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GUARDIANS
OF LIGHT
BOOK THREE



Lycan Tides

RENEE WILDES

Giving in to the lure of passion could lead to disaster...

Guardians of Light, Book 3

Selkie princess Finora is all too familiar with betrayal. Betrayal by her curiosity, which led her from the sea. By her body, which yielded to a handsome human under the full moon. By the human, who hid her skin and took its location with him to his grave. After seven years of searching, she no longer believes in miracles.

Trystan is a werewolf on a mission to find and return dragons to his homeland. He follows a slim lead westward across an unfamiliar sea. Gravely wounded in a pirate attack, his ship foundered in a storm and sinking fast, he comes face to face with the most unexpected rescuers—Finora and her two half-human children.

Selkie and werewolf. Both creatures ruled by the moon. The attraction is instant, mutual, undeniable...and impossible. Trystan is destined to return to the mountains and Finora can't leave the sea. Their only gift to each other is one night of searing passion—which could lead to the greatest betrayal of all...

Warning: Contains searing passion, bitter betrayal, hard choices, seven-year curses, and lost seal skins. Throw in an impending selkie war and one wicked ship-wrecking storm. Add a cranky sea-goddess, soul-stealing dragons, interfering mermaids, and children in peril.

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Lycan Tides

Renee Wildes

Dedication

To my mom and my sister and all other strong women out there who have ever had to fly solo as single parents. Thanks for reminding me of the woman within the mother. I stand in awe. May Finora reflect a fraction of your strength and grace. Thanks for showing me the way.

Prologue

“Bran, don’t go,” Finora pleaded, even as she handed him his seabag. Rona, the ginger cat, wound around her ankles with a plaintive meow.

“One last trip and we’ll have enough coin for a boat of our own.” In the flickering candlelight, Bran’s copper green eyes gleamed down at her from a face ruddied by years of salt air winds and pounding surf. “Think on it, Nora, no more workin’ for others, none to answer to but ourselves.”

The supreme irony that he worked so hard for his own freedom whilst denying her own was not lost on Finora. Her heart ached. She pushed the pain aside. “I’ve a bad feeling about this trip. Clouds pile up just beyond the horizon and the wind is rising. Please, stay here with me.”

“Know what I think?” He slipped a thick arm about her waist to draw her closer. “I think the moon’s clouded yer judgment. I know why ye wish me to stay.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Ye burn with the full moon. No matter what ye say by light of day, sea witch, by night ye’re mine and mine alone.”

He knew naught. His words crawled under her humanized skin, through her mind. She’d tried so hard to resist the pull of the goddess, to ignore the craving, the need. He was her husband, her captor. This was all he ever saw of her. She loved him. She hated him. She cursed the moon, even as her blood boiled at his touch. Her thoughts clouded as he fumbled with the laces of her bodice. She heard the seabag hit the floor, then his big, work-roughened hands cupped her breasts and she couldn’t think at all. She needed him more than she needed her next breath. She gloried in his total domination. He took her, there on the plank table, fast and furious. She didn’t care. ’Twas the way of the selkie cow to yield to the strongest bull. She burned for her mate. Only he could ease the fire in her blood, if for but a little while.

She shattered around him with a wild cry, shuddered in his rough embrace as he, too, shook with release. “By the gods, witch.” Bran staggered back, his face flushed as he caught his breath. “Almost ye make me forget what I was doing.” His green eyes narrowed. “Almost.” He smoothed his dark, mussed curls, straightened his clothing, buttoned his peacoat and picked up the seabag. “Never fear, I’ll be home afore the next full moon.” Then he was gone. The door shut with a sense of finality.

She slid off the table, stumbled to catch her balance. She stared around her, at her home, her prison, as she shook out her skirts and re-laced her bodice. Well, there was no help for it. He was gone, and without that key to freedom, she was stuck here. She cursed her long ago carelessness that gave him this power over her. The sea called to her with every wave, with every breath, and though her soul bled, she was unable to

answer. Without her lost sealskin she could not return. Some days it was enough to make her ache for death. Except for...

“Mama?” That precious little voice pulled her back from her dark thoughts.

“Coming, poppet.” Finora slipped into the nursery, around the massive black and white dog drooling on his paws. A small figure with dark tangled curls sat up in bed. Braeca, the one good thing to come of her ties with Bran. “What’s wrong?”

“Bad dweam,” the two-year-old confessed. “Wind. Big waves.”

Finora’s heart seized. Had her daughter inherited her curse, the sensing? “’Twas just a dream,” she lied. She lay down on the edge of the bed, pulled the little girl close. “Ssh, now. I’ve got you. No more nightmares.” She began to sing of blue skies, the cry of gulls, sun shimmering on peaceful waves. Braeca’s seal-brown eyes closed, and she slipped her thumb in her mouth as she drifted off to sleep.

Finora eased off the bed. The dog, Storm, watched her go. With Rona the cat in her wake, she climbed the stairs to the Light, the chamber of flame and mirrors at the top of the tower entrusted to her as Bran’s wife. Keeper of the Light, guardian for all mortal souls that sailed above the waves. The lighthouse inherited by Bran from his grandmother signaled the way clear of the rocks that sheltered the safe harbor of Lighthaven. She snorted. That’s what they’d named it, the harbor and town that flanked her prison. Lighthaven. Foolish humans, entrusting a sea witch with their fragile mortal lives. Had she been a vengeful creature...

But she wasn’t. She sighed, buffed mirrors that didn’t need cleaning, trimmed wicks and filled oil. She lit the lamps and replaced the chimneys. She’d friends below, people in no way responsible for Bran’s actions. ’Twas her own foolishness that had brought her to this end. She’d no one to blame but herself.

The dream came to her a week later. Thunder crashed, icy rain poured sideways. Clouds covered the crescent moon. Lightning flashed, struck the mast, an explosion of light and splintered wood, burning ropes and falling sails. The ship bucked, listed in the churning sea. Waves surged over the sides of the doomed vessel, made the deck slippery, treacherous. Voices screamed to their gods as men grabbed what they could to avoid sliding overboard to their deaths. Finora cried out in her sleep, unable to wake, unable to save them. The sea goddess Cilaniestra would not be denied Her due this night. With a horrific grinding, the ship twisted beyond all salvaging. Timbers shattered, broke apart. Finora’s lungs threatened to burst as she slipped beneath the voracious waves, as crushing darkness took her... Her eyes refocused on the stern of the ship, at the name painted in green letters.

Hope of Lighthaven.

Finora tore herself from the dream, sat up in bed. Gasping. Shaking. Cold to the bone. Bran, Ranulf, Viktor and all the others. Lost. Gone forever. Her heart bled for Mari, for all the other wives, now widows.

And she cried for her own loss. Bran had taken the secret of where he'd hidden her skin with him to his watery grave.

The full moon came and went. But this time there was no burning. She shook with the realization that Bran had left something of himself behind, after all. She was pregnant again.

Would she ever be free?

Chapter One

Four Years Later

He was Trystan, mightiest of the clans' guardians, scourge of demon and hellhound alike. Well he recalled marching into battle to the sound of pipes and drums, the cries of the enemy and the smell of their sweat, their fear. The predator in him gloried in the taste of their blood...

"The mighty Trystan, who canna pull his wee head outta yon bucket for two breaths in a row," his mentor Niadh thought-sent.

The vessel plunged through yet another wave, and the retching began anew. Trystan groaned. His sides ached from hours of heaving over said bucket, although his stomach had long since emptied. The air in the tiny cabin was stifling and foul, but Trystan was too weak to stand up and open the porthole, and Niadh in his current lupine form had no hands to do so, either.

A knock heralded Giles, the Lighthaven sailor who'd booked this passage from hell. "Came t' see if ye were still breathin'."

"Wish I werena," Trystan rasped. Lord of the mountains, lord of the night, son of the moon...brought down by mere water. 'Twas beyond humiliating.

Giles grimaced. "I'm sure. Pgah, it reeks in here!" He strode in to open the porthole. Fresh salt air swept into the cabin. He handed Trystan a cup of brackish water. "Rinse yer mouth an' I'll get rid o' this bucket." He was as good as his word, removing the foul-smelling bucket as Trystan collapsed onto his berth.

"'Twas yer idea t' come, remember?" Niadh asked.

Unfortunately, Trystan recalled the beginning moment of his own folly all too well. Standing in Queen Dara's cave, staring at the pictographs on the wall of the last dragon guardians flying off into the setting sun. Vowing to follow them westward, to find them and demand to know why they'd abandoned his people. He'd marched out of the mountains with Niadh and Ealga, the great mountain eagle, across the snow-covered plains of Arcadia to Land's End. There, a vast expanse of salt water blocked his path. A conversation with Giles in a smoky pub had landed him passage on the *Sunrisen*, a merchant vessel setting out on the first trip of spring, her hold filled with timber, coal and hides.

And so, here he was. *"Sun and moon, what was I thinkin'?"*

Niadh nudged Trystan's hand with his cold wet nose. *"Ye were thinkin' o' our people. Ye were thinkin' like a guardian. None can fault ye for that."*

Trystan stared into his wolf-kin mentor's silver eyes. *"I'm sorra for draggin' ye with me. I'm sorra the council punished ye with that form an' tied ye t' me."*

"Ye werena meant for Wolf Clan, but Badger." If a wolf could shrug, Niadh did so. *"'Twas me own error, t' bite ye durin' the full o' the moon. 'Tis me own fault Badger Clan is now short a warrior. Teachin' ye The Way an' guardin' yer back be a small price t' pay."*

"But ye canna shift. Ye canna heal if ye canna shift."

"I can heal. Slow, like any other creature." Niadh closed his teeth around Trystan's hand. *"Go t' sleep, laddie."*

Trystan closed his eyes, drifted off to the rock of the ship, the sound of birds and waves.

A pounding on the door woke him again. Giles burst in. "If ye're not dead, on yer feet. We need all hands on deck."

"What's goin' on?" Trystan struggled into his boots.

"Black sails spotted on the horizon." Giles' face was grim. "Corsair vessel. They prowl these waters betwixt Land's End an' Lighthaven in search o' prey like us. They're small an' swift whilst we lumber 'long like a pregnant woman in her last month. We can't run for long. They'll stalk us through the night an' be on us by dawn. We can but fight."

Trystan grabbed his boar spear, battle axes and knives. "If'n we lose?"

"They'll keep the ship. They want the cargo. They'll spare Doc an' the cook. The rest o' us are but fodder for the deep. Fight well, an' they might sell ye t' those that traffic in gladiators, but ye'll be chained t' the oars 'til the day they dock."

"I wasna born t' be 'nother mon's slave," Trystan growled.

Niadh bared his fangs, black fur standing on end.

"Ye've ne'er fought on a pitchin' deck, have ye?"

Trystan shook his head.

"Once the blood starts runnin', deck gets slipp'ry. Ye'll want t' widen yer stance, keep yer knees bent. Shift yer weight 'gainst the pitch."

"No' unlike the rope bridges in trainin'," Niadh reminded him.

Trystan recalled how many times those accursed bridges had dumped him on his arse in freezing cold mountain stream water. Not a comparison he'd have favored, no matter how accurate. He clenched his jaw. He'd not come all this way to be stopped by a bunch of thieving pirates. His journey was to Lighthaven and he'd not be stopped afore then, bad food and seasickness notwithstanding.

They went out into the alleyway. Trystan's eyes locked on the white face of little Toby, the cabin boy. Those big green eyes were wide with fright, and Toby gripped a cook's knife in his thin hand. Trystan frowned, shaking his grizzled grey head at the concept of an armed eight-year-old, more dangerous to

himself than anyone else. “*Stay with him,*” he ordered Niadh. “*With yer claws ye’re safer belowdecks. If’n they make it this far, he’ll be needin’ ye.*”

“*I’ve no burnin’ desire t’ feed the fishes,*” Niadh agreed.

To guard the weak and helpless was what they’d been created for. Trystan knew Niadh would guard Toby with his last dying gasp. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that. Surely the merchantmen were prepared to repel boarders. He followed Giles up the companionway stairs, out into a hornet’s nest of activity. Ealga plummeted down from the mast to land on his shoulder, dug her talons into the quilted leather jerkin and flapped her wings to keep her balance. Her weight threw his own balance off, but he widened his stance to compensate for the pitching deck.

Captain Reed strode over to them. Trystan marveled at how such a great bull of a man rode the deck as lightly as Giles. “But a matter o’ time afore they close in. If we can get close enough t’ Lighthaven, they’ll veer off. They hunt their prey in open waters. They’ve no desire t’ risk the wrath o’ the wizard.”

Wizard? What wizard? Trystan frowned at Giles. “Sommat slip yer mind?”

Giles flushed. “Ye don’t know if he’s a wizard or not. They moved into the Widow Sera’s manor. Him an’ his daughter. They don’ mix with our folk. ’Tis naught but rumors.”

“Back t’ lookout,” Reed ordered.

“Aye, Cap’n.” Giles nodded and scrambled up the knotted line, which hung down the mast from the crows’ nest, to follow those ominous black sails.

Trystan’s stomach lurched just watching Giles sway in the wind, and he lowered his gaze to meet Reed’s. “What d’ye wish me t’ do, ’til there’s need t’ fight?”

Reed smirked. “Ye’re no sailor, lad.”

Trystan bristled. “Mayhaps no’, but I’m no’ useless, either. I’ll earn me passage. Now give me sommat t’ do where I willna be in anyone’s way an’ there’ll be an end t’ it.” He closed his eyes and reached for Ealga’s mind, pictured a ship with black sails. “*Find it. Watch it.*”

She launched herself into the air, fierce and focused.

“Where’s yer wolf?”

“Guardin’ Toby below. Dangerous on deck. No way t’ catch himself should the ship list.”

Reed nodded. “Ye could fetch buckets o’ sand an’ line them up along the sides. When ye’re done, see if ye can help Doc.”

Trystan nodded, laying his spear behind a massive coil of line as thick as his wrist. He grabbed a bucket from one of the men and went below to the hold, where the sand was stored. He passed Niadh and Toby on the way. “What’s the sand for, laddie?”

“T’ soak up the blood, save footin’ an’ put out the fires,” Toby replied.

Two by two, Trystan hauled buckets of sand and secured the handles over bronze hooks along the sides. The watches changed just after sunset. Those on deck went below for a quick meal. Trystan passed

on Giles' offer of food. Ealga sent Trystan a steady stream of images of dirty lash-striped men with matted hair. Rowing hard with the wind, they closed on their larger prey. Her two side rudders and the foremost artemon sail on the bow steered her to take best advantage of the wind, and her mainsail strained to its limit, but the *Sunrisen* was no match for the smaller, lighter and swifter galley. The pirates took the advantage of oar as well as sail. Even with her holds full of cargo, the *Sunrisen* rode too high in the water for oars to have any effect.

The sun set with that ever-present ghost stalking just within sight. As the darkness swelled, Reed ordered all lights put out. Trystan recalled Ealga. The eagle was a creature of daylight and the darkness hampered her vision. Reed came up as Ealga settled herself on the sternpost. "Get some rest, lad. We change shift in four bells."

"I hate waitin' the worst," Giles confessed as they dropped onto the floor of Trystan's cabin. Toby was fast asleep, his cheek resting in Niadh's rough black fur.

"Sleep whilst ye can," Trystan advised, closed his eyes and let his mind float free. He sought the moonpaths, followed them across the churning waters to the other ship. Niadh strode the beams with him in man-form, bearing the familiar black hair and beard and silver eyes, through the mists of the dream-state that allowed a guardian's body to rest whilst his mind worked through a problem. "*Blood an' fire*," Trystan thought. "*T' take a ship, ye must stop her. How t' stop a ship without sinkin' her?*"

"*Rudder an' sail*," Niadh replied. "*Slash a sail, crack a rudder.*"

Trystan frowned at bows and arrows on the pirate vessel, grappling hooks on coiled lines, knotted nets with more grappling hooks along one edge. Bridges, he realized, to connect two bobbing ships and allow men to cross betwixt. Once aboard, it was all hack-and-slash until one side or the other gained the advantage.

And fight he would. The thought of death was less fearsome than slavery.

"*All livin' things die*," Niadh agreed. "*Rest now, laddie. I canna see them catchin' us afore dawn.*"

Trystan's mind returned to his body. He swore he'd just closed his eyes when a horn sounded from up on deck. The effect on the men was instantaneous, as if struck by a backlash from distant lightning. They poured up the companionway stairs and through the open hatchway onto the deck, snatched leather breastplates and bronze and leather helmets from where they'd been stashed at the bow, guarded by the peacock figurehead. Trystan grabbed his own dragon-scale hauberk, but disdained a helmet. He preferred clear vision in a fight, trusting his own enhanced speed to duck a head blow. Most of the men took up shields and weapons—bows and arrows, hatchets and knives. Reed alone wore chainmail and carried a sword. There'd be no mistaking who was the captain when the pirates boarded. Mick, the boson, had a broadaxe and a mace that would have done any riever proud. Trystan was the sole spear-wielder.

Just a few men remained working as sailors, taking positions at the rudders or sheets to keep the *Sunrisen* on her course toward the safety of Lighthaven. The rest donned the garb of temporary soldiers.

Trystan watched Giles, armed with bow and arrows, scramble up to the crow's nest. He joined Mick at the stern, guarding the armored but unarmed men at the rudders.

The pirate vessel was but a galley-length off the starboard stern. The pirates howled and screamed obscenities at the merchantmen. Mick scowled. "Just like wolves."

Trystan glared. They sounded naught like the deep, mystical calling of wolves on the hunt. Crows or jackals, mayhaps—all raucous bluster. "*Ealga, fly!*" he called. "*Watch!*"

The eagle launched herself into the air, winged over the pursuing galley. The enemy raised drawn bows for a first volley.

"Shields up!" Reed roared.

Trystan thought they could hear the man in the unseen port of Lighthaven.

The merchantmen got their shields up just in time to intercept the rain of arrows. Trystan positioned his over his rudder man, Jan, and himself. Ealga drifted in the galley's wake, well back of the attack.

"Return fire!" Reed ordered. His archers obeyed. The resulting screams told Trystan the pirates were less skilled at dodging. Not a few were unarmed rowers, poor bastards.

Another rain of arrows dropped from the morning sky. Their shields prevented any injury. Mick grinned. "We're better armed than most o' their prey. They'll find we're not so easily taken."

Thinking of little Toby below, Trystan hoped so.

"*I've got Toby,*" Niadh rebuked. "*Focus—an' be careful.*"

Through Ealga's eyes, Trystan saw an oarsman pull at an arrow in his shoulder. One of the pirates, rather than helping the man, stabbed him in the back with his cutlass. Trystan clenched his jaw. If that was the fate of one who'd outlived his usefulness on the other ship, then death 'twas indeed preferable to capture. He braced his legs against the roll of the deck and gripped his spear with his shield-hand, leaving one hand free for throwing knives and axes.

The galley drew alongside and the near rowers shipped their oars as pirates tossed out grappling lines, hooking into the various lines. Now Giles fired, taking down the saboteurs, but there were too many. Trystan noted one enemy archer fire a grapnel at the artemon, saw it tear through the sailcloth. The artemon collapsed, no longer able to hold the wind. Others fired at the mainsail with the same intent, and as the mainsail leaked, softened, the *Sunrisen* slowed. Without propulsion, the rudders were nigh useless. What good steering when you could not move?

Trystan saw the first net cast. The hooks caught in the bulwark railing, and the first wave of invaders scrambled like rats over the knotted nets. Reed and a group of his men greeted them. The first wave died at their hands, but there were more nets, more pirates. The merchantmen were forced back and battle ensued. Brutal, fast and furious, all hack-and-slash. No quarter asked, nor given. The deck ran red with blood, but no time to grab a bucket. 'Twas for later.

Pirates swarmed aft. Mick threw the first axe, followed by Trystan's. The first two dropped. Those that followed ran over them. Trystan had time for one more throw, then he grabbed his spear in his free hand and brought the shield to bear. The pirates crashed into it. Trystan bent his knees to absorb the force, one foot sliding behind him to brace. Then he shoved back, using every ounce of converted Badger scrap to throw the enemy clear, far enough for him to thrust with his spear. The skewered man looked shocked as he died, his sword dropping to the deck.

Jan, no longer needed for rudder work, released the tiller and rolled under Trystan's spear to grab the sword, bringing it up to make short work of another invader. Trystan set into the rhythm of battle—brace, shove, thrust. Ealga plunged from the sky to rake a pirate's eyes. Trystan cursed. Why couldn't females—eagle or human—follow a simple order? Stay clear of the fray, where 'twas safe? That her attack was effective wasn't the point.

"I'm tellin' yer mother," Niadh threatened. *"Ye think ye'd given up with yer sister, but ye're a slow learner...e'en for a Badger."*

Trystan didn't bother to reply. The sounds and smells of battle loomed on the edge of his focus. Blood and sweat, fear and rage, screams and curses. Trystan wondered at the kind of man willing to die for mere possessions, driven to risk death to steal what was not his, who'd rather die on the point of a spear than earn his own way. 'Twas like fighting rieviers, men without honor or decency. They didn't just seek to steal the *Sunrisen* from her men, but from the families. The women and children waited back home for their men to return, with money enough to afford them a life. Stealing from them was out of the question.

Sweat ran down into his eyes, but he could not spare the moment to brush it away. He shook his head. His hair stuck to his forehead. His shield grew heavy. His gaze swept the deck. One of the *Sunrisen* crew slipped and went down, just behind Reed. The captain battled the leader of the invaders. The corsair swung at Reed's face and the *Sunrisen*'s leader jerked backward to stumble over his own man. Trystan reacted by instinct alone, flinging his shield at the corsair captain. The edge of the bronze disc caught him beneath the chin. Trystan dropped his spear, pulled out two axes and waded into the fray. He fought his way to Reed.

"My thanks!" the man shouted above the din.

Trystan thought with the loss of their leader the pirates would retreat. He'd not figured their savagery would increase. They fought like men possessed by demons, like there was no going back. Trystan found himself the target for their revenge. An arrow bounced off his hauberk, the dragonscale too slick and tight for penetration by so small a weapon. A corsair swung his sword at his unprotected head. He ducked, blocked the blow with his axe and returned a strike of his own. Reed tried to protect his back, but the enemy surrounded them.

Another man, beady-eyed and feral, attacked with a cutlass. Trystan spun to parry and one of the other corsairs dropped under his reach, slamming an enormous studded morning-star into the back of his left thigh.

Ealga screamed for him as Trystan's leg collapsed and he fell to the blood-soaked deck. Reed and Mick cleared away the attackers. Trystan's whole world shrank down to simple pain. Burning pain, like demon-acid, the kind that peeled the mind away and left the nerve exposed. A pain that left room for naught else.

Niadh seized his mind, clouded it and placed himself between Trystan and the agony enough for Trystan to regain himself. "*Focus!*" he snarled. "*Pain's our friend. Tells us we're no' dead yet.*"

Trystan took a deep shuddering breath and clenched his jaw. He struggled to clear his mind, to rise above his body so he could assess the damage. He turned his head to see and wished he hadn't. His leg looked like he'd been used to bait bears. The blow missed the main blood vessels, but the bone shattered. Splintered shards buried themselves into the torn flesh and mangled layers of muscle. Dimly aware of Ealga raking the battleground, no longer able to control her, Trystan struggled against the overwhelming urge to shift, to turn. His superstitious newfound friends might kill him themselves. Although he could shift anytime, he depended on the power of the full moon for healing and rejuvenation. The new moon was growing, but its powers were negligible as yet. He dared not shift, and dared not wait.

"*I can heal.*" He echoed Niadh's earlier words. "*Slow, like any other creature.*"

At least until the full of the moon.

The corsairs were annihilated to the last man. The *Sunrisen* had no brig for prisoners. Reed ordered their bodies tossed overboard, then sent men across to the corsair vessel to rescue the oarsmen and salvage food, drink and what cargo they could. Mick and Jan carried Trystan to Doc. The man splinted the leg and poured *relag* tea into the wound. "I'll not lie t' ye, lad." His voice carried over the groans of the other fallen. "If the wound sours, ye'll lose the leg."

"Nay," Trystan rasped. "Leave the wound unsewn an' bound with *relag* an' waxroot. I'm a fast healer. I just need time, an' rest."

Doc frowned, but packed the wound with shaved waxroot and wrapped the leg in bandages soaked in *relag* tea. "I've dreamwine. Ye might wish for a drop or two."

Trystan shook his head. He didn't dare. Dreamwine was a potent painkiller but left the patient softheaded. If his mind weakened instinct would take the upper hand and he'd shift to heal, against the moon and his better judgment. "I could use a drop o' drenieval whiskey."

"Ye're in luck," Giles said from the doorway. "Guess what the corsair cap'n had stashed in his cabin? Greedy bastard. Better used on the hero o' the day, I say, an' as luck would have it, the cap'n agrees." He handed Doc a cup, and Trystan caught the sharp, fiery scent of home as Doc raised him up and held the cup to his lips. It flowed through him like molten lava from Mt. Aege, seared away the pain and distant numbness.

"All the comforts o' home," Trystan joked. "I'll be fine, ye'll see. I'm a tough old bastard, too mean t' die. Ask anyone." He lay back and closed his eyes. Time passed in disjointed shifts. Despite the Arcadian

medicines, his nose told him first the leg soured. Doc gave him the bad news as he shivered in his improvised bed on the table. “Ye’ve caught a fever, lad. The poison’s spreadin’. I want t’ try something else. A Rhattany remedy that sometimes works.” He crumbled up moldy bread, wrapped it in relag-soaked linen and applied it to the wound.

“Bread crumbs?” Trystan lifted an eyebrow as he drank down a bitter concoction of willow bark and rose hips.

Doc shook his head. “’Tis no’ the bread, but the mold. Don’t ask me why, but mold sometimes helps a bad wound. I’ve made a broth with rondane root an’ seaweed. Don’t ye curl yer lip at me. Ye need t’ keep up yer strength.”

“Hold on,” Niadh urged. “Ye must wait.”

Trystan tried, through rounds of medicines and liquid food, passed from burning hot to freezing cold and back again. Ever the moon loomed larger in the night sky. The pull of it under his skin was unbearable, irresistible. He stretched out his hands, to see the ripple of bone, the first shimmer of fur. He fought to hold on to the human, when everything within screamed to turn, to heal. Niadh helped as much as he could, but ultimately the battle was Trystan’s. Never had he thought the hardest battle would be against himself.

Doc shook him awake. “Best t’ take the leg off, above the wound. Clean flesh can heal. Otherwise, ’tis poisoning yer whole body, an’ we may yet lose ye altogether.”

“Nay!” Trystan shook with cold, with fever, but his mind was clear enough to comprehend. He just needed two more nights. He could hold on for two more nights, no matter how much the beast within snarled.

“There’s a storm brewin’,” Doc argued. “If we don’t do it now, we won’t be able t’ do it later. I’m good, lad, but even I can’t do surgery when the room’s tossin’ me one way an’ my patient the other, an’ all my instruments’re slidin’ off the table onto the deck.”

“I said nay. Giles says we’re almost t’ Lighthaven. If I’m t’ die, I’ll do it on dry land, an’ in one piece.” Trystan set his jaw. “Have ye...maggots?”

“We have.” Doc frowned.

“Might work t’ clean the wound, no’?”

“Barbaric thought, but aye, they would. All right, lad. We’ve naught t’ lose at this point.”

Trystan barely noticed the man’s return. His jaw shifted, his fangs lengthened. Niadh nudged his hand. His hand. Not paw, *hand*. Trystan focused. Hand. Man. *Human*. Two more nights. He could hold that long. Shift in the pouring light of the full moon, heal, and shift back. He was strong, Badger-strong. Wolves had naught on the stubbornness of Badgers. He could wait.

Chapter Two

Finora stood at the edge of the cliff. She stared out over the harbor and the breakwater. Her gaze swept across the open sea toward the distant horizon. The drop in air pressure pulled at her skin and in the waning daylight she watched the clouds boil up. The waves built a churning restlessness as Cilaniestra awakened. The wind whipped Finora's long sable tresses about her and she braided them back, knotting the end. She stared up at the Light, at the mortal defiance of the ravenous sea goddess who claimed Her tithe in blood and lives.

Long had her own people, the selkies and their merfolk cousins, watched the mortals sail across the surface of the deep against all common sense. Could they swim? Not hardly. Could they breathe underwater? Nay. Could they hold their breath underwater? Not for any useful period of time. And when they sank like stones, they were absolutely vulnerable to the crushing pressure of the deep.

Yet still they went out. Day in and day out. Cilaniestra demanded Her toll and the survivors put another name on the memorial wall of The Mermaid Pub, drank themselves sick and went back out the next day to tempt their own fates. 'Twas madness.

'Twas that foolhardy courage which had first drawn her. She'd been curious to see what manner of creature could be so...*chalgrecois*. Did they not value their lives? Did they worship death? What drove them? She had to know. So she'd crawled from the sea on that long-ago night, slipped free of her sealskin to walk among them. The music from The Mermaid Pub floated across the shore, the lights and smoke lured her in. And there he sat, smoking a pipe and contemplating the full moon. That accursed burning moon.

Bran the handsome. Bran the charmer.

Bran the lying, treacherous shark, who'd taken her precious sealskin and hidden it away, trapping her on land for seven long years. Away from her family, from her friends. From Prince Matteo, the selkie bull she'd been bound to. Her sire had hoped binding her to the future king of the neighboring pod would strengthen their own position in the greater selkie hierarchy. Instead she'd borne two children, tainted by their half-human blood. The elitist Matteo would have none of her now. And Bran was gone. Only Cilaniestra knew where her skin was.

Finora started back home, where Storm watched over the children playing in the heather. The dog was an excellent nursemaid. But when she reached the three, Storm faced the clouds, his nose twitching. Braeca

looked anxious. Three-year-old Ioain alone seemed oblivious to the tension. He was his father's son, with none of his mother's or his sister's sensitivities.

"What's wrong, poppet?"

Six-year-old Braeca shivered in the rising wind. "Bad dream kinda night, Mama."

At least Braeca just dreamed storms. Thus far she was spared the deaths. "Time to go inside," Finora stated. "Don't want you to get wet and catch a chill."

Braeca rolled her eyes. "We don't get chills, Mama."

'Twas the truth. Finora's blood prevented her children from getting the normal human childhood diseases, even as Bran's blocked selkie ailments. Braeca and Ioain were as accident prone as any other children their age but illness never touched them. Not so much as a sniffle.

"Don't sass your mama, poppet," Finora ordered. "Let's get inside now."

They ran ahead of her into the cottage at the foot of the Light. Storm lumbered behind her. Before he went inside, he turned one last time to eye the growing tempest and whined.

"I know, boyo." Finora stroked his floppy black ears. "Come inside now. With any luck there'll be naught for us to do tonight."

He shook himself and followed her. Finora shut and bolted the door against the wind. She lit the beeswax candles on the table. Her last pot of lilac honey glowed like amber. Whilst Braeca and Ioain played with blocks in the corner, Finora started a fire in the hearth and grabbed a kettle. Crossing the plank floor to a small unassuming door, she entered the well-house. She shivered as she uncovered the well and drew enough water for a pot of soup. Strategic cracks in the walls took advantage of the cooling wind. Even in summer the room was chilly, perfect for storing food. She looked around at the choices. Ioain was in an "I-hate-fish" stage. *Salt pork*, she decided, *potatoes, turnips, carrots, parsley and seaweeds*.

Cilaniestra's claws dug at her through the cracks. Odd how much colder air seemed than water. Finora frowned as she left the well-house, shutting and bolting the door against the cold—and the goddess. Finora hung the pot on the iron lug-pole and dumped in the chunk of salt pork and the dried seaweed. Chopping the vegetables on the table, she added those to the pot as well.

Braeca sat in the rocking chair, reading a story to Ioain. She was learning to read and do simple sums at Mistress Greta's school down in Lighthaven, and shared her newfound ability with her little brother and her mother. 'Twas one skill Finora wished she possessed. Bran had taught her enough math and currency to not be cheated in business but to read a poem or story for herself, to be able to help Braeca when a word gave her pause, would be a wondrous thing.

Finora got out her wooden mixing bowl.

Braeca's eyes lit up. "Can we have biscuits with supper tonight, Mama?"

"That's my plan." Finora went for the flour, salt, cornmeal and soured buttermilk. Equal parts wheat-and-barley flour and coarse-ground cornmeal, a sprinkling of crushed sea salt. Just as she poured the milk,

Rona jumped onto the table and bumped Finora's arm. A great tidal wave of liquid sloshed into the bowl, and Finora stared in dismay at the resulting slop. Irritated, she dropped the cat onto the floor. Rona gave a startled mew, glared at her and stalked off, swishing her tail.

Ioain giggled.

Braeca fought not to. "Just add more flour, Mama."

"Hope you're hungry. Guess we get biscuits for breakfast tomorrow, too." Finora added enough to soak up the extra liquid and stirred a vast mound of dough. "Probably dinner." *Varden cat.*

The still-bare lilac bushes rattled against the windows as she set the bowl aside and covered it with cheesecloth. Rain pounded on the wooden shingles of the roof.

Braeca shivered. "Stormy night, Mama."

Storm pricked his ears. Ioain wrapped chubby arms around the great dog's neck.

"'Tis just Cilaniestra throwing a tantrum," Finora replied with forced serenity. "Why don't you read us another poem whilst we wait for supper?" She sat in Bran's straight-backed chair and resumed braiding the hemp line she'd begun earlier in the week.

"I want the waven one." Ioain knocked his tower of blocks down to begin another.

"The Raven an' the Fox' it shall be." Braeca removed the scroll from the "book box" and unrolled it, sprawling on the rag rug afore the fireplace to read. Storm sniffed her hair, then went back to drooling on his paws. "'Once up-on a morn' I saw'..."

Finora's mind drifted at the familiar words and Braeca's careful pronunciations. Just beyond the breakwater, Cilaniestra stirred Her cauldron in the deep. The waves churned around Finora, tugged at her hair, pushed at her clothes.

The sighting struck. No dream, this, but a rare waking vision. The sea creatures dove as deep as they could to find easier going. Far above them, a ship bobbed like a cork in the waves. From her wide girth, a merchant vessel. Fully loaded, riding low on the waterline. Lightning illuminated the waves crashing over the familiar peacock figurehead on the bow. Tattered sails strained in the wind. The returning *Sunrisen* was almost home. The wind drove her at obscene speeds toward Lighthaven.

Thunder rumbled. Foreboding shivered up Finora's back and made her fingertips tingle. The *Sunrisen* hurled toward the great rocky breakwater that sheltered the harbor. Never had Finora been so thankful for the Light above her and the smaller one atop the end of the breakwater itself. So long as ships steered betwixt the two lights safety was assured.

Another intense flash lit the entire cottage, followed by a clap of thunder that rocked the candlesticks on the table. Storm reared up onto the table to peer out the window. He barked once. Finora grabbed her shawl and opened the door. Storm followed her into the wind and the rain. The light on the breakwater still glowed in the distance. "Easy, boyo." She curled her fingers into his fur. "Everything's fine."

Storm shoved past her to get inside first. It took some effort to close and lock the door. Finora wiped the rainwater streaming down her face with her wet shawl and laughed. “Lotta good that does.” She tossed the sopping shawl over Bran’s chair and moved to the fire to stir the soup, testing the firmness of the vegetables. Time to bake the biscuits. Braeca brought her the bake kettle. Finora rolled out the dough and Braeca cut out round biscuits with the tin cutter. Ioain placed the biscuits in the kettle. Then Braeca covered the bowl whilst Finora placed the kettle in the coals on the edge of the fire and ladled more coals atop the cover.

The contrast was not lost on her—the cozy homey setting, the scent of a wood fire, salt pork and baking biscuits inside, whilst outside men battled Cilaniestra’s fury and raced for the Light...for home. The Mermaid Pub and Madame Jasmine’s would be busy tonight. She went back to braiding hemp.

Storm just could not settle. He lay down by the fire for but a moment afore getting up to pace to the door. He pawed at it a couple of times, then went back to flop onto the rug, only to repeat the cycle. The rhythm of the dog’s nails clicking on the wooden floor drove her to distraction. When the biscuits had browned, she sat the children down at the table with their supper. Her own appetite was gone, fretted away with Storm’s pacing. A tremendous crack of lightning made her jump—as did the warning horn coming from Lighthaven.

Ioain whimpered.

Braeca’s eyes widened. “M-mama?”

“Stay here,” Finora ordered. She unbolted the door and opened it. The wind snatched it from her grip and slammed it back into the wall. Storm bounded out into the driving rain. She stared down from the cliff, out toward the lower light. She saw only darkness. Whether by wind or wave, Cilaniestra had obliterated one-half of the corridor markers. There was no way to mend the lower light in this storm. ’Twould be sheer suicide to try. With the wind ’twas no turning back for the *Sunrisen* now. Captain Reed would be forced to play a guessing game to judge the safe distance from the rocks, where the deep channel lay. Around or through the breakwater were the only two options.

Finora went in to soothe the children. Storm whined and pawed the door. A door slammed above them, the sound of breaking glass coming from the Light.

“Cilaniestra, no!” Finora charged up the stairs, into chaos and darkness. The bronze latch on the outer door had given way. It was completely twisted. The wind had flung the door open into the wall next to it, the glass shattered all over the floor. Wind and rain swept the interior. Everything was saturated. The Light was out. “Cilaniestra, you ravenous bitch!” Finora screamed into the wind. She grabbed the remains of the ruined door.

“Mama?” Braeca had followed her up.

“Get the oiled sailcloth. Tell Ioain I need the hammer and the *big* nails. Go.”

Braeca scrambled below, whilst Finora fought to hold the door shut. Icy rain slashed her face and her braid flailed in the wind like a sea snake. She squinted to see in the dark. Lightning lit the shards of glass on the floor. Braeca reappeared, dragging the roll of oiled sailcloth behind her. Ioain followed with hammer and nails.

“Mind the glass, poppets,” Finora cautioned. Braeca and Ioain leaned into the door whilst she unrolled the window-sized cloth over the hole where the glass had been. Ioain handed her the hammer, and one by one the nails, to block out the storm. Once the wind and rain were shut out, Finora sent Braeca to find small blocks of wood that they used to nail the door shut until she could make a final repair.

Additional horns sounded in the dark, Lighthaven’s final warning to any who could hear above the storm.

Restarting the Light was priority. Ioain brought towels, and Braeca a broom and dustpan. Finora took apart the central lamp, rubbed the chimney dry and emptied the oil basin half-filled with water. Ioain fetched the sealed box of wax-tipped wicks wrapped in oilskin, then held the dustpan whilst his sister swept up the watery remains of the window. When the basin was refilled with fresh oil, Finora threaded in a new, dry wick and covered it with the glass chimney.

She scooted the children downstairs. “Finish your suppers whilst I relight the lamp.” She grabbed a candle from the table and took it upstairs. Standing between the Light and the trickle of wind that remained, she touched the flame to the wick. The wax softened and melted. Finora held her breath as the flame tickled the wick. She watched the edges brown and curl. “Come on,” she begged. “You can do it. You *have* to do it...”

With a tiny puff, the wick caught and flared to life. Finora waited to ensure it burned, then replaced the chimney and turned the little air vents to burn the flame as high as it would go. She re-buffed the mirrors as the Light once more blazed out across the bay.

But the horns did not lessen. Someone pounded at the door below. By the time she made it downstairs, Braeca had let in Johls, the Lighthaven thatcher. “What’s happened?” Finora asked.

“Cilaniestra’s tithe. Ship ran aground the Break. Life rafts are lowered but we need yer help—an’ the dog’s.” His eyes were bleak. “Whole town’s turned out. Hurry. ’Tis the *Sunrisen*.”

