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Sea
Dance

Leanne Strange

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On her last day of a research assignment, Kass finds herself attracted to a handsome alien merman who won't take no for an answer.

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Chapter One

Kass Martijn yawned and rubbed her aching neck while hurrying down the long corridor in the first leg of the maze that led from her suite in the visitor complex to the trans-chute. Today was the last full day of Kass' three-day research visa on the world of Seamyst. She'd spent most of her time fighting bureaucratic red tape with the Archive Council of Aquinia. The permission code had finally come through in the middle of the night, which was why Kass found herself up and out before dawn. She wanted to transfer a copy of the data to her research team back on Earth before the council changed its mind.

Space travel had never bothered Kass much because it seemed like moving through a sea of stars. The water was her milieu, though—sailing, swimming, studying—and Seamyst was a water baby's dream come true. Saltwater covered ninety-seven percent of the planet's surface, though hundreds of mountain-islands rose from the floor of the ocean like towers. A city had been built on many of the mountain-islands by the Aquinian race of Seamystians, and a spaceport had been constructed on each mountain-city's largest plateau.

Three separate races had evolved on Seamyst. Two of them lived almost completely in the water—the Uni-Fins and the Bi-Fins. The Unis were most like the merfolk of Earth myth and legend. Their humanoid torsos turned into scale-covered ichtian tails instead of legs. The Bis' humanoid torso became two separate leg-like appendages,

each ending in a fin.

The third, called the Aquinians after the English translation of the name of their capital city, were the most humanoid of all. They walked upright on two legs with humanoid heels and broad webbed toes. They breathed air, but could survive under water for extended periods of time.

Political unrest among the three races kept the world of Seamyst unstable for a long time. The Unis and Bis each thought themselves superior to the other two while both resented the Aquinians' ability to walk on land and create a lucrative tourist trade with landwalkers from other planets.

Lately though, other aquatic and amphibious species began to visit Seamyst, taking advantage of the underwater cities and attractions, easing the cultural tensions somewhat. The research team Kass worked with decided to take advantage of the calmer atmosphere to access older data unavailable through modern communications systems.

Kass had spent the better part of the past two days filling out request forms and being shuffled from one office to another until she came full circle back to the Aquinian Archive Council. She'd finally had enough and told them in no uncertain terms she would file reports with the Alien Information Exchange League, the Seamyst-Earth Liaison Office, and the Earth Consulate if they tried to shunt her off again.

The aggressive strategy worked, although Kass spent a restless evening worrying they would deny her and she'd disappoint her team. The information was vital to a research project that had been ongoing for over five years, and once denied, a second request wouldn't be accepted for two years. Fortunately, they agreed.

She took a few more twists and turns down the shiny corridors. The floors were coated with a thin layer of water so that the Seamystians and other aquatic beings could soak

up the liquid they vitally needed for survival. Fortunately, she'd been warned to wear only rubber-soled shoes or she definitely would have gone sprawling more than once.

Finally, she arrived at the trans-chute. She hit the button and waited for a car while shrugging her shoulders to get the kink out of her neck. She could see herself living on Seamyst, exploring the mountain cities and underwater villages, studying the exotic aquatic flora and fauna—some of it so like Earth's, but much of it completely different. She knew she had to return to Earth the next day.

There was no way to extend her visa, not on the company's dime, and she sure didn't have the spare intergalactic credits to spring for even an extra day or two.

Now, she needed to concentrate on her work, and her mind spun with the possibilities of what she'd find in the old archives. She was only barely aware of the swoosh when the chute door opened and she automatically stepped inside.

Something solid slammed into her, the force temporarily knocking the breath out of her lungs. She staggered back, and a man's large hands shot out to steady her at the same time as she grabbed hold of his upper arms. Every nerve ending in her body crackled with awareness from standing so close to him.

The lights in the circular chute car illuminated a row of oblong mirrors around the inner wall where she glimpsed herself being held by a very tall man dressed in running togs.

Only the humanoid heels of his webbed feet were encased in running 'heelies', as the Seamystians called the abbreviated shoes covering only the heels and attached by an ankle strap. Her eyes traveled from water-spattered feet to muscular thighs encased in black pants then up to a wide

chest and the mass of deep dark green curls showing in the valley of the v-neck black tunic he wore.

She quickly steadied her mind and body before focusing her gaze on the face of the gorgeous alien hunk she'd bumped into. Surprised, aquamarine eyes stared down at her. Sea ears, which resembled those of humans except for the outer shell where the cartilage thinned and fluted, creating a ruffled edge that would sway to and fro like plant life in the water, framed his face. A strong square chin, deep-set eyes, a slightly rounded nose and a temptingly kissable mouth completed his arresting countenance.

