best tag team duo, bound together by the pen.

Jeanie is a shagacious word slinger, who will be world ruling side-by-side with her momma. As long as her Polar Bear (shhh it's a secret) does not drink all of her Cokes, all will be well. After gifting her clan with a knee buckling narrative or two, Jeanie intends to relax by throwing on her

favorite hoodie and jumping in her chromed-out truck in search of the alpha that is the basis of the heroes in all of her stories.

Her momma, Jayha is a lot closer to the convent than Jeanie, which is ironic considering that she's been accused of being the catalyst for the fall of the Roman Empire and a cult leader with low aspirations. When not indulging her torrid affair with ESPN, she finds time to grace Mr. Me with her presence. Jayha constantly hones her skills, so that when she ascends to her position as world leader, stupid people will be punished and desserts will be easily acquired on every corner. Until that fan-freaking-tastic day arrives, she'll continue to walk among the people rocking her standard outfit of Crocs and a blue t-shirt, composing rapturous reads ... all while straightening her crooked halo.

For your reading pleasure the following books are out:

Books by Jeanie Johnson:

lulu.com

VOLATILE: The Empress and the Executioner

V8: The Healer and the Alpha

Books by Jayha Leigh:

Loose-Id

The Wild, Wild Mess: Atlanta

The Wild, Wild Anybody's Guess: Aloha!

Books by Jeanie Johnson and Jayha Leigh:

lulu.com

HOT LIKE FIRE: The Taming and Liberation of Mariana

SMOKIN': Carolina in the Storming

Veiled Passions

A Little Bit of Dis

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