Braeca had already grabbed Storm’s harness and tossed it over his head. The dog stood quivering and whining whilst Finora buckled the straps and cursed the sea goddess. Ioain brought the round floater on a rope and handed it to Finora. “Braeca, you and Ioain stay here. I’m taking Storm down to the water,” Finora said. “Johls, you can go back down to the marina.”

She and Johls followed Storm down the pathway to the base of the cliff, where Johls left them to return to Lighthaven. She tied the floater to Storm’s harness. The massive dog hurled himself into the pounding surf and struck out for the distant wreck.

As soon as Johls was out of earshot, she hollered out over the water, “Bree!”

A green-haired mermaid popped her head above the waves. "What?"

"Check the wreck for survivors. Anyone who might not have made it to the lifeboats, or is stuck on the rocks. There are but two boats. If all tried to get in, they'd swamp and capsize."

"I'll even make the girls help." Bree's eyes twinkled with mischief as a big wave crashed over her head and she spat out a mouthful of seawater. "Imagine the stories in The Mermaid Pub tomorrow. 'I swear it *was* a mermaid, a real live mermaid.'"

Finora shook her head at her friend's mocking tone. Bree cared little for the lives of land-locked mortals, but she was a good friend. She'd help because Finora asked.

Bree rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say." She dove beneath the waves with a flip of her tail.

Finora shielded her eyes against the sleeting rain. Storm was nowhere to be seen. The *Sunrisen* settled on the distant rocks. Merfolk could streak at dolphin-speed through the water, even faster than selkies in seal-form.

"Finora!" Bree called. "*Moon-Shifters! Weres. One's hurt, bad. He's in man-form, won't be able to swim. Your dog's here.*"

"*Let Storm tow him in. Can he hang onto the floater?*"

"*He can if he wants to live,*" Bree retorted. "*I'll bring them to you, so the locals don't squeak.*" Her voice dripped with disdain. "*I've got the other.*"

"*What forms are they?*"

"*Wolves.*"

Lovely. Wolves would start a riot, especially if anyone saw them turn into men. "*It's a full moon. Don't get bit.*"

"*He'd poison himself. Trust me, this one's not that dumb.*"

Was that admiration Finora heard in Bree's tone?

Finora paced the rocky shore. She saw the boats put out from Lighthaven's piers, saw at least one lifeboat make it into the calmer waters of the harbor. A misshapen shadow appeared in the waves. Bree half-carried, half-towed a waterlogged black werewolf. Lightning flashed, and his silver eyes glowed at her from the dark. Bree stopped short of the shallows and the Were paddled in the rest of the way, staggering up onto the rocks to collapse at Finora's feet. He panted, too winded to even shake the water from his fur.

"Thanks, Bree!" Finora called.

Bree waved. "I'd better go check on his friend, make sure the dog doesn't lose him."

Storm could tow a human with his teeth, provided the human didn't panic and thrash around. But it would be easier if the other Were could hang onto the floater. "*How bad is he?*" Finora asked Bree.

"*Left leg injured,*" Bree answered. "*He can't use it to kick. He knows the dog's there to help and is trying to paddle with one arm. He keeps phasing in and out, but so far he's holding onto his human form. I'm under them in case he lets go.*"

Storm approached from the wreckage. He snorted water from his nostrils, but paddled toward shore. The floater drifted behind, with the grizzled grey head of a man shimmering aside it. Stars, he hung on by a thread. Above the tempest, out of sight, shone the full moon. Although she couldn't see it, she felt it. Apparently, so could the unknown Were, and he fought a losing battle against it.

The black wolf hauled himself to all fours and stared out at the approaching dog. Nay, not at Storm but at the Were behind him. Finora got the impression of silent communication betwixt them, similar to hers and Bree's. The shimmering subsided, but Finora knew it lurked beneath the surface, like a cauldron just shy of boiling.

Storm lumbered up onto shore and over the rocks, far enough for the Were he'd rescued to claw his own way free of the water. Finora untied the floater rope from Storm's harness. Storm looked confused. He tried to go back in, but Finora whistled him away from the water. She didn't need mortals on her beach at the moment. Lighthaven had things under control. The sudden silence of the horns told her that. Storm shook himself and sat down to wait.

The black wolf nuzzled the man sprawled on the rocks. Finora knelt aside him. Rolling him onto his back, she checked the strength of the pulse in his neck and the steady rise and fall of his chest. She brushed aside tangled grey hair, uncovering a long, swirling column of blue tattooing down the left side of his face. Her fingers caught in a small braid. Despite the hair and the grey color of his neatly trimmed beard, Finora didn't get the impression he was all that old. He had strong features, with the crooked nose that all warriors seemed to sport. She placed her ear against his chest, against the supple armor he wore. Whatever it was, it wasn't made of metal, but it wasn't quite leather, either. His heartbeat was strong and steady and she heard no gurgling in his lungs to indicate he'd breathed in any seawater. He wore a coiled-bronze torque around his neck and a unique amulet—a wolf's head with an eagle's beak and wings.

She raised her head to find him awake, blue eyes staring at her from but inches away. "It's all right," she soothed, laying her palm against his cheek. "You made it to land, to Rhattany. You're in Lighthaven now."

"Lighthaven." He had an unusual rolling accent. Something flashed feral-green in those piercing blue eyes, and she felt his jaw shift against her hand. "'Tis safe?"

"You're safe here, cousin of the moon. I swear it." She'd meant the words for reassurance only, realizing too late how he was bound to interpret them. Sure enough, he closed his eyes and shimmered into a very furry silver-grey wolf in battle armor, with a mangled hind leg. A very big, wet, unconscious wolf, at the base of a very tall cliff. "No! Sir, cousin, now is not the time. Wake up!" She shook him. He could have been a pelt, for all the life he showed.

The black wolf glared at her. She tried to lift the grey one. Stars, he was heavy. The lights of the cottage taunted her from a distance that might as well have been the moon. She had to get back to the

children and she couldn't leave an injured man on the rocks, exposed to the elements. She turned to the black one. "'Tis the full moon. I don't suppose you could shift and carry him?"

He ducked his head and flattened his ears.

She sighed at the negative. For a Were to be trapped in alternate form, against the pull of the full moon—since werewolves did not shed their skins as selkies did—smacked of some sort of clan binding-punishment. Finora sensed a story or two there. "Well, I've bad news for you. Seal cows possess but a fraction of the size and strength of their bulls. I can't do it, either."

She tugged off the grey wolf's human clothing, rolling it in his leathery armor to give herself time to think. The answer that came to her was her sire. King Griogair. If he'd even answer her. They'd not spoken since she'd left the waters seven years ago, against his express command not to go near the humans. He'd not even bothered with an "I-told-you-so." But he was the one bull she knew who might answer her. They'd been close, once.

"*Sire? I need your help.*" Finora sent out the call, not daring to hope for an answer, and waited. Several minutes passed. The wind tore at her clothing and rain pelted her numb skin. Still she waited. "*Sire, please.*"

A huge brown shape exploded out of the water and up onto the rocks with a roar. Even in seal form, the bull towered over her. Two others flanked him, shedding their skins to reveal giant, naked, grim-faced men with wicked-looking tridents. Storm rolled over onto his back. The black Were crouched down, curled a lip and backed away. The lead bull shook off his skin and became an equally nude, sable-haired man with proud, aristocratic features. He'd a commanding presence that made her first reaction one of wanting to cower at his feet.

King Griogair.

"Daughter."

He still acknowledged her? Shaking, she knelt at his feet. "Sire, forgive me."

To her shock, he reached down and raised her up. Those imperious brown eyes softened as they studied her. "Whatever punishment I might once have deemed appropriate for your imprudence, seven years of exile has more than wiped it away, Daughter. You are still bound?"

She nodded. "I can't find it. I've looked everywhere."

He smiled a slight, cold smile. "Not everywhere. It exists. Don't give up. Don't lose hope. When you find what you seek come home. As long as I reign in the deep you'll be welcomed, I swear it. Matteo be damned."

His face blurred in the tears that stung her eyes. He hadn't forsaken her.

"Now, why did you call me?"

Finora turned to indicate the two Weres. "They're from the ship on the rocks. I need to get them up to the cottage." She pointed to the distant lights at the top of the cliff. "The grey's injured and can't be roused.

He's too heavy for me to lift. As they're Were, I can't ask the humans for help. Can you have someone carry him for me? The black can make it himself."

"I'll do it myself."

Finora's jaw dropped. "I would not presume—"

"*That*, Daughter, is why I do it." Griogair reached down and scooped up the limp form of the grey Were as if he weighed naught. Finora turned and led the way up the cliffside path, Storm and the black wolf in her wake. Griogair strode aside her. His men stayed behind to guard his skin, so he didn't fall prey to the same fate as she. "You've never given in to self-pity. Always, you take what you're given and make the most of it. I'm proud of you, Finora."

Finora's head spun. He acknowledged her as his offspring *and* he used the familiar name her dam had given her? "How fares my dam?"

"She's well. You've a new little sibling, a she-pup. Your dam named her Aingeal."

"I thank you for that news, Sire." They reached the top of the cliff, and Finora stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Wait a moment, please." She took off her shawl and tied it around his hips to cover him.

His eyes flashed. "Humanity doesn't become you, Daughter."

"Tis not for myself, Sire. My children have been raised with human values. Humans don't reveal their skin-forms to their children and I wish not to shock mine. Please?"

"Very well."

The door flung open, and Braeca and Ioain dashed out to greet her, heedless of the weather. "Mama! Mama!" Ioain flung his arms around her legs.

"Come inside, both of you." Finora shooed them inside like a couple of wayward chicks. Griogair had to duck under the doorframe. Finora shut the door behind Storm and the wolf. Both canids shook the water from their fur and dropped afore the fire.

"Where do you want this one?" Griogair asked.

Knowing he was a man, and injured, Finora couldn't bring herself to just toss him on the rug, even though he was soaking wet. She turned to the black wolf. "Will he heal?"

He nodded, then dropped his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

"Lay him on my bed. I'll show you." She led the way into her room. Griogair waited whilst she grabbed an armful of drying towels and rubbed excess water from the grey fur. Then he laid the unconscious Were on the quilt. A window revealed a break in the clouds and a moonbeam pierced the night to bathe the Were's injured leg. Cilaniestra must be satisfied with Her tithing this night. The storm dissipated.

Finora led Griogair back out into the main room where Ioain and Braeca stared wide-eyed at the black werewolf snoring by the fire. "Would you care for something to eat or drink afore you go?" she asked.

To her surprise, he settled into Bran's chair. "Nay, I'd sit for a moment." He eyed the children. "They've the look of our people save for the curls." His nostrils flared as he took in their human scent. "Yet they aren't."

"Sir?" Braeca moved to stand afore him. "Why are you wearing Mama's shawl? Where are your clothes?"

His eyes narrowed as she dared to meet his gaze. "This one has spirit—and vision."

"Aye." Finora swallowed, nervous. "Poppet, he lost his clothes in the sea. He helped Storm rescue the two wolves. I brought them here so they wouldn't scare people."

Ioain pointed to the black wolf. "Will he eat us, Mama?"

The Were raised his head at that, and Finora saw a glint of amusement in his silver eyes.

"Only if you don't go get your nightclothes on and get into bed," she replied.

"Night, Mama." Ioain dashed. Braeca rolled her eyes and strolled.

Finora turned to see one corner of Griogair's mouth twitch.

"She's much like her dam," he stated.

"Stars, I hope not." Finora shuddered at the thought.

He rose. "I must leave you now, Daughter. I'm glad you're well, and your offspring. Remember you're always welcome home." He handed her the shawl and strode into the night.

Finora clutched her shawl and cried.

Chapter Three

Tristan awoke to sunlight blazing through a window. He struggled to drag open salt-encrusted lids. His eyes burned as he focused on that streaming light. Not a porthole—a real window. He lay in a four-poster bed that did not swing. His mouth felt as dry as the sand from the hold of the *Sunrisen*. His body screamed with thirst. But his leg no longer pained him. The nauseating smell of decaying flesh was gone. He held his breath as he reached beneath the quilt and ran his hand down the back of his thigh, relieved to find intact skin over muscle. The bandage was gone. He'd shifted under the full moon and healed.

He frowned. His memory returned in splintered fragments, like shards of broken pottery. He remembered Doc trying to convince him to permit surgery afore a storm hit, then bits of the tempest itself—an insane, raging beast of screaming wind and surging waves. The *Sunrisen* had shattered around him on jagged rocks. Men had scrambled about in the dark, trying to save their own skins. He relived freezing water closing in around him, over him, and shivered even now. Then the miraculous appearance of a dog built like a bear, the shadow of a fish with long green hair and the sharp stones of a shoreline digging into his skin.

He recalled a woman's dark eyes in the moonlight. He stared at the colorful design that graced the white quilt covering him, vivid interlocking circles of red and blue, and took a deep breath. A woman's bed. His body stirred. The pillows, the sheets were ripe with her rich, musky scent. There was no scent of a man at all. Where were Niadh and Ealga?

Where was he?

The door opened and a dark-haired woman strode into the sunlit room. Her scent hit him first—day over night, clean sunshine and the sharp briny tang of sea air over warm woman. The lethal sway of her hips got the attention of parts of him he'd nigh forgotten existed on the long celibate journey westward. She carried a pitcher and a cup, and smiled. "You're awake. How are you feeling?"

His body hardened at her sultry voice. "Thirsty." He stared into familiar brown eyes. The soft liquid eyes of a doe. Bedroom eyes. 'Twas her—the woman from last night. He'd not been dreaming.

She poured water into the cup and handed it to him, then set the pitcher on the bedside table aside a basin. "You must have swallowed some seawater last night. Drinking lots of fresh water will help."

"Where am I?" He frowned at the rough, rusty edge to his voice and drank.

She poured him another. "You're in Lighthaven, in Rhattany." She sat down beside him, on the edge of the bed. "Do you remember anything from last night?"

“Bits an’ pieces.” Lighthaven. So the *Sunrisen* had made it after all, afore foundering on the rocks. “How many asides me?”

“Living or dead?”

He took another sip. Fresh, cold, with the tang of minerals, a tinge of iron. Never had plain water tasted so good. “Either. Both.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. His gaze locked on those plump lips. “I went down into the village to check. We lost four of the crew and two of the rowers you rescued after the corsair attack. Captain Reed, Mick and Doc are fine.”

“What o’ Giles an’ Toby?”

“Giles survived. I’m sorry, I don’t know who—”

“The cabin boy, Toby.”

“Oh.” The woman blinked. “He’s fine. He’s resting at Madame Jasmine’s, along with the rest of the crew who don’t have families here. The girls there spoil him rotten.”

Relief eased the tightness in his back.

She leaned over to rest the satiny inside of her wrist against his brow. “You don’t have a fever. That’s good news. With that leg I feared I’d find the worst this morning. But the moon did Her part, and your black-furred companion was right. You’re a fast healer.”

Trystan frowned. She knew? She knew what he was? She communicated with Niadh? Niadh survived? He glanced over at the doorway.

A bright silver eye peeked around the door. “*Glad t’ see ye this morn’, too, laddie.*”

“*Where’s Ealga?*”

“*Shreddin’ a rabbit for breakfast. She’s as sick o’ fish as the rest o’ us.*”

Trystan studied the woman, for the first time catching a sense of “Other” from her, along with a deep well of sadness, of desolation, she held locked up tight. ’Twas reminiscent of Niadh’s darker moments, the feeling of a Shifter caught in a single phase and unable to escape.

“*But whilst mine was imposed, a punishment, hers was stolen. ’Twas no fault o’ hers.*”

She placed cool fingertips against the pulse in his neck.

He scrubbed at his eyes. Delicate but work-roughened hands stopped him.

“It’s dried salt, from seawater. You’re covered in it. Don’t rub them. You might scratch your eyes. I’ve water heating for a bath.” She poured water into the basin, wrung out the wet cloth within and placed it over his eyes. “Here, this should help for now.”

Trystan wiped the gritty crust away and twisted to put the cloth back into the basin. He relaxed against the pillow, relieved. “It does. Thanks. What’s yer name, lass?”

“Finora. Yours?”

Finora. “Trystan. Me companion out there is Niadh.”

“Where are you from? Forgive me, but you don’t sound either Rhattan or Arcadian.”

“The mountains north o’ Arcadia.”

“Long way from home, mountain man.” Finora grasped the edge of the quilt and tugged it down to his waist.

He tensed as she bent down to lay her head on his chest. Sun and moon, her hair was soft. He held very still, so stiff he ached. “What’re ye—”

“Ssh.” She reached up to rest her fingers against his lips. “I’m just listening to your heart and lungs. Now be quiet and let me listen.”

She could lie there all day if she liked. Or slide her face farther down, wrap her lips around him and ease the discomfort... Of their own volition, his fingers threaded through the sable strands. They slid over his skin like silk. He wondered where she’d slept last night.

Too soon she rose. “Sounds good. No lingering effects from last night. Roll over.”

He frowned. How could he be so aroused and she be so oblivious? “What for?”

Finora rolled her eyes at him and fisted her hands on her hips. “Stars, you’re suspicious. I want to look at the wound.”

She was all business. Pity. “’Tis gone. There’s naught t’ see.”

“Don’t be such an old lady. Humor me.”

Mayhaps she preferred women. Now that’d be a shame. He did as she bade, felt cool air on his bare skin as the quilt was ripped away. Her hands slid down the length of his left thigh with thorough but quick efficiency afore she replaced the quilt. Trystan rolled over and captured her hand, curled his fingers around her wrist. “Naught else ye cared t’ ogle this morn’?”

She blushed. Awareness sparked in her eyes. Optimism stirred. Mayhaps she liked men after all. “Spoken like a man who’s been at sea too long,” she retorted. “For your information, I’m an old widowed mother of two and hardly a lass. You don’t have anything I’m not already well acquainted with, and if you’re looking to get ogled this morning you’re in the wrong house. Sounds like *you* could use Madame Jasmine’s. I’m sure they’d spoil you rotten, too.”

Trystan grimaced. “Sorra t’ disappoint ye but I dinna frequent whores.” He far preferred sexual encounters based on genuine attraction and liking to the simplicity of women who doled out their favors to all and sundry for the shine of hard coin.

But never afore had attraction flashed so immediate, so hot and fast.

She didn’t respond, but stood to go and pointed to the far corner. “The chamber pot’s there behind the curtain. I’ll go check on the water and bring the tub in. I washed your clothes last night and dried them by the hearth, then hung them outside. The sea air freshens clothes better than just drying them afore the fire.” She bustled out, leaving him to his thoughts.

Widowed. Not married. He wondered how long and filed the information away for later. So he was in Lighthaven, in Rhattany. He'd reached his destination, the first stop on his quest. He recalled Giles' words about the so-called wizard in town. He'd be best served by speaking with the eldest residents in town. They'd be the most familiar with any old tales or rumors. He'd try to avoid the wizard's notice. Shifters had good reason to steer clear of those that practiced sorcery. He took care of his body's needs afore a knock at the door announced Finora's return.

She dragged a large wooden tub that looked too small for him. But as one used to bathing in cold mountain streams, even in the dead of winter, a warm bath was too great a luxury to pass up—even if it looked like his knees would be up around his ears. "I still have to bring the water," she said. Her gaze never left his face, never traveled down. She acted as though she worked around naked men all the time.

Nudity had never bothered Trystan, but her nonchalance made him blink. "I can help."

She shook her head. "You have no clothes yet. I can't have you running about in naught but your skin. Ioain's due to wake at any moment."

So she *had* noticed. "What d'ye plan t' tell him o' how his wolf now walks on two legs?" Trystan asked her. "I canna stay on four."

"Don't worry. He doesn't talk to strangers—he's too shy. Braeca knows how to keep secrets. No one in Lighthaven has seen your other form, and they can't see Niadh's, correct?"

Trystan shook his head. Niadh's situation still stung.

"Then we've no cause for concern." Finora smiled. "Be right back."

She half-filled the tub with buckets of cold water, tempered it with boiling. Although the end result wasn't hot, 'twas warm enough to relax. "Do you need help washing your back?"

Was she flirting with him? He wondered what she'd do should he say, "Nay, but ye can wash me front." But he shook his head and she left him with rosemary and bay leaf scented soap, washrags and towels.

"I'll be back with your clothes, and get breakfast ready. Have to fetch Braeca from school soon."

When she brought in his plaid and shirt, Trystan washed and dressed. He was surprised to find his leather money pouch dried as well. Every coin was accounted for. He missed his weapons. He'd have to purchase more at the earliest opportunity. He hung the washrag over the back of the chair and the towel on an empty wall peg. Opening the bedroom door, he almost tripped over a small boy. Trystan crouched down and smiled. "Ye must be Ioain."

The little boy's eyes widened over the thumb in his mouth. He looked from Trystan to Niadh, who sat by the door. He took his thumb out of his mouth to point at Niadh. "Man?" Then he pointed at Trystan. "Woof?"

Trystan stilled. "Ye see us, laddie?"

Ioain nodded. He pointed to Niadh. “Woof. Man.” He searched Trystan’s eyes, his brow creasing with puzzlement as he cocked his head. “Man. Woof. Not woof?”

Finora turned, startled. “What do you see, Ioain?”

“Peepo.”

“He sees inside the truth o’ people,” Niadh said. *“He sees a Were’s true nature.”*

“He can see the true form o’ people,” Trystan relayed. “An’ Weres.”

Finora paled. “What do you see when you look at Mama?”

“Sea peepo. Man last night, too. Not wike fish girl. Not me. Not Bwaeca.”

Finora’s gaze caught Trystan’s. “The man who carried you here last night was my sire. We’re selkie, but Bran was human.”

“But the littles have the Sight,” Niadh commented.

Trystan wondered what a selkie was. “Where do they get the Sight from? ’Tis a rare talent in humans back home, but no’ unknown.”

“From me.” Finora rubbed her arms. “I feel weather changes, dream storms. I have a connection to the sea goddess Cilaniestra. I see people’s sea-deaths in my dreams. Braeca also sees storms in her dreams, but so far she’s spared the other. I thought it skipped Ioain.”

“No’ skipped, just different.” *What a heavy burden t’ bear.*

Ioain tugged on her skirt. “Mama, I’m hungwy.”

“You can eat with Trystan.” Finora moved to the table to pour milk into a clay cup.

“Let me take care o’ the bathwater.” Trystan returned to the bedroom and lifted the tub.

“Don’t do that,” Finora protested. “It’s heavy.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her and grinned as she blushed.

“Where d’ye want me to dump it?”

“Just over the sea cliff,” she replied.

“Be right back.” Trystan hauled the tub outside. The Light and its cottage stood atop a grassy, windswept cliff. Far below, grey water foamed white as it thundered against jagged black rocks. He poured the bathwater out over the edge onto the rocks below and carried the tub back into the cottage. “Where does it go?”

She pointed to a hook on the far wall. He hung the empty tub up out of the way afore sitting in a chair opposite Ioain, who stared at him as he drank his milk.

“Thank you.” Finora set a plate afore him, filled with roasted potatoes and a hash of eggs, herbs, vegetables and cheese.

“Yer’re welcome, lass.” He watched her bristle at the word, and his lips twitched as he suppressed a chuckle. “*Did ye eat anything?*” he asked Niadh.

“Aye.”

Finora brought a plate of biscuits and a dish of butter. She split one for Ioain and slathered it with butter and honey. "What would you prefer to drink?" she asked Trystan.

"Water's fine." He took a bite of the egg hash. Different, but tasty.

She poured a cup for him and one for herself. He reached for a biscuit. The meal passed in silence but it wasn't awkward. Trystan ate and watched Finora braid hemp in her corner chair.

Niadh's ears pricked and Storm barked. A knock sounded at the door. Finora got up to open it. An old man stood there, cap in hand.

"Brung ye the new glass for the Light," he stated.

Finora smiled. "So fast? That's wonderful, Kastin! Come in."

"Can I help ye bring it in?" Trystan asked.

Kastin eyed him and Niadh. "Giles asked 'bout ye. He thought ye drowned."

"I'm Trystan. Tell him Niadh, Ealga an' me made it t' shore." Trystan nodded toward Storm. "Dog saved me life."

Kastin shook his head. "Ne'er met anyone with a wolf an' eagle for pets. Aye, if ye can get the glass, I'll get the frame."

Trystan pulled a blanket-wrapped square from a cart lined with straw, pulled by a massive dog that was the spitting image of Storm. "Where d'ye want it?" he asked Finora.

"Up those stairs. I'll show you. Ioain, stay here."

Trystan tried not to notice the swaying curves under that skirt as she led the way up the tower stairs to the Light.

Kastin brought up the rear. The old man pieced the frame around the glass and worked it into the hole in the door. He tested the tar seal, reinforced with tiny nails. "Should hold."

"That's what we thought last time," Finora muttered.

Kastin shook his head. "When Cilaniestra pitches a fit, there's naught we can do. 'Tis easy enough t' fix."

"But expensive." Finora sighed as she showed the old man out.

Trystan stared around the Light chamber. He'd seen naught like it. The scent of oil, salt and spent tallow candles burned his nose. Sunlight glinted off mirror and glass.

Finora reappeared. "Now I can replace the broken latch on that door."

"Let me. 'Tis little enough a thing t' do."

"Kastin brought a bolt latch this time. Should hold better. Bran tried to save money, but this should have been done long ago." Her eyes were sad. "'Tis my fault they're dead."

He shook his head, moved to rest his hands on her shoulders. "'Twas a bad storm. Men are no' fish. If ships sink, men drown. The glass broke, the latch broke. What the gods create always outlasts what men would make against it."

“Bran was lost at sea. My husband.”

He wondered at the bitter edge to her words. 'Twas not the tone of love in mourning. If ever she'd been a grieving widow, 'twas long over now. “How long's he been gone?”

“Four years.” She handed him the new latch. “Lost at sea on the *Hope of Lighthaven*. Bran never even knew of his son, Ioain.”

“I'm sorra, lass. Canna be easy raisin' two littles on yer own.”

“We manage.” Finora's tone told him she'd not welcome sympathy.

She struck him as a woman who “managed” well. Trystan studied the latch. 'Twas an amazing piece of metalwork, a solid bar within a hollow chamber. One solid background nailed to the doorframe, the other to the door itself, and the bolt slid across the seam of the closed door to hold it shut, anchored by metal loops at both ends. The latch handle flipped down into grooves to hold it secure.

“Who made this?” he asked.

“The smith, Kale.” Finora handed him a hammer and together they repaired the door.

He had to meet this craftsman. “Can I come with ye when ye go t' get Braeca?”

She nodded. “Sure. I can purchase a few things in the market.”

He followed her down into the main room, where Ioain played on the floor with blocks under the watchful eye of both Niadh and Storm. “I'll be back in a bit.” Trystan stepped outside. Niadh followed. In the distance, across the harbor, men worked to repair the smaller light on the breakwater. He turned back to the cottage. Bare bushes shielded the windows, new buds just starting to appear in the branches. High above them, the huge silhouette of a raptor soared through the sunlight. Trystan took a deep breath for a sharp piercing call, a poor substitute for an eagle's cry. But Ealga dropped onto his shoulder, her talons settling into the scarred leather. He imagined a glint of welcome in her fierce golden eye.

“Where ye been?” he asked her. “Scare all the wee critters away?”

She ruffled her buff colored feathers.

“So, what d'ye think o' our hostess?” Trystan asked Niadh.

Amusement tinged Niadh's reply. “A *verra practical woman*.”

Finora was a beautiful, sensual woman, with an air of mystery. Trystan couldn't shake the feeling that she kept herself busy to avoid the darkness in her soul, a darkness somehow connected to the man she'd named husband. “She's a born Shifter, no' made. A critter o' the sea on land, with human bairns. Wonder what her story is.” He stared down at the village of Lighthaven. “Wonder what they make o' her down there.”

“I dinna think she'd welcome yer askin'.”

“Prob'ly not. Best t' ask her.”

“Be int'restin' t' hear her answer. Wonder when she tosses us out o' the house, or how ye plan t' convince her t' let ye stay.”

Trystan wanted very much to stay. He grinned. Spice made a dish more interesting.

The door opened. Finora and Ioain came outside, followed by Storm. "Time to fetch Braeca, if you wish to come along." Finora's hair whipped about her, blew across her face.

Ioain stared at Ealga. She hissed at Storm and ruffled her feathers. Her talons flexed on Trystan's shoulder. He reached up to stroke her breastbone, to calm her. "She willna hurt ye, laddie," Trystan said. "But she's a wild critter, no' a pet. Ye can look, but dinna touch."

Finora appeared fascinated. "She's real? She's not one of us?"

Ioain and Trystan both shook their heads. "I rescued her as a hatchlin' an' raised her. Taught her t' fly, an' t' hunt. Unfortunately, she latched ont' me. She doesna know she's an eagle an' doesna know t' seek out her own kind. So she stays with me an' Niadh."

"I've seen hawkers with hoods and jesses, but naught like this." Finora smiled. "She's free to come and go? Will she be all right in town?"

"Aye, she should be. Best e'eryone gets a good look, so's they can recognize her. I'd hate t' pluck arrows outta her—" he glanced down at Ioain, "—rump."

Finora's lips twitched. Trystan was riveted by that lush mouth. 'Twas made for smiling. The darkness that was her companion was not a natural part of her. She swayed toward him, and he found himself holding his breath at her approach.

Niadh laughed at him. Trystan ignored him, his gaze locked on sparkling brown eyes. She drew close enough for him to catch her scent, that warm woman's scent, rich and ripe and wild. It stirred an answering wildness within him, clouded his mind. The look in her eyes was direct and teasing, not sensual. Whatever effect she had on him was a natural part of her. She was not doing it apurpose.

If she ever did, he might not survive.

"We'll see about finding a place for the three of you to stay whilst we're in town."

Banished. Trystan wanted to groan.

"*Told ye so,*" Niadh remarked. "*Who'll take a wolf, eagle an' armed barbarian on?*"

"*No' at the moment.*" Trystan had to replace his weapons. 'Twas nigh unto being naked.

Ioain tugged on her skirt. "Stay with us?"

"Oh, I'm sure he'll want to stay with his friends," Finora said. "We haven't room." She started to town. Trystan fell into step aside her. Niadh and Storm nudged a sulky Ioain along. "You'll find your shipmates in The Mermaid Pub. They've good food. If you don't want to stay at Madame Jasmine's, there are a couple of good boarding houses."

Lighthaven proved a bustling little harbor town, the main road flanked by fishing boats, drying nets and stacked lobster traps. Rack after rack of filleted fish dried in the sun. Trystan wrinkled his nose and tried not to grimace as he strode past. Pgah, if he ne'er tasted fish again...

Shallow boxes of water-to-sludgy-white-crystals lay atop wooden tables. Trystan's nose told him 'twas seawater drying to salt. To someone from the mountains, salt was a precious commodity. As part of a bride price, a pound of it was more valuable than one entire living goat. The sight of so much of it just lying about staggered him. Farther down the road a woman draped seaweed over drying racks. Another one of those immense dogs sprawled behind her.

"I'll be back for some, Mari," Finora called to her, "as soon as I get Braeca from school."

"I'll be here." Mari eyed Trystan with curiosity.

Finora led the way past various trade shops—the cooper, the whitesmith, the joiner, the cordwainer and cobbler, the tailor. The blacksmith's was a spacious, open affair. Kale was nowhere to be seen. Then came the potter, the thatcher and the smokehouse. "The school's in the meeting house, in the center of town," Finora explained. "The boarding houses and Madame Jasmine's are just past. The mill and the weaver's are at the end of the road. The Mermaid Pub's right on the waterfront." She turned to Trystan. "We can try the two boarding houses on the way to the school."

"As ye wish."

At the Twin Fires, Mistress Danette shook her head. "You can stay," she told Trystan, "but your animals have to stay down in the stable. No pets."

"'Tis no' acceptable," Trystan stated. "They're no' pets."

"They're not people," the old woman argued.

At the Shady Oaks, Mistress Biatta proved just as stubborn. "I'm not cleaning dog hair off all my furniture. I run a clean establishment."

Finora heaved a dramatic sigh. Trystan tried not to smile on the way to the school. Braeca came running out. "Mama! Mama!" Trystan watched Finora kneel down aside her daughter for a hug. Braeca stared at him and Niadh over her mother's shoulder.

"I thought we'd stop by The Mermaid Pub on the way home," Finora said.

"*An' try one last time t' leave us in town,*" Niadh commented.

They entered a cozy wood-and-stone establishment, scented with pipe smoke and burning peat moss from the two fireplaces, sour ale and sweet cider and sharp whiskey. A band played in the corner—squeezebox, fiddle, drum and flute. Men, and not a few women, sat around tables. Some folk were cleaner than others. Trystan's nose twitched as he passed a pungent old man, but he smiled as he spotted Giles and Jan dicing in the corner with a few fishermen.

Jan spotted him first, seated as he was facing the door. "Ye're alive!"

Giles turned. "Trystan!" He jumped up to clasp Trystan's wrist in welcome. "I thought ye drowned. I was so relieved when Kastin said otherwise."

"I did drown," Trystan said. "Dog hauled me t' shore."

"Let me buy ye a drink," Jan offered.

A serving wench came up with her tray and knelt down to Braeca's and Ioain's level. "I've nice hot apple cider and cranberry scones fresh from the oven," she said.

The children's eyes lit up and they followed her into the kitchen.

Finora glared at Trystan, hands on her hips. "So, no boarding house."

Giles handed Trystan a cup of amber liquid. "Here. Ye'll need this."

Trystan took a sip. Drenieval whiskey. "Thanks." Turning to Finora he replied, "'Twas yer own boardin' houses wouldna take us. I'll no' have them in a stable."

"Nay, that's out of the question. There's Madame Jasmine's."

"Let's take this discussion outside. We dinna need the whole town's ears on our words."

"You want to take this outside, fine." Finora marched back out the door.

Trystan placed his hand on the back of a chair and Ealga hopped down to perch there. He turned to Giles, who grinned. "I'll have another waitin' when ye return." Trystan blocked Niadh's laughter from his mind as he followed in Finora's wake. Outside, he saw her slip around the side of the building.

She awaited him, arms crossed under her breasts. "There's Madame Jasmine's."

Trystan kept his gaze on her face, not on the shadow where her breasts plumped above her gown. Such sweet curves... He shook his head. "I dinna frequent whores."

"I'm not telling you to sleep with them," she huffed. "They also rent rooms to travelers."

He laughed. "Ye've ne'er stayed in a brothel. There's noise—laughter, fights, shoutin'—day an' night. Music, incense—bloodshed o'er thievin', or the mere accusation o' thievin'. Havin' t' watch o'er yer purse e'ery second. There's no *sleepin'* involved."

She visibly wavered. "Well, I'd hate for you to be robbed, or cast out into the street."

"So would I." He stepped closer. "Ye know, lass, there's another option."

Uncertainty and awareness flashed in her eyes. She took a step back. Her retreat was blocked by a rain barrel. "What's that?"

"We could stay with ye. Ye know what we are. We're safer with ye." He took a deep breath, savoring her scent as he moved close enough to feel the warmth of her body.

"You're safer, but am I?" She searched his eyes.

He tried not to take offense, but frowned anyway. "Niadh an' Ealga willna hurt the littles. I swear it on me soul."

"I know that. I didn't mean them."

He froze. What had she just said? "Ye think I'd hurt ye? After all ye've done for me? Unbelievable." He turned away afore he said something he'd regret.

She grabbed his sleeve. "Wait. I didn't mean to insult you."

Trystan spun back and glowered. He curled his fingers into fists to avoid shaking some sense into her. "Well, ye did. What *did* ye mean? Speak clean."

Finora bit her lip. “The only man I’ve ever been with was my husband and that wasn’t a happy relationship. I didn’t wish him dead, but I’m better off for him being so. I haven’t taken up with anyone else since. I’m not looking to now. And I’ve but the one bed.”

She had to mention that bed. He’d have heeded those peppery words more were it not for the way her eyes darkened, softened, the subtle change in her scent. She might not be looking, but she’d been struck by the same attraction as he. Knowing she wanted him, too, made him hard all over again. He relaxed his hands. “Where’d ye sleep last night?”

“On the floor next to the bed, in case you needed something during the night.”

Oh, he’d be needing her in the night and no mistake, but neither one of them would be sleeping on the floor again if he had his way. He wrapped his fingers around her arm and felt her tremble as awareness slid toward desire. “How long’s it been since ye last ogled a mon?”

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s a personal question.” He breathed in that deep, ripe woman’s scent and his body tightened to the point of aching pain. Desire clouded his mind. He found himself wanting to get closer to this magical, mystical woman. “Ye’re right, ’tis a verra personal question. Humor me. How long?”

She flushed bright crimson and bit her lip. “Since Bran left.”

Four years. Unbelievable. Were Lighthaven men blind? ’Twas obvious she harbored no lingering affection for her late husband. His gaze locked on her lips, he curled a hand behind her neck and drew her to him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Finora whispered.

Trystan grinned. “If ye need t’ ask, lass, ’tis been *far* too long for ye.” He raised her wrist to his lips, savored the taste and feel of her skin. He searched her gaze. She looked stunned, embarrassed—and aroused. Her eyes, the scent of her body, didn’t lie. He leaned in to capture her lips, muffling her sound of surprise. She went rigid in his arms. He’d expected that. But when she didn’t smack him upside his head, he knew he had her.

His mouth moved on hers. He slid his tongue along the lush fullness of her lower lip, teasing, coaxing. He growled when her lips parted, and she returned the kiss. Her hands slid over his shoulders, tangled in his hair to pull him closer. She opened her mouth and whimpered as he pressed his advantage, stroking her tongue with his. She tasted of honey and spice and a woman’s deep need. His body burned as she sucked him into her mouth, her tongue dueling with his. Her fingers tightened against the back of his neck, and she moaned, trembled in his arms. Hot, elemental, more than lust and beyond even need—Trystan could not begin to decipher the depth of his yearning for this woman. All he knew was he had to have her.

He broke off the kiss, mindful of where they were. “Tell me t’ stay, lass,” he whispered in her ear, nipping at the fleshy lobe. “Let’s finish what we started.”

She tilted her head in open invitation. “For how long?”

“Until ye throw me out on me arse.” He trailed a finger down her cheek. “Whene’er ye say, I’ll leave. I’m just here askin’ questions, lookin’ for someone. When I get a lead, I’m gone. I made a promise t’ someone back home, a promise t’ keep.”

“Will you tell me the tale of this quest?”

He nodded. “I can tell ye the beginin’, aye. The end’s no’ yet been written.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I love a good bedtime story. Ioain will be happy you’re staying.” She sobered. “Just don’t break his heart when you leave.”

“I’m just a temporary house guest,” he assured. “No broken hearts involved.”

“Good. Then let’s go home.”

Trystan shook off the shiver of foreboding at her words.

Chapter Four

What had she gotten herself into? Finora crossed her arms to hide her shaking hands and watched Trystan's broad back lead the way into The Mermaid Pub. The tightness in her womb, the wet heat betwixt her thighs, shocked her. The full moon was last night. The burning need should have been over. She wasn't supposed to respond to a male out of time. Of course, four years was a long time to go without. 'Twas the selkie way to indulge that part of their natures. 'Twas the easiest way to trap them, as she'd learned to her sorrow.

Why now? Why *him*?

Her lips still tingled from his kiss. She quivered at the thought of sharing her bed tonight, of limbs entwined and hot skin sliding against hot skin. What was it about Trystan that made him impossible to resist? She should have put her foot down and left him in town to find his own way. Was it because he wasn't human, either, but a fellow creature of the moon?

He *was* safer with her, away from eyes and questions. But was she safer with him? Ioain wasn't the only one at risk for a broken heart. *He's not staying long. He has a mission to complete, then a family and home of his own to get back to. A family of his own... 'I made a promise t' someone back home, a promise t' keep,'* he'd stated.

"Trystan, wait."

He turned at the doorway, a question in those piercing blue eyes.