Their gazes locked after he seemed to have scrutinized her with just as much interest. His blue-green eyes smoldered with curiosity and sensual enjoyment that both pleased and bothered her at the same time.

Irrationally, Kass appreciated the rich, sparkly mint green of his skin and wondered if it would feel as luxurious and sleek, like silk against her body, as it looked. He pulled her firmly against his length, and her breasts tingled as his wide chest pressed into them.

This close, the exotic sensual appeal of this alien male devastated her senses. He was quite unlike any Earth man she'd ever encountered, although he definitely seemed to be like a humanoid male in all the right places. She bit her bottom lip as her body throbbed in response to his virile alien physique.

"Are you steady?" He spoke in impeccably enunciated Earth English, and concern laced his deep, vibrant voice.

Her nipples responded to his nearness and the sexy sound of his voice. His cool body seemed to warm, too, as his sexual heat rose, matching her own. She tried not to blush, knowing this powerful male probably felt her rapidly beating heart. Kass forced herself to act more rationally.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied as calmly as she could, starting to find the situation a bit awkward and a touch irritating. She didn’t like that he caught her at the disadvantage of being off-balance and unaware, but his magnetic charisma kept her hypnotically glued to the spot. “I should have watched where I was going. I didn’t mean to bump into you.”

A rumbling laugh came from deep within the Seamystian, and the concern in his eyes turned to amusement. “My fault. I rushed out and nearly trampled you in the process. I didn’t expect anyone to be about this early in the morning. I’m not sorry, though.” His gaze lowered to the generous swells of her breasts filling the deep vee of her jumpsuit. “We seem to fit perfectly in all the right places. You’re trembling. Are you afraid of being caught by a dark sea-demon?”

The increasing twinkle in the aquamarine of his eyes made her realize he teased her. It annoyed her that she could not share his amusement, especially since his grip on her upper arms tightened and he moved as intimately close to her as possible.

“You’re the only devil I’ve currently met, but I don’t scare easily. You can release me. Now.” She wouldn’t give him the benefit of seeing her vulnerability. It didn’t matter that she found him sexually stimulating; she wasn’t about to jump his alien bones before she even knew his name. If he didn’t put her down, she’d make him release her.

He only laughed at her again. “Ahh, very well. I’ve enjoyed our delightful first contact. We’ll meet again, my sweet sea siren. Good day till then.”

His voice caressed her every bit as much as his body did when he slowly pulled away.

Her heart once more increased its tempo as his gaze danced rakishly down the length of her body and back

again. With a glint of sensual mischief and a slight nod of his head, he strode away from her as quickly as he'd come up against her.

Kass felt totally shaken and didn't know if their encounter had lasted a minute or an hour. She did know she wouldn't quickly forget the pulsating warmth and tingling caused by the exotic Seamystian.

She rubbed her arms where he'd gripped her with his large hands and wondered if there'd be bruises. If not, she might be tempted to believe she dreamt the entire incident. More aroused than she cared to admit, Kass pushed a series of buttons, keying in the co-ordinates to her destination.

Feeling completely, sensually alive, she realized that the Seamystian awakened a hunger in her she hadn't felt in a long, long time. Kass forced thoughts of the eye-catching alien out of her mind as the chute stopped. She disembarked and made her way to the Communal Archive Center.

At the entrance, Kass read the map and learned the archives took up four small sub-levels of the four-story building. The Seamystians, a friend who'd briefly visited the planet on business had informed her, kept detailed reports of their history along with everything else. Even with information from her friend and reading the tourist pamphlets on the voyage to Seamyst, she still knew very little of their customs.

An Aquinian sat on duty at the Archive Help Desk. Elderly, slightly withered by time, with drooping sea ears and long webbed-toed feet sticking out from under the small desk, the Aquinian looked up at her from his reading terminal. "Section?"

His curt query and bored voice showed no surprise at the odd hour of her visit or concern for anything other than his reading.

“Environmental data,” she responded, moving up against the half-shell shaped metal desk.

“Permission code and IIC.” His brusque demand for the code and her Intergalactic Identification Card was punctuated by the crackled whisper of the static electric charge his work robes made when he shifted in his swivel chair. She didn’t think he ventured out into the water much anymore, since his skin looked too dull and dry.

Kass handed him the polyslip with the permission code along with her IIC. He inserted the slim, multi-colored plastic card into a tiny machine, then keyed in the permission code. When a blue light finished flashing, he removed the card and handed it and the slip back to her.