Stars, those eyes...

"The someone back home, whom you promised. Is it a woman? Are you married?"

"A woman? Aye. But a wife?" He shook his head and smiled. "Nay, lass. Were I bound t' another, I'd no' be stayin' with ye an' the littles. 'Tis no' me way. Me folk back home have but one mate. There's no one awaitin' me return."

One mate per male? In her world the strongest bulls got the most cows. A bull could have many cows in his household, but each cow answered to but one bull. A pang struck her. A course being stuck on land, with Bran gone, she'd had an uncommon spell of freedom. None to answer to, making her own decisions. A small rebellious part of her—the part that had caused her to disregard her sire's warnings so long ago—reveled in that freedom. Even as she yearned for the sea itself, she dreaded going back to the harem, to being just one of many in her sire's household, until he shipped her off to some other bull.

Why her heart flipped at Trystan's unbound status she didn't know. 'Twas of no consequence to her. "You've never taken a wife?"

His eyes twinkled. "I've been asked. But I've ne'er been tempted t' say aye."

Stop talking now. You're making a fool of your— "What? You mean to tell me your *women* do the choosing? And they *ask*?" Finora knew her jaw was surely hanging down around her knees, but she couldn't seem to close her mouth.

"The clans are each ruled by a headwoman. The women govern an' each decides who they wish t' take as a mate an' father their bairns. Doth a mon piss her off enough, a lass is free t' release him an' choose another."

"What do the men do?"

He shrugged. "Whate'er we're good at. We hunt, scout, craft, defend. Those o' us that be guardians, though," a shadow crossed his face, "are sworn t' the clans as a whole. That be above any bond t' one woman. There's no' many women who relish the thought o' a mon that oft disappears for days, weeks or months at a time on clan business, or can be slain in battle."

"Is that what this is?" Finora asked. "This quest of yours? Clan business?"

His eyes sobered. "Nay, lass. 'Twas a promise t' a guardian queen, who wished t' know if she be the last o' her kind."

She sensed a holding back in those words, like there was something he could have added but didn't. One thing was clear to her, however: Trystan was an honorable man, with his own ironclad code of conduct. She could trust him. She moved around him, brushed against his arm as she opened the Mermaid's door and went back inside.

The children sat at the table with Giles and Jan, Niadh and Storm sprawled at their feet. Ealga perched on the back of Braeca's chair. Giles handed Trystan the half-finished whiskey Trystan had set down when he'd stepped outside for their talk. "Would you like something?" Giles asked Finora.

The whiskey was too tempting. She needed a clear head. "Just cider," she replied. Tess unloaded her tray at the next table.

Giles waved Tess over and gave her Finora's request.

Finora sat down in the empty chair betwixt her two children. "Were the scones good?"

Ioain nodded. "Can we bwing some home?"

"Please, Mama?" Braeca added, pleading in her big brown eyes.

Finora laughed. "Very well. Enough with those cow eyes, poppet!" When the other woman brought her the cider, she said, "Tess, I think I'll need a dozen of those cranberry scones to take home with us."

"I'll wrap them now," Tess replied.

Trystan held out a hand and Ealga returned to his shoulder. He slouched against the wall, savoring his drink. “They make this back home. Me uncle Cormag’s a master. His has a unique nutty flavor an’ his barrels’re stamped with an acorn.”

Finora stared at Trystan, the wild Arcadian mountain man, from his long, grizzled grey hair to his muscled legs. She couldn’t help herself. The tattoo down the left side of his face made him look so fierce, but all she could recall was the hot desire in his eyes and the feel of those strong arms around her, holding her close. She wasn’t the only one staring at the way his broad shoulders filled out his shirt. Catching herself at it made her frown. Ridiculous to feel possessive over a stranger. She had no claim on him.

“Acorn whiskey’s rare,” Jan stated. “Hard t’ find, an’ too rich for the common purse.”

“Soon we should be able t’ afford it. Cap’n’s lookin’ for ’nother ship,” Giles clarified. “We’ll be sailin’ ’gain in a few weeks.”

Finora’s gaze slid to Trystan, who stared at the memorial wall, at all the names of those lost to Cilaniestra. “What is it?”

“’Tis lucky I am t’ no’ be listed there. Thanks t’ him.” He saluted Storm with his cup.

“Lighthaven Water Dogs. Mari breeds and trains them,” Finora told him. “They’ve gained a reputation all over Rhattany.”

Braeca also stared at the wall. “My da’s on that wall.”

“Aye, lass.” Trystan’s face softened. “I’m sorra for yer loss.”

Oh, he was dangerous...

“Is your da gone, too?”

“No’ t’ me knowledge. But I’ve been gone from home for some months now.”

“But ye’re *old!*” Braeca indicated his grey hair. “He must be *ancient.*”

“Braeca!” Finora’s cheeks heated.

Trystan laughed. “Well, I’m no’ as old as all *that*. Simply went grey early. They told me it makes me look wise.” He assumed a solemn expression that made the children giggle.

Finora again sensed a holding back. Trystan shot her a sharp glance but said naught further.

“Time to go home,” Finora said. “I don’t want to be climbing in the dark.” She stood, picked up the wrapped packet of scones and inclined her head to Giles and Jan. “Good night.” The children headed for the door, shadowed by the two canids. Finora followed with Trystan and Ealga bringing up the rear. She tried in vain to ignore his gaze. The back of her neck prickled with awareness.

She stopped at Mari’s. Storm’s dam sprawled against Mari’s makeshift stand but lumbered to her feet at their approach. She looked to be near her time—swollen like a great furry whale. “I need a *kira* of frill and a half of red.” Finora reached down to rub the dog’s ears.

Mari weighed out the two seaweeds. “Pups should be here next week,” she said to the Ioain and Braeca. “You two will have to come see them.”

Ioain stared at his shoes. Finora paid Mari and tucked the wrapped packages under her arm. They continued up the cliffside path. The children sang a counting rhyme Mistress Greta had taught Braeca. Finora and Trystan followed in silence.

“Finora!”

Bree’s call stopped her in her tracks. *“What’s wrong?”*

“Naught’s wrong,” the mermaid replied. *“We’ve been scavenging the ship and I found something your new friend might wish to see.”*

Trystan placed a hand against her back. “What is it?”

She turned around. “Bree’s found something she wants you to see. We’d best go down to the shore.” She shivered. That luring, elusive shore...

The children flew back down the trail, calling “Bree! Bree! Bree!” all the way to the water. Bree herself floated just beyond the shallows.

“I found some weapons that look to be yours.” She indicated the left side of her face. “The blades have similar markings. Stand back.” She flipped the first one toward them.

An axe. Finora barely had time to register that fact as Trystan shielded the children with his own body. Ealga launched herself out of the way. He watched the spinning blade and, almost faster than Finora could follow, plucked it out of mid-air.

“Is it yours?” Finora asked him.

He stared at the blade in wonder, traced the etching with a finger. “Aye.”

“I’ve three more, and a great big one,” Bree called. “There’s also a shield with some strange animal on it—long body, short legs, sharp teeth. Sound familiar?”

“’Tis a badger, lass,” he responded, eyes alight as he herded the children farther back. “I’ll take ’em if ye’ve the strength t’ pass ’em this far.”

That put a kink in Bree’s tail. The mermaid’s face darkened as she hurled one axe after the other. Finora had never seen anyone move so fast, but Trystan caught all three, dropping one to the ground afore grabbing the next. Bree had to dive for the double-edged broadaxe and used both hands to hurl it. Finora ducked out of the way as Trystan leapt in front of her to catch it.

He growled. “’Twas reckless.”

“She’s got a temper,” Finora told him as Bree dove again.

“She could kill someone.”

Finora shrugged. “She doesn’t care overmuch. Call it a test.”

Bree reappeared on the surface with the shield, sliding through the waters on her back, into the dangerous shallows, the shield on her chest sea-otter style. “Come and get it,” she purred.

Finora stiffened as Trystan waded into the sea. Bree was looking to teach someone a lesson. A cold, wet nose nudged her hand and she jumped. Niadh stared at her with uncanny calm. He didn't appear at all worried, and Finora tried to relax.

Trystan reached for the shield and Bree flipped over, smacking him with her tail. Her arms reached for his neck—she was trying to dunk him. But he was smarter than the mermaid had given him credit for. He stood with a wide stance and knees bent so although the tail lash might have stung, he didn't topple over. Instead of grabbing for her slippery fish body, Trystan knotted a hand in her hair, and afore Finora could blink had one of the small axe blades held to Bree's throat.

"Enough games," he growled. "Give me the shield like a good girl."

Bree laughed as she held out the shield.

"Did I pass?" Trystan asked, releasing her hair—not his weapon—to take the shield.

"Not quite." Without warning, she curled her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his in a quick, playful kiss. He froze. She pulled away afore he could react. "You passed." With a hard downward swing of her tail, she spun away, heading for deeper water. *"He's a good man, Finora—smart, fast, and a protector at heart. You might think on keeping this one."*

Trystan slogged his way to shore, tucking the axe away and wiping his mouth. He glared at Finora. "Ye have verra odd friends, woman."

Braeca and Ioain giggled. Finora grinned. "You forgot to say thank you," she prompted. *"He says thank you,"* she sent Bree's way.

"*Liar,*" Bree laughed.

"At least you got your weapons back," Finora said. "I've oil polish that will reverse any salt water damage."

Ioain walked up to the shield, tracing the creature Trystan had called a badger, and then pointed to Trystan himself. "You."

Finora frowned, trying to reconcile the silver-grey wolf with the curious animal on the shield. She couldn't make her mind do it.

Trystan knelt afore Ioain. "Ye're right, laddie. Me mother's clan is Badger, me father's clan is Wolf." He indicated the tattoo on his face. "The top circle is for me mother—it stands for Badger. The lower circle is for me father—it stands for Wolf. Me plaid also shows the blending o' wolf-black an' badger-grey. So, back home, anyone can look at a mon an' see who an' what he is, what family he calls kin."

"Let's go home," Finora suggested. Back up the cliff they climbed, to the cottage by the Light. 'Twas near dusk. Ealga flew off to a distant tree to roost. "I'll get the Light," she said. "Can you start a fire in the hearth?"

"Aye," Trystan agreed. By the time she returned downstairs, a fire was crackling and he was removing his not-leather armor and weapons belt.

Finora took down a jar from the mantel—the metal polish. Braeca fetched the basin from her mother’s bedroom, placed it on the table, then went back for the pitcher. Ioain brought rags and a towel. Finora ran a hand down the supple, shiny almost-leather. Upon closer inspection, she noticed they were the scales of some mysterious creature. Rather than black as she’d first thought, ’twas the darkest red imaginable. “What is this?”

“The shed skin o’ a dragon. The greatest o’ our guardians. They vanished years ago. No one knows why. I thought them lost fore’er ’til I met Queen Dara—an’ she be but half.” He looked at Finora. “Where there’s one, there must be more. That’s who I promised, what I promised. T’ find the rest, where they went.” His gaze hardened. “T’ know why they abandoned me people, their charge.”

Of course a guardian would take the desertion of a fellow guardian very seriously. Finora rested her hand on his arm. “Do you know which direction they went?”

“All I know is west, into the settin’ sun. ’Twas how I ended up comin’ from Arcadia t’ Rhattany. Ye’re west.”

“What’s a dragon?” Braeca asked.

Trystan frowned. “D’ye ken a lizard, lass?”

She nodded.

“Well, imagine a great flyin’ lizard, as long as ten men, in any shade from red t’ gold, with spines along its back, a forked tongue, tendrils hangin’ from its muzzle, an’ breathin’ fire.” He, too, ran a hand along the armor. “No blade can penetrate dragon scales.”

Ioain and Braeca blinked. “Fire?” Braeca asked.

He nodded. “Th’ greatest Shifters o’ them all. They can turn into humans. Known by their red hair, ability t’ wield magic an’ power t’ allure.” His gaze captured Finora’s.

The power to allure... Finora caught herself staring into Trystan’s eyes for a long moment. She snatched her hand from his arm and shook herself back to sense. “I’ll start supper.”

Trystan sat at the table, cleaning his weapons, first with clear water, then with the oil, whilst telling the children amusing tales of his childhood. Finora mulled over his earlier words. What if the dragons had a reason for leaving? What if they didn’t want to go back? What chance did a mortal warrior, Shifter or nay, have against a fire-breathing magic-wielder, clad in an impenetrable hide, ten times his size? A giant lizard with claws and fangs? She knew what they looked like. She’d seen a picture of one, once. But where? When?

The children chattered through a supper of sausage gravy over the last of the biscuits. Trystan’s gaze clashed with hers, but she averted her eyes. Finora remained quiet, troubled by her thoughts—and troubled about being troubled by her thoughts. How could she care so for a near-stranger?

After supper she washed and Braeca dried the dishes whilst Trystan went out with Niadh and Storm. Rona curled afore the fire, purring. Finora sat down to her braiding, Braeca grabbed her stylus and chalk to

practice her letters and Ioain built a fort with his blocks. Trystan was gone for a long time. Finora listened to Braeca read two poems, then Ioain's yawn told her it was time for bed. "Go get your nightclothes on."

"But Mama," Braeca argued, "we wanna wait for Trystan."

"Absolutely not," Finora decreed. "'Tis time for bed, poppet, and that's the end of it."

She tucked the children into their little beds with a kiss and closed the door. Edgy, she grabbed her shawl and stepped outside. Storm lay curled by the door, but Niadh and Trystan were not to be seen. She strode over to the edge of the cliff and sat down in the cool grass, tucking her knees under her chin. She stared out at the dark depths of the sea, felt the pull of the tide against her skin, that never-ending siren's call. She had no business on land—her home lay beyond. But what if she did find her skin? What would happen to her children if she returned to the sea? What would it be like, to forego her newfound freedom for the constraints of the harem, to surrender her will anew to whatever bull she must answer to?

She lay back and stared up at the all-powerful moon, the cool glowing face of Cilaniestra, who gave and took back, like the very tide itself. Afore she even heard his steady footsteps, she felt Trystan's approach.

"Such dark thoughts on such a beautiful night." Trystan dropped aside her. "I could hear ye broodin' clear 'cross the bluff."

He'd been running, long and hard. She felt the damp heat pouring off him. "You think she's beautiful, the face of Cilaniestra?" She waved to the moon.

"Ye dinna think so? She rules our world, lass—nightwalker an' sea critter alike."

"She's a treacherous bitch," Finora retorted, her tone hard as stone as she sat up. Tears stung her eyes. "I don't expect you to understand."

"What d'ye no' think I'd ken?" he demanded. "Bein' trapped in one form whilst yer entire bein' screams t' be 'nother? Havin' that hollowness gnaw at yer bones day an' night, without rest?" He cupped his hand under her chin, turning her face so her gaze met his. His eyes gleamed in the moonlight, a trace of feral-green mere inches away. "I ken the sea calls ye home, lass, an' I ken ye canna return. Why is that?"

She swallowed hard and tried not to shake. "Does the sea reach your home? Do you know of selkies?"

He shook his head. "Nay, me mountains're landlocked. It takes weeks o' hard travel t' reach the sea. I'd ne'er e'en heard the word selkie 'til I met you."

"We're born Shifters, seal to human. Look out there, at the lower light. See them?" She pointed without looking.

He turned away to gaze down at the Break, at the shadows on the rocks. "Those odd-shaped dogs, with slopin' backs an' fins for paws?"

Finora nodded. "Those are true seals, but we look similar in true-form, if bigger. We can shed our sealskins like a blanket, take human form, walk among them. I did once, out of curiosity. We're very careful with our skins, for if we lose them—or they're stolen—we can never go back. Never return to the

sea, though it screams inside us until our souls shrivel and we go mad with the yearning. I've been looking for years. My sire told me to not lose hope, but it's so hard. It's unrelenting."

"What happened?"

"Bran found where I'd hidden it, and he stole it and hid it elsewhere. Then Cilaniestra took him for Her *tithing* and now he'll never be able to tell me." Tears slid down her cheeks.

Trystan reached up to brush them away. "Ye have the littles who love an' need ye. Ye have friends who care for ye, too. Ye have a good life, Finora. What we canna change we can endure. Ye're stronger than ye know."

She searched his eyes for pity, saw compassion and understanding in his face.

"Ye need t' take yer mind off the dark things," he said.

"What do you suggest?" she whispered.

He answered, but not with words. He leaned forward to brush her lips with his. His kiss was tender, undemanding. She laid her hand against his cheek and sighed, parting her lips under his. She shivered as he deepened the kiss, the stroke of his tongue against hers bringing her to tingling awareness. She curled her fingers through his hair to hold him closer. It had been so long since a man had held her, and never with such care. It made her tremble, uncertain.

Heat poured off him in waves, and she breathed in his unique scent. Wild and dark, like the deepest shaded forests, a hint of earth and spice. It wrapped about her like a blanket, warm and comforting. Always she'd flamed fast and hot. Trystan took his time, stroking her arms with his hands, teasing her tongue with his. Long, leisurely kisses. Drugging her senses with a slow steady burn. She relaxed, luxuriating in the novelty of seduction.

He broke off the kiss, and she bit back a whimper of protest. But he moved to the sensitive column of her throat, the unfamiliar brush of his beard making her shiver. He scraped his teeth over her pulse. It hammered against his lips with the pounding of her heart, and she arched her neck, gasping his name in his ear. Desire clouded her mind. Her body came alive as her world shrank down to taste, scent, touch.

Trystan.

She shifted in his arms, clutched his shoulders, stroked down over his chest. Her fingers brushed the amulet around his neck, and she opened her eyes to see that odd creature, a wolf's head with an eagle's wings and beak, staring at her. It startled her right back into focus. "Where'd you get this?" she asked.

He groaned, half laughing. "Me sister. We're no' goin' t' talk about me sister, are we?"

Her cheeks heated and she shook her head.

"Good." He cupped his hand around her breast, rubbing his thumb across her nipple. A sharp dart of pure need struck, tightening her womb. Her nipple pebbled beneath the material of her gown. His lips found a spot on her neck that made her choke and he suckled on the skin there hard enough to leave a mark, soothing her with his tongue.

Stars, he made her burn. Burn for more. Finora pulled his head up for another open-mouthed kiss. Every stroke of his velvet tongue intensified the aching need. His hands were magic, teasing her into an agony of yearning. She fell back onto the cool grass, wrapped her arms around him to slide her hands under his shirt, caressing hot skin over hard muscle. He settled between her thighs, his hard length pulsing against her swelling, softening core. She twisted restlessly, rolled her hips. Her entire body throbbed with the need for the glide of skin on skin, and she choked back a sob of pure frustration at the confining layers of clothing.

Trystan pulled back with a muffled curse. His eyes gleamed down at her, a naked wanting on his face to match her own. "Sweet mother, lass, but ye make me burn." His voice had deepened, rough with passion. He grasped her hands, stilled her caresses.

She arched up against the hard press of his body. "Please," she whispered.

He shuddered. "I'll no' take ye on the cold ground like a ruttin' beast," he growled. "Take me t' yer bed, lass. Let me make this time what it should be."

It wasn't the place, but the man. And that *var den* bed was too far away. She needed him now. To her utter amazement, he rolled off her, scooped her up into his arms and strode toward the cottage. Finora leaned forward to lick the salt from his skin, catching a bead of sweat with the tip of her tongue.

He staggered, closed his eyes and turned his face skyward. "Ye're killin' me, woman."

Good. The feeling was mutual. If he'd make her wait, she'd make him pay. The entire way. She slid her hand down his chest to pinch his nipple.

The word that escaped his clenched jaw wasn't one she'd ever heard, nor did she understand its exact meaning. The tone of strangled frustration, however, she was intimately familiar with. She burned, she ached, she needed. Him. Now.

Somehow he opened the door and made it inside, shutting the door behind them. The fire burned low in the hearth. Trystan's face flickered with light and shadow in the wavering glow. Finora stroked her palm down the side of his face, her fingers gliding over his tattoo down to smooth his beard, trace the seam of his lips. He turned his face to press his lips against her palm, kissing his way down to her wrist. He traced the veins with his tongue, and the rough hair against her sensitive skin made her shiver in anticipation of that beard brushing across her in other places.

And then they were in her bedroom, behind the final closed door. At last. Moonlight poured over the unmade bed, made the entire room glow. Trystan's eyes gleamed at her as he set her down. She quivered as she slid down the length of his body. He reached out with shaking hands for her laces, loosening them enough to slide her gown off her shoulders, down her arms and body until the material pooled in a heap around her ankles.

Finora bit her lip as his gaze traveled down, over her body. Hers was no longer the sleek suppleness of a young girl. Her breasts hung heavier, her hips had widened, and no amount of physical activity made the

slight rise of her abdomen flatten. She looked like what she was—a mature woman who'd borne more than one child. But when his gaze returned to hers, his eyes shone with open appreciation, like a man who admired what he saw. Who *wanted* what he saw.

"What are you looking at?" she whispered.

"At the lush curves o' a beautiful woman, who knows what she wants, an' for t'night she wants me," he replied hoarsely. "Show me, lass, show me what ye want."

He was a true miracle. She took his hands in hers, bringing them to her breasts. His calloused fingers curled around the soft globes. She fit into his big hands perfectly. She sighed at his touch. Trystan groaned and pulled away.

"I 'pear t' be o'erressed," he rasped. She moved to help him, but he stayed her hands. "Nay, lass, I'm hangin' on by a thread here. Touch me now an' I'm done for." He unwound the plaid cloth, yanking his shirt over his head to toss it somewhere behind him. He hauled her close. Hot skin, slick with sweat, slid against hot skin. The crisp grey hair that sprinkled his chest teased her nipples, and she gasped at the foreign sensation. He locked her to him with his arms, with his lips, and tumbled her down onto the bed, rolling her beneath him.

Finora shifted against him, her legs tangling with his. He broke off the kiss to stare down at her. His face was flushed, his eyes gleamed with desire. For her. He leaned down and took her nipple in his mouth, teasing her with the tip of his tongue, drawing hard. Heat struck her, low and fast. She closed her eyes and clutched his hair, arching into his mouth with a shivery cry. He surrounded her—his scent, the heat of his body, the strength of his arms. He knew where to touch her, when, how much. His hands, his lips, his tongue...

She lost herself in a world of pure, wanton liquid need. Her entire body shivered in reaction as his beard brushed across the sensitized skin of her stomach, as Trystan slid his hand down to stroke his fingers through the dark curls that shielded her molten response to him. She needed him to ease the ache. He made her burn hotter, until she writhed against him. Begging, pleading, her words incoherent to her own ears until the words died away and all she could manage was a gasp, or a choked sob.

"Sweet mother, lass, when ye leap ye just close yer eyes an' jump." There was wonder in his voice.

How was he still able to speak? Finora shook in his arms, gasping for air, panting under him, her entire body afire. 'Twas a wonder the bed itself didn't burst into flames. He stroked her, gliding his fingers through her cream and circling the tiny hidden bud, mimicking the motion with his tongue on her nipple. She arched into his mouth, into his hand, legs tangling with his. She was so close...

Trystan moved down, sliding her legs over his shoulders. Through a red haze, she felt the first probing touch of his tongue. She stiffened in shock, but it felt too wondrous to protest. She ached, she needed this. She clutched at his hair and moved on his mouth, swelling even more. Her thighs trembled as she rubbed

against him. He suckled the tiny bud that was the center of her passion, and need coiled tight. With a flash of heat and a muffled cry she shattered around him.

Trystan raised up to probe her pulsing wet heat with the hard proof of his own arousal. Finora wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him into her, in one smooth mind-blowing motion. She gasped. It had been too long. He was huge, he stretched her to near-discomfort.

He groaned. "Easy, lass, wait but a moment. Relax." He kissed her, slid his tongue over her lower lip, and she shivered at the taste of herself on her own tongue. Trystan nibbled his way down her neck, reaching up to knead her breasts with his hands. At her liquid response, her softening, he eased back, and then thrust home again. Her body clutched his in an age-old rhythm she was powerless to resist. Finora pushed him, tightening her muscles when he would have gentled his thrusts, quickening her pace when he would have slowed down. She grabbed his hands, pulled them above her head, slid her hands free so he held her wrists. She tilted her hips, tightening her body even more, driving him deeper.

Trystan understood. "Ye need it hard an' fast, now, lass, so be it." He held her down, slammed into her body in a frenzy of thrusts, driven now to reach his own climax. The heat was unbelievable as she panted under him, lost in a burning white need. Her body tightened anew, and this time she felt his climax boil up around him, through him, in time with her own. His body shuddered as his seed spurted deep within her body. She came again, her channel milking him.

He collapsed on the bed, releasing her wrists to wrap his arms around her and pull her close. He rolled onto his back, so she lay sprawled over him, still joined to him. Finora laid her head on his chest, her hair blanketing his skin. His heart thundered in her ear as he stroked her back and took a deep, shuddering breath.

Finora was stunned. She'd never known passion like what she'd just experienced with Trystan, never knew 'twas even possible afore tonight. He didn't feel like a stranger. Her entire body hummed, and an unfamiliar lethargy weighed her down. She relaxed against him, purred and stroked a hand down his side, quivering with the lingering aftershocks as his body softened and slipped from her own. She sighed, trying to get her breathing under control.

Trystan pulled the covers up over them and drew her close, as if he was loath to let her go. Warmth crept over her, through her, and she closed her eyes, relaxing as she slid toward sleep. "Ssh, I've got ye," he murmured. "Close yer eyes an' rest. No more dark dreams t'night. Just sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

Talk... They had a lot to talk about. But she couldn't seem to bring herself to move, let alone think or talk. It was enough just to be held, sheltered in his strong arms, enveloped in the comfort of his warm body, his wild scent. She drifted off to the sound of his heart beating in her ear, the soft rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, rocking her to sleep.

Chapter Five

Spiridon the man opened his eyes and stared down at the blonde hair of the woman kneeling between his legs. His body still shook from the aftershocks of climax, and lingering energy sizzled along every nerve ending. Amazing the water in the marble tub didn't luminesce. Two days. Two days it had taken to restore his powers. There was something to be said for sex magic, even with mortals. This one, whatever her name was, had a talented mouth. Power refilled him to overflowing, pulsing with the need to *do* something.

Spiridon the beast growled with the need to tear out the woman's throat for not being *her*.

The chambermaid looked up at the sound and smiled, vapid blue eyes alight. She probably thought he growled in appreciation for her efforts, which were prodigious.

Stupid cow.

Prey.

He curled his fingers into fists, wrestled the power down. "Go," he ordered, afore he did something he wouldn't regret.

She batted her eyelashes at him. "Do ye wish me to finish yer bath first?" Blood would ruin the rare Kumarian carpet—lucky for her. "Out!" he thundered, pointing toward the door.

Her none-too-honed survival instinct kicked in, and she sloshed out of the shallow water and fled the room. Sinking back down into the warm water, he closed his eyes and fought for control of his beast. Her fear should have pleased him, but it didn't. He could summon only contempt and disgust. Mortals were too easy. Their minds were weak, they were no challenge to control. It got harder and harder to let them walk out that door. Unfortunately, if he started shredding bedmates, it would become harder and harder to find one. They already feared him, but were unable to resist the allure and compulsion of his beast. He needed their compliance. Sex magic was safer than blood magic.

The only one who didn't fear him was Anuk. His daughter. And even his beast shied away from that thought.

There was her, that insidious voice whispered. Even after hundreds of years, it never quieted. His control snapped. The beast within roared and broke free. He flung his hand toward the hearth as flames shot across the room. He'd barely time to roll out of the tub afore the shift. Every bone popped, muscles stretched, as scales burst through his skin. The room shrank as he flashed back into true-form.

The beast.

The dragon.

The door opened and Anuk herself strode in. Her cold, golden eyes swept his form and her lip curled. “You’re scaring the peasants again.”

He growled as she marched up to him and placed her hand on her hip.

“You need their cooperation for this plan of yours to succeed,” she reminded him. “Get control of yourself.” Her voice was a whip of contempt. It cracked along his hide. Damn queen. Even a lifetime under his rule—he couldn’t call it control—failed to crush that accursed arrogance from her.

She was too much like her mother.

She was too much like *her*.

“*What do you want?*” he demanded.

“Reed is here, requesting an audience.”

He held his shields locked in place. “*Looking for a ship, I’m sure.*”

She crossed her arms. “You could pick a worse captain.”

“*He sank his last ship. You’d have me give him another?*” Spiridon fought the urge to shred the pillow, the mattress, the help.

“The Fates and the weather sank his ship. You know as well as I do it happens. The sea goddess of these waters—Cilaniestra, they call Her—takes what She wants to take. The people here accept that as a historical fact. He’s still the best candidate. He knows these waters.”

“*And do you think you can convince him to join us?*”

Her smile was chilling. “I think I can...persuade him.”

She suspected naught. He was glad that smile wasn’t aimed at *him*. “*Then go...entertain...our guest. I shall be along shortly.*”

“Whatever you say.” She turned and strode out.

Whatever you say. He curled his talons along the marble flooring at her mocking tone. Thank the gods he’d had the foresight to not teach her sorcery. She was dangerous enough as it was. He’d told her it was a male talent and she’d not challenged his word.

Thus far.

Spiridon flashed back down to man-form and raked a hand through his hair as he contemplated the enigma of his daughter. Had he made a mistake all those years ago, stealing back what was his? Mayhaps centuries of exile *had* clouded his judgment. The blood bond wasn’t quite enough to stay the constant discomfort of two predators under the same roof.

He hoped similar goals would be.

Shaking his head, he strode over to the wardrobe, examining his choices for the meeting with Reed. Anuk was right. Reed was the best candidate to command the fleet, and now thanks to Cilaniestra he was available. He’d become sorely depleted from the summoning ritual. That barbaric sea goddess was not an

easy ally. And yet, the spell had worked. The *Sunrisen* was no more, and her captain was on his way here. It all came together as planned.

Well, Spiridon amended, there wasn't a fleet just yet. But there soon would be.

And then they would pay for their insolence, their treachery. Those accursed, archaic mountain clans. How dare they lure *her* away from his side?

How dare she go?

But he'd shown *her*. He'd show them. He'd show them all. He would not rest until the last guardian-worshipper was but a distant memory. Mayhaps then the voices would be silent.

Mayhaps then he'd have peace.

Anuk narrowed her eyes as she stared through the crack in the door at the bald man standing aside the library fireplace. This Captain Reed was tall for a human, with a proud stance and shoulders broad as the doorway. His breeches clung to long, muscular legs, and she wondered what color his eyes were.

What color would they turn in arousal, should she bother to seduce him? Her father wanted him swayed, but he'd said naught about seducing the man. However, Anuk was bored and seldom listened to her father anyway. She smoothed the sapphire velvet of her skirt over her hips. The color flattered both her fair skin and the fiery copper of her hair. Tiny seed pearls framed her bosom. A matching sapphire pendant on a pearl necklace nestled in her cleavage. Captain Reed wouldn't be able to take his eyes off her.

She swept into the room, savoring the scent of sea air and sandalwood. He turned at her entrance, and she counted to three afore the musk in the room increased. The air thickened with his awareness of her. Men were all the same. None withstood the lure of her beast for long. But to his credit, this one kept his gaze on her face after a single, quick all-encompassing glance.

His eyes were green, a smoky ever-changing jade. Intriguing.

He inclined his head. "M'lady."

She shivered at his voice, a deep sensual rumbling like a giant tomcat purring. "Captain Reed." She lowered her own tone and her lashes. "I apologize for the delay. My father should be here momentarily. Would you care for a drink whilst you wait?" She moved to the sideboard. "We have acorn whiskey, or would you prefer wine?"

Her father might hate the mountain clans, but he was not above using their most famous export as a bribe.

"Whiskey'd suffice, m'lady."

Suffice? Ooh, he was all cool control, the very picture of restraint. A less assured woman might have believed him indifferent, were it not for the crackle of awareness and the scent of desire in the air. She

poured them both drinks, straightening her shoulders to pull her bodice a bit tighter across her breasts afore turning, adding an extra sway to her hips as she approached him. “Your whiskey, Captain.” She handed him his glass, not letting go right away when he took it, sliding her fingers over his as she released his glass.

His eyes glinted at her, letting her know he was aware of the game. He wasn’t disapproving, or declining, but he wasn’t oblivious to her deliberate influence, either. Smart man. She wondered what would shake that calm, and her nipples tightened in anticipation. Oh, aye, this one was well worth seducing.

Anuk hoped her father concluded his business quickly.

“I’m sorry about your ship,” she offered.

That surprised him. He inclined his head. “Thank you,” he said. “Visiting the families o’ those lost be the hardest part.”

Her brow creased in puzzlement. “Why would you do that?”

“I lost four men. Men whose wellbeing *I* was responsible for. Their families trusted me t’ bring their men home, an’ I failed. Two had wives with young children. Two had aging parents. I went t’ give them the news, an’ death-compensation.”

“Death-compensation?” Anuk blinked. What on earth was he talking about?

“One year’s wage t’ the families, t’ give them time t’ find other sources o’ income.”

“With whose money?”

Now it was his turn to frown. “My own.”

“You pay out your own money?”

“I’m without dependents. I live simply.”

All she could do was stare.

“’Tis a leader’s duty t’ take care o’ his own. They were *my* men, *my* responsibility. Asides that, ’tis the right thing t’ do.” He took a sip of whiskey. “Would ye have their families starve? What d’ye do when one of yer servants suffers a personal loss?”

Anuk had never considered the families of servants, or the servants for that matter. The servants were there to serve. What happened to them when they disappeared on the other side of the door was no concern of hers. It was their lot in life, their duty, to serve her father and her, not the other way around. “What an odd custom.”

She didn’t realize she’d spoken aloud until he quirked an eyebrow at her. “An’ what would yer custom be, m’lady?”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Spiridon apologized from the open doorway. He strode into the room, shimmering with magical energy. A long robe of red silk, adorned with dragons and unicorns embroidered in gold thread, rustled with every step. Anuk was glad for the interruption, and the glint in her father’s eye

said he knew it, too. “I couldn’t help overhearing, Captain. Most generous of you, but if you’re constantly paying out money, how do you accumulate more for the next time?”

Reed straightened. “The next cargo, the next voyage.”

Spiridon poured himself a glass of fragrant blood-red wine. “And have you one?”

“Not at the moment. I’m in the market.”

“And this concerns me how?”

Anuk blinked, and sipped her whiskey to hide her surprise. Her father wasn’t wasting any time. “Shall I leave you two to your discussion?”

“Stay,” Spiridon said. “As my partner and heiress, you should be more involved in my business dealings. You’ve no objection, have you, Captain?”

Reed didn’t even hesitate. “Not at all, m’lord.”

Anuk sat in the corner rocking chair. What was her father up to?

Spiridon took a seat near the hearth, Reed across from him. Her father studied the flames in contemplative silence. Reed stretched out his legs and sipped his own whiskey, seeming quite comfortable with no one speaking. Whilst her father meditated, or whatever it was he did, Anuk studied their guest. He didn’t shift his weight, his breathing didn’t change. His aura never flared or wavered. Patient, controlled, comfortable in his own skin—not driven to fill the silence with nervous chatter.

What would it take to break that ironclad control?

“I have amassed a considerable fortune over the years, Captain.” Spiridon at last spoke. “I plan on starting up a trading company, with a small fleet of ships. I might have an opening for a captain who knows these waters.”

Reed sat up straighter in his chair.

“But understand, Captain, I am looking for a man who follows orders,” Spiridon clarified, narrowing his eyes. “If you work for me, you work for me. You go where I say, when I say, and you do what I say, how I say to do it. You would be in charge of the ships, voyage and sailors. I would run the trade missions and all negotiations.”

Anuk sputtered on her drink. Her father never negotiated. He conquered or he destroyed. Such was the nature of the beast. Personally, her beast preferred conquering, but with Spiridon, one never knew.

Reed’s jaw tightened. Anuk recognized the signs of struggle. A man who’d always worked for himself, done things his way, forced by circumstances to answer to another. An utter loss of control sacrificed for the reality of necessity.

“Could I choose my own crew for the ships?” Reed asked.

Spiridon nodded. “In matters of sailing, I bow to your expertise. Your reputation precedes you, Captain. You are both an able seaman and an honorable leader of man.”

Reed straightened just a bit at the compliment.

"I believe we can come to an agreement, but I shall give you time to consider my offer." Spiridon glanced at Anuk. "You'd be well compensated."

Of course he would note the undercurrent in the room. She stiffened. Was she to be part of Reed's *compensation*? Choosing to seduce the man was one thing. Being ordered to was quite another.

Spiridon rose. "I shall be in my workroom. Anuk, have dinner sent to me. I look forward to our next meeting, Captain." Typical of her father. Once business concluded, he didn't linger to chat.

Anuk savored her final sip of whiskey and regarded Reed over her glass. "Are you otherwise engaged tonight? I'd be honored if you'd join me for dinner, Captain. He'll be busy for hours, and I hate to eat alone."

He met her gaze. "The honor would be mine, m'lady."

"Good." She rose to place her empty glass on the sideboard, and turned to see Reed standing also. She flushed at the heat in his gaze, and shivered as the air in the small room thickened until she could barely breathe. For a moment she let herself get lost in the shifting depths of his eyes, then she shook herself back to sense. She was supposed to ensnare him, not the other way around.

He held out a hand to her, and she eyed it warily. He smiled. "I don't bite."

Nay, but I do. "How disappointing," she teased.

The smoky jade ignited, and he grasped her wrist to pull her to him with a gentle but relentless strength. "Take care, little girl. Your father would not thank me for laying my common seafarin' hands on his highborn daughter."

Anuk couldn't wait to feel those large, work-roughened hands on her. "I'm a big girl, Captain—of an age to make my own decisions."

He frowned. "Business is business. Best t' keep it so."

"Your business is with my father. I'm not parcel to that arrangement." She slid closer, until her body brushed his. She felt almost petite as he towered over her. "What I do, I do for me, not my father. I am no whore for him to order to a man's bed." But how she tingled at the thought of having *this* man in her bed.

"Yet did I ask, would ye go?" He slid an arm around her waist. "I know ye're no innocent. I'd not offend ye, but I'd know if this be but a flirtation."

"Would you lift my skirts and have me against the wall, Captain?"

His nostrils flared. "Would ye have me treat ye like a common tart, or as a lady?"

"A lady still has a woman's needs." Anuk had never known a man to be so resistant to her allure before. "And right now, I'd have you kiss me."

He cupped a hand behind her neck, stroking the skin beneath her jaw with his thumb. "Would ye have me stop with but a kiss, lady?" he murmured. "What is this power ye wield over me, t' make me want ye so?"

“And here I’d have thought ’twas the other way around,” she whispered. His lips were but a breath away. Anuk thought she’d perish from the waiting. “What’s your mother name?”

“Gavin,” he bit out.

“Kiss me, Gavin—” His mouth swallowed the rest of her words as it captured hers, his tongue surging to duel with hers until every thought scattered. It was no request, but pure demand. The beast within her gloried in his aggression, and she opened her mouth under his, slanting her head to press closer. She curled her fingers into his shirt, feeling the heat of his body beneath her hands. He tasted of hungry male and dark passion, with the earthy hint of sharp whiskey. Her heart pounded, and she almost forgot to breathe. Never had she felt ravished by a kiss alone.

Gavin reached up to curl one big hand around her breast, thumbing her nipple through the velvet bodice of her gown. Her head spun as she clutched at his shoulders to remain upright. He slid his other hand down to cup her backside, hauling her against him. He pinched her nipple hard. The sharp pain, so sudden and unexpected, made her body jerk. Anuk whimpered into his mouth. He soothed the sting away with gentle circles, dragging his mouth from hers to trail open-mouthed kisses down the side of her neck. She shivered, goosebumps rising from the tickle of his breath on her damp skin. He sank his teeth into her shoulder, biting down until she cried out in shock—and arousal. Again, he eased the pain with a stroke of his tongue.

“I thought you said you didn’t bite.” Her voice shook.

He nipped at her ear, pinned her hands behind her back, bending her backward until she cradled his huge erection with her burning core. “I lied.”

She laughed, dazed and breathless, but her body coiled with tension at the uncertainty of it all. In this position, she stood upright only from his holding her, balanced against his arm. She could break his hold, but the beast within thrilled at his mastery.

Fickle beast.

Gavin raised his head to meet her gaze. His eyes smoldered with lust. “Don’t be afraid, Anuk. I’d not hurt ye.”

She believed him. “When I said stay to dinner, I didn’t mean for you to be dining on me.”

“Liar.” He rubbed her erect nipple until she whimpered again. “Ye’ve been beggin’ for this since ye walked into this room.”

Drek. He was right. Things were not going as she’d planned, but she was more aroused than she recalled ever being in her entire life. Heat pooled low and deep, and her breasts ached for his mouth. “I never beg.”

“Ye will, m’lady.”

She shivered at the dark promise in his eyes as he unlaced her gown enough to free her breasts. He raised her hands above her head and backed her into the wall, holding her wrists with one hand whilst

inching her skirts up with the other. “So you do mean to take me up against the wall,” she murmured. The murmur turned to a gasp as his rough fingers trailed up her inner thigh, and she widened her stance to allow him better access.

“That’s it.” His voice was a rough growl. “Let me in.” He stroked her streaming folds with surprising gentleness. Anuk closed her eyes to savor the building pleasure, only to have him say, “Nay. Open yer eyes, little girl. Don’t hide yer passion from me.”

She dragged her eyelids open, shy and vulnerable with him watching her. But the sweet magic he worked with his hand...tension coiled tighter, the blood shimmering in her veins. Her legs trembled as Gavin circled ever closer to the sensitive bud, never quite touching that point of fire until she wanted to scream with frustration—or draw him a map. With a big arrow pointing “Here!” She tensed as he trailed his fingers back through her cream-drenched folds, but relaxed when he rubbed over the puckered flesh between her nether cheeks.

He pinched her backside, right where it curved down to meet her leg. Hard. Hard enough to make her choke and her eyes burn. He bent down to close his mouth over one breast, drawing hard on her nipple, teasing it with the tip of his tongue. *Now* his fingers returned to the swollen bud, circling once, twice...

“Gavin!” Anuk cried out as she shattered from the pleasure-pain sensory overload. He released her wrists to encircle her waist with his arm, and she lowered her arms to pull his head closer, arching into his mouth. He rose up, silencing her with his lips, his tongue, until she shook in his arms and clung to him for dear life.

Just who bound whom? Anuk slid her hands down his chest to pull his shirt from his breeches, gliding over hot sweat-slick skin until she could cup his erection. Her beast awoke with a vengeance. Part of her yearned to drop to her knees and feast on him, but measuring him with her fingers, she reconsidered. She doubted she could manage without doing him an injury.

Gavin tore his mouth from hers. “Don’t even think about it, little girl. I’ve another idea.” His eyes blazed down at her. “Lie down on the rug.”

Lie down? All he had to do was release her and she’d fall down. On trembling legs she allowed him to guide her back to the rug afore the fireplace, where she sank in an untidy heap at his feet.

“Unbind yer hair,” he rasped.

Wondering why she felt so compelled to obey, she reached up with shaking hands to remove the pins. Unbound, her hair tumbled about her shoulders in a riotous mass of copper curls.

The effect it had on him was unmistakable. “Lor’ ye’re beautiful, lady. Lie back and raise yer skirts for me.”

She did, sprawled before him and the fire like an utter wanton, legs parted, hiding naught from his view. What a sight she must present—the firelight dancing across her bared skin, framed by pearls and

sapphire velvet. Too aroused for embarrassment, her beast purred as she writhed on the rug. “Were you just going to stand there looking at me?” she teased. “Or would you care to join me?”

“I thought I’d watch for a bit.” His voice was hoarse.

“Watch what?”

“Yer passion. Touch yer breasts like ye were alone in the dark. But keep yer eyes open for me.”

Her beast had never been shy, but she’d never been so exposed. Anuk took a deep shuddering breath, locked gazes with him and curled her fingers around her own breasts. She tugged at the coral nipples until they were aching points of need, until she whimpered and rolled her hips at him. “Please,” she whispered. *Come to me*, her beast whispered.

Gavin knelt just beyond reach. He unbuttoned his breeches, freeing his erection for her view. As his hand fisted around the immense length, Anuk groaned. He stroked himself once, base to tip. “I won’t join ye until ye make yerself come. Do it, little girl. I’d have all from ye.”

And I from you, her beast retorted. But Anuk was too close to the ragged edge to turn back. She needed relief, and if he wasn’t going to oblige her, then who needed him? She lowered a hand to caress herself with the lightest of touches, plying the nub hidden within wet swollen folds and copper curls. She was no longer able to hold his gaze, but closed her eyes and threw her head back, losing herself to the rush of pleasure. His heavy breathing was a dark counterpoint to her lighter pants as she stroked herself into wet, quivering need. “Gavin, please,” she gasped.

“That’s it,” he encouraged. “Come for me, Anuk.”

With a scream she did, to find her fingers replaced by his lips, his tongue, as he drank in her passion. She moved against his mouth, and he suckled on her. She promptly came again. Her thigh muscles quivered, and she stared down at him, sated and dazed and breathless.

He glanced up, his eyes black with unspent lust. “My turn. Roll over.”

Her insatiable beast roared as she sparked with renewed need. *Come to me*, she purred. *He’s ours for the taking*. Anuk rolled over and raised herself up on all fours, spreading her knees as he moved behind her. He grasped her hips and eased inside her, bit by bit, drawing back and thrusting again, slowly, gently. She gasped as he stretched her, as her body shifted to accommodate him. She whimpered as he stroked over sensitive nerve endings, and her body clasped him with reawakened hunger. He groaned and thrust deep, seating himself to her very womb, filling her completely. He reached under her to fondle her breasts, teasing her nipples. They shuddered together as he began to move, hard and fast, the friction a hot, intense pleasure that bordered on pain. Her blood boiled as her beast began her calling, her body sucking on Gavin with every stroke to make him hers. *Come to me, give yourself to me*.

He came with a rush of fluid, wide open, holding naught back. The beast snared his soul, pulling him to her with each spurt of his body, binding him to her. Anuk cried out with her own release as he filled her to overflowing. The flare of power was blinding, disorienting, a pleasure like no other as she claimed him

as hers. They collapsed together on the rug, shaking, panting for breath. He slipped from her body and rolled her under him. She stared up into his dazed, reverent expression, seeing the chains behind his gaze. He was hers. Already she felt the power slipping away from her, like water down a drain. The only way to reclaim it was to do it again...and again. 'Twas a rush more addictive than any drug or spirit, this claiming of souls. Soon enough her beast would push her into taking him again, but for now it was time to rest.

Looking into his smoky jade eyes, forever changed, she almost felt...regret.

Chapter Six

Finora awoke to a heavy arm about her waist and gentle snoring in her ear. Her heart caught in her throat. Had Bran returned? Had he even left? Was it all just a dream? She wriggled, and the arm tightened. A bearded jaw nuzzled her neck. Her eyes snapped open.

Bran didn't have a beard.

Memories surfaced like an ocean behemoth coming up for air. She shifted to a slight twinge betwixt her thighs. Finora's skin heated from what had to be the mother of all blushes as she recalled Trystan joining her on the cliffside...and what had followed. The first loving, so fierce. The next, deep in the night, slow and tender. Half in a dream, half awake. She snuggled closer to the warmth of his body.

"Thought ye'd still be asleep, lass," his sleep-roughened voice growled in her ear.

"Nay," she whispered. "I woke but a moment ago."

"Startled t' find someone in yer bed?"

"How'd you—"

"Yer heart took off skittering like a flushed rabbit."

She rolled over, stiff with physical soreness and embarrassment.

His blue tattoo glinted almost silver in the moonlight, his hair tousled from sleep and her fingers. He frowned at the hesitation in her movement. "Did I hurt ye, lass?"

Her cheeks grew hotter. "Nay. I'm just...unused to..." Stars, she couldn't even finish that statement.

Trystan chuckled and brushed her hair back from her face. "Why's that? A beautiful woman like ye shoulda have yer choice o' lovers at yer beck an' call."

His touch was so gentle. Finora leaned into his hand, not unlike Rona when she wished to be petted. "I'm too fey for most of them. My dreams make people uneasy. Truth be told, I didn't want any of them, either. Not really. The moon just wasn't enough of a reason to..."

"Ye faced that moon alone, every month for four years?" She searched for mockery in his disbelief, but found none. Rather, what she heard seemed almost...admiration. "I told ye, ye're stronger than ye know."

A part of her tired of being strong. She turned from that thought, and stiffened. The alternative to strong was weak, and she'd vowed to never return to weak again. Skin or no. His hand slid to her shoulder, rubbing the tension away. Finora sighed, trying to relax. "Until now. Until you."

He leaned in to brush his lips across hers, an unspoken response to her confession. She froze, not sure she wanted to test the limits of her soreness. Trystan pulled back. “Easy now, lass,” he murmured. “Fear no’ that I’ll take ye again whilst ye’re still tender from the last.” He slid from the bed, and her gaze was drawn anew to the sleek muscled perfection of his warrior frame. He wrapped his plaid about his hips and grabbed the pitcher. “Be right back.”

Finora stared out the window. The moon sank low toward the horizon, but the sky had not yet begun to lighten. She sighed and cursed her wakefulness. She’d pay for it later, when the children ran circles about her and she fell asleep face-first in the supper pudding. For a fleeting moment she thought of Bree and her sisters, envying the mermaids their frivolous natures. Even in King Griogair’s court, she’d been cursed with an ever-practical mind. Her dam had oft chided her to show a lighter face to the world—to the bulls.

“It’s not the way of a cow to seem so thoughtly,” Fiona had told her daughter. “We’d not want the bulls fearing we could out-think them.” Her mother had showed their world what it expected to see. But Finora knew a weaker will could never have been able to keep the lesser cows of the harem in line, and suspected her sire knew it as well. King Griogair couldn’t be the only bull to tolerate a capable cow.

Unfortunately, Finora didn’t possess a frivolous bone in her body.

Certainly Matteo had never treated her with a bit of respect. The two times they’d met, under the close supervision of her parents, he’d confined his comments to superficial observations, as if she were incapable of a true thought or opinion. He’d never asked for one, and she’d not volunteered.

A possible lifetime of silence made her shudder.

“There ye go broodin’ again,” Trystan commented from the doorway.

“You’d prefer cooing and fluff?” Finora’s voice came out sharper than she’d intended, but there was no taking it back.

His head tilted as he considered her question. “No’ at all,” he stated. “I prefer straight conversation an’ knowin’ where ye’d stand on things. I’d have ye speak o’er broodin’.” He stalked forward to pour water in the basin, then set the pitcher down and tossed one of her washrags into the basin. He dropped his garment as one wholly comfortable in his own skin, wrung out the cloth and sat down on the edge of the bed aside her.

“Lie back,” he coaxed.

Finora did, to feel soothing wet heat on her tender flesh. She sighed, relaxing at the novelty of Trystan doing what she’d always done for herself. His touch was light, gentle and too matter-of-fact for her to summon any embarrassment. Asides, it eased the worst of the ache. He rinsed the cloth and repeated his ministrations several times afore leaving the rag in the basin and returning to bed.

“Better?” he asked.

She nodded, and he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. She flipped the quilt back over them both.

“I take it ye’re done sleepin’?”

“I’d not bother you. I can go out into the other room,” she offered.

He shook his head. “Nay, I’ll close me eyes no more this night an’ I’d no’ risk wakin’ the littles afore ’tis time.”

“Mayhaps a bedtime tale, then,” Finora suggested.

“What would ye hear?”

“Well, you did promise me the story of this quest of yours.”

“So I did.” Trystan was silent for a long moment. “How far back would ye have me go?”

“Tell me whatever you wish. Whatever you’re comfortable with. I’d not have you share state secrets with me.”

“I told ye our clans are ruled by women, an’ they choose their own mates,” he began. “Ye’ve noticed my amulet.”

Finora felt her cheeks flush at his teasing tone, recalling the inopportune moment that unusual emblem had distracted her. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” she defended herself.

“I’m sure,” he agreed. “There are few like it in the world. Sons take after their mothers’ clans an’ daughters after their fathers’. Me father bein’ Wolf Clan as I said, me sister Moira followed him. When King Hengist o’ Riverhead, in northeast Arcadia, offered for her, she accepted. His standard is an eagle, a golden eagle on an indigo background. The amulet was designed t’ show the union o’ wolf an’ eagle, the first o’ its kind. Those that Moira considers her close-kin alone doth possess these.”

“Your sister wed a king?” What did that make Trystan then? Didn’t royalty marry royalty in his land as well?

Trystan snorted. “A king o’ but a wee kingdom. Still an’ all, Hengist is a fair an’ just mon.” He paused. “Arcadia is a land in flux. The once ways, the world o’ the triple goddess—maiden, mother, an’ crone—are bein’ challenged by the one truth. One god, inflexible, intolerant. The truth-seekers o’ the one truth destroy all who refuse t’ convert t’ their way. They’re driven t’ annihilate all non-human races from the world.”

Finora shivered. “Like shifters and dragons?”

“Amongst others, includin’ any an’ all who use magic—seers, shamans, healers.” Trystan’s arms tightened. “Our guardians, and Hengist and Moira, fought t’ keep the once ways, but a shadow crept o’er the landscape. Riverhead’s nearest neighbor t’ the west is Westmarche, led by an ambitious madman named Jalad. He’d do anything for power, sellin’ his soul t’ a demon from the Abyss t’ aid him in his conquest.”

Finora felt as well as heard his growl, and felt a slight shifting beneath his skin. “Ssh...”

He caught himself and took a deep breath, easing his grip. “Sorra, lass.”

"I'm fine," she assured him. "What happened?"

"Hengist an' Moira were betrayed. Hengist had t' go t' the Arcadian high court, t' witness the marriage o' High King Sezeny's son Tanis t' some Princess Chandra. Hengist went as weel t' ask for aid in disarming Jalad. Whilst he was gone, Jalad invaded. Most all the men were slaughtered. A few managed t' sneak Moira out an' send her northwardtoward home."

"And you went to her rescue?"

"Aye. Us an' another, tho' we'd no' ken it at the time." Trystan rolled onto his back. Finora sprawled across him like a second blanket. "We found her in the Great Marsh, a miserable bug-infested bog. She was a sorra sight indeed." His eyes were distant, focused on that scene from the past. "I'd barely caught up with her when *he* appeared, on a white steed like an avenging avatar warrior from legend. No' ken who he was, I nearly skewered the mon afore Moira stopped me. He was a friend o' Hengist's, sent t' find, help an' protect Moira—t' get her home. As if I needed any help. Still, he dinna ken o' me any more than I o' him. So."

This was like a legend of old, like a singer's tale. "And was she grateful, this sister of yours, with two great warriors out to rescue her?"

He snorted. "She blistered the both o' us. Told us t' dispense with the chest-beating."

Finora choked down an unexpected giggle. "I think I'd like this sister of yours."

"Ye would." He shot her a sour look. "She was determined t' go home, round up the troops an' march 'gainst Jalad. Demon an' all. Loren was just as fixed t' stop her from riskin' Hengist's heir."

She gasped. "She was pregnant?"

"Aye. Daft woman said 'twas o' no consequence. Course Loren an' I dinna quite see it in the same light as she."

A pregnant queen should be pampered and spoiled, her every whim carried out. Finora couldn't imagine one charging into battle at the head of a screaming war band. She could easily picture Trystan tying Moira up, to prevent such a folly, and said so.

"Ha. Dinna ken I'd no' considered it. Would have, were it no' for the fear that when she got free she'd order the two o' us cut like second-rate colts."

"Ouch."

"Aye. Loren offered t' take first watch, an' Moira an' I fell asleep. When I awoke, 'twas dawn an' Loren was long gone. Moira an' I made it home safe."

"Did you ever see him again?"

"Aye. He 'peared in Badger-Clan a few days later, with a redhaired woman in dire straits. One o' Hengist's peasants who'd been Jalad's prisoner. Loren went back t' rescue her."

Red hair? From what Trystan had told her and the children earlier...

He nodded. “Aye. She was, though at the time she dinna ken her own nature. She was the local healer, raised the daughter o’ peasants. Her name’s Dara.”

“What happened to her?” Being the prisoner of a demon couldn’t be good.

“She was branded as a slave—a bed-slave, or whore. She attempted t’ kill Jalad but failed. He offered her a job as assassin. When she turned him down she was beaten, thrown into the dungeon an’ starved. When she threatened t’ reveal Jalad’s other self, he gagged her and tried t’ burn her alive at the stake. Loren rescued her and brought her t’ us. The iron chains he bound her with act as a poison t’ dragon-kind, freezin’ their powers. The iron poisonin’ an’ the red hair were me first clues that she wasna what she seemed. But they’d been gone for so long, since long afore I was birthed, that I wasna sure.”

“And she was the dragon queen who sent you on this quest, in search of others like her?”

“Aye, she was but half, orphaned young an’ the daughter o’ Hengist himself.”

Finora frowned. “But I thought you said your folk had but one wife?”

“We do. Hengist knew Dara’s mother long afore he married Moira. She wished t’ know if she was the last.”

“Did you defeat Jalad?”

“Aye. Dara’d become a powerful fire mage, an’ Moira fought, too. I dinna ken she e’en was on the battlefield until ’twas too late t’ stop her. We were all fightin’ for our lives at that point. Afterward, I thought Hengist might die o’ apoplexy on the spot. I truly pitied the mon.”

Finora was in awe of such women. She wanted to be like such a woman as to earn that tone of admiration from Trystan, for all he’d probably never admit to admiring his sister. His tone suggested he’d considered strangling Moira a time or two. Stars, she couldn’t imagine a world more dissimilar to her own. They had naught in common, other than a powerful sexual attraction. And when he’d completed his mission, he would go home to his world of strong women and she would stay here, a shadow on the fringes of her own world. Of the sea, but not in it. On the land, but not of it.

“You said you traveled west when you were sent to follow the trail of the dragons.”

“Aye?” Trystan’s tone was wary.

“You said Westmarche was to the west of Riverhead. Jalad’s land.”

He stiffened and nodded.

“What happened? What was it like?”

He growled again. “None free. All slaves, serfs t’ work his land. The land tired, used up. The people half-starved, without hope. No color, no music, no laughter. No healers.” He turned to look at her. Ghosts haunted that gaze. “The once ways decree that the bodies o’ the dead be burned, so that their spirits may return t’ the Light. ‘Light t’ Light, from this world t’ the next.’ But no’ in Westmarche. Nay. The one truth buries the dead in earth, in darkness. Mass graves dug at night, so the dead are lost, without access t’ the

Light. Old women, children, haunt the marches. Wailin' spirits o' the lost, with voices t' drive a mon t' despair." He shuddered.

Finora pulled him close. He felt cold to the touch, and she rubbed her hands over his skin. "Is there naught anyone can do, a priestess or rites or something?"

"Aye. Mayhaps. Their first priority, Hengist an' Moira, was t' see t' it that no more were lost. T' get through the winter with no crops, t' face spring with no seed for planting. When the livin' are seen t'—then 'tis time t' see t' the dead. If the bodies can be exposed t' the sunlight, burned on pyres in the once way, then the shamans can find their souls and send them off t' the Light."

He didn't mean...digging up the bodies only to burn them? Finora couldn't imagine a more horrific task.

"'Tis glad I am that I was no' called t' walk the path o' shaman."

She had to change the subject. "You mentioned Moira was pregnant?"

Trystan nodded.

"When was she due?"

"Later this spring. Within the month, I shoulda think. Moira's convinced 'twill be a lad. They plan on the name Alvar, for Hengist's grandfather."

"Will you stop and see them, on your way back home?"

"Aye. Hengist missed out on the raisin' o' Dara. 'Twill do him some good t' be driven t' distraction chasin' a wee one about." His lips quirked, too briefly to be called a smile. "We need t' hear the laughter o' children again, t' drown out the screams an' the silence. I dinna know which o' the two be worse."

Stars, his nightmares were mayhaps worse than her own. "And what of you? You said you keep turning women away. Do you not wish for a family of your own?"

"Mayhaps someday, if the peace holds an' the guardians can stand down a bit. With the one truth, the rieviers an' our secretive neighbor Shamar t' the north, I have me doubts. Sometimes there's a call for some t' guard so's *others* can live in peace."

But if ever there was one deserving of peace... Ioain took to few people the way he'd taken to Trystan. He struck Finora as a man who'd become a guardian because he cared about what happened to his people, who'd taken responsibility for their welfare. Queen's request or no, he'd taken on the assignment to demand an accounting from the guardians who'd placed their own wellbeing above that of their charges. Surely it was the warriors who needed peace most of all. Mayhaps they alone could truly appreciate how precious and sometimes fleeting it was.

His eyes searched hers. "There ye go, thinkin' again." His slid his hands down her back, over the curve of her backside. "What o' ye, lass? What do ye think on?"

Finora frowned. "I was wondering what I could do to help you with your search. Lots of people come and go through a port town like ours. Red hair is as uncommon in this land as your own. How long do dragons live?"

"Centuries, if left alone. Why?"

"Then you might want to examine the old logs in the meeting house. Bran's grandmother, who used to run the Light, also kept records, but Bran had them moved to the meeting house after her death. Do you read?"

"Only clan and common," he admitted. "A little Arcadian, but no' much."

"Then we'll split the workload," she said. "I can cover the Rhattany and Theressan records."

"Ye dinna have t' do this," he said. "'Tis me own quest."

"For shame." She clucked her tongue and shook her head. "A clansman advocating going it alone? What would Niadh say?"

"Ye're right. Verra weel, we have a deal. Partners?" He stuck out a hand.

Finora smiled. "Oh, I can do better than that, warrior." She inched her way up his body, until her lips poised a breath above his.

"Hmm." Trystan's blue eyes ignited as his hands caressed the backs of her thighs. "I'll bet ye can at that." He raised himself to capture her lips in a burning kiss, continuing the motion until he sat up with her astride his lap. "So sweet," he whispered against her lips.

Finora quivered as his hands glided over her skin, raising prickles of awareness in their wake. He rubbed small circles on her lower back, tilted his head to nibble down the side of her neck. Her nipples pebbled into the crisp curls on his chest, and she tangled her fingers in his grey hair. "Stars, what you do to me," she confessed, her voice thin and breathless even to her own ears.

"Tell me if ye're too sore for this, lass." Trystan's eyes held her gaze. "I ken there's other ways t' pleasure ye."

She shook her head, reaching down to take his growing erection in her hand. His groan sent a tingle of heat through her. She leaned back on his thighs, and gasped as he bent his head to capture her nipple between his lips. Stars, the magic he worked with his mouth alone! Her body swelled and softened with every pull at her breast, and she felt each stroke of his tongue deep within. How he made her ache to fill the void, the emptiness.

Trystan eased into her body, letting her set the pace. She rode him slowly, the hot friction an exquisite sensual torture that made them both gasp. Finora lost herself in the gradual buildup, not wanting it to end too quickly. Something told her everything would change between them when they walked out the bedroom door, and she wanted to hold onto this perfect moment forever. She stared into Trystan's piercing blue eyes, which retained a hint of feral-green even when dark with passion.

But her body was too greedy, and she cursed her very nature even as she quickened her pace, straining with need. He reached between their joined bodies, found the small nub that focused all her need into one dazzling explosion of pleasure. Her nails tightened on his shoulders as she came around him in undulating waves. He silenced her cries with an open-mouthed kiss and stiffened as his body reached its own zenith.

Finora refocused slowly, on Trystan's flushed too-beloved face. The melting softness that crept into her heart when she looked at him...Why was sex more than just the easing of a craving with him? It felt like an emotional joining, like family, like coming home.

Except his home was hundreds of miles away, in another land. She cursed her fickle heart. She knew what it was like to be trapped in a land and a family not her own. She would never do that to Trystan. Yet, as she found herself yearning to hold onto him for just one moment more, for the first time she felt an inkling of what it must have been like for Bran. Was that what it had been like, the desire to hold onto something precious forever, that had made him do what he had done? Not out of cruelty, but out of desperation to never lose what he had never had?

For years she'd thought of Bran with naught but contempt and an anger that bordered on rage. He'd stolen her soul. She was trapped, wounded and bleeding, forever—unless the Fates turned benevolent. Griogair had told her not to give up hope. But hope was crueler than concession. Yet now, for the first time, Finora felt...pity...for Bran.

How very odd.

Trystan watched the play of emotions cross her face. The teasing quip that popped into his mind died a silent death at her troubled look of...enlightenment. She was the most haunted, complex woman he had ever met. 'Twould take a lifetime to learn her moods.

He stopped himself right there. When had a night's warmth and pleasure turned into a yearning for hearth and home? He'd told her true. He was a guardian, sworn to the duty of placing the needs of his people as a whole over his own. He was to bring dragons back to the mountains—or a tale of why he'd failed. He couldn't stay here, and Finora could never leave. 'Twas impossible.

He'd promised no broken hearts when he left. He refused to lay his at her feet. She had enough to deal with.

A door opened and closed. A light knock sounded on Finora's door. "Mama?" Braeca called. "Ioain's had a bad dream. Can you come?"

Finora leapt off Trystan's lap so fast she staggered, as if he'd been a fire and she'd been singed. "Coming, poppet." Her gaze scanned the room, and she snatched a nightdress off the corner chair and

threw it on—backward. She was out the door afore he could tell her. Trystan wrapped his plaid about his hips and followed.

Finora sat in the rocking chair, comforting a sobbing Ioain. “Ssh, little one,” she soothed. “It’s all right. ’Twas just a dream. We all have nightmares sometimes.”

Ioain shook his head. Terror poured off him in waves.

Niadh shot Trystan a look. “*’Twas a sight-vision.*”

Trystan knelt aside the chair, reached out to stroke the little boy’s rumped curls. “Ioain, we’re here. Hold on to yer mama, now. Take a deep breath.”

Ioain made a shuddering attempt at obeying that gentle command. He turned to peek at Trystan with one eye. Finora glared at Trystan with a “What do you think you’re doing?” look.

Trystan forced himself to ignore her for now. Ioain needed to know he was safe, but Niadh’s tone suggested they might want to hear about what it was the little boy had seen. “Ioain, sometimes our dreams try to tell us something—like when your mama and Braeca dream storms, and then they can warn people there’s one coming. To keep people safe. Sometimes talking about it makes it less scary.”

Ioain looked dubious at that. But Braeca nodded. “It’s better to not keep secrets. It’s scarier when it’s only in you.”

Trystan lit every candle he could find. “There. It’s not dark anymore. Can you tell us what you saw?”

Niadh laid his head in Ioain’s lap, and the boy reached out with one chubby wee hand to rub the black Were’s velvet wolf ears. The tears sliding down from glittering brown eyes broke Trystan’s heart. He simply waited, letting Finora and Niadh work their magic. Eventually, Ioain took a deep shuddering breath and nodded.

“Fire,” he stated. “Flames ev’wywhere. Gold eyes staring at me. An’ a mean man laughing at...at someone scweaming.” He stared at Trystan, and burst into fresh tears. “It...it was you! You were scweaming.”

Chapter Seven

Poor lad. 'Twould be enough to make a man grown lose sleep, let alone a wee one. Trystan caught Finora's gaze over the top of Ioain's head. A muscle ticked in her jaw. Any tighter, her teeth might crack. "*What d'ye ken?*" he asked Niadh.

"*I ken there's an unhappy dragon in yer future.*" Niadh's voice was grim. "*Take it as a warnin' t' watch yer back.*"

A rogue guardian? Trystan's hackles rose at the very thought as he stirred the sleepy fire in the hearth back to life. "*Always.*"

"Well, I say some nice hot cider and something to eat as the sun comes up will make everything brighter," Finora stated with forced cheer. "Got those cranberry scones to finish off, remember? Thought we'd go down to The Mermaid tonight for Bowen's chowder."

Ioain sniffled, but looked up with a hopeful expression. "Weally?"

Finora nodded. "Best in town." She rose and poured a jug of cider into a pot to set over the rekindled fire. They ate, watching the sky lighten from grey to pink-and-gold to a clear brilliant blue.

Trystan stepped outside with Niadh whilst Finora helped Braeca prepare for school. "We should go down t' The Mermaid an' begin talkin' t' people. Find out more o' this so-called wizard an' his daughter."

"*Cap'n Reed dinna seem t' place much into it. He might be a good one t' ask for fact, no' rumor,*" Niadh agreed.

Finora led the children out, Storm in her wake. "There's a library off the main room in the meeting house. I'd start there."

Trystan shook his head. "I'll begin in The Mermaid. Talkin' t' folk."

Ealga dropped onto his shoulder. They strode down to the village. Trystan noticed the boats out in the harbor. "Fishing?"

Finora shielded her eyes against the sun's glare on the water. "Lobster, mostly. Fishing vessels go beyond the breakwater."

Mari monitored her customary stand. "They're going to see what can be salvaged from the *Sunrisen*."

"Mari, can you meet me in the library after classes?" Finora asked. "I need your help with some historical records."

"Sure. Looking for anything specific?"

"I'm tryin' t' track down an ancestor o' mine," Trystan lied. "I can read th' ones in common, but Finora thought ye might be able t' pull old Rhattany records."

"And Theressan," Finora added.

"How far back?"

Finora looked to Trystan. "Last century?"

He nodded. "For starters. Any mention o' any comin' from the mountains north o' Arcadia, south o' Shamar. Coulda be called the Breakback, or Dragon's Back, Mountains."

"Sure," Mari stated. "I can for certain read the Rhattany ones. Might consider consulting one of the Theressan rowers, though. My Theressan's pretty basic."

"Let's see what the Rhattan ones turn up first," Trystan decided.

Mari nodded. "All right."

Finora left Braeca at the school, then turned to Trystan. "I've got a passel of washing to do. We'll catch up to you at the Mermaid for supper."

"See ye then." He watched her walk back toward the Light, admiring the way her skirts swayed in the sun, then continued on to the Mermaid. He reached for the door, and froze as a twinge of *wrongness*, of *secret*, zapped his fingers. An odd jangle against his nerves.

Niadh nudged Trystan's hand with his cold nose. "*Feel that?*"

Trystan closed his eyes and his ears and reached out to sense what Niadh had caught. "*What's that all about? Where's it coming from?*" Unlike his mentor, he couldn't yet pinpoint the source of a warning.

"*Scan as ye go in,*" Niadh instructed. "*See if ye can tell me.*"

They found Captain Reed with Doc, Mick, Giles and Jan, poring over charts held down by tankards of ale.

"'Tis a risk," Mick was saying. "A whole fleet of merchant ships?"

"Corsairs'll never attack a fleet," Doc said. "Safety in numbers."

"Hard t' keep a fleet together, 'specially in bad weather," Jan commented. "If we get separated, we'll need t' know where t' meet up. Ye'll need cap'ns ye can trust."

The shadow blanketed that table. But from which mon? Why couldna he tell? Trystan wanted to growl in frustration. Of what use was a warning if he couldna isolate it? He couldna watch all of them.

"*Reed. Where once he was so open, now he's closed.*" Niadh voiced caution betwixt the lines.

Reed? To outward appearances, Reed seemed the same big bluff seaman planning the next voyage—a profitable one, to hear tell. But when Trystan sent out a guardian's spirit-touch, he saw the shadow within Reed. His soul was no longer his own. What had happened? And when?

"*Someone else leads this discussion,*" Niadh commented. "*Pay attention.*"

Something about that shadow tugged at the edges of Trystan's mind. It had an almost familiar feel to it. A lure. A craving. Pure sex. Where had he felt that touch afore?

“Ships an’ crew are on their way. We just have to wait for them to get into port,” Reed stated.

Where he led, the crew would follow. But whom, or what, did Reed follow? Trystan strode up to the table with Niadh in his wake, keeping his senses open. He’d never traveled so far from home, so why he’d feel a familiar enemy here nagged at him. A blonde serving wench came to ask if he needed anything, and over Giles’ snicker he ordered an ale. He shook his head at his friend.

“Mick, you’re ready for your own command,” Reed stated. “I’ll put you and Jan on one of the other ships. Giles, you’re now my first.”

Mick straightened. Jan and Giles cheered. Doc just beamed and nodded his head.

“One o’ the Theressans mentioned Cap’n Kale’s *Divinia* be one o’ the ships coming t’ pick them up,” Mick commented. “He’d be a good one t’ have in the fleet. He’s got three ships aside that one, all sound an’ seaworthy, an’ his own doc asides.”

Reed looked thoughtful. He glanced up and caught Trystan’s eye. “We’ve got Rhattans an’ Theressans aplenty, but none from Arcadia save ye. I know ye’re no sailor, lad, but what can ye tell us o’ trade with yer folk?”

Something within urged caution. Westmarche and Riverhead still recovered from Jalad, and the rieviers were a constant nuisance as well. Shamar was the great unknown, its borders long closed. “Land’s End is a decent port,” he began. “Trade with Arcadia should be encouraged. We’ve got metalworkers, raw wool an’ hides, good woolen cloth, drenieval whiskey, dyes an’ a lot o’ medicinal plants grown nowhere else.”

“Metalwork?” Reed’s eyes narrowed. “As in weapons?”

“*Careful*,” Niadh cautioned.

“Kings Sezeny an’ Hengist have standing armies,” Trystan replied. “*Let them mull on that for a bit.*” Hopefully news of the Jalad-Hengist conflict had not yet reached these shores. “Acourse there’d be weaponsmiths, as weel as farriers, decorative metalwork an’ jewelry. We have wood an’ leather aplenty, so saddlemakers and harnessmakers, also soap an’ candlemaking. Dried meats.”

“Good timber, too,” Jan added.

“We could use a guide.” Reed watched Trystan with more than his own eyes. “Someone familiar with the area, who could introduce us t’ the right contacts.”

“Oh, sure, because I love pukin’ me guts out for days on end,” Trystan retorted. “I think I’ll pass on the chance t’ sail about.”

Giles grinned. “There is that one small fact, Cap’n.”

The serving wench brought Trystan his ale with an interested smile. He took the cup but shook his head. She shrugged and wandered off to the next table.

Jan noticed the byplay. “Not on the market anymore?”

“There’s public knowledge, an’ then there’s private,” Trystan replied. “Best t’ keep the two separate.”

Finora hummed as she scrubbed one of Ioain's shirts in the tub with lye soap and a stiff brush. 'Twas warm enough to do the washing outside. Two of Braeca's skirts already hung on the line. Storm kept an eye on the boy as he found twigs "fo' the fire". Ealga soared overhead. Warm sun, slight breeze, buds making a serious attempt at becoming leaves.

Earth and sky.

Cilaniestra felt distant indeed on days such as this.

Finora wrung out the shirt, dunked it in the rinsing water, wrung it out again, and hung it on the line. What a great nuisance clothing was—collecting dirt and odors, always having to be washed. She watched Ioain gathering grass stains and dirt along with the wood, studied her reddening hands and sighed. There were advantages to going without. Well, she amended, not on really cold days, but otherwise...

"Mama?" Ioain came over to her as she started on a pair of his breeches.

"Hmm?"

"Bwaeca says you haf bad dweams, too."

She looked up. "I do. Everyone does."

He shook his head. "Huh-uh. Not wike ours. She says we're special."

Finora sighed, and dropped the breeches to haul him close, wet hands and all. "We are," she admitted. "Some special people have dreams that mean things to others. They're like messages that come to us in our sleep."

"Why?"

"Why when we sleep?" she tried.

He nodded.

"Because we're so busy when we're awake we don't pay attention," she said.

"Why us?" Ioain bit his lip.

I wish I knew. "Because we're good messengers."

His eyes shimmered. "But why are they so scawy?"

Finora's heart ached. He never should have to bear such a burden. The gods should have waited, but Braeca had the same trouble. "Whenever you have a bad dream, come and tell me, all right?"

He nodded again. "I wike Twystan. Can he stay wif us?"

Finora remembered Niadh and Trystan comforting Ioain. "He's a nice visitor, isn't he? But he's just visiting, and soon he'll have to go home. His family misses him."

"But I don't want him to weave!" Ioain cried. "I wanna keep him fowever."

Now why did *that* sound familiar? Finora sighed, crushing the echo in her own heart. Never ever *ever* would she do as Bran had. “You’ll meet a lot of interesting people in your life,” she told him. “Some stay and some go, but you’ll always remember them.”

“I don’t ’member Da.”

She wished she could say the same. “He died afore you were born.”

“Can’t we get ’nother one?”

Oh, stars, where had *that* thought had its birth? “You don’t just pick up a da in the market,” Finora told him.

“Bwaeca said Mawissa lost her da, an’ her ma got ’em ’nother one,” Ioain insisted. “Twystan’d make a good da.”

Aye, he would. “Trystan’s a soldier who has to take care of his people,” she told him. “Maybe someday he will have a family.”

“But I want *us* to be his famiwy!”

“Oh, Ioain,” she sighed. So much for no broken hearts when Trystan left. “He lives far away, and we live here. Let’s just have fun whilst he’s here and remember him when he goes.” She stood. “Come help me get the sheets off the beds.”

Ioain’s tears dried under the effort of tugging sheets off the mattresses.

“What a good helper you are.” Finora hung the quilts out to air whilst she went back to scrubbing clothes and sheets. Soon enough she was done, the line full of wet clean clothes drying in the sun and breeze. She dragged the tub to the edge of the cliff.

A sudden sense of eyes on her, a feeling of being watched, made her freeze. Trying not to draw Ioain’s attention, she straightened and turned in a slow circle. She didn’t see anything, but the sense of being watched made her skin crawl. *Eyes. Eyes in the deep.* She looked out over the water, at the boats in the harbor, at the men on the breakwater. Deeper. Not *on* the water. *In* it.

“*Bree, this isn’t very funny,*” she sent.

A moment of silence greeted that. “*What are you talking about?*” Bree’s familiar, whimsical “voice” replied.

Finora’s skin prickled. What was going on? “*Where are you?*”

“*Playing tag with the girls. Why?*”

Bree’s call was distant. She played far offshore. Whoever watched her was much closer. Within the breakwater. “*No reason,*” Finora replied. She dumped the water over the side of the cliff and lugged the tub back into the cottage. Best to keep the children away from the shore line today.

Soon enough it was time to head down to the village to retrieve Braeca from school. She clasped Ioain’s hand as she led him down the path. She still felt that malevolent watching like a cold wind blowing on the back of her neck from within the breakwater. Goosebumps rose on her skin.

Ioain shivered and moved closer.

“Can you feel that?” she asked him, surprised.

He nodded, and his lower lip quivered. “Something scawy in the water. It’s watchin’ us.”

“It’s okay,” she soothed. “It can’t leave the water, so we’re safe on land.” If it could, she figured it would have by now. “Let’s just get Braeca and Trystan and have some of that wonderful chowder I promised you.”

His face brightened somewhat.

Hopefully whatever it was would be gone by the time they made the long climb back home...in the dark.

Mari was not at her stand. Finora wondered what the problem was. In fact, the entire market area seemed unpopulated. She got her answer when she approached Kale’s smithy. A sizable knot of men gathered around a hooded and cloaked woman who seemed to be looking at some decorative bronze. Their focus on the woman, so singular to the exclusion of all else, was eerie. An earthquake couldn’t have moved them. Finora trembled as she passed by. The level of arousal scent rivaled Madame Jasmine’s. She cursed as a tingle of awareness made her breasts swell and her nipples tighten, even from this distance.

The woman turned. Finora caught a glimpse of gold eyes and a knowing smirk afore Kale stepped betwixt the unknown woman and Finora’s line of sight. As she and Ioain approached the schoolhouse, the effect dissipated but left Finora reeling and gasping.