“Sub-level two, room ten.” He immediately seemed to become unaware of her presence.

“Which chute do I take?” she asked, hating to disturb him any further.

He looked put out that she bothered him again. “Stairs. First stairs to your right.” He pointed in the direction without even looking up a third time, an indication he did not want to be bothered anymore.

That was fine by Kass. At least some Seamystians didn’t maul you. Had the archive attendant shown any lascivious interest she might have belted him. She grumbled to herself and wondered at the sensations still whirling around in her body and at the back of her mind. She gave herself a quick mental shake. Time to get to work.

Squaring her shoulders, Kass bolted down the stairs. She entered the room only to discover an ancient computer console, two dusty chairs, and a disk cabinet, all sporting cobwebs as their only decoration. Looking around, she felt like going back to the clerk and punching in his placid, dull-green face.

This room hadn't been utilized in years. She didn't notice any security cams like Earth archive warehouses might have. Well, perhaps she could get the old equipment to work. She brushed the seat of one of the swivel chairs before sitting in front of the antiquated machine.

"A little dust never hurt anyone," she muttered, wondering how many years it had been since anyone used the room. Kass knew the Seamystians normally used state-of-the-art equipment, but hadn't taken the time to update the medium on their oldest data.

She flung back her russet-brown braid, and then switched on the console. The machine coughed, sputtered and then whirled smoothly, its mechanical voice spewing out instructions for its best operation...in Seamystian.

"I have a model back home older than you, big fella. I know how you operate." Kass sniffed with disdain at the grime-coated terminal knobs. "It's cleaner, too."

As though in retaliation, a yellow-green light on the screen began flashing on and off until Kass gave the console a healthy whack. It immediately began to hum, awaiting her input.

She chuckled. "Works every time."

She keyed in the translation code someone had had the foresight to scribble on the console in indelible ink, and it repeated its instructions in English. After she keyed in her request, the computer began to show signs of life again by the sporadic flickering of green letters on its screen, then it simply went blank. Once more, she tapped her fingers impatiently on the keyboard, but the green screen remained blank. Old computers had odd senses of humor.

"Don't malfunction on me now, you old geezer. Give!" She gave the machine another whack, expecting it to work as before. She even repeated keying in her request and grinned in triumph when the screen finally came alive.

Her joy didn't last long for the machine started going out again. The hard drive sputtered, and words raced wildly across the screen. Just as she reached over to try to stop the machine's irregularities, it became quiet once more, Seamystian glyphs marching across the screen.

"What's that stuff? Translate it, you old rust-bucket!" She fussed at the antiquated piece of machinery while keying in the translation code again. The glyphs twirled, and when they stopped, English words took their place. "Good. Now I can read it."

Kass found blank disks in the top drawer of the cabinet and inserted one, hoping they were still good. Then she started the search for environmental data on a certain type of algae similar to the one her research team was studying on Earth.

A disease had struck a type of algae on Earth, killing it at a rapid pace. If they didn't find a way to stop the scourge, the delicate balance of life in the oceans would be destroyed. Her team had charted the course of effect, as many ways as they could imagine, and unless they found a cure for the disease, the only result was the total and complete devastation of life on Earth.

Granted, it would take millennia to happen, but the point of critical mass—and no return—was projected over and over again as a mere decade away. The team had been working non-stop toward a solution—and failing miserably—when Seamyst had joined the Alien Information Exchange League and begun encouraging tourism. Since the world was mostly saltwater, Kass' supervisor examined all data emerging from Seamyst. He'd found several references to an algae disease that had been cured in Seamyst's ancient times, but nothing on the specific remedy. Apparently, it happened so long ago no one had

memory of the exact way to cure it. That's when he'd sent Kass to Seamyst to research the archives.

Movement on the screen caught Kass' attention. A long list of file names with brief descriptions scrolled up. The list was much longer than she expected. She could either open each one and search for the information she needed or copy them all and transmit them back to Earth when she returned to her suite.

The latter option wouldn't let her know if she had even found the information she needed, but searching all the files would take longer than the time she had left. She could spend the rest of the day and night browsing as many files as she could and still not know.

Well, there was nothing else to be done but copy all the files. She tried not to think about the consequences if the information couldn't be found at all. If no one had recorded the ancient cure—or it turned out to be a myth, after all—the team was back to square one.

Kass began the painfully slow process of copying all the files on the tired old machine. At this slow rate, she was going to be here all day anyway. She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. The old computer chair was more comfortable than the bed in her suite at the visitor complex and relieved the ache in her neck somewhat.