Mistress Greta grasped her arm with a frown of concern. “Are you all right, child?”

“Mama?” Braeca’s eyes were wide.

Finora flashed what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “I’m fine, poppet. Just worked a little hard today, and I forgot lunch. Some of Bowen’s chowder and I’ll be fine. Let’s go meet Trystan at The Mermaid.”

Mistress Greta looked unconvinced. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” Finora straightened. “Let’s go. They’re waiting for us.” She headed back down to The Mermaid and entered the cheery warmth of the tavern. The glowing peat fires and the reel the band played in the corner dispelled the lingering unease from her bizarre trip to town. What cared she for a new whore in town? Obviously her imagination had gotten the best of her.

Mari sat at a corner table with Trystan, their heads bent over a tattered leatherbound book. Trystan looked up at their approach. He didn’t smile, but his eyes softened and he pushed away from the table enough for Ioain to clamber into his lap. “Hungry?”

Ioain nodded. “We been washin’ all *day*!”

Finora dropped into a chair and motioned Tess over. “Three ciders,” she ordered. “And chowder all around.” When Tess left, she turned to Mari. “Find anything interesting?”

“Well, this is the first reference I could find of a Rhattan captain going to Arcadia,” Mari replied. “It’s a Captain Owen of the *Banur Dream*, some seventy years ago. He has awful handwriting, though, and worse spelling. But he mentions trading with a Southron vessel. Oil for wine and dried fruit...blahblahblah.”

“Blah!” Ioain shrieked, and giggled.

Everyone looked up, then smiled and went back to whatever they were doing.

Trystan’s gaze captured Finora’s. “But he mentions a mage aboard the Southron vessel, notin’ the other crew half-fawnin’, half-cringin’ around him like whipped curs, driven to obey his ev’ry command despite their own personal aversion or fear. As if they couldna help themselves.”

“*The power to allure*, you said,” Finora recalled.

“Aye. An’ Finora?” Trystan’s face was an odd mix of elation and hesitation. “His name was Spiridon.”

She shrugged. “So?”

Mari leaned forward. “Spiridon’s the name of the red-haired lord who moved into Widow Sera’s manor.”

“With his daughter,” Trystan finished, his voice tight, his shoulders rigid.

“*The power to allure...*” Gold eyes... “The market!” Finora exclaimed.

“What?” Mari and Trystan asked in tandem.

“I think I just saw the daughter in Kale’s smithy.”

Chapter Eight

“M-my lord?”

Spiridon frowned over his goblet of wine at the houseman. “What do you want?”

“There’s an important visitor requesting an audience. He’s traveled far with an urgent matter to discuss.”

Spiridon grabbed the man’s mind with his own, ripping the memory from the human’s brain. *Darkness cloaked in seawater.* A denizen of Cilaniestra. Not merfolk...seal-folk. Selkie. One far too full of his own importance. One with an offer, and a request. A trade.

Hmm...

“His name?” Spiridon demanded.

“M-matteo, my lord.”

Spiridon found himself intrigued, and sprawled back in his chair. “Send him in.”

The scent of sea salt and fish hit him first. This Matteo, who dripped seawater all over the marble-tiled floor, had the pale skin of one who avoided the sun, as would any deep-sea creature, but it was scarred and covered hard muscle. He moved with the aggressive stance of a predator, a warrior, with deceptive liquid brown eyes. Clothed in a robe of woven sea fronds, he wore a circlet of gold and rubies on his brow, undoubtedly filched from some sunken vessel. Spiridon took him in at a glance. Hard body, devious mind, weak character. Scheming. Selfish. Me. Mine.

Just the sort of man Spiridon hoped to meet. Greedy. Amoral. Easily controlled. He flexed his hand, watching the emerald flash in the ring on his finger. “Speak, Matteo.”

The selkie royal stiffened. “I am *Prince* Matteo, *merchant*.”

The beast awoke at his “guest’s” curled lip and sneering tone. Spiridon watched his nails lengthen into claws as his hand tightened around the goblet, picturing it being Prince Matteo’s neck. He almost felt the pulse pounding against his fingers. “Indeed, if you are here to trade information, you *are* a merchant. Thank you for clarifying.”

Color slashed the selkie upstart’s cheeks. His lips thinned.

The beast growled. “My time is limited,” Spiridon stated. “As is my patience. Speak or get out. Your offer means little to me.”

“Even when it involves Cilaniestra?” Matteo taunted. “You seek ships to carry you to Arcadia, but what of warriors to take those ships and bring them to you?”

“Cease your riddles. What’s on your mind?”

“We—the bulls under my command—could scour the waters, find appropriate ships, overtake the crews and force them to sail into this very harbor.” His liquid seal-brown eyes narrowed. “You would be in my debt, *merchant*.”

“Nay.” Spiridon shook his head and took a sip of wine. His beast wished it tasted of blood. *Later*, he soothed. *This could work to our advantage*. “I know you’re not offering this out of the goodness of your heart, selkie. Speak. What do you wish in return?”

Matteo’s eyes blazed with an unholy light. “A skin.”

“You already have one.”

“A very specific skin.” Matteo took a deep breath. “King Griogair’s daughter is the woman on the cliff, running the Light. The human fisherman hid her skin, and she has been unable to find it. They say you’re a sorcerer. You could use magic to find it and give it to me. I in turn will recloak her in it and grant her fondest wish to return her to the sea.”

“Again out of the goodness of your heart?”

Matteo bared his sharp tusks. “Hardly. She was promised to me as a bride by her sire. By marrying the daughter of a powerful rival, the daughter of his favorite cow, I’d be in a position to expand my power when I take over my own pod. It would be little to overrun his. I’d be king under the sea, and I could make you king above it.”

“She has two brats off that fisherman.” The beast gloated as Spiridon watched the selkie’s face flush at that little reminder. “No cow would leave her offspring.”

“She’ll have no choice,” Matteo spat. “The song of the deep haunts her bones, her soul. Cows are weak. She’ll be unable to resist the allure. Once she hits the water, she’s mine. Cilaniestra wishes the two children in Her service. They both have the sight. The cow sees storms as does her dam. The bull sees the truth in any creature. They could be of use to you—and to Her. But do with them what you wish. I care not. I will give Finora many more children to chase after. She will have no time for concern for her human abominations.”

In Spiridon’s experience, that was not how motherhood worked. Anuk’s mother had died defending her egg from him, and it was his. He’d had to kill her to take it. Regrettable, that. The other dragons had turned against him for that one, dragon killing dragon, banished him in the hot dark of the earth for centuries. With Anuk. His last act was to bind the egg to him with magic. They could not remove it. They’d condemned her along with him.

Still, to get his hands on two gifted servants, and the ships he needed, without having to lift a claw of his own... Spiridon cocked his head, considering. “All you want is the skin?”

“It means naught to you,” Matteo replied. “But all to me. Have we a deal?”

“Agreed.” Spiridon drew a knife. “I need six ships, with full crews. You will bring them to me, and the children of the selkie witch on the cliff.”

“Agreed. And you will locate the lost sealskin of Finora, daughter of Griogair and Fiona, and turn it and her over to me.”

“I will need something of hers, something personal, to set the locator spell, but agreed. A blood-oath binding.” Spiridon pricked his palm with the blade, allowing one drop of blood to drip into his cup. Then he rose and approached Matteo, holding out the knife. “One drop in the cup, if you please.”

Matteo complied.

Spiridon mixed the liquid with the blade of the knife. Careful to speak the words of the binding spell in draconian ancient, he whispered over the brew. “Blood oath binding, afore Cilaniestra hear our vow. A trade. Me to he, one sealskin of Finora shena Fiona. He to me, six ships and the two half-human offspring of Finora shena Fiona. To the completion of the trade, or to death, whichever come first. A vow of silence on he, to not speak of this agreement lest death come swiftly.”

The mixture flared with moonlight. Cilaniestra’s shark-toothed smile appeared on the surface. Then it faded. Spiridon took a sip, then held the cup out to Matteo. “Drink.”

Matteo finished the bespelled wine.

Spiridon motioned for him to keep the knife. “This knife bears the weight of the spell. Whoever you nick with the tip will be bound to our agreement. Use it on each man of the crews on the ships you take. They will give us no difficulty then.”

Matteo sheathed the knife, then stood waiting.

“We are done here,” Spiridon stated. “You may go.”

An ugly red mottling spread across Matteo’s cheeks at being dismissed. “Don’t push me, wizard.”

Spiridon allowed the beast partial freedom. Scales and claws flashed over his right arm, as he took the goblet back. “Nay, selkie. ’Tis you should not push me. Now go.”

Matteo paled and fled with rather undignified haste.

“Royal blood must be thin indeed in that family.” Spiridon snorted, and poured himself more wine.

Anuk backed away from the grate, through which she’d been eavesdropping. So the woman keeper of the Light was a trapped selkie princess? She recalled their eyes meeting in the market. The selkie Finora had not been unaffected by the beast’s allure, but a creature of the tides and the moon would be vulnerable to such an elemental force as desire and lust. She’d had a small boy with her—one of the two children Spiridon had voiced interest in. Anuk frowned and tried to envision his face. All she could recall was dark, curly hair and wide, dark eyes tinged with fear.

But fear of what? His mother? That didn't seem right, somehow.

The selkie Finora felt familiar. Why, Anuk wasn't sure. They'd never met. If what that pompous selkie princeling said was true, Finora was trapped to this town, and Anuk had never ventured out in public afore today. And yet, it felt as if they had met afore. Like a forgotten flavor on the tongue, or an elusive scent, tickling the edges of her mind but refusing to come forth.

What did Spiridon want with the children? There had been a dark undercurrent to the spell Spiridon had cast that made Anuk uneasy. She mulled it over in her mind as she returned to her rooms to dress for dinner. Shopping had been profitable indeed this day. Gavin Reed had told her of Mick's promotion, and she'd considered the ramifications of having two of her father's captains under her own personal allure. She'd know what transpired beyond what her father chose to tell her.

A twinge struck her at that thought. For some time she'd been suspicious he withheld information from her. That he gave her but the barest answer to her questions—no more, no less. Partners, yet...he didn't trust her.

That hurt. She was his daughter, his own flesh and blood. He was the only parent she remembered. She loved him. She'd do anything for him. And yet, the expression on his face when he thought she wasn't looking...an unspeakable wariness in his eyes.

The knocking on the door jerked her from her thoughts. "Enter," she called.

"Would ye care for a bath, m'lady?" the maid asked.

"I would, with the jasmine bath oil. Then pull the brown silk gown. Inform the kitchen staff we are having two guests for dinner."

"At once, m'lady." The maid started the bathwater, and soon the room filled with jasmine-scented steam. She laid the requested gown on the bed, unlaced Anuk's current dress and set out the drying cloths.

"Return in half a candlemark," Anuk ordered.

The maid showed herself out of the room, and Anuk slipped into the hot, oily water. She'd invited the new Captain Mick and the blacksmith Kale to dinner. Two more souls secured. Two more sets of eyes and ears in her employ. She wondered, were they loyal to her father...or to her? Were they to give contradictory orders, whom would the men follow?

Why was she even thinking such a thing? Her goal and her father's were the same. More power, wealth, prestige. They worked together. Didn't they? Curse Gavin Reed for making her doubt. Death-compensation, looking out for the servants...what madness was that?

And yet, the loyalty he commanded was absolute, without being a tyrant.

Something to think about. Along with that "cows are weak" statement made by that idiot selkie prince. Anuk so wanted to enlighten him on the error of his beliefs. Preferably with fang and claw. She almost felt sorry for the unknown princess, being bound to that pompous ass for the rest of her days.

Why was she even thinking about another woman's plight? It was no concern of hers. Getting her missing skin to Matteo would make all Spiridon's plans come to fruition. That should have been her only concern.

Curse Gavin Reed anyway! She'd been naught but confused since she'd met him.

Just thinking about the human made her body come alive in the most annoying fashion. She ducked under the water. It didn't help. She would take both Kale and Mick tonight. That should quiet the unsettling yearning for Reed. Remembering the rush, she tried to imagine what two at once would be like, and became dizzy just considering it. Her beast awoke with a vengeance. Her body pulsed with need.

She washed and dried quickly, not wanting the touch of the maids. When the maid returned, she assisted with lacing the new gown. Anuk dismissed her. Dinner wasn't for another hour yet. She'd have to find something to occupy her time. Something to divert her mind from the achy state of her body.

The library. There were those volumes on the top shelf she'd wanted to investigate. She strode down the hall to stumble through the library doorway. Gavin Reed possessed this room. Anuk couldn't even look at the rug afore the fireplace. She lifted her eyes to the shelves. There—the history section. Where was that little red volume? *A History of Dragons*?

There it was. She lifted her skirts with one hand to climb the ladder. Reaching out a hand, she hesitated, waiting to see if it had been bespelled by her father. Once, when she was younger, she'd touched one of his magic books and gotten a nasty shock. She'd learned to be cautious. But it seemed mundane. She slipped it off the shelf and carried it down. Settling into her rocking chair, she opened the book.

The artwork was fantastic, drawn by someone who knew dragons. The proportions and detailing were perfect. She went to the title page. It was written by Rala Kahn Androcles shena Vana Kahn Androcles. As she read the name, a tingle caressed her fingertips, and the book seemed to grow thicker. The number of pages doubled, nay tripled. Beneath the standard black lettering were red runes dried, rusted brown. Startled, she moved to close the book.

"Ouch!" She'd caught her finger on a rough edge of the clasp. She stared in dismay at the blood welling, the spreading stain absorbing into the paper. Her father would kill her for ruining one of his precious books. Panicked, she opened the book to the offending page—and froze.

There was no bloodstain. The black lettering was gone. The red-to-brown runes were now discernable words, though how she knew them—they weren't in any recognizable dialect that she spoke or read—she'd no idea. But she recognized two things right off. One, the book was written in blood. Dragon blood. And two, it *knew* her. It had been *waiting* for her. Her, Anuk. It was her blood that had turned the lettering. She now held the true book, a book intended only for her. Had she never found it, she knew it would remain a short amusing biology of dragons. But now? What sort of book was it now?

She turned to the first page. “Blood to blood...daughter to daughter...Hear and heed these words...” What in the world? She could *hear* the words written, as a voice in her head. A female voice, in the ancient bardic style. She slammed the cover closed, and the book shrank down to its original history format. Well!

A sudden need to keep it secret struck her. She would read it in her room. She met a houseman at the foot of the stairs. “I have a sudden headache. I wish to take dinner in my rooms,” she told him. “Please convey my regrets to my father and our guests.”

“Yes, m’lady.” He bowed. “Shall I send for the physician?”

“Nay—just a maid with willowbark tea.” Anuk swept up the stairs to her room. A few minutes later, a timid knock announced the kitchen maid with a tray. “There on the table.” Anuk pointed. “Undo the lacing and begone.” She locked the door behind the girl, shimmied out of the gown and tossed it over a chair. Donning a simple linen shift, she wrapped herself in a woolen shawl and curled up in bed with her book and the tea. Wouldn’t do to leave the tea untouched.

She had a headache. Must remember that. Just as she was about to open the book, a more authoritative knock hit the door. Anuk shoved the book under her pillow and tried to look pitiful. “Enter.”

Spiridon entered, undeterred by the lock. “I heard you felt poorly enough to cancel dinner.”

“I didn’t cancel it. I’m just dining in my rooms tonight.”

“Aye—a headache was mentioned. Rather poor timing for our guests.”

“Feel free to entertain them yourself,” Anuk stated.

“I am certain to be somewhat less—entertaining—than you would have been. Nay, I have cancelled dinner altogether. I shall dine in my rooms as well. A quiet evening at home, after a profitable day, can be its own reward.”

Anuk thought of his meeting with Matteo. “A profitable day, you say? Do tell. Was it very interesting?”

“Naught to trouble your aching head about, my dear. Rest. Drink your tea. I’m sure you’ll feel better in the morn.” Spiridon strode out.

More secrets. Anuk seethed. Why was he so insistent on keeping his meeting with Matteo hidden from her? That made no sense. As his partner, she should be kept apprised of his dealings. If she hadn’t taken to spying on him, who knew what else she’d not be knowing?

She pulled out the book and opened it. Why now? The book had been on the library shelf, of this house or previous ones, her entire life. What had prompted her curiosity now, after all these years? She was no history lover.

“*When the student is ready, the teacher appears,*” the book whispered in her mind.

That was uncanny. Anuk shivered. Was the book magic? Then why was it in the library and not Spiridon’s workroom?

The book laughed. Laughed! *"The magic of queens is not meant for a mere male, daughter of queens."*

Daughter of...what? It must be mistaking her for someone else.

"The blood does not lie, daughter of queens," the book insisted. *"Who was your mother?"*

Now *that* question made her head ache for real. Her father had never told her her own mother's name. He'd merely referred to *"her"* in a tone of longing and loathing.

"Who was your mother, child?" the book asked again.

"I don't know!" she cried. "Why do you ask? What does it matter?"

Why was she talking to a *book*?

"The blood does not lie, daughter of queens, She Khan Androcles. Your mother was of my line."

"Are you saying you're my ancestor?" This went beyond weird. Her heart pounded.

"The blood does not lie. How can you not know the name of your mother? The power passes from mother to daughter."

"What power? I have no power! Father told me she died afore I was born, he never speaks of her. It's too painful for him. He loved her very much."

"Who told you you have no power?"

Anuk winced as the book's angry tone stabbed through her mind like shards of obsidian. "I'm only a female. Only males may become great sorcerers. My father told me so."

"Oh, really?" Grim amusement. *"Open me, and behold the truth, daughter of my daughters' daughters."*

More afraid and intrigued than she had ever been in her life, Anuk moved the lamp closer and turned the first page.

Chapter Nine

“The daughter? In the market?” Trystan’s gaze burned into Finora’s. “Are ye certain?”

She nodded. “I’d have to say aye. Surrounded by a great herd of men, only one of which belonged in the actual smithy. Kale. ’Twas like they were moonstruck.”

Mari’s eyes were serious. “I’ve heard they’re witches. Why I never go near the manor house. Wonder what she was doing out and about? They usually send servants to the market.”

Tess brought their food and drinks. “I heard Mick and Kale were invited to dinner up at the big house. Only other one I’ve heard tell of going afore this is Cap’n Reed. Mayhaps they’re getting more friendly with the folk around here. ’Bout time, too.”

Trystan stiffened. Finora sensed something grim pass betwixt him and Niadh.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Naught.” *Later*, his eyes said. He made a show of sniffing his bowl of chowder. “What *is* this?”

Braeca giggled. “Chowder. A kind of soup.” She picked up her spoon and took a big bite. “Mmm...”

He frowned. “What are these little green things?”

Finora’s lips twitched. “It’s mostly potatoes, corn, and celery, with a milk base. The green things are leeks—a type of onion—and various herbs for flavor. The little pink things are clam meat. A type of seafood.” She indicated Ioain, who was practically inhaling his bowlful. “He hates fish, but he loves this stuff. Try it.”

Niadh gave it an experimental lick.

Trystan took a bite, swallowed, then crossed his eyes and clutched his throat.

“Very funny,” Finora muttered.

Mari gathered up the book. “I have to get back home. If I find anything else out, Trystan, I’ll let you know.”

“So what did you learn in school today?” Finora asked Braeca.

“We started sub-trac-ting,” Braeca said. “It’s adding backward—take away numbers from bigger ones to get smaller ones.”

“Like...if I have a full glass o’ cider, an’ I take three big gulps,” Trystan demonstrated, “then I have half a glass o’ cider.”

“What did *you* do all day?” Braeca asked.

“Washed clothes,” Finora answered.

Braeca made a face.

"There was somefing scawy in the wato when we came here," Ioain said. "We walked past it weal fast."

Trystan shot Finora a sharp glance.

"Something was watching us from the harbor," she admitted. "It felt hostile, angry. But it stayed there. If it could have left the water, it would have. We're safe enough on land. 'Twas odd, though. I've been here seven years and I've never felt anything like it until now. Why wait until now?" She took a deep breath. Wood smoke, pipe smoke, apple cider and chowder. All the familiar scents of home. She almost forgot what life in the harem was like. She almost felt more at home here, in The Mermaid, than she'd ever felt in her sire's pod.

Almost.

Save for the siren call of the sea itself, her yearning to play with Bree and her sisters once more. How long it had been since she'd played tag with a dolphin. She missed the behemoth concerts. The mystical sounds rang out for miles when they sang, the enormous air-breathing fish. Some men hunted them with sharp metal hooks called harpoons for their meat and their oil. She knew what it was to need to hunt to live, but somehow their deaths were different than eating the smaller fishes. They were so majestic and grand, she felt a loss when one was dragged from the water. As if part of her very soul shriveled and died.

What was it that had stalked her from just beyond the shallows?

"I'm sure it's naught to worry about—just someone playing a mean trick on us," she stated.

Mick and Kale came in, dressed in their very best church-going finery, with big scowls on their faces.

"What's the matter with ye two?" Trystan called.

"We were invited t' dine at the big house," Mick growled. "But then were turned away at the door."

"Lady Anuk was feelin' poorly," Kale added. "So here we be. Tess, a whiskey an' ale."

Finora noticed Captain Reed frowning at the two men. "What's his problem?"

"Do ye notice anything...different...about Reed?" Trystan asked her. "Anything at all?"

She shook her head, and was surprised to see Ioain set down his glass and nod.

"He's wike that inside." The little boy pointed to the peat fire in the near hearth, which glowed with glints of red flame between the layers of moss.

Finora blinked. He was more perceptive than she'd thought.

"What about Mick an' Kale?" Trystan pressed.

Ioain shook his head. "Not wike Weed. Just peepo."

"They had t' have done sommat t' Reed," Trystan told Finora. "He wasna like that afore. E'en Ioain can sense his change. I have t' find out if they're what I seek."

"But they sound dangerous," she protested. "Changing people? Why?"

"I dinna ken. But I need answers t' take home t' me people. I've been gone long enough."

Finora caught the wistful tone in his voice, and saw Ioain's lower lip stick out and begin to tremble. "Ioain, what's wrong?"

"I don' want you to go 'way!" Ioain glared at Trystan.

Finora cringed inside.

Trystan smiled and shook his head at her. "Ne'er criticize any for speakin' their mind. Best t' be honest, always." He turned to Ioain. "I'll miss ye as weel, laddie. But I must be gettin' home. Me sister's havin' a wee bairn soon, an' I need to be seein' me family. I miss them and me mountains and forests."

"Can I come visit you?"

"Someday, when ye're a great big grown mon an' I'm a bent-o'er oldster, why no'? The Clans'd welcome ye."

"What's a bairn?" Braeca asked.

"A baby, poppet," Finora replied.

Ioain's eyes grew very round. "Twystan's gonna haf a baby?"

Braeca gave him a disdainful look down her nose. "No, silly. Trystan's *sister* is having a baby. Trystan's gonna be an *uncle*. Only girls can have babies."

"How come?"

Finora choked on her cider. Trystan's eyes twinkled at her.

"Cause." Braeca's tone was superior...and final.

"Not fair!" Ioain protested.

The door opened to let in Palo, a very pregnant Bella and their three children. Braeca jumped up to greet her best friend Mia with a hug. Bella waddled over to their table. "I'm so glad I found you here an' didn't have to climb that awful hill!" she puffed.

"Like you're climbin' any hills in your condition, woman!" Palo chided.

"What's wrong?" Finora asked.

"Naught," Bella assured her. "I was just wondering if your littles could spend the night with mine. We made some new puppets for them to play with."

"Please, Mama?" Braeca begged. "No school tomorrow."

"Pwease?" Ioain echoed. "I wuv puppets!"

Finora raised her eyebrows. "Are you sure you're up for five?"

Bella waved that off with a laugh. "Midwife says I've got another month to go."

"How many babies you got in there?" Finora teased.

"Just the one. Honest, I'm fine. Palo will be with them the whole time."

"Please?" Mia added to the begging.

"Very well." Finora turned to Palo. "You bring them home straightaway if they're too much."

"You can help Dag find eggs in the henhouse," Palo told Ioain.

Ioain's eyes lit up. "Yay!"

"An' I can show you how to milk a goat," Mia told Braeca. "I just learned. It's not hard."

"It's *squishy*!" her brother Dag teased.

"Eew! Ma!" Braeca protested.

Finora laughed. "Go on, then. Have fun."

"I'll bring them by after lunch," Palo promised. He waited for Ioain and Braeca to grab their coats, and then they all left together. The noise level dropped with their departure.

Finora smiled at Trystan. "Braeca and Mia go to school together. Palo and Bella live on a farm up in the hills. The children love going there."

"'Tis good for wee ones t' enjoy different things," he said. "The more things they try, quicker they find what they're interested in an' good at." He motioned for her to sit again, then joined her at their table.

She nodded. "I'm glad Mari and Bella step in. Sometimes I worry that they're too isolated up at the Light."

"They're fine," Trystan assured her. "They're like any other wee ones their age. Trust me."

"So, what's happened to Reed?" Finora asked under her breath.

Trystan leaned forward and took her hand. "He's spirit-touched, bound t' another. 'Tis almost like a guardian binding, like what I have with Niadh since he's the one who converted me. Teacher-student, partners. 'Tis heart an' mind an' spirit. What Reed has, 'tis similar but different. Darker, twisted. Niadh an' I are aware o' each other at all times, but Reed's binding 'tis one way. Someone sees through his eyes, hears with his ears, but he's unaware of it."

"So guardians are made, not born?"

"Aye. If we're needed—war or some such, those already changed move t' swell our ranks. Biting a warrior under the full moon works t' create a shifter. I was meant t' be a badger, but I found Niadh in a foot trap. When I tried t' free him, we tangled an' he bit me, turnin' me t' wolf instead. Why I alone have badger-grey hair among the Wolf Clan, an' I travel betwixt Badger an' Wolf Clans."

"So your hair turned grey when you were turned?"

He nodded. "Aye. Hair the color o' the chosen pelt serves t' warn others o' our higher calling—why I ne'er wed. I'm the only grey wolf in the clans. Most are black like Niadh." His eyes grew sad. "As punishment for his indiscretion, Niadh is doomed t' keep that form. I'm hopin' when we return I can convince the council t' lift his sentence. 'Tis too harsh an' has gone on long enough."

Finora turned to Niadh. "I'm sorry."

Niadh inclined his head.

"I hope you succeed. No one should be trapped in one form. I know."

"Ye need yer skin t' return t' the sea?"

She nodded. "I've looked all over the cottage and the Light tower, even down in the well. I've searched the caves under the cliffs. I can't think where else he'd hide it, since he knew what it was, what its power was, and wouldn't want it to fall into the wrong hands."

Niadh sneezed. Trystan squeezed her hands in warning, and Tess came back around.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"Nay." Trystan smiled.

"I need to get back up to the Light afore dark," Finora stated.

"Have a good night then." Tess wandered off.

"Ready to go?" Finora asked. "If you want to stay..."

Trystan shook his head. "Ye're no' walkin' home alone with sommat stalkin' ye along the shore." He accompanied her out onto the street. "Did ye e'er consider asking yer goddess, Cilaniestra, for help in findin' yer skin? Seems a goddess o' the sea would know right where it is."

Finora shuddered. "You don't ask Cilaniestra for favors. Ancient fishermen did it—asked permission to fish these waters. And they paid a hefty tithe in lost ships and lost lives for the privilege. Her cost would be too high. She takes what's most dear. I would not trade one of my own children for my freedom, and that's the price she's most likely to ask. I have naught else of value to offer, and that I will never do."

"Is she so dark then?"

Finora started to nod, then sighed and considered. "Depends on your point of view. For those that have lost loved ones, she can seem so. But for men from above to take prey from the predators of the deep, a trade must be made. Flesh for flesh. The ships become reefs that are home for many creatures. There are tiny, nearly invisible creatures that devour rotting flesh and stray scraps, that are in turn eaten by small fish, that are in turn eaten by bigger fish, and so on. If you consider that Cilaniestra has to care for all, then I guess not. But my children are not currency, nor are they objects for trade or barter."

Trystan smiled at her as they walked toward the cliffside path along the shore.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm of the mind that mothers are the ultimate guardians. We pale by comparison."

She snorted, but couldn't suppress a shudder as they passed through the empty market place. She stared ahead at the harbor's edge, where water lapped the shoreline with deceptive docility, and faltered. "I know I'm being foolish. Mayhaps 'twas but my imagination."

"Seldom do two people have the same imagination," Trystan said. "I'm armed. Niadh an' me, we'll be ready for whate'er ventures forth. Call Bree. Ask her if sommat's amiss."

Finora plowed to a halt, and felt the heat rise in her cheeks. "I'm a fool. Why didn't I think of that?" She closed her eyes so she wouldn't be distracted. "*Bree?*"

"*What's wrong? You sound tense.*"

“*Can you meet us? Come through the harbor.*” Finora opened her eyes and turned to Trystan. “If there’s anything amiss, Bree will find it. Not many creatures are fool enough to take on a mer. Their bite packs a powerful venom.”

Trystan’s jaw dropped. “She *kissed* me!”

“She didn’t *bite* you, so you’re safe.”

He looked unconvinced, so Finora just started walking again. He’d catch up.

He did, quicker than she had thought, just as she reached the narrow corridor that ran along the rocky shore. The water lapped at their boots. He kept a hand on one of his throwing axes, and his eyes were watchful as they scanned the surface of the harbor. “D’ye sense anything, lass?”

“I *warden hate* it when you call me that!” Finora burst out.

His eyes twinkled at her, unrepentant. “Verra weel. D’ye sense anythin’, *granna*?”

Finora glared at him, then she, too, turned her attention to the water. “Here comes Bree.”

“So what’s so urgent it couldn’t wait?” Bree called.

“Are ye alone?” Trystan asked.

“For the moment,” the mermaid replied. “I do have an assignation after dinner I need to return to, since you won’t come out and play, wolf man.”

“Bree, has anything changed? Have you heard any rumors?” Finora tried to keep her voice neutral, but creeping anxiety tightened it until she could barely form the words.

“Sommat was stalkin’ her an’ Ioain from the water earlier today,” Trystan clarified.

Bree shot him a sharp glance. “The boy?”

“My *son*, yes.” Finora glared at her friend. “Bree, focus. Think hard. Has anything changed back home?”

“King Freine’s taken ill. Prince Matteo was seen leaving your father’s hall looking none too pleased.”

Finora froze. “King Freine’s ill? How bad?”

“No one’s seen him in weeks. We don’t know if he’s even still alive. Looks like Matteo’s all but in charge now.”

Oh, Cilaniestra, no. “Bree, *think*! Are the *pups* still alive?”

“I think so.” Bree frowned. “I don’t think they could keep that secret.”

“What are you talking about?” Trystan demanded.

“When a selkie king dies, and his heir takes the throne and the crown by force, all secondary heirs—usually the successor’s bull siblings—are murdered by the new king’s bulls. He can’t allow any challenges to his reign. He’ll then move to impregnate every unrelated cow in the harem with his own offspring, and hand his cow siblings off to his chosen supporters.”

“Sounds chaotic,” Trystan said.

"You have no idea how brutal it can be," Bree stated. "Every shark in the sea seems to follow the scent of blood."

"You can't hide something like that," Finora mused. "So I don't think it's come to that yet. Freine must still be strong enough to wield support. Bulls won't follow the weak. Wonder what Matteo and my father discussed."

"King Griogair was a staunch supporter of the alliance with King Freine, and there's been peace between your two factions for many years," Bree reminded her. "An alliance to be cemented by your union with Prince Matteo. I wonder..."

"What?" Finora and Trystan asked in unison.

"I wonder if Matteo asked for your father's support—independent of his father's."

"My father would have said no. He's an honorable man. He would have honored the agreement with Freine as long as Freine still breathed. If he received proof of Freine's death, only then would he consider Matteo's offer."

"But Matteo would have equal power, and would remember Griogair's initial dismissal," Bree warned her. "Matteo is not so honor bound as his father...or yours. He would consider it an insult."

"He would never dare attack my father!" Finora burst out.

"Now *that*," Bree flashed a significant glance at Trystan, "would be chaotic. You should be glad you are out in the air and well out of it, Finora. Keep her close, warrior—her and her children. Keep them safe."

Niadh waded out into the water. He held out a paw to the mermaid, almost like a hand.

"I hold you to your vow, guardian," Bree responded to whatever he said. "I have to go. If anything happens, I will tell you." She turned and swam off.

Finora was freezing, despite her wrap. She trembled, part cold, part fear, part rage. "Matteo!" she called. "If you hurt my father I swear I'll find a rowboat and cut your heart out with a *spoon*!" she hollered across the water.

Trystan choked. "Subtle, lass." He pulled her into his arms, rubbed his hands up and down her back. "Let's get ye inside where 'tis warm. Ye need t' start the Light up for the night, too, remember?"

"Aye, ye're right," Finora murmured into his shirt. "There's naught I can do to help my father, but there is something I can do for the people here. And as long as I'm here, I will honor my charge."

He turned her face up to his. "Spoken like a true guardian."

"Do you really think so?" This close, he rendered her breathless with but a single look.

"I do. Bein' a guardian starts with yer heart, an' ye have the heart o' a bear."

She blushed, then frowned. "What's a bear?"

He snorted and shook his head. "Let's go. I'll explain where it's warmer."

Niadh gave a little yip and loped off.

"Where's he going?" Finora asked.

“Scoutin’. If we’re goin’ tomorrow, he’ll snoop around t’ check out the place t’night.”

She led the way up the cliffside path toward the cottage. Rona lay curled up in the kitchen window watching their return. Storm greeted them at the door, or rather pushed his way through them to get outside. Finora draped her wrap over her chair, then grabbed a candle, lit it and climbed the stairs to start the Light. It was a well-rehearsed series of tasks, and soon the Light blazed over the calm of the harbor in all its fiery splendor.

Fire. The one thing missing in the watery realm of the deep. There were glowing worms kept in glass jars that illuminated the various rocky chambers, but naught like the warmth and light possessed by the humans. Yet one more reason to question, to waver. To doubt.

“Stay safe, Sire,” she whispered. She stared at the moon. Tonight, Cilaniestra kept herself hidden.

Finora descended into the light and warmth of her home. Trystan had revitalized the hearth, and Storm was back on the rug afore it. The big dog thumped his tail as she flopped down and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Such a grand beastie,” she crooned. She turned to Trystan as he crouched aside her. “Strange. I’ve grown to love this house. Once it was just my prison. Now it’s my home.”

“I look around, an’ ev’rywhere my eye falls becries ye. Ye’re ev’rywhere in this place.” He turned to her. “If it feels like a home, Finora, ’tis ’cause ye be the heart o’ it.”

She needed to change the subject. “So, what’s a bear? I need to be knowing if it’s an insult or a compliment you flung me, comparing me to some unknown animal.”

“A compliment,” he assured her. “Bears are the ultimate mothers an’ guardians. They live in the mountains, great shaggy furry critters mayhaps four times the size o’ Storm here. High hunched shoulders, lowset head, no tail. Verra round bodies.”

“So you’re saying I’m round?” she teased.

“Nay. A bear is a survivor. They can survive the toughest climate, eat almost anything. They’re peaceful unless riled. A mother bear births but one cub at a time, an’ it follows her for two years, learnin’ the way o’ things. They’re canny, lovin’ an’ good teachers. But they’re absolutely ruthless when sommat threatens their cubs. Ye ne’er want t’ mess with them.”

“Hmm...but I like it when you mess with me, mountain man.”

That feral-green light flashed in his eyes. “D’ye now?”

She grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled him closer. “I’m not a mother tonight. Tell me more about this canny and loving part, though.”

He smiled. “Now ye’re fishin’.”

“I’m a selkie. We’re experts.” She leaned forward to nibble under his jaw and slid her arms up over his shoulders.

Trystan turned his head and captured her mouth in a bone-melting kiss. Finora’s lips parted, and tingling heat rose with every stroke of his tongue on hers. She clutched his hair, nipped at his lower lip.

Trystan growled and deepened the kiss, until her breath became his. His became hers. He reached out to haul her onto his lap, and she flowed over him, onto him. Like water on rock.

Something wet and cold pressed against the back of her neck. Finora squeaked and jerked her eyes open to see a very quizzical and interested Storm peering at them both.

Trystan half-laughed, half-groaned. “Mayhaps we should take this someplace quiet—with a solid door we can close?”

“I know just the place,” she whispered. She rose and hauled him to his feet. “Come on.”

“Bossy as well as canny,” he teased.

“Wait till I show you the loving part,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Canna wait.”

She dragged him to the bedroom and kicked the door shut so the latch dropped into place. “Now where were we?”

“Fishin’.” His eyes gleamed at her in the moonlight.

“Well, first off, clothing has to go. Tangles you up, tends to slow you down.”

“No clothes. I think I’m likin’ this whole fishin’ idea.” He unwound his plaid and pulled his shirt off. “Need help with that?”

Finora turned her back to him. “Mayhaps just with the lacing.”

He swept her hair aside to kiss the sensitive nape of her neck. She shivered as he pulled the laces loose enough to work the gown off her shoulders. He seemed determined to follow the descending line of cloth with a burning trail of nibbling kisses across her shoulders and down her back. Trystan reached around to cup her breasts, tease them into aching points of need as he kissed his way down her spine.

The brush of his beard over her sensitized skin made Finora gasp and arch into his hands. The material crumpled in a heap at her feet, but Trystan kept going, raining a fiery trail of kisses over the curve of her backside. No longer able to reach her breasts, he abandoned them. She wanted to cry at the loss, only to whimper anew as his seeking fingers glided over her belly. He nibbled her thighs to tease the backs of her knees with his tongue. Who’d have thought that could be so arousing?

He trailed his hand across her inner thighs up to the damp curls betwixt her thighs, and Finora moaned. Her legs shook. Her fingers itched to touch him, but she couldn’t move. She’d never been so enflamed in her entire life. “Trystan, please!”

A growl was his sole reply, as he sought and found her heated core. She pushed back against him, rolling her hips, wishing it were his tongue. He crowded her forward onto the bed, slid beneath her so she straddled his face.

It was a shocking change of position. Finora looked down...to see a large male shaft jutting toward her. Trystan took her hand, wrapped it around himself, and squeezed. Velvet over wood. He groaned. “Touch me, lass. Taste me.” Taste him? Surely he didn’t mean... She choked as his tongue traced a line of

fire along her drenched folds, and he reached out to cup her breasts, pinch her nipples. Her hand tightened in response, and he groaned again, thrusting upward with his hips. She stared, mesmerized by the single drop of creamy white fluid crowning the flushed head of his shaft. She flicked her tongue against him. The deep, salty, earthy taste surprised her, aroused her. The very impropriety of it all aroused her. Emboldened, she twirled her tongue around the blunt head.

“Take me in yer mouth.” Trystan’s rough voice, raspy with desire, sent an answering shiver through her. “Suck on me.”

She’d never imagined doing such a thing in her life. But it felt so good, what he did to her, that she yearned to give him the same pleasure. She opened her mouth around him and took in as much as she could, pulling back when she choked. She soon discovered her limit, and used her hands to compensate. Awkwardly at first, then with more confidence, she soon found a rhythm to it all.

Trystan’s tongue stroked her, stabbed into her. His fingers circled her nipples, his tongue built her tension with every flick against the crowning pearl. Finora found herself rubbing against him, faster, aching, needing that cresting burst of pleasure. Her hand tightened on him, and she sucked harder, mimicking the act of sex. He thrust up faster, and she knew he drove toward his own satisfaction. The whole world shrank to pure sensation, boiling need tightening to almost painful intensity. She moved on his mouth, tonguing his shaft, sucking on him. She loved the feel and flavor of him. She loved arousing his own need to such a frenzy.

The rush hit her, exploded through her. She shook over him, tightened around him until he groaned and a splash of hot liquid flooded her mouth. Unsure what to do, she swallowed...and swallowed. And then collapsed onto him, dazed and breathless.

Trystan rolled them onto their sides, turned her around so her head rested on his shoulder. His heartbeat pounded under her ear, and every muscle twitched. He lay gasping. She shook in his arms, quivering with aftershocks. Every beat of his heart thundered through her.

She’d never felt so exposed...or safe...in her life.

His fingers trailed over her arm, down her back. She raised herself up over him, so she could look down into his eyes. Warm satisfaction with flickers of lingering heat shimmered up at her. She felt her cheeks flame at what she’d...they’d...just done.

“Dinna be embarrassed, lass,” he whispered, tracing her lips with his thumb. “’Tis a rare gift o’ pleasure I’ll be rememberin’ always.”

She wasn’t ready to be a memory just yet, and leaned in for a slow, sultry kiss. He rolled over her, and she ran her hands down his back. Morning was a long way off. Plenty of time for more memories.

Chapter Ten

Trystan's arms tightened as Finora squirmed against him in her sleep. The sun had not yet cracked the horizon, yet he lay wide awake. He brushed her hair from her face and watched her slumber. Her eyes darted beneath closed lids. He wondered what she dreamed about.

He'd dreamed of introducing her to his mother. Fenia would welcome her new daughter and grandchildren. He sighed. 'Twas impossible. The way he understood it, Finora was bound to the sea and could never leave it. He had to go home. A creature of water would never be happy in mountains of rock and earth. The sea was in her blood. She'd never find peace anywhere else.

Unless...

There might be a way. The sea might be in her blood, but the earth was in his bones. Guardians could convert another only under the full of the moon, but at other times a bite could be used for healing. A bond to the earth for strength. Solid, stable. With the sea in her blood and a tie to the earth in her bones, it might be possible to grant her a sense of balance, to ease the tearing in her soul. If he had to leave, he could at least grant her this one parting gift to make the remainder of her days more bearable.

"Niadh, what do you think? Could it work?"

"In theory, aye. But I dinna ken any who's tried it in that capacity. Would it hold her back if she did someday find her skin? Would it prevent her from living full-time in the sea?"

Trystan didn't know. All he knew was her pain had somehow become his. He couldn't stand by and not try to do something to ease her suffering. Something told him a sense of balance was possible, and this was the way.

But would she agree?

"Great Mother o' All, help me aid her," he prayed. "She deserves t' be happy an' at peace, whate'er the future holds for her. Where'er Ye lead, I follow. Ye know that. But let me no' cause Finora further harm. Help me do what's right by her."

A sense of affirmation filled him.

He trailed his fingers down Finora's arm, and smiled when she made a grumpy sound and swatted his hand away. What he wouldn't give to be able to wake her up every morning for the rest of their lives. He'd be proud to call her Mate...if she'd have him. If she'd ask. He recalled her shock that women ruled in his world. Her world sounded backward, if bulls held all the power and cows were seen and not heard. Women

were the personification of the Mother of All. They brought forth new life. Was it so different under the waves?

The sea goddess was female. Cilaniestra. Did she not demand honor as well as tribute?

Trystan bent his head to nibble Finora's shoulder, flick his tongue against her ear. She sighed and tilted her face away to grant him greater access, but didn't open her eyes. "Are ye dreamin', lass?" he whispered in her ear.

Her lips quirked. "Mmm hmm." She reached up and caressed his cheek.

"Finora, I need ye t' wake."

"I need you, too." She pulled him down for a sensuous, drugging kiss.

Sun and moon, she aroused him like no other. The tingle of awareness ignited to a slow, low burn. He stroked her tongue with his, reveled in the sweet warm taste of desire, of need. Her need. For him. Her fingers tightened in his hair as she shifted closer and entwined her legs with his. The sensation of her sleep-warmed skin sliding along his made him shiver.

He needed to talk to her before they got beyond thought, let alone speech. "Look at me, Finora."

She dragged her eyelids open. "Hmm?"

She made him ache with but a single sultry glance. Trystan watched her struggle to focus, saw clarity return to her eyes. "I've been thinking," he said.

"About what?"

"What's different 'bout swimming in the surf as ye are now as opposed t' afore?"

Finora quivered. "I can touch the water, but not be a part of it. When I'm in my skin, the water flows through me. It's a song in my blood, it echoes in my soul. It's music and poetry. I'm complete. I can feel the creatures around me, hear their thoughts, feel their emotions. I'm part of the whole. Without it, I'm but a cork on the surface. Blind. Deaf."

"What 'bout when ye stand on land?" he pressed.

"It's dead to me. Still. Silent. Dead. No music. No motion." She shuddered.

Trystan shook his head. "Nay, lass. No' dead. 'Tis strong. Constant. A foundation. The earth is the bones of this world, the sea is Her blood. A balance exists betwixt the two. I think I can help ye feel that balance, give ye a tie t' the earth t' help ye stand firm."

Her eyes narrowed as she frowned. "How?"

"Do ye trust me?"

"Aye," she replied without hesitation. The quickness of her answer warmed him.

"As a child of the earth, it runs deep in me, through me. I can share me essence with ye, similar t' a guardian conversion spell. 'Tis a lesser magic, used most often when healin' a grievous wound."

"Would it drown out the sea?"

He shook his head. "Ye're a daughter of the sea, of water. I canna change yer verra nature, were I t' attempt t' convert ye under the full o' the moon. 'Twould be a link only t' the earth, through me. 'Twould make it less foreign t' ye, give ye a sense o' the familiar."

Hope lit her face. "How?"

Trystan hesitated. "Do ye trust me?"

Finora nodded. "You'd never hurt anyone, guardian."

"Weel, in this case, 'tis unavoidable. I'd have t' bite ye hard enough t' break the skin so the Were serum can enter yer blood."

"What would it feel like?"

"I canna answer that, lass. Mine wasna halfway, but under the full o' the moon. I'd ken 'twill be less violent than me own."

Finora shivered. She searched his eyes, for what, he didn't know. "I know you only want to help. Have you done this afore?"

"Nay. I've seen it done for healing. In theory, it shoulda work. It willna harm ye."

"Would you stay human...or wolf?"

An idea struck him. "Human."

She visibly braced herself. "Go ahead."

Trystan grinned and reached for her. Pulling her rigid body into his arms, he touched his lips to hers.

Finora jerked back, her eyes wide. "What are you doing?"

"Lor', woman, ye have a wee short memory," he teased. "Guess I need t' be remindin' ye." He took her mouth again, in a thorough kiss of absolute mastery that gave her no quarter to hesitate or change her mind. His lips devoured hers, and with a whimper she opened to him. The silken caress of her tongue tangling with his burned though his body, and he hardened in reaction. His inner wolf howled for his mate, howled to take her and make her his for all time. His hands ran over her satin skin and lush curves. She burned hot and fast as he curled her arms around his neck to hold him closer. He nipped at her lower lip, and her nails tightened into his shoulders in response.

Trystan crowded her back into the pillows, slid his leg between hers as she wrapped herself around him. He loved how she responded to him, so quickly, holding nothing back. Heart and soul his. He kneaded her breast, teasing her nipple until it flushed and puckered tight against his fingers. He kissed his way down her throat, growling when her pulse pounded against his lips.

"Please..." Finora's fingers tangled in his hair as she guided him down and arched her back, offering her breast to him in open invitation. She slid her legs through and around his.

The stroke of her smooth, supple skin against his made him shudder and groan with pleasure. Every nerve danced to attention as she teased his lower body. All the blood pooled in his groin, making him lightheaded. Sun and moon but he ached. He latched onto her breast like a starving man, rasping her nipple

with his tongue. Teased it with quick, stabbing motions until she cried out and writhed against him. He burned at the hot scent of arousal, of need that poured from her, burned to bathe himself in that fire.

He switched to her other breast, suckling hard, slid his hand down over the curve of her hip to knead her backside. Unbidden, words pounded in his brain. “Ye draw me as the moon draws the tide,” he whispered. “Magical, irresistible. Selkie an’ Were, both kin t’ the moon.” He rose, ravished her mouth with his until they were both shaking and breathless. “I bind meself t’ ye, earth t’ sea, bone t’ blood.” He slid his aching shaft through her hot cream, burying himself in her throbbing body. She pulsed around him with hunger and need, stared at him with passion-glazed eyes. “I feel yer hunger, I feel yer need. It calls t’ me. An’ I pledge me body t’ answer that call. Heart an’ soul, I bind ye t’ me, sea t’ earth, blood t’ bone.” He felt his fangs lengthen, and his vision narrowed to the blood pounding just below the sweet, silken skin of her throat. He flexed his hips, drawing out, then slamming into her as deep as he could. At that moment, he bent his head and bit her, where her neck curved into her shoulder, until her blood flowed over his tongue.

She cried out in shock, in helpless arousal, arching into him. Were serum flowed into her as he tasted her blood. Primal need flashed, to possess her, to bind her to him. To take her so deep she never got him out. He pounded into her, too far gone in the rush of power, of magic, to hold anything back. She met him with voracious passion, as caught up in the flames as he. Stroke for stroke, sizzling need for pulsing need. Until sea and earth erupted in an explosion of fire.

Finora screamed as she shattered, her body squeezing around him. He shuddered as the pleasure took him, a flash of relief as his seed rushed to fill her. He felt it, felt himself swirling within her, felt his Were moon-serum coating her bones, locking him to her for all time. He’d expected to bind her to the earth.

He had—through him. And he felt the sea rushing through his veins, with her blood that flowed into his body. He ran his tongue over the bite wound, watching, dazed, as it closed afore his very eyes. He took her mouth, and she melted into him, around him. He felt her quiver at the taste of blood and magic that lingered, felt the slow, relentless bleeding of her soul slow, and stop, in time with the wound on her shoulder.

Mate. Mine, echoed through his mind. Sun and moon, what had he done?

Finora couldn’t stop trembling. The elemental earth magic locked onto her bones and the slight ever-present sense of wrongness dissipated. Balance, relief...regret. She turned to Trystan. “I can sense your thoughts, your feelings. Why regret?”

“I only meant t’ bind ye to the earth, no’ t’ me.” His eyes were troubled. “I feel the sea, a distant ebb an’ flow within me. Can ye still?”

She concentrated. “Aye, but muted, as through a curtain. It worked!”

“Can ye still summon Bree?” His tone was urgent.

It hadn’t occurred to her she might not be able to now. How else would she be kept abreast of what transpired below? *“Bree? It’s Finora. Can you hear me?”*

A moment of silence. *“Finora?”* Bree sounded a thousand miles away. *“I can barely hear you. It’s like through a tunnel. Where are you? Is everything all right?”*

“Everything’s fine,” Finora told her. *“Don’t worry about me.”* She turned to Trystan. “I can still speak with Bree. It’s foggy, but still there. I sense your presence. Not thoughts or feelings, but a presence, an awareness at the edge of my thoughts, like seeing something out of the corner of my eye that’s not there when I turn to look at it.”

“Ye canna hear me thoughts?” He looked relieved.

“Are your thoughts so terrible, then?” she teased.

“That isna what I meant, lass. ’Twas meant t’ be a single tie t’ the land only, not a personal tie t’ me.” He paused, his expression serious. “Were we bound together, by blood an’ moon as True-Mates, we’d sense each other’s thoughts an’ emotions. But we’d have t’ stay together. Ye couldna return t’ the sea without me, I couldna return t’ the mountains without ye. ’Tis soul-bound, no’ mere marriage, I speak on. ’Tis too permanent an act to perform by accident an’ without yer full knowledge an’ consent.”

A part of her thought it wouldn’t be so bad, being bound to Trystan. He was noble, honorable, compassionate...handsome and an amazing lover. He not only accepted her thoughts and opinions, he encouraged them. Where else would she find a man like him?

“I’ve never been able to sense any element aside the earth afore,” Trystan went on. “I dinna feel anything ’bout it, emotionally, no’ yearnin’ nor fear, but I can sense its presence. No one told me ’twould work both ways.”

“Well, that doesn’t surprise me,” Finora stated.

He turned to her. “Why no’?”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes...barely. “Trystan, it’s perfectly logical. You told me you saw it used to heal, and I assume you’ve met True-Mated couples, rare though they be. Well, I assume you meant all involved parties were earth at both ends, true? When was the last time someone tried it with a creature of water...or the air? Stands to reason it would have a residual backwash the other way.”

He looked, then his eyes lost focus for a moment and he chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Niadh’s wonderin’ if mayhaps ye cured me seasickness.”

Hope rose, warm and bubbly. “Wouldn’t that be wonderful if I could do something for you in return? It would make your return home less miserable than your journey here.”

His face sobered, and he searched her eyes. “Do sommat for me in return? Lass, ye gave me an’ Niadh our lives back. A life-debt we owe ye fore’er.”

Finora shook her head. "Shipwreck rescues are what I do, my job, my calling. Like you're a warrior. If you have to swear life-debt to everyone you protect in battle, what a tangled web Arcadia must be! You fought and defeated a demon. The whole world must owe you."

He shook his head. "That's not the way it works."

"What? You were just doing your job?" She glared. "So was I. Leave it lie, warrior."

Trystan laughed. "Your da must have grey hair, lass."

"I take after my dam," she admitted. "My sire's a rare one. Thoughtly cows don't scare him. I miss my family. I have younger siblings I haven't even met yet."

"What's it like, home?" he asked.

"Boisterous. Loud." She thought for a moment. "That's what hurt the most—the silence. Such a terrible silence, alone. I told you we live in harems, that each bull has many cows all living together in small groups under one dominant bull's big group. Families of cows and their pups, under their personal bull. My father rules over his realm." Her lips thinned. "The bulls are temperamental, belligerent. Family groups and borders tend to be...fluid. My sire's group is the most stable in the area. He doesn't encourage bullying or raiding, but in other herds it's quite common."

He looked shocked. "Ye mean ye could wake up one morning the wife o' one mon an' go t' sleep that verra night the wife o' 'nother?"

Finora nodded. "If a bull wants you bad enough and is strong enough to take you, and your ruling bull can't defend you, yes. Only the strongest bulls can take and hold a harem."

"An' women—cows—have no choice in the matter?"

"Well, we can try to sneak off, or complain, but the bulls are four times our size, Trystan. Sometimes, a cow will have her eye on another bull and leave herself open for him to take her if she catches his interest. So it's not always against her will. But sometimes it is. Asides, that's the way of things. The way it is."

"And *that's* what ye would go back to? Why would ye want to?"

"It's my home. My family. It's all I know."

He shook his head. "Nay. Once, mayhaps. But ye've learned better now. Yer curiosity got the better o' ye and ye came t' investigate. No fault o' yers ye were betrayed by one shoulda kenned better. Now ye've been on land for what, seven years? Ye've seen other women make lives for themselves independent o' men. E'en the married ones exist in a partnership.

"Ye've the strength now t' make a choice, should the opportunity present itself. 'Tis yer choice, no' yer fate. T' return t' the sea, or stay on land with yer littles. T' stay 'til they're grown, an' then return, if that be yer wish." His eyes were fierce. "Yer choice, lass. Ye've the strength t' make it. No one tell ye what ye can or canna do. No one. That's what this tie can do. What 'twas intended t' do. Free ye t' make yer own choice. No' a prisoner anymore."

She froze. "I still don't have my skin."

“Ye’ll find it. Ye’d ken if ’twas destroyed. When ye find it, then ye’ll understand what ’tis I’m tryin’ t’ tell ye.”

“*Finora!*” Bree’s call came from a thousand leagues away, distant and fuzzy-edged. More scream than mind-call. Shock, anger, despair hurled with a complete lack of focus.

“*What’s wrong?*”

“What’s wrong?” Trystan echoed.

Finora held up a hand to silence him and focused hard to hold on to Bree. “*What’s happened?*”

“*King Freine is dead,*” Bree wailed. “*Matteo’s taken the crown and disappeared. The cullings have begun!*”

Chapter Eleven

A wave of nausea swept over Finora. *“What do you mean, gone?”*

“His henchmen perform the culling. Matteo’s not there. No one knows where he went.”

Trystan’s hands shook Finora by her shoulders. “Finora, ’tis Bree, no? What’d she say?”

“Matteo’s taken the crown from his sire, King Freine, but he’s not there to supervise the culling.”

“Is that normal, leaving it for others?”

She shook her head.

“I dinna like this. It feels wrong.” Trystan’s eyes glazed over for a moment. “Niadh says Palo’s on his way here with the littles. Best get dressed.”

“Finora, I’ve got one o’ Freine’s minor cows with me. She’s taken refuge with the mers, and we won’t let Matteo’s bulls have her. She’s pregnant. She says Matteo was heading to land, to speak with a great wizard. He has a magic knife—one that makes all do his bidding.”

“He? Which ‘he’ has the knife? Matteo or the wizard?” Finora pulled on her stockings, tossed a gown over her head. Trystan was already winding his plaid about his shirt, securing it with his wolf’s head brooch.

“Matteo. She says the wizard gave it to him.”

“Thanks, Bree.” Finora relayed the message to Trystan.

“Time for me an’ Niadh t’ pay a visit t’ this great wizard.” Trystan’s jaw was set as he donned his hauberk and buckled on his weapons belt. “We’ll get Reed to introduce us.”

Finora bit her lip. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Here.” Trystan thrust a handful of dried herbs at her. They were tied with a green ribbon and gold cord. “Hang this o’er yer door. Get the kids an’ lock it behind ye. Dinna open it t’ anyone ’til I return.”

“What is it?” She sniffed at it. The plants were unfamiliar—save one. *Rovelia* was a nasty type of seaweed, prickly and poisonous. She was careful not to touch it.

“A warding from Mari. She’s a witch. It’s made from repellant plants from both earth an’ sea. No one may enter yer home uninvited. As long as ye keep the doors an’ windows closed, ye’re safe.” He kissed her, hard.

Mari was a witch? This was a new Trystan she’d always known existed but had never seen. All business. All warrior. “And why should I be needing this? I have no enemies here.”

“Humor me.” Trystan stiffened. “Niadh, what’re ye doing? Nay, ye wait for me, ye bloody wee fool. Naaay!”

Finora’s heart lurched. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Trystan shimmered for a moment, then he wrestled it down. His eyes blazed with savage fury. “They took them. The children. A small band o’ dark-haired men wearin’ garments o’ sea-fronds, armed with odd three-pronged spears. Niadh tried t’ intervene an’ they took him down. He still lives. They’re bringin’ him with them. Down t’ the village.”

Fear she’d never met afore clogged her throat until she nigh couldn’t breathe. She grabbed her coat. “I’m coming with you.”

“Nay, ye’re no’.”

“Trystan, those men you just described are selkie bulls in human form. What would they want with my children?” She thought hard. “Matteo. He’s the only one who would. But why?”

“Were ye no’ promised him as bride? Would ye no’ tie him t’ yer father by doin’ so?” he demanded. “Ye stay here, where ’tis safe. I promise on me life, I will bring them home t’ ye.”

He couldn’t divide his attention betwixt her, Niadh and the children. If she could help him by staying behind, then she would. “Be careful. Be safe.” *Come back to me. Great Mother of All, watch over my children. Let no harm come to them.*

He nodded and left.

Finora hung the warding over the door, bolted it behind her, and prayed as she had never prayed afore.

Trystan watched Reed reach for the great bronze doorknocker. A bronze ring in a dragon’s jaws. Reed called it fanciful, but to Trystan it felt like an omen. His inner guardian wolf growled, and he felt his own hackles rise at the darkness swirling behind that door. The ring thudded against the door...once...twice. Conviction burned in Trystan’s heart. *Respect an’ honor. Strength in the Earth. T’ the Light at the End o’ All Things. The Mother o’ All will welcome us. I dinna fear death, so much as failure. Please let me no’ be too late. Keep the wee ones safe.* Trystan fingered his amulet as the great door swung open.

A stooped, rail-thin elder stood afore them. “Who disturbs my master’s peace?” The old man’s voice trailed off in a fit of coughing.

Two things trailed from the interior of the house to wrap themselves around Trystan—the reek of incense and a sense of avaricious hunger, of eyes cloaked in shadows. Lust. Sex. Pain. Trystan sneezed and set his jaw against the spell stirring his body. Niadh would be immune to that dark magic, but he was wounded. He’d trance himself to stop the bleeding, but his healing would be slow, hampered by his

inability to shift. Trystan had to save him, but the drug-tinged incense would play havoc with his own senses.

"I've brought a person of interest to Lord Spiridon," Reed announced. "One with knowledge of Arcadia."

"Was he expecting ye?"

"Not at a specified time. Would ye prefer we make an appointment?"

"Come in and wait in the hall whilst I see if the master will see ye."

"If not, mayhaps the lady o' the house," Reed pressed.

The old man shot him an aggrieved look. "The lady is indisposed at present."

A flicker of concern crossed Reed's face. "Naught serious, I hope."

"They've not called a doctor, if that's what ye ask. Wait here." The old man shambled off into the shadows.

"Do ye know the lady o' this house?" Trystan asked.

A secret flashed in Reed's eyes. "Aye. A remarkable woman."

Trystan sneezed again. 'Twas like a brothel for demons. He fought down the suicidal urge to storm the castle.

Trystan stared at the marble and granite. The statuary had a definite erotic bend to it, or mayhaps the incense affected his brain. He gripped the amulet, letting the discomfort of the eagle's beak against his palm focus his mind past the stirring of his body. *Strength in the Earth*, he reminded himself. *Respect an' honor*. 'Twas cloyin' but he fought it. Trystan tore his gaze from the artwork to look over the marble tiles of the floor, to follow the blood-red woolen runner to the grand staircase. 'Twas like a palace. Even Hengist's Keep didn't have the fancy bronzed railings. Wrought iron would have been less work, and more durable. But come to think on it, 'twas no iron in sight.

Wasn't that interesting?

Dragonkind couldn't abide the touch of iron, pure or blend. 'Twas a binding poison on their powers. The wounds Dara had borne had been grievous and soul-deep. That it was absent here was interesting indeed.

Ponderous footsteps announced the old man's return. "Ye're to wait in the library. Follow me."

Reed winced. Trystan wondered why and kept his eyes glued to the rigid set of Reed's shoulders, the uncharacteristic hesitancy in his step. Reed paused afore entering the room. Trystan viewed it cautiously from the doorway. At first glance it looked downright cozy. A cheerful fire burned in the hearth, comfortable furniture, oil lamps on the wall for lighting enough to read by, a fine woolen rug on the floor. But the room reeked of lust and sex, pain and darkness. It curled around Trystan, and to his disgust he felt his body harden in reaction.

Niadh and the children were nowhere to be seen.

He tore his mind from the allure by studying Reed. The shadow within the big sea captain permeated the rug. Whatever had been done to bind him had been done here. Now he knew where he'd felt such a stirring afore. Dara. That fierce golden allure screamed dragonkind, but this was nothing like the clear passion that marked her presence. This was a brutal, dark twist on it, a bend of subjugation, enslavement, possession. Everything the guardians were supposed to stand against. How could a guardian go so wrong? How was Trystan to stand against it when his very body strove to weaken his mind?

'Twas all wrong. Trystan clenched his jaw. He was badger as well as wolf. Closer to the earth than most, in it as well as on it. Therefore, he should be stronger than most.

"We can have something to drink whilst we wait," Reed said. "There's drenieval acorn whiskey, or wine if you'd rather."

The last thing Trystan wanted was to weaken his mind further with spirits. "I'll pass, thanks."

Reed shrugged and poured himself a generous portion of the whiskey. The sharp scent of home cut through the drugging incense, clearing Trystan's mind. Home. East and north. Cold mountains, cozy fires. Fenia and Rybyk, Moira and Hengist. Dear old Agata, the shaman. The guardians—badger, wolf, bear. Dragon. They also called the border mountains home. How could guardians stray so far from their essence, their very reason for being?

He couldn't wait to get home again. If he never saw that accursed sea again, 'twould be too soon. But how could he return there, look Dara in the eye and tell her the only blood kin of hers he'd found were enslaving people?

"And just what do you think you are doing?" a warm, melodious voice demanded. It reached around, within, resin-warm, resin-thick. Ready to harden to amber, trapping one forever. The wolf within Trystan reacted, crouching with flattened ears and a low growl of defiance. The human Trystan turned to confront a tall aristocratic red-haired man with chilly gold eyes and a sardonic twist to his mouth. That cold reptilian gaze pinned Reed, and to his horror Trystan saw Reed drop to his knees and bow. Just like that.

"Forgive me, my lord."

The man turned to Trystan, and something red and unpleasant flashed within the gold of his eyes. "I am Lord Spiridon. You have come to serve me in my trading venture?"

Serve? In his dreams. Guardians served the people, not the other way around. "I only serve me goddess, me mother and me people," Trystan stated. The sensual racial resemblance to Dara was unmistakable, but Dara had always ignored her allure. Never had Trystan conceived of a dragon wielding it as a weapon.

"I'd forgotten the stubbornness of those that dwell in the mountains, living in caves like dens of bears instead of civilized humans," Spiridon sneered.

"Yer people come from those verra mountains," Trystan said. "Ye're no more a lord than I am."

Spiridon seemed to swell to twice his original size. “I am a creature of the elements, of earth and fire, of magic. Power goes to the powerful, to those who can wield it. None can stand against me.” He indicated Reed, still on his knees, head bowed.

Now where had he heard that afore? Why couldn’t a bully ever come up with a new line? “Release him. I have much t’ discuss with ye, but Reed isna a part o’ this. Release him.”

“Who are you to order me about?”

“One who says ye dinna demonstrate true power by pushin’ about those weaker than ye, as if ye were naught but a schoolyard bully,” Trystan answered. “Ye should be above that, my *lord*.”

“Reed knows to respect his betters.”

“Respect is earned, no’ forced. Ye’ve but forced him t’ bow t’ one more powerful than he. It proves naught o’ ye bein’ better than anyone—just stronger. An ox is stronger than a man, yet do men bow t’ the ox? Release him.”

The red in Spiridon’s eyes glowed brighter, yet the dark cord about Reed snapped, as if a rope cut by a knife. “Ye may go, Captain. Do not return again until summoned...or I shall be most displeased.”

“Aye, m’lord.” Reed left without a backward glance.

Trystan shook his head. “Why waste yer time here? Ye’re meant for so much more.”

“And what’s that?” Spiridon looked amused. “What is it you think I am meant to do?”

“Where are they?” Trystan demanded. “The children stolen by the seal-men? I know they were brought here.” The feel of a burning cord encircled his throat, cutting off his voice. He could neither speak nor move.

Spiridon approached, his eyes blazing. He reached out a hand to caress the dragonscale hauberk. “Where did you get this?” he demanded. There was an odd hoarseness to his voice.

Trystan found the cord loosened enough for a whisper to trickle out. “Recognize it? ’Twas made from the shed skin o’ a guardian. ’Tis verra old. Made afore I was born, afore the last guardian dragon disappeared from our mountains fore’er. Where’s Niadh? Where are the children, ye rotten beast?” He found himself choking for air and dropped to his knees, gasping.

“I could kill you now, you half-breed abomination,” Spiridon growled. He bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. “Did no one pass along the tales of a dragon’s allure? I could make you crawl over here on all fours and pleasure me, and make you enjoy it.”

Trystan found strength enough for a whisper. “I’m no’ interested in men.”

Spiridon laughed. “I’m not a man, you poor fool. And it wouldn’t matter.”

A wave of pure unadulterated lust swamped Trystan. His body hardened, his member ached. He’d never desired anything like he yearned for the perfect creature standing afore him. Tearing his mind from the sensual allure was like pounding forge-fresh spikes straight into his brain. He reached for one of his

knives, not to throw—he'd no strength for that—but to grasp a blade. The pain of the cut gave him something else to focus on.

Spiridon stood afore him, his hips level with Trystan's face. "First things first." His sharp gaze scanned Trystan's clothing. "There we go. That's what I was looking for." He reached out to pull one long sable strand of hair from Trystan's body, where it had caught in the edge of the dragonscale. Spiridon tsked. "Not your color, guardian."

The door opened, and through a red haze of fear, lust and pain Trystan focused on the approach of a dark-haired man. "I brought you the children, as promised, wizard, plus the wolfling as a bonus. Now what have you for me, according to our pact?"

He spoke as an arrogant princeling—spoiled and selfish. Trystan watched the swirl of darkness in his soul, the stain of blood.

Spiridon smirked. "Who am I to deny true love?" he taunted. He kissed Finora's hair and whispered a litany of guttural hissing phrases. The hair glowed and crackled. "Come to me," he called in common, and with a "pop!" an oilskin-wrapped parcel appeared on the nearest table. Spiridon unwrapped it. A tumble of sable-colored velvet hide unfurled in his grip.

Matteo sucked in a breath. An unholy yearning gleamed in his eyes. "Give it to me." His voice was raspy and hoarse. "In the name of Cilaniestra, honor the pact."

Thunder rumbled in what Trystan knew was a clear blue sky. Spiridon cast the selkie a surprisingly sulky glance and tossed him the skin. "Begone, merchant. I still await the second half of your bargain."

"And you shall have it." Matteo glared at Trystan. Stalking forward, he reached out to take hold of the wolf-eagle amulet. Afore Trystan could blink, Matteo had torn it from Trystan's neck. "This will come in handy. Finora won't be able to walk for a week when I'm done with her tonight." He turned and left.

Rage consumed him. Trystan fought to stand. Just that quickly he fought to breathe.

Spiridon laughed. "This is going to be more entertaining than I thought. Come in, my dear."

Dara walked through the door. Trystan gasped for air, shook his head to clear it. Dara wasn't here. She was safely back in Poshnari-Unai, with Loren. This woman had no humanity softening her chiseled draconian features. Clear gold eyes glowed back at him. She toyed with a lock of long, red hair. Trystan felt the sweep of that hair caressing his bare skin, tickling his balls and teasing the head of his rigid shaft. He groaned. She was exquisite. Her beauty, her soft skin, her scent, and that hair... Spiridon he could fight. This other...he didn't want to fight.

He tried to summon some sort of resistance. Somewhere under the aching lust jangled a discordant note of concern. Niadh, wounded and bleeding, somewhere in the manor house. The children, scared and helpless, hidden away somewhere. Finora about to fall into the hands of a patricidal, fratricidal madman with delusions of grandeur.

The dark queen ran a hand through his hair, caressing down his cheek to his lips. They tingled at her touch. He felt the burning pool deep, straight to his groin. He felt her presence, in the rug, in his soul. Reed hadn't stood a chance against these monsters. The human didn't have a fraction of a guardian's strength.

A guardian's strength... Trystan forced his mind from his body, focused past the burning lust to the dragons' aura. They were guardians, twisted in a manner he'd never conceived of. He studied Spiridon and his...daughter. She was his daughter. Trystan noted a subtle cord of binding betwixt them. Spiridon had bound her to him. She was unaware of it. Trystan watched the cord as the young queen approached. The scent of her desire curled around him, through the drug-induced haze. It pulsed down the binding cord from her to her father. Trystan caught Spiridon's subtle glow as the slight shimmer of power disappeared into his body.

He was leeching power from her, his own daughter, like a bloody parasite.

Trystan opened his mouth to say something. Her lips brushed his, and his body came alive with heavy need. Her tongue stroked his, and his fingers ached to touch her. Sun and moon, she was glorious!

"He's all yours," Spiridon said. A door opened and closed.

The queen pulled back, her lips glistening a whisper from his. Just like that, Trystan could move again, and speak. "What's yer name?" he asked. The taste of her was intoxicating. He shook his head to clear it.

"Anuk." She cocked her head. "Why are you here, Badger-Wolf?"

Badger-Wolf. Clan. Guardian. *Great Mother of All, give me strength.* "Ye, dragon. Anuk." He laughed mirthlessly. His body raged with burning need. "I'm here for ye. To bring ye home. May the Great Mother help us all."

Chapter Twelve

Finora paced about the room as Storm watched from his spot on the rug. A part of her reluctantly grinned at how their positions had reversed. The rest of her seethed. Trystan and Niadh were in deep trouble—she felt it as a sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. Niadh hurt. Trystan alone. Her children stolen. Why? What purpose would two half-human bairns serve anyone?

She made a pot of tea, but her hands shook so hot liquid sloshed over her hand. With a muffled curse, she plunked the cup on the table. *“Bree!”*

“What’s going on?” Bree again sounded so distant. Finora said a quick prayer of gratitude that they could hear each other at all through the spirit-wall of earth that Trystan had erected.

“Selkie bulls stole my children and took them to the local dragon-wizard.” Finora caught Bree up on the current crisis. *“They wounded Niadh. Trystan went to confront them.”*

“Alone? That’s brave. Not too smart, but courageous. Are you ready to carve that on his gravestone?”

Finora shuddered. *“They don’t bury their dead. They burn them. Trystan’s not dead yet, Bree. How are things with Freine’s pod?”*

“Bloody. Sharks are happy.” Bree sounded grim.

“Tell my father what’s happened. Get Freine’s cow to my father. He’ll protect her.”

“Your father won’t interfere in rival politics. His truce ended with Freine’s death. And we never interfere in land affairs.”

“I know. But my father might be interested in my children’s fate for the sake of shared blood.” For my sake. How she hoped she’d not imagined the softness in her sire’s eyes when he’d gazed on the children.

“All right. I hope Trystan knows what he’s doing.” Bree vanished.

Storm stared at the door. A low growl rumbled.

“Finora!” Matteo’s voice sounded through the thick wood. “Open up. I have to talk to you.”

“What have you done, Matteo?” Finora demanded.

“My sire could no longer rule. He was weak, dying. You know how it is. The pod must have a strong leader. It’s time for a new era to begin, a new alliance betwixt your sire and me. Only then can we put down the rebels who stole your children.”

What? What had he said? “Are you saying you’re not responsible for taking Braeca and Ioain? For wounding Niadh?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Matteo answered. “I did not injure your...friend’s...wolf. Your sire’s alliance with my pod ended with my sire’s last breath. I was coming to speak to you, to ask you to be an intermediary betwixt your sire and me. Once we were promised to each other. I still value our connection. Why would I risk alienating you when your goodwill is much more to my advantage?”

Finora snorted. “You, who’ve said no word to me these past seven years?”

“I ran into Trystan on the way to town. I’ve gone to gather reinforcements, to help him get your children back. Come see what he gave me as a token of our agreement. By Cilaniestra I swear, I *have* seen Trystan and I hold something you *will* want to see.”

Finora noticed he did not address their long separation. She waited for Cilaniestra to strike him dead for telling her a falsehood in Her name. When nothing of the kind happened, she frowned. Every instinct told her to not trust Matteo, that he was unworthy of confidence. But he did not lie. He knew the price of invoking Cilaniestra’s name. He passed Her test. And Trystan couldn’t do it alone. If Matteo pledged his own troops in a rescue, as a token of a future alliance, she would represent him to her sire wholeheartedly.

Storm lumbered to his feet. Another low growl rumbled through the room like distant thunder. To her shock, he planted his immense body between her and the door she reached for.

“What are you doing, you daft dog?” Finora scolded. “Move. Back. Get out of my way.”

Storm’s brow wrinkled as he gazed at the door, then back at her. Amazing how a dog could look worried. Conditioned from birth to obey, still he moved to resist her command.

“It’s all right,” she reassured him. “We have to help Trystan. We have to bring the children home.” Finora rubbed his ears. “Storm, go lie back down.”

With visible reluctance, Storm returned to the rug.

Finora reached for the door. Opened it. She was careful to stay just inside, though.

Matteo stood several feet back. His stance was confident, but relaxed. He was alone. An aggrieved look crossed his dusky face. “See? Surprised She didn’t strike me dead? I’ve been called many things in my life, princess, but liar has never been one of them.”

She bit her lip. “What have you got, Matteo?”

He held out an amulet.

Finora stared at the familiar wolf’s head and eagle’s beak. She couldn’t imagine Trystan parting with it short of death. And somehow she’d know if he were dead—with or without the earth bond. She’d just...know.

“He wanted me to give it to you. He wanted you to keep it safe for him.”

Matteo’s voice was steady, his eyes level.

Finora stepped through onto the walkway. “How is he?”

“Having a drink with the wizard and his daughter. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. She’s very beautiful, the daughter. Red hair, gold eyes.”

“A dragon’s allure.” Still, the barb stung. Surely he wouldn’t fall for another? Surely he’d stand firm, like the earth that anchored him? That now anchored her? Finora reached for the amulet, and Matteo’s fingers brushed hers as he handed it over. She placed it around her own neck and closed her eyes. *Please keep Trystan safe.*

Matteo reached around her, pulled her to him in a surprising hug. “Don’t worry about the children,” he stated. “I swear no harm will come to them. Things are going to be fine, you’ll see. They’re the way they were meant to be.”

Something soft, warm, familiar brushed her shoulders, clung to her back. Finora gasped in disbelief at the almost-forgotten tingle of magic, of home, as she...melted. Shifted. She blinked, disoriented, up at him. She opened her mouth. Only a muffled bleat emerged. She staggered to balance on flippers. The sea roared in her ears, in her blood, in her soul. It drowned out the earth. She didn’t belong here. The sea called, beckoned. She needed to go home.

Matteo’s eyes gleamed in triumph. “Time to go home, princess. Your dam misses you.”

Home. Mother. Little Aingeal. Father. Finora took off running, desperate to silence the calling, the lure. She rolled down the path at a waddling gallop, Matteo—now also in bull-form—nipping at her flank. She barely noticed the rocks digging into her skin. The rocky shoreline, the water beyond. The sea.

Home. She was almost there...

That glorious, churning *alive* sea.

Incredibly, just as she reached her destination, something jangled at the edge of her awareness. A sense of wrongness. She hesitated, torn. There was something here, something she didn’t want to leave. If she could just remember what it was...

Sharp pain sliced her flank, the warm sticky sensation of blood trickling over her hide. She whirled to see Matteo towering over her with tusks bared. *“Move it, princess. Can’t you hear it calling you? Let’s go home.”*

She stared back up at the cottage. A black dog barked frantically in the window, paws flying as he looked to dig through the glass. She didn’t want to leave him, didn’t want to leave... *“Wait, Matteo.”*

He used his greater bulk to herd her forward, into the shallows. The blessed surf crashed over her, and she shivered at the sensuous slide of the water over her body. The salt burned her flank, and she turned a reproachful gaze on him. *“You didn’t have to do that.”*

“You need to obey me, Finora.” Matteo was implacable. Adamant.

Adamant. Resolute. Steadfast. Like the earth she’d left behind. So unlike the ever-changing surge of water that tugged her every which way. She floundered to find her bearings. She struggled to find the euphoria. It eluded her. Something wasn’t right. Something held her back. Her mind clouded in a tidal wave of forgotten sensations. What should she be remembering? Why couldn’t she recall?

“It’s our way, princess. Your sire gave you to me. You must obey me. It’s our way,” Matteo insisted.

Finora dimly remembered the Intending ceremony. She'd said the words. But why did they chafe so, if she'd agreed to go to Matteo? Why did this feel...wrong? She shivered at the cold kiss of the air, whimpered in pleasure as the sweet caress of the sea chased away the icy touch of foreign air.

Matteo nuzzled her neck, and the brush of his whiskers against her oh-so-sensitive skin made her gasp. Every touch was a torture of pleasure, as her body came alive with awareness of need. So big, so strong, the bull aside her. Every instinct within her bowed to the dominant bull. He gripped her neck in his jaws, covering her with his body.

"I could take you now, right here on the shore." He groaned as he slid along her body. *"And you'd beg for more. But when I take you, it won't be as a rutting beast."*

"A rutting beast." Those words echoed in her mind, a jangle of discord. Confused, Finora shied away from him and plunged into the surf. She came up gasping, flailing like a pup. There was no purchase, nothing to grab onto—

"What's wrong with you, Finora?" Matteo sounded supremely irritated. *"Start swimming forward."*

It was as if she'd never done this afore. She fought the buoyancy, struggled to hold her breath when Matteo shoved her under. She'd panic, and he'd let her surface for air. Time enough for a single bleat of terror, then he shoved her back down again. Gradually the realization that she wasn't going to drown sank in, and she relaxed. She gained control over her limbs and rolled and swerved through the water, but it remained...uncomfortable. Almost foreign.