What if the cure for the disease was nothing more than a myth? Her supervisor had admitted the possibility. If her research turned up nothing, they would have to request a consultation with the most prestigious scientists of Seamyst.

On a world that was more than ninety-five percent water, their scientists should know more about curing an algae disease than anyone else in the galaxy.

Myths and legends...Kass sat upright and scooted closer to the computer. She opened a second screen and looked through the categories, hoping Seamyst's myths and

legends were in this section. She found ‘Myths, Legends and Fables.’ Using the search feature again, she typed in her keywords, and the hard drive nearly ground to a halt.

She should have waited until it finished copying the first batch of files before beginning another search. Now she was afraid the whole thing would freeze if she tried to stop it. Fortunately, the files continued copying, but at a much slower pace. She might very well be there all day and night.

Kass settled back in the chair again to wait. She toyed with the zipper on her jumpsuit, and the Seamystian she’d bumped into at the chute filled her thoughts. She almost wished she’d met him two days ago, but it was a good thing she hadn’t.

Her mind needed to be on obtaining access to the archives, not wondering how the sea-man would be in bed. With only one day and night left on her visa, she wasn’t really interested in a one-night stand before leaving and probably never returning.

Although slightly arrogant and full of himself, he interested her enough that she knew she’d want more than one night with him. Kass sighed. Maybe she could save up enough to visit Seamyst as a tourist one day. But how would she ever find him when she didn’t even know his name?

Chapter Two

“I really did intend to meet you again, my sweet siren, but I imagined a more romantic setting.”

Kass’ eyes popped open at the first sound of the deep, seductive voice. She turned toward the exit, surprise overcoming her at finding the smiling Seamystian leaning against the door frame. His long, lustrous locks of dark green were neatly pulled behind his head. He’d changed from jogging gear to a tight-fitting gold jumpsuit that hugged every centimeter of his thickly muscled body. He also wore matching gold heelies.

She returned his stare but not his smile. She wondered how long he’d been standing there. A glance at the computer clock told her more minutes had gone by than she realized...and, she belatedly noticed the computer had frozen, after all.

Turning to look at him again, she couldn’t help but notice his sensuous lips were still curved in a smile that stretched into a lewd grin as his gaze went from her face to her breasts. Her hands instinctively flew to tug at the zipper, but it was already up as far as it would go. Why did the v-neck have to be so damn deep?

She sprang to her feet as he crossed the room toward her. The quick motion sent another pain through her stiff neck muscles and she rubbed them. “How did you know I’d be here? Are you following me?”

“It seems we’re drawn together no matter where we go.”

She frowned at him. His cryptic words grated on her nerves because his smug expression seemed to convey that he knew the reason behind them. On the other hand, he

could just be an arrogant jerk and use the lame line with any female he met more than once.

“But no,” he continued. “I’m with security, and Kweriden, the attendant who let you in, called me to make sure you’re legitimate.”

She reached for the polyslip she’d left on the desk. “I have the proper authorization.”

“I know.” He smiled apologetically. “Most Seamystians Kweriden’s age don’t trust off-worlders. He thought you acted suspiciously.”

Kass laughed, but when he reached out to caress her cheek, she stopped abruptly and slapped his hand away. Her skin tingled at his presumptuous touch, and a sudden swell of desire rose within her. His nearness once again caused a physical awareness of him she couldn’t explain and confused her even more. She stepped back, bumping into the edge of the desk.

“Th-the computer froze.” The words came out in a breathless rush.

He glanced over her shoulder. “These old computers frequently do so. I’ll report it to tech support.”

“Thank you.” She eased past him and started for the door.

“I’m glad that we crossed paths again, so that we—”

She spun around, intending to give him a piece of her mind, and discovered his broad, gold-clad chest only centimeters from her nose. Tilting her head back, she looked up at him. “I don’t know who you are, nor do I care, but I’m not in the habit of listening to a stranger make such brazen advances as you have.”

“My name is Deverel Yonar.” The intimacy of his rich, deep voice sent waves of delicious pleasure up her spine. “So now I’m no longer a stranger, am I, my sweet siren?”

This Seamystian should be thrown into an intergalactic

prison for being so damnably nova-hot—or for his impudence. Hoping he didn't realize he still made her senses whirl, she tried to articulate her displeasure with him. "I'm not your sweet anything."

He shrugged, muscles rippling beneath the tight gold fabric. "As you wish. What brings you to my world?"