It was beautiful, their sea. Vivid and full of life. Fish of all different types darted in for a closer look, but not close enough for them to grab. She chased them half-heartedly. Her stomach roiled at the thought of eating raw fish.

Why?

Her wound attracted the unwanted attention of a hungry grey shark, but she was too nimble to be caught.

"Look what you've done," she snapped at Matteo.

"If you'd have kept moving, no unpleasantness would have been necessary," he retorted. *"It's your own fault. Keep moving and you won't get eaten."*

"Finora?" A familiar female voice sounded in her mind. Matteo gave no indication he heard the newcomer.

"Who are you?" Finora asked. *"How do you know me?"*

A moment of surprise, of silence, greeted her question. *"This isn't a joke, Finora. Did you trade your skin for your brain?"*

"My skin? What are you talking about? What are you?"

"My name's Bree. I'm the mermaid who happens to be your best friend, selkie. You lost your skin seven years ago. Don't you remember? It was stolen, hidden. Where did you find it?"

The voice rang with the utter conviction of truth. Mermaid. Fish-people. Selkie. Seal-people. A sudden flash of herself, walking on land on two legs, flashed in her mind's eye. Finora faltered, and shook her head.

Matteo snapped at her from the corner of her eye. *"Keep moving, princess."*

If she was a princess, shouldn't he be treating her with greater respect? He drove her like a herd dog farther out to sea. What was a dog? An image of an immense black and white dog pawing at a window appeared. How did she know of dogs? Of windows?

"Where are we going?" Finora asked.

"To Matteo's stronghold. He's the new king." Bree sounded disgusted.

"So I'm a princess and he's a king? He says I'm bound to him by my father. So he's taking me home?"

"Finora, you shouldn't want to go with him!" Bree's words were frantic. *"Wake up! He's a murderer. He killed his own sire, he killed all his bull siblings and he's going home—now that he's got you—to rape and impregnate every unrelated cow in the place so they have his offspring. He'll hand each of his sisters to his henchmen to face the same fate, and he'll use you to force your father into an alliance with him. An alliance you and your father were against."*

"Why would my father bind me to someone we didn't like? I remember the Intending ceremony."

"Because we didn't know he was crazy back then, that's why. I rescued one of King Freine's cows. She's pregnant with another legitimate heir to the throne Matteo's stolen. It was your idea to smuggle her into your father's household. She's staying with your dam, Fiona. You told me King Griogair would protect her. You were right."

Finora shuddered. Was the bull she was with really so terrifying? Sure, he was a bully, but...

Bree appeared from the depths, green hair streaming out behind her. *"It's true. You're back. I can't wait to tell your father. He's so worried about you and the children."*

Children? Finora tumbled as dark eyes, dark curls, laughing faces flashed. Braeca. Ioain. Warmth. Love. Pride. Rage. Stars, they'd taken them. Matteo's men had taken them, given them to the dragon-wizards for who-knew-what purpose. Niadh had almost died protecting them. Trystan was even now trying to free them. It all came rushing back—the storm, pulling Trystan from the surf, Bree throwing his weapons at him. Passion hotter than any she'd ever known.

He risked everything for her and her children. She loved him. She had to get back.

Finora turned, only to have an angry bull ram her like an attacking dolphin. He knocked all the breath out of her, and she doubled up in pain. Without air, she had to scoot to the surface, but even the smallest movement was an agony.

"Where do you think you're going?" Matteo snarled.

"Leave her alone, you thug!" Bree cried.

He bared his tusks, and Bree gave him a peculiar smile. *“Do it. Bite me. Solve all the world’s problems.”*

He turned away from the mermaid.

Finora whimpered. *“Home. I need to go home.”*

“You are going home,” Matteo growled. *“You’re born selkie, of the sea. Land was never your home.”*

Ioain had to be terrified. Braeca, for all her toughness, was still but six. She couldn’t leave her children behind. *“It is now.”*

“You have no home there anymore. Those half-human abominations should never have been born. You were mine!” Matteo crackled with black rage. *“The children have been claimed for Cilaniestra’s service. She’ll take good care of them—none dare cross Her. And your fickle lover’s mind belongs to the dragon witch as soon as he spills himself in her body. He’ll forget all about you. All humans fall to her allure.”*

A knife pierced her heart at the image of Trystan thrusting between the redhead’s legs. Finora shook her head. Nay. Trystan was strong. Guardian. He’d find a way to fight. The thought of her children serving Cilaniestra was too horrific to contemplate. *“Bree, go warn my father.”*

Bree was off like a thrown trident. *“Stay strong, Finora. I swear we’ll find a way out of this.”*

“I’ll make you forget all about your pathetic human lovers.” Matteo’s words were a dark promise that poured through Finora’s mind. *“I know the fire that burns in your selkie body with the moon, with the tides. Who else can ease that fire in your blood as well as one who understands and feels it, too? I know what it is to need, to ache for relief. I can pleasure you for hours—as man, as beast. Whatever you want, whatever you need.”*

Finora cringed at the docile creature inside who came alive at his words. This was the bull who’d murdered his own family for power, who’d sold her children to a goddess. No matter how her body burned, she’d never take him willingly. She had to find a way out of this. When he brought her afore her father, she’d have a chance to convince Griogair to take a stand against Matteo—to help rescue Braeca and Ioain.

The thought of war between two rival pods was horrific. But Matteo couldn’t be allowed to get away with what he’d done. If Griogair made a pact with Matteo, what prevented Matteo from turning on Griogair one day? Taking everything for himself?

Everything starting with her. Bree’s words shook her—“rape and impregnate”. She’d never want Matteo. But he wanted her. With his greater size and strength, he could take what he wanted with or without her consent, any time he wished. Her heart pounded in her throat, made her dizzy.

They passed through the gateway, into Freine’s—Matteo’s—realm. Finora felt the shimmer pass over her and she staggered upright on legs. Human form. Naked. A fact Matteo was obviously aware of. The fact had barely registered afore he pinned her to the nearest column, a hand knotted in her hair as he took her mouth in a brutal kiss.

Finora tasted blood and bit down. Hard.

With a roar, Matteo jerked back. Spitting blood with every curse, he backhanded her to the floor.

She stared up at the blood on the pillar. Old blood, long dried. She wondered whose it was.

“My lord?” Another bull, almost as big as Matteo, approached.

Matteo whirled. “What is it?”

“We have one harem cow unaccounted for. She’s not here and may have escaped to open water.”

Finora wanted to cheer Bree’s success.

Matteo reached down and hauled her to her feet. “Come with me.” He wrapped an arm about her waist and escorted her to a luxurious suite of rooms befitting royalty. They left her cold. Her skin crawled at his touch. “Have a bath. Have something to eat. Rest.” His eyes gleamed as he gazed at the bed. “Trust me, you’ll need your strength tonight, when I return.” He left and shut the door. She heard a heavy bolt slide home.

Locked. Trapped. Finora, too, stared at the bed. The thought of her and Matteo... Her stomach churned and she barely made it to the basin in time. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Hold on, poppets. Be brave. We will get you out. Please, Trystan, be strong.”

What transpired in the world above? Was Trystan even now succumbing to the dragon whore’s wiles? His mind gone, his soul bound to darkness as Reed’s? Was their last best hope gone?

Finora shivered and rubbed her arms. If Bree could get to King Griogair, did they have yet another chance? She hated waiting. She’d been a prisoner long enough. ’Twas time to think. To plan. When the time came to act, she’d be ready.

Chapter Thirteen

Trystan's entire body jerked as burning agony tore through him. His hair singed, skin progressively reddened, blistered, blackened, cracked. His very blood boiled. He dropped to the floor, screaming, just like Ioain's visions, unable to stop himself. Sun and moon, 'twas as if he were being roasted alive. He stared at his arm. Naught. No damage.

The searing pain hit again, blinding.

'Twas not his own pain. 'Twas Niadh's. He was getting a residual echo through their link. Gods! The real thing, first hand, must be a hundred times worse. "What are ye doing?"

Anuk hauled him to his feet. "So you *are* bound to the wolf. What happens to the maker affects the made. Interesting. I shall have to tell my father."

Her touch was unbearable. "What are ye doin' t' Niadh?"

"My father needs to have a chat with him. He needs to talk man to man, but those binding spells are hard to break." Anuk's eyes were unfathomable. "Shifting aids healing, therefore the need to shift should break the binding, if the need is grievous enough. I can't believe Niadh will die in that form. The bonds will break, and he'll shift and heal. Then he and my father can have their little...chat."

"Yer da is a sadistic bastard," Trystan snarled. "What does that make ye?"

The daughter of a sadistic bastard. But was she like Spiridon? Truly? He watched an uncomfortable expression cross her face—and wondered. Was she puppet or puppeteer?

"My father hates your kind. Why, I don't know. But he's building up an army to invade your land and destroy your people, wipe you from the face of the earth. And you're going to help him. You and Niadh."

"Ne'er."

She smiled, a predator's show of teeth. "You won't have a choice. Do you really think to stand against us?"

Trystan shuddered. He had to focus past the pain, had to free the children. "What o' the bairns?"

"They're safe in rooms upstairs. Together."

At least they hadn't been separated. "Missin' their ma. Listenin' to our screams." Trystan clenched his jaw against another scream. That's all Ioain needed—to learn his visions of horror came true. He'd never sleep again.

Again a look of discomfort crossed Anuk's face.

“Ye’re dragonkind. The greatest guardians our world has e’er seen,” Trystan told her. “Have ye ne’er heard the tales? Do ye ken naught o’ yer own history? Has yer da said naught o’ yer ma?” He clutched his stomach and sagged against the wall as another fiery blast robbed him of further speech.

Her eyes narrowed. Not in sympathy, but at least he had her attention. “What’s my mother got to do with anything?”

Trystan laughed mirthlessly, gasping for breath. *’Tis just pain. No’ true damage.* Somehow he had to separate himself from Niadh. He focused on the unfamiliar coolness of the sea, the feel of it rushing through his veins. The echo of his bond with Finora. She had expressed no surprise it worked both ways. Could he hold it, use it, without the fire-creatures suspecting? ’Twas harder than he’d thought, but he summoned enough of a cool mist to blunt the worst of it.

“Ye poor wee fool. Ye’re dragonkind. Yer ma has e’erythin’ t’ do with who an’ what ye are.” He staggered to his feet. “Dragons are matriarchal. Knowledge, magic, pass from mother t’ daughter.”

Her gold eyes widened. She looked shocked, but not surprised. Like he did more confirming something she already knew, rather than revealing new information. “Only males have magic.”

“Spiridon told ye that?” Trystan snorted. “Males have magic, aye—but ’tis naught compared t’ the power o’ females. Ye’re bigger than he, stronger than he, an’ yer magic wields the verra power o’ life’s beginnin’.”

“Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’re my prisoner. Mine to do with as I please. I’m taking you to your cell.”

The sensation of choking gripped him. His vision dimmed. Then, as suddenly as it came, it receded. “Take me to the children,” he panted.

“Do you really want them to witness what you’re going through?” Her lips thinned, giving Anuk a sour, unpleasant expression.

At least the pain racking his body overwhelmed the desire she’d attempted to invoke. Did it keep mind and soul together, Trystan decided, pain was preferable to passion. The thought of ending up like Reed was horrific. Death was preferable to slavery.

“O’ all the crimes t’ lay at yer feet, the sufferin’ o’ bairns is the one the Mother willna forgive ye when ye face Her at The End O’ All Things.” He reached for her wrist. “Men at least have the power t’ choose, t’ fight or succumb. But a bairn has naught. ’Tis our greatest duty as guardians, to protect the innocent. The weak and helpless.”

“I’m no guardian.”

She was right about that. But she could be. She *should* be. She could fight Spiridon’s hold over this town as no other could. If she would.

Mayhaps *this* was why he’d landed here. Not only to find a dragon, but to free one.

Stranger things had happened.

"If I am t' die here," he clenched his jaw, "then grant me this one small mercy. Tell me true. Do ye intend harm t' the children?"

Anuk shook her head, and a terrible weight rolled off his shoulders. "Nay. They're seers, promised to the service of Cilaniestra. As priest and priestess, their lives will be carefully guarded."

As long as they lived, rescue and escape were possible. If he and Niadh died, another might someday succeed. "An' their mother?"

"The selkie? She's returned to the sea where she belongs. The sea and her skin will drown out all memory of the land—and all on it." She sniffed. "Including her children. Including you. The selkie king who took her is quite a lusty man. I'm sure he's wasted no time in giving her something else to think about."

Her eyes took on a sly glint. "Selkies have passionate natures. Won't take any time at all for him to seduce her. All creatures of the moon yearn for the pleasures of the flesh. Picture even now, his mouth on hers, his hands on her breasts, her legs wrapped around his...hips...as he thrusts into her willing body. Does she scream when the pleasure takes her, or just bite her lip? Bulls are huge. How quickly she'll forget you."

Trystan closed his eyes, tried to close his mind to the images Anuk had invoked. This was a pain he'd no defense against. Selkies did not take exclusive mates. There were no vows betwixt them. Finora had no reason to stay true to one man, especially one in her past. Would she truly forget, or did the tenuous thread holding her to him, to the earth, give her any strength to fight?

Did she even want to fight?

Hold on, my love. Dinna give up on us just yet.

Anuk stared at the grey-haired man swaying afore her. Trystan was the strongest man she'd ever met. He'd climbed to his feet, staved off horrific pain to speak, and fought against her allure. His words troubled her. Added to her own growing suspicions about Spiridon, and what the book had told her, made her doubt. Made her wonder.

What had happened to her mother? Why weren't they in the mountains of their birth? Why had Spiridon lied about the magic?

What else did he lie about?

"Come on," she ordered. Action gave her less time to think. "Through the door and up the stairs."

"T' where?"

“To wherever I say.” She stepped closer, close enough to feel his trembling as a vibration of air against her skin. “You can follow me of your own accord, or I can have two strong housemen escort you.” Her voice lowered. “You know you want to. Come to my rooms, my bed. You yearn for that with every breath, with every beat of your heart.”

His eyes were glazed, yet incredibly he shook his head. “I am the master o’ me own body. Spirit o’er flesh. Badger-stubborn, Badger-strong.”

His voice was but a whisper, but she admired his strength. “Come.” She grasped his wrist, dug into a nerve point that brought him to his knees. She immediately let up. “Don’t be stupid. Save your strength. You’re going to need it.”

He followed her up the stairs. She felt his muscles flexing beneath her hand, but they made it to her rooms without incident. As soon as she turned the knob, he twisted free and attacked her. Rage awoke, swift and hot. “Get off!” she snarled. Something welled up from deep within, surging out as she shoved him off her—

Across her room into the opposite wall, where he crashed and landed in a heap. Unmoving. Unconscious.

She stared in shock at her hands. A crackle of something powerful zinged along beneath her skin. Similar to the sensation of shifting, but with a euphoric feeling. What had just happened? Was that magic?

The book laughed in her mind. “*You thought it was all chants and spells?*” it teased. “*Magic is whatever you need it to be, guardian. As subtle or as public as you wish.*”

Anuk hauled Trystan onto the mattress, tied him spread-eagled, a limb to a post. She needed to check on the children, make sure they were all right, without having to worry about Trystan staying where she put him. Although, seeing him spread-eagled in her bed almost made her stay... “Badger-wolf-badger-wolf,” she whispered. Her words shimmered over him. Did he try to shift, the images would spin too quickly to follow, confusing him and not allowing him to hold either image long enough to actually shift. That should hold him as a human, and therefore keep him restrained until she returned.

“*The children. Check the children.*” The nagging compulsion was new and unwelcome. But the book would not be denied. Almost as an echo of Trystan’s earlier words...

She went down the hall and unbolted the door. As she slipped into the room, a lamp crashed into her hip. Anuk stared in astonishment at the small girl wielding it like a club. The room pulsed with fear, and yet the little savage dared fight, standing betwixt Anuk and the tiny boy cowering in the corner.

“Back off, beastie!” The little girl drew back for another blow.

“Ow! *Drek!* Stop it.” Anuk grabbed the lamp and twisted it out of the child’s grasp. She received a kick in the knee in exchange. Admiration warred with amusement. “I’m not going to hurt you.” To seem less threatening, she sat on the floor. “What’s your name?”

“What’s yours?” the little girl challenged.

“Anuk.”

The little boy sniffled. “I want Mama!”

A twinge of sympathy stirred. They were so small, so helpless...

What was she thinking? They were sworn to Cilaniestra. Their mother was gone. 'Twas up to her to win them over to their new life. But it all felt...wrong.

What was the matter with her?

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

The little girl shook her head, but her brother bit his lip and nodded. His big seal-brown eyes were wide and

glittered with tears yet to streak down his chubby pink cheeks. An insane urge to cuddle him, comfort him, washed over her. He gave her a suspicious, somewhat awed look.

“You’re a dwagon?” he asked. “Like Twystan said?”

Anuk blinked. “Trystan told you about dragons?”

He nodded.

“And you can see me?” That meant he could see what was, in truth, and not just appearance. So no one could try to sneak up on him, pretending to be one thing whilst hiding another.

He nodded again.

“Why are we here?” his elder sister demanded, arms crossed.

“You’ve been chosen by the goddess Cilaniestra for a very special job, because of your gifts,” Anuk replied. “You’re to stay with us now.”

“Where’s Mama?” the little boy asked.

“Ssh. Your mama’s been returned to the sea. That’s where she belongs. She’s been made to understand this is the way things are supposed to be. I’m your new teacher and I’ll take care of you now.”

“I want Mama!” the boy wailed.

His sister went over to him to wrap her arms around him. “Where’s Trystan?”

“He’s here.”

“Can we see him?”

“In time.” After his compliance had been...assured...Trystan could be her greatest help in getting the children settled in their new life. “What’s your name, child?”

“Braeca. This is Ioain.”

Triumph stirred at that small concession. “Well Braeca and Ioain, let me order you up something to eat.” Anuk stepped outside and motioned to a maid. “Two bowls of chicken soup, bread and butter, and milk,” she ordered. “Have someone return to the cottage on the bluff and get the children’s things. Return the dog to Mari.”

“Aye, m’lady.”

Anuk returned to the children. “Supper will be here in a bit. I must leave you for now. I will come back later.”

She peeked into her room. Trystan still slept. She frowned. Had she done him an injury? Used too much power? She’d best go check on her father’s progress with the wolf, Niadh. Would Spiridon succeed in restoring the other guardian’s humanity?

She made her way down the back staircase, into the wine cellar, then through a secret panel to another staircase. So narrow her shoulders brushed the walls on both sides, it wound down and down into the very bedrock, until she scented the sea running through channels in the land. Far below, in the darkest dark, fire lurked. Molten rock and metals. Always she could sense it. But now, it felt different. Closer, almost as if she could reach out and touch it...

“You can,” the book whispered. “It is a part of you. You are a part of it.”

She tapped on the door to Spiridon’s workroom. Oddly enough, he did not answer. The wards were down. Curious, Anuk cracked open the door and peeked inside. Spiridon was gone. The wolf was gone. Instead, a wreck of a man lay curled up in a ball on the floor. In chains of bespelled bronze. Burned, almost beyond recognition. Battered. Bloody. He might have been dead, save for a faint moan, the merest rise and fall to indicate breath.

It had worked. Bile rose. She steeled herself against horror, pity. Her father had done this to another creature. A creature whose only sin had been being a guardian, trying to protect children. Rage rose, swift and hot. No one deserved this.

“You can help him,” the book whispered. “Life or death, it’s in your power, guardian. Heal him, or end his suffering. Don’t sit back and do nothing.”

Killing him would be easy—and maybe the greater kindness. She had no idea how to heal him, or if she should. What mercy was there in healing him, only to have Spiridon begin his questioning anew? Spiridon did not intend for either guardian to walk out of here as a free man. He’d expect her to turn them, as she had so many others.

She couldn’t do that. The book and Trystan had hinted at another way, another power, another purpose. She had to discover the truth. Then she could choose.

The man groaned again, and she slipped into the room and shut the door. No sense locking it—it would do no good keeping Spiridon out of his own workroom. Shelves of canisters lined the walls, a fire crackled in a small hearth, torches encircled the room. It smelled of magic and sex and pain. But not death. Not yet.

Not ever. Not if she could help it. Cautiously she approached the man and knelt aside him. “Can you hear me?” she whispered.

Incredibly, he opened his eyes. A slashing silver color, full of pain and rage and defiance. Somehow he found his voice. “Come t’ finish the task?”

How could he speak? The strength of these men awed her. Guardians must be wondrous creatures. She needed to know more. She dropped her recently erected shield and reached out to him with her senses. Bottomless agony crashed over her, through her. It felt as if her flesh peeled back from her very bones. How could he still live, let alone consciously? What could she do? She knew no healing spells. "*Pain to me,*" she thought. It wrapped itself around her in tearing layers of pain atop pain. She floundered, struggled to focus, to send it elsewhere.

"*The fire,*" the book whispered. "*The fire in the earth.*"

Not knowing, just reacting, Anuk grasped that distant pool of molten earth, willed the cocoon of pain to go there. She gasped as it dissolved and flowed from the here and now, as if it had never been.

Niadh stared at her with shock and awe. She reached for his hairless, ruined face. She felt the fires in the room, felt them in her soul. She focused on her own life force, linked to every fire in the house. She stretched her senses to seek every fire in the town. Kale's forge. The Mermaid. She was going to need every one to maintain her strength for what needed doing. And then she summoned the only word she could think of. "Restore," she whispered. Life, warmth flowed from her, through her hands into him. Flesh cooled, wounds closed, skin reknit.

Done at last, Anuk collapsed. Even with the book's and fires' help, she shook with weakness. And shock at what she had dared to do. At what she'd been able to do.

"What have ye done, lass?" Niadh brushed the hair from her face. He looked distinctly odd without so much as a speck of hair on his body.

She had no idea how to regrow hair. It would just have to come back on its own.

Or not. The door crashed open, and Spiridon stood glowering at her, hands on hips. "Just what, might I ask, do you think you're doing?"

Chapter Fourteen

Finora paced the confines of her rooms. How to get to her sire? How to convince Matteo to take her? He'd lied to her. He had orchestrated the whole thing with the wizard—probably traded her children for her skin. Matteo was just selfish enough to do it. And once bound to her, what was to stop him from annihilating her sire's pod as well and taking over the whole colony?

She'd have to convince him he'd won her over. He was big and strong and powerful. A king now, for all the blood on his hands. The selkie cows she'd seen fawning over her sire and his chosen bulls indicated that was what was expected. Too bad she and her dam Fiona were made of stronger cloth. And her seven years on land had done naught to weaken her spine. But she could pretend.

"Bulls see what they wish to see," Fiona had said. "The more self-absorbed they are, the less likely they are to see past the ends of their whiskers. And the easier they are to fool."

Finora hoped her dam was right.

The door opened and Matteo stepped through. Leave it to the arrogant bastard to neither knock nor await permission to enter. Already he acted as if he owned her. Pasting a pleasant expression on her face, Finora approached him and inclined her head in a subtle sign of respect. He frowned and cocked his head at her. "Finora?"

"Is that not how my king is to be greeted?" she asked, raising her gaze to his.

Matteo looked confused...and cautious. He was no fool. She'd have to move very slowly to allay his suspicions. "It is," he replied. "I was not expecting such from you, especially after our last...encounter."

"Have you not replaced Freine as king? Am I not in your palace? Then as your guest, I should show respect." Her eyes narrowed, and she took on a touch of royal hauteur. "My father is also a king. As a princess, may I also be entitled to respect? You took me by surprise. I did not expect to be mauled in public like a common whore."

He had the grace to flush. "You're right. You're entitled to be mauled in private."

His eyes said he made a jest. She did not find it amusing. "I prefer, my lord, to not be mauled at all," she retorted. "Common bulls maul. Surely you're capable of a gentler wooing?"

"A challenge, is it?" Matteo laughed. "You're full of spirit, princess—and surprises."

"Would you care for a drink?" Finora moved to the table. She bypassed the wine in favor of *attilar*, a strong liquor distilled from the stem-milk of the *attilas* seaweed.

He raised an eyebrow. "Careful That's strong stuff, and you've been away a good long while."

“Afraid I’ll get tipsy and take advantage of you?”

Open, unaffected laughter transformed his face. His brown eyes sparked. He really was a handsome rogue. If only his character had been different, Finora might truly have been tempted to stay with him. She mentally pinched herself. He was a kidnapper and a murderer. The sooner she convinced him to take her to her father, the sooner she could get away and return to her children.

Finora set the decanter and glasses on a tray and carried it to a low table by a settee. She sank down to relax against the cushions. “Are you happier towering over me, or would you care to join me?”

He sat beside her and poured them each a small portion, handing her the crystal goblet. She wondered what doomed vessel he’d snatched them from. “To renewing our vows,” Matteo toasted, and tossed it back in one swallow.

Stars! Finora knew better than to follow suit. She sipped at the sweet, creamy concoction, bracing herself for the follow-up bite. ’Twas as she remembered. Heat flushed her entire body, and the material of her gown irritated her skin. Too much of that and she’d be shedding her gown from sheer annoyance.

“I forgot how much I missed home,” she said. “The flow of the water, the colors of the fish, the song of the behemoths, the excitement of a shark chase. Even the taste of home.” She held up her glass to study it in the greenish light of the glow-worm lanterns. “It’s lonely on land. Too quiet.” She took another sip.

“Why did you go?” Matteo sounded genuinely curious. His eyes studied hers.

“I wanted to know what it was like, what they were like,” she answered. “I didn’t expect betrayal.”

He reached out to brush her hair back from her shoulder, and the slide of his fingers against the side of her neck made her skin tingle. She shivered. One corner of his mouth quirked.

She found herself staring at his mouth.

“You always were an adventurous soul. That was part of what drew me to the alliance. Instead of just another fawning cow, you have spirit. You’re unique. I’ve missed these wasted years. But now you’re home, you’re mine once more.”

Did he plan to embrace her spirit, or break it? Was she naught but a challenge, a possession? A means to an end? She blinked. What was wrong with her? He was a means to an end, not the other way around.

Matteo poured them each another. “You feel it, too, don’t you?” he murmured. “The attraction stirring?”

It had to be the *attilar*. She wouldn’t be attracted to him. No matter how big, strong and handsome he was, he was still a monster. She was selkie, true, but she had a mind and a will. She was stronger than her body, more than just instincts. Finora lowered her gaze as she took another sip.

“Look at me, Finora.” His voice had somehow deepened, mellowed, a caress all by itself.

She did, only to be ensnared by that dark, liquid gaze. Flickers of heat shimmered in them, and she found a part of herself reacting to him, drawn to the lure of desire, of need. “Matteo?” She wanted to kick

herself at that breathy, tremulous sound, and she curled her fingers into her palm to try to break the spell he wove around her.

It had to be some sort of spell.

“Aye?” He reached out with his free hand to curl his fingers around her throat, stroking her skin with the lightest of touches. Such leashed power, such restraint. He drew his thumb along her jaw, traced her lower lip.

A tingle followed in the wake of his touch. Warmth. Awareness. Her lips parted, but her mind went blank of anything to say. She trembled.

“What were you going to say?”

Stars, she couldn’t remember. All she could remember was begging her sire to agree to the Intending ceremony. Matteo, the neighboring prince. An equal. Handsome, powerful, charming. “I was thinking of our Intending ceremony,” she whispered.

“Me, too. I’ve thought a lot about it.” Matteo curled his fingers around the back of her neck. “Your sire will honor that bond.” He set his glass down, took hers from her nerveless fingers. “Everything I want is right here. You, princess.” He dipped his head and captured her lips.

If only he’d been rough, she might have found the strength to push him away. He’d all but said he’d make her stand with his afore her sire and demand Griogair honor their bond. But she had to make sure. The Claiming ceremony was the only way to make it irreversible. He brushed his lips against hers, taking her mouth with gentle possession. She whimpered as her body awoke, and her mind went fuzzy in an onslaught of need. She ran her fingers through his hair, holding him close and slanting her mouth under his to deepen the kiss.

Anything to get to Griogair. Anything to get back to her children.

Trystan, forgive me.

Matteo stroked her tongue with his. He tasted of *attilar*, of hot, male passion. She shook in his arms, with fear and shame at her body’s awakening need. Matteo would have her. Better this than forceful taking. She’d set out to seduce him. She’d never considered he’d seduce her.

But he was a master of persuasion. He brushed the outer curve of her breast, a teasing promise of things to come. Finora stiffened in his arms, but the silken slide of his tongue against hers made her skin tingle, her breasts swell. She shifted restlessly as her gown chafed her stiffening nipples. Every rasp of cloth was a torment. Too much sensation.

She whimpered anew as he dragged her onto his lap. He slid one hot hand along her leg, stroking under her skirts. His touch was an exquisite torture, and he guided her thigh to one side so she straddled him. The shock of cradling his burning erection made her jerk away from his kiss. The motion rolled her hips into him, and it was his turn to groan.

Matteo pinned her with his heated gaze. “Shocking, isn’t it? I feel your struggle. A part of you wants this. A part of you doesn’t. Which part will win, I wonder?” He reached around to tug at the laces of her gown, loosening them until the material slid down to her waist.

The touch of sea-cool air on her overheated skin was a blessed but momentary relief. She pulled her arms free of the sleeves, terrified he’d use them as a restraint. Matteo cupped her breasts in his hands, teasing her nipples with his thumbs until she thought she’d scream. He captured one in his mouth, pulling strongly, teasing the very tip of her nipple with his tongue.

Tension coiled, low and deep. “Matteo!” she cried.

He shuddered and raised his head. Triumph and lust glittered in his eyes. “Say my name again.”

Her body ached for his touch. That’s all this was—lust. He but commanded her body, never her heart. Did this gain her freedom, she’d grant him this one concession. Finora ran her fingers through his hair. “Matteo,” she whispered. This time ’twas she who captured his mouth with hers.

He stood, and she wrapped herself around him as he carried her over to the bed. She tore his shirt from his body, running her hands over the hard muscles beneath his pale selkie skin. He shuddered beneath her touch, and she broke off her kiss to run her tongue along the side of his neck, scraping her teeth lightly over the pulse pounding in his throat. Would that her teeth were longer—she’d tear it out, ending everyone’s misery. “Matteo,” she whispered in his ear.

He set her down, shrugged out of the tattered remains of his shirt, shoved her gown down over her hips until it pooled in a heap at their feet.

Finora rained kisses across his chest, teasing his nipples with her tongue as she cupped his erection with her hands. He was huge. He’d tear her in two. “We’ll never fit,” she whispered.

He laughed, a breathless ring of dazed victory. “Aye, we will. You were made for me. Afore I’m through you’ll beg me to take you.” He tossed her on the bed, dragged her to the very edge and buried his head betwixt her thighs.

Stars, how her body craved that particular pleasure. Finora shut her mind off and yielded to the inevitable. Matteo was greedy, voracious. She lost count of the number of times she shattered under the skillful assault of his mouth, crying out her pleasure until she was exhausted and breathless. She wasn’t sure she could take much more. “Matteo, please.”

His eyes glittered up at her. “Never thought I’d hear you beg. Such a sweet sound.” He slid up to capture the breast he’d neglected earlier, teasing her nipple as he’d teased her nether jewel. She rolled her hips up at him in aching, pulsing need, quivering all over. He grasped her legs in his hands, pulling them over his shoulders. He broke off suckling to growl, “What do you want?”

“Matteo, please.” Beyond pride, empty, needy, she writhed under him.

“Tell me what you want.” He probed her slick folds with just the head of his erection.

“Matteo!” She rocked against him. “You. I need you. Please. Take me now.” The words left an ugly taste in her mouth, but then he surged into her and time just...stopped.

Matteo grunted as he thrust into her. “So hot, so tight.” The slide of his enormous shaft was a burning, almost painful pleasure that built relentlessly. He was lost in finding his own release, held her down with bruising force. Finora coiled tighter and tighter around him as he stroked that sweet spot deep inside her with ruthless repetition. His face flushed, his body glistened with sweat as her channel tightened on him.

This was the power of the beast. Her world blew apart as she shattered around him, as he poured himself into her. Her last thought was “*Tristan, forgive me*” afore the world went dark.

Home at last. Her deception had worked. The following morning, after a bath and a meal, Matteo had wasted no time in bringing her afore her sire. Finora glanced around the familiar courtyard. She eyed the selkie bulls standing guard amongst the marble columns. How white they were, the great stones and columns, without the staining of blood. But she knew the tridents the bulls held were not strictly ceremonial. Were Griogair to order it, this hall would run as red with blood as Matteo’s. Were all bulls killers at heart? Was there truly another way, or did she and Fiona merely delude themselves?

Finora watched her parents’ approach. Fiona rushed to embrace her. Finora flinched as Matteo’s grip tightened over the healing cut on her hip.

“Are you all right?” Fiona, too perceptive by far, asked. Her nostrils flared as she caught the intermingled scents of Matteo and Finora. She shot her daughter a sharp glance.

Finora pasted on a big fake smile. “I’m fine.”

King Griogair stood afore them. “Daughter.” He, too, could hardly miss the unmistakable scent of Claiming. “What is this?”

She knelt at his feet, a level of respect she’d not shown Matteo. The bruises on her body protested. Bruises Matteo, to his credit, had not intended to inflict. Not in anger, merely in passion. A passion Tristan would surely never forgive her for. But was she able to be free, to be reunited with her children, she’d pay any price.

Any.

Griogair’s eyes narrowed at her stiffness. “You’re hurt.” He glared at Matteo, and his hands curled into fists. “What have you done to my daughter?”

Matteo’s eyes willed her to speak. Dared her to speak.

“I’m all right, Sire. Truly. ’Twas but a rather...rigorous...Claiming ceremony.” Finora’s cheeks burned at that confession, but her innate honesty demanded that truth.

Fiona gasped. “Claiming ceremony?”

Matteo drew himself up. "Did we not have an Intending ceremony? Did I not restore her lost skin to her, enabling her return? Are we not royal peers? I demand you acknowledge our pact, and honor our arrangement."

Griogair's gaze swept the hall. "Everyone, leave us." All fled, including bodyguards, until only the four royals remained. Gossip was undoubtedly running rampant through the halls. Finora's father pinned Matteo with his gaze. "King Freine is dead."

"Aye."

"My arrangement with him is now void."

"I would have you make a new arrangement...through your daughter...with me."

Fiona glared at Matteo. "She's hurt."

"I but Claimed what was rightfully mine," Matteo growled.

Griogair turned to Finora. "Was it rape?"

Fiona flinched at that ugly word.

Finora shook her head. "Nay."

He studied her, eyes keen. "You took him willingly? You acknowledge the Claiming heart and soul?"

It was now or never. "Nay, Sire. I but used my body to convince him to bring me afore you. I claim the sanctuary of your house, your aid in righting a grievous wrong done to you through me and mine."

"Granted," Griogair stated.

Finora dove behind her sire as Matteo's face reddened, then darkened. "What treachery is this?" he demanded.

"In Cilaniestra's name I charge you, Matteo, with the abduction and enslavement of my children. You traded my children for my skin with the dragon-wizard, and attempted to kill the guardian wolf Niadh when he tried to stop you."

She'd only been guessing, but when Cilaniestra didn't strike her dead she knew she'd grasped the truth. Griogair's brows lowered. "How far you'd reach, son of Freine, to harm those of my blood."

Matteo's liquid brown eyes spat fire beneath his heavy brows as he drew himself to his full height. His lip curled into a sneer. "Her human children will come to no harm. They're sworn to Cilaniestra's service."

Griogair shook his head at Matteo's transparent attempt at intimidation, as if the younger bull's greater bulk was of no concern. "Only one of blood can gift a child to divine service. As the fisherman is dead, only Finora can turn her children over to Cilaniestra's service."

Finora swayed as hope swelled in a dizzying wave. "Then there's still hope?"

"There's always hope," Fiona declared. She knelt down aside her daughter, taking hold of her hands in a firm, light grip. Such deceptive delicacy hiding such strength. Strong women existed everywhere.

Finora thought of Trystan's sister, Moira, and smiled. "I am now king, and your equal," Matteo snarled at Griogair. "I demand you honor your vow and turn Finora over to me. We have shared the Intending and the Claiming ceremonies. Even now she may carry my offspring."

Oh, stars. She'd lost sight of that one little fact. Tears burned. Surely fate wouldn't be that cruel.

"You demand? You arrogant pup! Even in the face of your crimes, you demand? In my very house?" Griogair roared. "Guards!"

There was a scuffling outside the doors as half a dozen armed bulls entered at a run to encircle Matteo with tridents pointed.

"Think long and hard on this," Matteo warned. "Would you risk open war on your border, over one whore of a she-pup?"

Griogair's fist lashed out, knocking Matteo to the hard tile floor in a spray of blood. "Take him away."

"Then war it is." Matteo grasped his ruined nose as he was removed from the hall.

Finora turned worried eyes to her sire. "Oh, Sire, nay. You can't risk open war. I'll have no lives lost on account of me."

Griogair shook his head. "He's lusted to control both kingdoms his entire life. Were it not for this excuse, he'd have found another." He snorted. "If I can't handle that sorry excuse for a misbegotten pup, then I don't deserve my crown." He turned to Fiona. "Take her to the baths, then both of you return. We've a rescue to plan."

Chapter Fifteen

Tristan tugged at his restraints to no avail. The more he pulled, the tighter the knots drew. Every time he tried to shift a swirl of images prevented him from locking onto the wolf. Badger-wolf-badger-wolf. Had to be a spell. Simple, but effective. How to fight it? His hands and feet were numb from the knots. His head still pounded from the backlash of power that had tossed him clear across the room. He'd been an absolute lunatic to attack a dragon with his bare hands. He was lucky to be alive and in one piece.

An idea tickled the edge of his mind. His stomach roiled at the thought. Badger-wolf-badger-wolf. He stared at his hand. Sun and moon, this was going to hurt. "Badger-wolf-badger-wolf," he whispered, accepting, twisting the magic, restricting it. Savage pain crackled along his forearm, as it morphed, shrank, down to badger-paw, stretching back to wolf. Grey-black, small-smaller. He bit his lip until he tasted blood, to hold back a cry of pain as joints popped and bones ground together. Fire danced along his nerves. His back arched as his entire body jerked...and his hand pulled free. He collapsed, gasping as his hand tore through the fur and pads lengthened back into fingers. Fingers that tingled unmercifully as the blood rushed into them. He panted. His eyes burned. One down, only three more to go.

When it was over he could barely move. He lay there gasping for breath, willing his vision to clear and his stomach to settle. The children. He had to find the children, make sure they were all right. His heart ached with sorrow and rage. He could no longer feel Niadh's pain. That could mean only one thing.

Niadh was dead.

To die so far from kith and kin, on a foreign shore... "I swear, all will know ye gave yer life in defense o' bairns," he vowed.

"Who died?" a familiar voice asked from the doorway. "Shoulda known I'd find ye lyin' about in bed."

Tristan rolled off the bed onto the floor and staggered to his feet. "Niadh?" he croaked.

"Mostly." Niadh, bald and naked, sagged against the door frame.

"Ye look terrible."

Niadh grinned, but his eyes were haunted. "I look a lot better than I did. Anuk healed me an' set me free. She held Spiridon off long 'nough for me t' escape."

Tristan reached for Niadh with his mind. Naught. There was naught there. The link was broken. "What's happened?"

“’Tis gone.” Niadh’s expression was bleak. “I’m guardian no longer. The wolf is gone. I canna shift. When that demon dragon invoked the human, everything shattered.”

Trystan grasped his mentor’s wrists. “Ye shall always be a guardian. When we get home, we shall be restored. Ye just wait an’ see.”

“Where are the children?”

Trystan went to rip the sheet off the bed, tearing it in half and holding it out to Niadh. “Here. Ye canna prance about in naught but yer skin. All the women shall swoon.”

Niadh wrapped it around his hips. “Thanks.”

“They’re somewhere on this floor,” Trystan stated. “Place isna that big. We’ll just look for a locked door an’ kick it in.”

Niadh grinned, albeit weakly. “Just like old times.”

Trystan’s heart warmed. “Absolutely. Here’s t’ future old times.”

They strode down the hallway. A terrific tremor shook the house, and flames shot up the far wall. Voices screamed from the floor below them, and Trystan heard the sound of pounding feet running for the nearest exit. “I think they’ve got the right idea!” he shouted. “The dragons must be takin’ it up a level.”

Niadh tried the first door. It opened easily, to reveal a linen closet. “She dinna kill ye. She saved me. What did ye say t’ her?”

“I but gave her a history lesson. In truth, I think I but confirmed sommat she’d heard afore.” Trystan found the first locked door. “Here.” Together they kicked, until the lock gave way.

Ioain cowered behind Braeca, who screamed and threw the remains of a lamp at them. Brave lass. Terrible aim. “Easy, there,” Trystan soothed. “’Tis me. Are ye all right?”

“Twystan!” Ioain launched himself across the room and into Trystan’s arms, sobbing.

“Ssh, it’s all right. We’re gettin’ ye both outta here,” Niadh whispered.

Ioain stared at him. “Woof?”

Trystan froze. “Can ye still see the wolf, laddie?”

Ioain nodded. “He’s...hurt. But he’s there.”

Braeca crept closer as Niadh closed his eyes, mouthing a prayer of gratitude. “What happened to your hair?”

Niadh opened eyes that glistened with a sheen of tears. “Stupid dragon scared it clean off me head.” As jokes went, ’twas a weak one. But Trystan was overjoyed Niadh was strong enough to make jokes at all.

The house shook again, an explosion of wood and plaster and glass erupting from the burning far wall as two enormous scaled forms shot into the sky. “Time t’ go!” Niadh yelled. “Down the stairs afore the whole place collapses!” The children followed him out into the street, with Trystan bringing up the rear. There they stood, gawking, with the rest of the villagers who’d gathered to watch the flaming spectacle overhead.

"Traitor! How dare you defy me?"

Anuk swerved to avoid the fireball her father flung at her. *"You lied to me!"*

Human screams below told her their battle was witnessed.

"You're my child," he roared. *"Bound to obey."* Spiridon dove for her head, black talons outstretched.

She barely tilted out of the way of her smaller sire, snaked her head around to rake his serpentine neck with her fangs. The coppery taste of his blood was sweet on her tongue. *"You told me I had no magic."*

Spiridon snorted. *"Pitiful beginner spells. Crude at best."*

"They might be crude, but they're mighty," she retorted. *"I healed and freed Niadh. What you plan is wrong! What we're doing is wrong!"*

"They must pay!" Spiridon snarled. With a great inhalation, he puffed himself up, then released another toxic cloud of gas and flame.

She heard distant screams below, from the human witnesses.

As if dragon-fire could hurt her. An impressive visual, but more a nuisance, a mere distraction, really. *"Who? These Arcadian clans? Why? What have they done that your hatred burns so bright?"* Anuk asked. *"Tell me."*

"They turned her against me."

Now, maybe, finally, they got to the truth. Anuk's carnelian wings faltered. She tired rapidly. *"Who?"*

"Your mother," Spiridon answered.

The book hissed. Anuk all but fell from the sky. *"What?"*

"Guardian, they called her. And she chose them over me, to stay with the mountain clans rather than me. Her mate! Worse, she tried to keep you from me." His gold eyes glittered madly above the bright crimson blood streaming from the gash in his neck.

Was it her wishful thinking or did his wings slow a fraction? *"Tried?"* Dread filled her. *"Obviously she did not succeed. How did you stop her? How did you beat her?"*

"I tried to take her egg. She fought me. Fought me. Her beloved mate. I killed her, and took you."

"You killed my mother?" Anuk crashed into the belltower of the meeting house. Something snapped in her wing. In blinding pain she tumbled to the frozen ground, barely missing the humans gawking at the battle. Had they no survival instinct?

The book screamed in her head.

“They turned her against me, those mountain savages. Foul beast-humans who dwell in caves and around campfires! But I showed them. I bound you to me, so no one could take you from me. You’re my daughter. Join me, and together we can rule this pitiful human race.”

Pain morphed her into her unclad human form, and she cradled her broken arm close. “You’re mad!” she screamed aloud. “You’re a murderer. Where are the others? The other dragons?”

His immense garnet length soared overhead with lethal grace. *“They were unable to remove you from me. We were banished into the earth for centuries, until I made a pact with Cilaniestra and clawed my way free.”*

The level of betrayal was almost unfathomable. He had to pay. With the last of her waning strength, she chanted, “Dragon-man-dragon-man.”

Spiridon crashed to the ground with an agonized cry, blurring between naked red-haired man and red-scaled beast.

Anuk saw Trystan wince in sympathy from the corner of her eye. How had he gotten free? Her gaze shifted to the children, and Niadh, approaching from the smithy. Was he wearing her bed sheet?

Sudden weakness struck her. 'Twas as if all her strength flowed from her, down a drain. She staggered, swayed, fell to her knees. Her sight glazed over, and she saw it. A shining gold spirit-cord, tying her to her father. What? Insight hit. She'd felt it afore. Every time she'd had sex, bound another being to her, he'd sucked it all away. She was the source of all his power. Had been all along.

“You bloody parasite!” she screamed. “It wasn’t your magic all these years, was it? It was mine! You’re nothing but a powerless...troll-turd! Leech!”

He rose, his expression ugly. “You’re as bad as she is. You’ll pay the same price.”

“I’m exactly as she is.” Anuk staggered to her feet. “I’m a guardian.”

Trystan and Niadh moved to flank her. Trystan placed a hand on the small of her back, and a curious blend of power flowed into her. Earth and sea. An impossible mixture, but undeniably there. She stared at him, startled. He smiled. “We stand together, guardian.”

“Ye’re yer ma’s child, guardian,” Niadh added. “Renounce him. Break the tie.”

After everything she’d done to them, they stood with her? Forgave her? She’d never be worthy of such a gift, but she’d spend the rest of her life trying. “I renounce thee, Spiridon the Nameless. Mate-murderer. Thou art not my father. I am *Anuk* Kahn Androcles shena *Lena* Kahn Androcles shena *Ilya* Kahn Androcles shena *Rala* Kahn Androcles shena *Vana* Kahn Androcles shena *Mystria* Kahn Androcles.” She had to catch her breath after that.

The book laughed in her head. She pictured it gloating from her bedside table, and stretched out her hands. “Come to me,” she commanded. With an audible “pop” it appeared in her hands.

“I am the daughter of dragon queens, and by the power that passes from mother to daughter I break all ties with thee,” she finished.

Spiridon screamed as the cord flared...and vanished.

“Quit tryin’ t’ shift,” Trystan called.

Spiridon did, and a drawn-looking man lay crumpled on the ground, eyes closed. He clawed at the dirt with bent fingers, as if trying to summon the strength to rise. Now he had none but his own strength to wield.

Drek, her arm hurt. Anuk belatedly summoned a cloak of black velvet to cover herself as she choked down the urge to kick him in the head, or better yet, rip it clean off his body. The suffering he’d caused. Him, a guardian. How best to punish him? Inspiration stirred. Slowly, she smiled.

“Mama! Mama!” The little girl Braeca’s cries distracted Anuk. She turned to see both children running pell mell down the street toward a group of armed seal-men...and the woman who led them.

Chapter Sixteen

“Braeca! Ioain!” Finora ran harder than she had ever run in her life. Dropping to her knees, she caught both children to her. They clung to her, sobbing. “Ssh, it’s all right. I’m here. We’re safe.” It was worth it. Everything. Anything. She’d never leave them again. Never.

Griogair knelt beside her. “It seems our rescue was not needed, after all.” He smiled and stroked the children’s hair. “Your mother’s back, little ones. You’re free and safe.”

Braeca peeked at him over Finora’s shoulder. “You!”

Finora smiled. “This is your grandfather, Braeca. Ioain.”

“Gwampa?” Ioain tried.

Griogair nodded, and Ioain stepped forward to give him a hug. After a moment’s hesitation, the selkie king hugged him back.

A tall, muscular, nearly naked man helped an injured Anuk forward. Finora stared at him. “Niadh?”

He nodded wearily.

Finora glared at Anuk. Fury rushed through her. Drawing back a fist, she knocked the dragon-whore to the ground. “You rotten bitch! Whore! Baby-stealer! How dare you!”

Strong arms dragged her off Anuk, who lay on the ground surprisingly not fighting back. “Easy, there, lass. It’s no’ what ye think.”

She whirled on him, stared deep into his eyes. Trystan stared back at her with clear blue badger-wolf eyes. He’d not fallen prey to the dragon-witch’s wiles, after all. “You’re all right,” she whispered.

“I would never betray ye with the likes o’ her,” he replied. He grimaced and closed his eyes, turning to Anuk, whom Niadh was helping up from the dirt. “I dinna mean it as it sounded, lass.”

“No offense taken,” she muttered.

Betray. Oh, stars, what had she done?

Griogair must have seen the distress on her face, because he grasped Finora’s arm. “You did what you had to do. If he doesn’t understand that, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

“What do we do with him?” Mari called, indicating Spiridon.

Anuk turned with a singularly unpleasant smile. “Cilaniestra!” she hollered. Her voice rolled over the hills of the earth and the waves of the sea. “I make You an offer!”

Eyes appeared in the clouds. “Daughter of earth and fire, what wouldst thou say to Me?”

"I am dragonkind, guardian. That is who I am, what I was born to be. I have here one who would deny his very nature. As blood kin, I offer him up to You. He refuses to be a guardian on earth. He has stained the ground with the blood of those he was in a position to protect. Therefore, let him be a guardian of the seas, in service to You."

Spiridon paled. "Nay. Anuk, what are you doing?" Panic raised his voice to a rather effeminate, piercing shriek.

"A guardian to serve You, all the days of his life." Anuk waited.

"Done." Cilaniestra turned Her implacable gaze on Spiridon. "Oathbreaker, I bind thee to the waves of the sea. Swim amongst the fishes, the mer and the selkie. I charge thee with protecting the shores of my realm, to maintain the peace amongst all."

Spiridon shimmered, stretching into an elongated version of a dragon, with fins in place of claws. A dark, glistening garnet deepened to purple along his spines, with wings shrunk down to but an afterthought.

"Come." Cilaniestra blinked Her eyes and vanished. In a blur of motion, Spiridon made his way to the water's edge...and was gone.

Anuk sagged in the circle of Niadh's arm.

Trystan pulled Finora to him. She resisted. "Go with your grandfather, Braeca. Ioain. I have to talk to Trystan."

"Come on, you two. Let's go to the Mermaid Pub and await your dam there," Griogair said. He turned to Mari, who stared at him with an awed expression. "I'm sure this beautiful woman can show us the way."

Mari blushed to the roots of her hair. Braeca giggled.

Finora watched them go, and Niadh and Anuk returned to the remains of the manor house.

Trystan cupped her chin in his hand, turned her face until her gaze met his. "Are ye all right? What happened t' ye?"

"I opened the door." Her eyes burned with tears. "Matteo said he needed my help to rescue the children, that you had sent him. He gave me this as proof." She placed the amulet around his neck.

"He had yer skin," Trystan stated levelly. "He returned ye t' the sea."

She nodded miserably.

"How could ye leave yer bairns?"

How could she hope to explain the disorientation, the forgetting? "The sea overwhelms all...for a bit. The roar was so loud, but I kept hesitating. He drove me, unmercifully." She raised her skirt to reveal the long, scabbed-over wound on her hip.

Trystan's eyes turned cold and deadly. "He did this t' ye?"

"Aye." Finora swallowed hard. "I couldn't remember how to swim. It felt like I was drowning. I couldn't remember how to hold my breath. I kept trying to surface, and he just kept shoving me under."

“Ssh.” He pulled her to him, rubbed his hands up and down her back in a slow soothing motion. A tremor ran through him. She felt him quiver. “Where did he take ye?”

“To his palace.” Finora shuddered at the memory of the blood-stained pillar. “There was blood everywhere.”

“How did ye get t’ yer father?”

Here it was...the beginning of the end. “I tricked Matteo into taking me.”

Trystan held himself very, very still. “How?”

“Once upon a time, we’d been betrothed by my father. I convinced him I still honored that pact. As a princess, bound by her king father to a then-prince peer, now the neighboring king. He was bound and determined to an alliance with my father.” Finora took a deep, shaky breath. “He almost raped me. So I...I seduced him instead.”

She waited for the explosion. She waited for him to shove her away. When neither happened, she dared to meet his gaze. Instead of the revulsion she’d expected, she saw only acceptance. Admiration.

Huh?

“Ye were alone. Locked up in a murderer’s house, knowing he’d slaughtered all of his kin. Bruised. Bleeding.” He brushed the hair from her face. “I see the one on yer cheek. I assume there are others.”

She nodded. “But—”

“I ken what ye’d tell me. Ye did what ye had t’ survive, t’ escape. It must have been a convincing performance. I almost pity the poor bastard.”

He made no sense whatsoever. “Why?”

“Because he had but yer body, when heart an’ soul ye belong t’ me. When he had ye, all ye thought on was escaping, returnin’ t’ the bairns...an’ me.” His eyes were steady. The love in them stole her breath. “I love ye, Finora. We’ve a tie that transcends earth an’ sea, an’ I’m grateful ye returned. Ye always wondered what would happen when ye got yer skin back, what would happen t’ the bairns. Well, ye had the chance an’ made yer choice. I told ye yer stronger than ye ken.”

She pulled him down to her in a heartfelt kiss. He took command of it in a heartbeat, his tongue chasing away the memory of Matteo. She gave herself up to his kiss, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Dinna cry, lass,” he whispered. He moved to kiss each one away. “No more tears. No more despair. We’re free. I love ye.”

“I love you, too.” And she did, fiercely.

“Let’s go get the bairns and go home.”

In a daze she headed for The Mermaid Pub. Griogair took one look at her face and nodded. “You have a tie to the land that balances out the call of the sea. It’s what helped you return when you made your choice. I take it you’ve made your choice?”

She nodded. "I'm sorry, Sire, but I choose to stay here, with Trystan, since he'll have me. We're going to be a family."

Ioain's eyes widened. "We're keeping him?"

Trystan laughed. "Aye, laddie, ye're stuck with me."

Braeca eyed him with unexpected gravity. "Are you going to be my new da?"

"Aye, lass, if ye'll have me."

She thought it over, then nodded. "You won't leave us?"

Finora's heart stuttered in her chest. What would Trystan say to that?

Trystan regarded her seriously. "I would ne'er leave t' ne'er return. I'm a guardian, lass. There are times when I'll be called away on Clan business. But I swear t' ye on me soul that barrin' death I will always return t' ye. And should death take me, me last thoughts will be o' ye."

Braeca's lip trembled, but she sucked in a deep breath and nodded.

Griogair rose. "Walk with me, Daughter."

Finora escorted him to the water's edge, where his dozen bulls waited. "Will I ever see you again?"

He shook his head. "We'll guard your way back to the distant shores, but you were meant for so much more than the harem. You have a grand adventure awaiting you, and a fine man to share it with. I wish you well."

"Give my love to my mother, and please be careful. Matteo—"

He laid a finger against her lips. Shushing her. "I have made an alliance with the mer king, Krinardt. They've agreed to help me keep that treacherous pup in check until his half-brother grows to adulthood. We'll be all right." He tucked her skin beneath his arm. "We shall honor you with a fallen ceremony. The flames will ensure you never fall prey to another again."

The destruction of her skin, as if she were a great warrior fallen in battle. She flung his arms around his neck. "I'll miss you."

"But not the sea." He smiled. "That was a clever bit of magic, the tie to earth. Tell your man I applaud his creativity. Raise your children to become adults with honor and purpose. I think these guardians of yours will set them a fine example." He turned away, donned his skin, and plunged into the sea with his bulls.

She swallowed down the aching lump in her throat and turned back to town. When she returned to The Mermaid, she spied Trystan at a table with the children.

"Anuk went t' free their people from the bindin' spell," Trystan told her. "An' Reed. Niadh but watches her back. We'll be headin' for home on the first ship t' be found. Anuk returns with us. I told her o' her niece, Dara. She's eager t' meet her. Asides, this town will be glad t' see us gone. We've caused enough ruckus for ten lifetimes."

Indeed, everyone seemed to be watching them from the corner of one eye. Mari came over and grabbed the last remaining chair at their table. “Superstitious fools,” the witch snorted.

“Can I interest you in a slightly used lighthouse and cottage?” Finora asked.

“You might, at that,” Mari replied. “I’d be happy to take over when you leave.”

Finora hugged her. “You’ve been a good friend. I’ll never forget you.”

“Mayhaps someday I’ll come visit.”

Trystan smiled. “You’ll always be welcome.”

Mari stood and made her way to the door.

“Mama? Ev’wyone’s stawing at us,” Ioain complained.

“Are you ready to go home, poppets?” Finora asked.

They nodded.

“You have no idea,” Trystan whispered.

A warm glow suffused her entire body. “Oh, I think I do, mountain man. I can’t wait to meet your family.”

They walked arm-in-arm up the cliffside path. The children ran ahead to let Storm out. The big dog greeted them with thunderous barking. Rona paced the edge of the table. Braeca and Ioain flung their arms around Storm. Trystan started a fire in the hearth, and the children curled up on the rug afore the fire. Rona wound around Finora’s ankles, and she bent over to pet the cat. The cat arched her back with a meow, paws flexing on the floor.

“Mayhaps I should start supper,” Finora said.

Trystan shook his head. “Look.”

Braeca and Ioain were sound asleep, cuddled up with Storm.

Finora smiled as Trystan carried first Ioain, then Braeca, to their beds. Storm plunked down on the floor betwixt the children as Finora covered them with their blankets.

“Are you hungry?” she whispered as he followed her into the common room. “I can make you something to eat...” The words died in her throat at the expression of blatant hunger on his face.

“Later.” His voice was raspy. “Show me.”

Oh, stars. He was going to explode when he saw where some of those bruises were located. She swallowed hard. “Trystan—”

He captured her mouth in an open-mouthed kiss that melted her very bones. “I love you,” he whispered when they finally came up for air. “I’ll always love you. May you ne’er fear tellin’ or showin’ me sommat. What happens t’ ye happens t’ me as weel.”

She led him to her room, and he closed the door behind them. He reached for her, stroked a hand through her hair as she leaned into his touch. “Now I know how Rona feels,” she said. She took a deep

breath. Trystan's familiar scent curled around her, comforting as a blanket. "Make me forget." To her horror she started to shake. "Make him go away. Please..."

"Oh, lass." That feral-green glint flashed in his eyes. "I could kill him, right now. But here's sommat better." He kissed her temple, nibbled along her jaw where the bruise from Matteo's blow still ached. "So strong," he whispered. "So beautiful an' brave." His beard brushed the sensitive skin of her neck, and she shivered. He caressed her with just his fingertips, as lightly as butterfly wings. His lips, his tongue, followed along in the wake of his fingers.

Finora whimpered as her body awoke. Trystan loosened her laces, and her gown pooled at their feet, but he seemed to be in no hurry. His fingertips trailed across her collarbone, down her arms. Goosebumps rose, and she quivered. "Trystan..."

"So soft," he whispered. "Like silk, like satin." He caressed her in the moonlight, his eyes all but glowing in the dark. "Ye're like a dream. I ne'er want t' wake from this." He brushed her lips with his, teased her with but the tip of his tongue and he smoothed his hands up and down her back.

Stars, his touch felt so good, so right. Her heart drank in his words. She reached for him, but he stayed her hands.

"Nay, lass. T'night's yers." He eased her down onto her bed, running a hand down her side and over her hip. His fingertips skirted around the wound. "Does it hurt, lass?"

He was rapidly giving her something else to think on. She shook her head. "Not when I'm with you," she told him. She gasped as Trystan nuzzled her belly. "That tickles."

"Aye?" He nuzzled her again, and she giggled helplessly. "I like the sound o' that," he said. He nibbled along the underside of her breast, and she sighed, curling her hands through his hair. Fire licked along her skin, everywhere he touched. She all but purred as she slid her hands over his shoulders and he shivered. "I yearn for yer touch," he murmured. "Ye're the other half of me soul. Ye make me world complete."

Finora gasped as he suckled gently at her breast, and she arched into his mouth as he caressed her other breast. "Stars, Trystan!" Heat pooled low and deep, and she shifted restlessly, tangling her legs with his.

"Easy, lass. There's no hurry. We have all night. Ev'ry night, 'til the end o' our days." He was as good as his word, gently wooing her with kisses and soft caresses until she was lost in pure pleasure. There wasn't an inch of skin he didn't worship, until she was a quivering bundle of need.

"Trystan, please. You're driving me mad."

"No' yet, but I will." His kiss turned carnal, hungry. She gloried in the deep, earthy taste of him. Shadow and spice. His hands teased her nipples until they ached. She panted under him as he took first one then the other and drew hard. He slipped a hand betwixt her thighs, stroking her to fevered heights. "So beautiful," he whispered. "Such passion."

“Only for you,” Finora vowed. “Only and ever for you.”

He rolled over and drew her atop him. Finora couldn’t wait any longer. She eased over him, gasping as he slid into her body. It felt like coming home, like they were truly one. She rode him slowly, feeling every exquisite stroke all the way to her heart. And when the pleasure hit, it was a quiet burst of warmth as they melted together.

“I love you,” she told him. “I’ll love you when we’re tottering around telling our great-grandchildren what to do. Marry me.”

“I thought you’d ne’er ask.” He took her mouth in a sweet, soft kiss and pulled her close.

“Was that an aye or a nay?” she teased.

“Oh, aye. Fore’er an’ always.”

Epilogue

They'd made it to Arcadia at last, after months of hard travel slowed by the short legs of the children. Standing in Queen Moira's bower of Safehold Keep, Finora still marveled at the regained luxuries after all that Riverhead had endured. Very little reminders of the war remained. She held little Alvar and stifled a yawn as his mother watched with soft indulgence. "Ye're good for my brother," Moira stated. "I've ne'er seen him so content."

"I hope so." Finora stared out the window at the green expanse far below. She watched Ioain and Braeca cavorting with Storm and a couple of wolfhound pups in the grass. A watchful kitchen maid supervised whilst churning a fresh batch of cream into butter.

"You're a born mother," Moira added. "When do you plan on telling him he's going to be a father?"

Finora froze. She'd prayed the seasickness she'd suffered on the crossing had been just that. Trystan had suffered no such illness. But her illness hadn't abated one little bit once they'd reached land, and she was forced to admit the truth. She was pregnant.

"Don't look so horrified," Moira chided.

"You don't understand." Finora burst into tears and handed Alvar back to his mother. "Mother help me, I don't know who the father is."

"Ah." Moira didn't look surprised—or critical. "Trystan told us of your time beneath the waves." And she stepped to the doorway of the nursery. "Bring the lady Anuk at once," she told...someone.

Anuk appeared within minutes, dressed in a high-necked gown of emerald velvet. She looked better than she had in weeks. Almost at peace. There was a softness in her gold eyes, a newfound knowledge and acceptance. Not a little of which had to do with meeting her niece, Dara, at long last.

"What's wrong?" Anuk asked.

"Finora's worried about what to tell Trystan o' the wee bairn she's carrying. You're a healer and a mage. Can you tell her if it be a child o' the earth or the sea?"

Anuk nodded. "Easily. Finora?" She laid a gentle hand against Finora's belly.

Finora felt a warm glow brush her womb, and held her breath. She felt a coolness as Anuk withdrew. "Well?"

"'Tis a lad, as strong an earth spirit as his father," Anuk smiled. "Not an ounce of seawater in his veins."

"Truly?"

Anuk nodded. "Truly. The nightmare is over. For both of us."

Finora sniffled, and grabbed her in a fierce hug. "Thank you."

"Go talk to that husband o' yours," Moira teased. "And then go take a nap. You're making me sleepy."

Finora followed the stone stairs down into the lower hall. Hengist's great sword rested above the roaring fireplace on the far wall. Beneath a colorful woolen tapestry portraying the royal wedding of Hengist and Moira, Hengist himself and Trystan sat playing a board game of horses and hounds at the great oak main table.

Plans were already well underway for her own wedding to Trystan.

From the scowl on Trystan's face, she knew who was winning. "Care to concede and take a walk with me?" she asked.

"Gladly," he muttered, pushing away from the table. "I've no head for strategy."

Hengist laughed. "'Tis a fine day. Too fine to stay inside. Go. Enjoy yourselves." His eyes twinkled as he winked at her. He knew. How, she couldn't fathom.

Finora led Trystan over to a cushioned garden bench. "Sit."

A wary look crossed his face. "Am I in trouble?"

Laughter bubbled up from nowhere. She felt giddy, drunk on pure happiness. This bright spring morning was truly their new beginning. "Nay. I've a little something to tell you, my love..."

About the Author

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Love will give them strength...or prove to be their fatal flaw.

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Guardians of the Light, Book 1

Dara Khan Androcles is really in over her head this time. From childhood she's been forced to hide her half-dragon mage fighting skills behind a public persona as a healer. Now, with a traitor and his demon threatening the throne of Safehold, Dara has no choice but to turn reluctant warrior—and seek help.

She strikes a bargain with runaway Elven prince Loren ta Cedric and his sentient, pain-in-the-butt war mare, Hani'ena. Loren's not only too handsome for Dara's own good, the powerful empath can see right through to the pain that drives her.

Loren can't help but feel Dara's every hurt, physical and emotional. Though his need for her drives him half mad, he must stay his course to see justice done for his people. Even if it means swearing a Life Debt to the distracting mortal.

That vow, made in the heat of their parallel quests, carries more power than either of them guessed. The power to bond the unlikely pair as Life Mates. The power to lay bare the fears and desires that could bind them to a single purpose—or tear them apart.

All the while a demon awaits, ready to destroy all that they hold dear.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Duality:

Lorelei hesitated. “Thy tantrums require energy. Thou shalt need to replace it. Eat.”

Dara sagged. Now the surge had worn off, she was exhausted and shaking. She reached for a roll spread with tasi root.

Looking lost in thought, Lorelei sipped her tea.

Dara's own eyes swept the shambles of the bower. Her cheeks flushed. “I'll clean up the mess, my lady. I swear it.” She wasn't sure how she'd replace everything. “I'm sorry. I lost my temper and...”

“Everyone has a temper. From what I hear, thou wast provoked. I know the feeling well enough.”

Dara recalled the rain cloud pouring over Pari's head. She shook her head, haunted by the memory of fierce rage and an almost unholy glee at the wanton destruction. “Not like mine. It's always been a problem, but now with them,” she touched the torque, “it's a thousand times worse. As soon as my control weakens or slips... Well, you've seen it.” She indicated the damage.

“Any fires afore today?” Lorelei's question was casual, but her eyes were intent as she awaited Dara's response.

“Nay.” Dara frowned in confusion, trying to think.

Lorelei nodded. “This palace was built on earth and fire, volcanic rock, ages old and dormant, but never dead. Thy natural dragon’s blood is too dilute to manifest itself in the ordinary mortal world, but that dose of undiluted dragon’s blood in prison, coupled with the blood torque in a realm rich with magic of all five elements, hast changed thee.”

Dara gulped. Her hands shook, and tea sloshed over the rim of her cup into the saucer.

“It is unheard-of for an untrained talent to be able to draw on raw power; fire is quick to turn on pretentious amateurs. But in thy case, the fire within fueled the fires without. Thou needs learn control afore thou destroy thyself and all about thee. The very nature of fire-powered magic be chaotic, lending itself far more to destruction than order. Easily summoned by strong dark emotions—jealousy, possessiveness, anger, hate, rage—it is difficult to control and harder to banish. It burns its wielder in the very flames of the power summoned. Natural, for a dragon, but usually fatal for a mortal human.”

“*We protect thee*,” the voices assured her.

“Thou needs learn control,” Lorelei said. “We hath mages to help teach, and I canst supervise any further mishaps.” She paused for a moment. “There is another gift Mystria left behind. A book of spells on the Isle of Mysts. The book teaches thee the spells and torque gives thee the power to use them and make them become reality.” The dowager queen looked her in the eye. “If thou wouldst defeat the abyss and Jalad, thou shalt need this.”

Dara stared back. “Real spell-magic?”

“This goes beyond healing. I speak of true sorcery. Fire magic used to purpose.” Lorelei frowned. “Pari knows the way and the passwords. The path is dangerous, through the Shadowlands. It is a true quest. Wilt thou go?”

Elation swept through her. “Aye. I’ll go.”

Lorelei stood. “Come in, lad. I was just leaving.”

Loren entered the room and looked around as his grandmother left and shut the door behind her. “I love what you have done with the ‘early cyclone’ theme.”

Dara was too tired to react. “I’m going away.”

“I heard. You shall not go alone. I go with you.”

“Nay.” She shook her head. “It’s too dangerous. *I’m* too dangerous.”

He pulled her into his arms, cradled her head against his heart. “You would never hurt me, or anyone else you care about. Of that I am certain. You ransacked a room, a one-riever army. That is all.”

Strange how soothing his heartbeat was, how it banished despair.

“You are not alone, Dara. We started this together. We finish this together.”

“Stubborn elf,” she muttered.

“Best you remember that.” He rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head. “It would save a great deal of difficulty if you would just accept that one simple fact. Face it, woman. After hoards of trolls and goblins—and one upcoming demon—a temperamental dragon just is not all that intimidating.”

She growled.

He laughed. “Look at me.”

She did, only to get ensnared by those eyes. He was the dangerous one. Dangerous to her heart. When he dipped his head to capture her mouth in a kiss, she moaned and burrowed closer.

“We were meant to be together,” Loren whispered against her lips. “Better we fight others, together, than each other.”

How could he be so sure? Dara was tired of fighting, tired of thinking. She just wanted to feel, to have the magic of Loren’s kisses sweep away all else. She clung to him, teasing his lips with her tongue, sliding her hands beneath his tunic. Hard muscle under hot skin, heart pounding beneath her fingertips. He pulled her back, down onto what remained of her bed, rolling her beneath him. She gasped at the foreign, thrilling sensation of his weight pinning her to the mattress. His hand stroked up her side, barely brushing her breast. Teasing.

Heat. Yearning. She arched up, legs tangled with his. Frustration made her want to scream.

“Easy,” he soothed, raining a trail of fiery kisses down the side of her neck as he curled his fingers around her breast, stroking his thumb over her aching nipple. Afore she’d time to react to that, he’d lowered his head to take her nipple in his mouth, right through the material. The hot suction of his mouth sent a dart of need straight to her womb.

“Loren!” She twisted in his arms. Wanting more. Needing more. The intimate stroke of his tongue drove her mad. Liquid heat pooled betwixt her thighs. He slid his hand into her hose, his fingers caressing the skin of her legs. Closer... Her eyes snapped open, staring up into his flushed face. She burned, on fire, alive with a need she couldn’t name.

His eyes glittered down at her, dark with passion. Smoky, like jade. “I know, *elingrena*. I know what you need. Trust me. Give yourself to me. I am yours. You are mine.” His mouth captured hers in a carnal kiss of absolute possession, as his hand slid betwixt her legs, fingers stroking softly over swollen, passion-slick folds.

Dara stiffened with shock at his audacity—for about a second. Then she sank into a storm of pleasure. Whatever he was doing built her need to a desperate edge. She moved on his hand, sure she’d die if he continued. She’d die if he stopped. She’d *kill* him if he stopped. He moved to her breast again, drawing strongly, his tongue teasing the very tip of her nipple as his fingers circled a hidden bud of pure heat. She panted with need, arching into his mouth, his hand. Need coiled tighter and tighter. The ache was excruciating. What was happening? Her body was no longer her own, but his.

She's known nothing but pain, but love waits in the arms of one man.

Hedda's Sword

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Guardians of the Light, Book 2

Maleta is a true survivor. Attacked and left for dead at a young age, she has traded her heart and emotions to become the ultimate weapon of vengeance for the Grey Goddess, Hedda. She swears to depose Queen Sunniva and restore her ancestral home to her brother, no matter the cost.

Cianan is drawn to the mysterious land of Shamar on the power of a vision—the death of a beautiful swordswoman to an army of skeletons. When he meets Maleta, he recognizes two things. She is his true Life-Mate. And she is the woman fated to die this horrible death.

He vows to change her fate.

Cianan must unite the diverse people of a fragmented land to overthrow a vicious despot and convince their true queen to take the throne. Falling in love with a mortal woman who's buried her heart and shies from his every touch—that's the real challenge.

Maleta knows she can trust Cianan to save her country. Can she trust him to help her save herself?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Hedda's Sword:

Cianan sponged the blood and sweat off with the tepid water, amused to see but the top of her head as she blindly handed him a drying towel. Not once did Hedda look at him. He could not bear the thought of putting that filthy tunic back on. She was going to have to deal with him shirtless. He strode over to the quilt and dropped to the floor afore the hearth. Tossing his hair back over his shoulder, out of the way, he stuck the cheese onto the toasting fork and held it out to the flames while Maleta changed the water and freshened the cloth on Jovan's forehead.

She joined Cianan on the quilt to pour them each a cup of mead. She took a big swallow and reached for a peeled egg.

He felt her gaze on him, but left her with her thoughts as he placed the softened cheese on its plate and spread some on a piece of bread. He held it out to her and she traded it for a cup of the mead. The wood popped in the hearth. Maleta jumped, spilling a bit of mead over their wrists. He smiled and took the cup from her hand. "Are you all right?"

"I'm nothing but nerves," she confessed. "I've felt like a bowstring forever, ready to snap." She tucked her knees under her chin and stared through him, into the flames.

Were she any other woman, Cianan had a solution for releasing that tension. If not for the presence of her brother, the scene could have been the perfect setting for seduction. The mere thought made him burn. He snorted to himself at the irony of being with the one woman oblivious to her surroundings. He realized

the twisted compliment that she didn't view him in that way, as she still viewed sex as a threat, but it was small comfort when he wanted her so. The few chaste kisses she'd dared return made him yearn for more.

He had to think on something else. "There is hope for your brother," he told her.

"The healers have already been here, on Tzigana's order." She turned bleak eyes to his. "They said there's nothing they can do, that he's beyond all aid."

Cianan stared at Jovan's still form on the bed. Jovan breathed. His heart beat. But his mind and spirit were gone, withdrawn away from the world, hiding deep within his body. Cianan had seen such collapses afore, from overwhelming trauma and stress. "Not all." He turned to Maleta. "Eat. Drink. Get some rest. Jovan is not dead. He is not going to die. Come morning, we shall start looking for a solution. But not now, not when we are both exhausted."

She finished the food in her hand in silence. "Do you think Dara can help him?"

"I think Benilo, our Minister of Healers," Cianan mused. "He is the most powerful spirit healer we have." He felt the king's presence. "*Loren?*"

"*Are you both all right?*" Loren asked.

Cianan sent his memory of Sunniva's trial and Jovan's collapse. "*I hoped Benilo might have a suggestion.*"

"*Let me get back to you on that,*" Loren said. "*I shall let you know what he says by morning. You both should rest.*"

"Cianan?" Maleta's voice masked Loren's withdrawal.

"What?"

"Where did you go?" she asked. "You seemed so far away."

"Finding the person to ask the right questions," he replied. "Loren is going to ask Benilo and get us an answer by morning."

"Dara's husband? You communicate with him?"

"Always. He worries when his people wander far afield." Cianan smiled. "Now he knows how his father felt all those years while *he* ran all over the land."

"And you remind him of that every day."

"Well, mayhaps every other or so," he admitted.

Her own smile wobbled a bit. "He's your best friend?"

Cianan nodded. "We grew up together. It never mattered he is a royal prince and I am a nobody. We went through warrior academy, ranger school and were chosen together. Our war mares are sisters. We are brothers by all but blood."

"You've never spoken of your real family," she said.

"I have none," he replied. "I was an only child, and my parents died when I was but a youngling. Lord Elio raised me, Loren's former weaponsmaster and now Minister of Defense."

"I'm sorry," she said. "How did they die?"

"My father Daneal was plain infantry, a regular soldier killed in battle," he replied. "My mother died in an accident a year later." To his shock, she scooted forward to wrap her arms around him. "What is this for?"

"No one should be alone in life," she declared, her voice rough with unshed tears.

"It was a long time ago, *elingrena*, and I have a new family. Family is not blood ties." He stared down at her. "I am not alone. Lord Elio, Loren and Dara are my family. You and Jovan are also my family. You are not alone anymore, either. We now have each other." He captured her hand to place a kiss in the palm.

She glanced up to search his eyes. Hers shimmered in the firelight. "You came here for me?"

"Aye. You know of the dreams. I was not about to let you die."

"I don't understand. You didn't know me."

"I knew your courage, your spirit." He brushed his lips against her inner wrist. Her skin was so soft. "You were meant to live free."

She gasped at the contact, but did not pull away. Her fingers curled around his other arm, slid up to his shoulder. Her touch was feather-light, hesitant, barely there—it burned to his soul. The warrior gave way to the woman within. For him. Words failed him. He released her hand, searched her eyes. Shock and confusion flared in her eyes, but no fear. Only her fear would have stopped him. He leaned forward to capture her mouth with his, in a slow, gentle kiss. He touched her with his lips alone, giving her every chance to pull back, move away. He prayed for her to stay.

Maleta stiffened for a moment. He felt her tremble with indecision. Then the hand on his shoulder slid up to cradle the back of his neck, and she relaxed into him. Her mouth opened under his, and her fingers tangled in his hair. Her kiss soaked into him like rain after a long drought, heated his blood quicker than a brushfire. Many times in the past had he unwound with a woman after a battle. Now his body burned for release. With his true life-mate's kiss, the vow screamed anew for him to start the binding ritual, not to let her get away. Hedda and Tzigana be damned.

He fought for control, not to let passion slip its tether. Her trust was too new, too fragile. Seducing a virgin was easier—she knew nothing. Maleta was much more difficult—all she knew of sex was horror and abuse. All she knew of soul-binding was Hedda's possession. But in this moment she trusted him to show her a gentler way. They kissed for long moments, until he caught the first hitch in her breath and she moved closer, both her hands anchored in his hair. He stroked her lower lip with his tongue. She started, whimpered into his mouth, then—miracle of miracles—she touched her own tongue to his.

It was like being struck by lightning. Cíanan went rigid with the holding back. Slow, dark, sensuous, drugging kisses, over and over, again and again, that had Maleta shaking and clinging to him. He dared not touch her, dared not fall back onto the quilt afore the fire, although he could barely hold himself upright. All he wanted was to lose himself in her touch, in the taste of her, the feel of her, the scent and sound of

newly awakened passion. The blood pounded in his ears and in parts of him a great deal lower. He was lost and pulled back from the precipice to prevent himself from taking that final leap. It almost killed him, but he gentled the kiss, stilled her hands, and was the first to pull back and open his eyes.

Her skin was flushed, her lips glistened. She dragged her eyelids open, and the sultry, smoky look in her eyes stole his breath. He saw the exact moment clarity returned—her cheeks flamed scarlet. He turned away to pour them each a cup of mead, to give her a moment to compose herself. She took the cup from his hand with a shy smile, and took a sip.

“Are you all right?” Cianan asked.

Maleta nodded. “I feel...almost normal, I guess. Hopeful. If I can come back, there has to be a way for Jovan to come back too. Sunniva didn’t win.”



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