Most Seamystians were proper when meeting a stranger for the first time. At least, that was what she'd been told and experienced so far. She didn't care who he was. She'd had enough of his overbearing presence for one day. Since she couldn't bed him like she wanted to, she'd rather not see him again at all.

"Where I go and what I do is none of your concern," she snapped.

"I'm chief security officer on Aquinia, so it is my concern."

"Research," she said and left him standing there as she started for the door again.

"You could at least tell me your name?" he called after her.

Kass halted and let out a sigh. She turned around, her eyes widening as she once again found him only centimeters away. Damn, but he moved quickly and quietly.

"My name is Kass Martijn." She attempted to remain calm, but his nearness excited her too much. She tilted her head back to look up at him, which caused more pain. She put a hand to her neck, trying once more to work out the kink. "Look, I've tried not to be rude, but why are you pursuing me like this?"

Kass continued rubbing her neck and wondered at his sudden silence. Why did he stare at her as if he were searching her very soul? Why didn't he leave her alone? Mostly, she wondered why she just stood near him when she felt like blacking his eye and tearing off his clothes at

the same time. He was right; something inexplicable drew her to him.

“Allow me. I can soothe those aches away.”

Deverel’s words startled her out of her thoughts. His voice was soft and enticing, like the hand he placed at the nape of her neck to gently massage her tense muscles. She felt him touch her long braid with his other hand, running down the flow of it until his fingers reached her buttocks. Briefly, his hand rested where her hair ended. She shivered as she sensed the motions of wrapping her braid around his wide palm. Then he gently tugged on it, bringing her head closer to his.

For a few moments, she looked into his eyes. Just for a fleeting second, she really wanted to throw caution to the wind and ravish him.

“Most off-worlders don’t like the accommodations in the visitor suites. There have been many complaints that the beds aren’t comfortable. We’re hoping to rectify that soon. Just relax, Kass.”

He dropped her braid and placed the hand that had held it on her other shoulder. His touch felt so soothing she couldn’t help but give over to the warmth of his hands. She closed her eyes and relaxed under his calming ministrations along her shoulders and neck. As the pain eased, she leaned her head back against something warm and solid behind her, and a feeling of floating on air encompassed her. Floating on air? Her eyes popped open to find he had picked her up so smoothly, she’d hardly been aware of it.

“Put me down,” she demanded as he lifted her higher.

“Ungrateful human,” he teased and seemed to be amused by her struggle. “I’m thoroughly enjoying myself, and I think you are, too.”

That did it! She furiously swung her left fist toward his face. He dodged her blow, but loosened his hold on her. She

took advantage by slipping from his arms. When her feet touched the floor, she steadied herself, spun around on one foot, and with the other made contact with the back of Deverel's knees. He toppled heavily to the floor, and Kass stared down at him with narrowed eyes.

He shook his head in bewilderment and glanced up at her. "You know something? You are the first who has ever caught me off-guard that easily. I hope you know that this isn't going to prevent me from getting to know you better."

She blinked at him. Was he really that dull-witted? She placed her hands on her hips. "Your behavior is rude and crude. I've tried to be civil, as I was led to believe is your custom, but your continued harassment makes it hard for me to remain polite."

He stayed seated on the floor, grinning up at her. "You know, I think you're quite taken with me. I like that. I don't give up easily when I come across an attractive female who makes me want to mate with her."

Kass stepped back a pace, stunned by his proclamation. "Mate with me? Are you insane? Can't you see when your attentions are not wanted? Damn you!"

She turned and fled, not waiting to see or hear his reaction. She finally reached her suite, breathless from her indecorous dash along the corridors. She hurried through the small sitting room and into the bedroom where she withdrew a change of clothing.

No more low necklines for horny Seamystians to ogle. *Mate with her indeed!* She stepped into the shower and let the water wash over her. Surprisingly, the stiffness in her neck was gone. However, no matter how hot or cold the water, nor how hard she scrubbed her skin, she couldn't erase the feel of Deverel Yonar's touch.

The trouble was she desperately wanted to mate with him, too!

Forget him. *You don't have time to become intimately involved with a Seamystian, no matter how much you want his sleek, sexy body. You barely have time to obtain the data you need. There are plenty of hot guys back on Earth.*

But none of them were as hot as Deverel Yonar.

She had dated other good-looking, sexy men, yet, none of them affected her like that hot, green alien. Was that why she'd been acting like a moron? Sure, she'd had flings before, but usually after at least one date. Her body ached, and she'd never wanted sex as much as she did at that moment. From the second they bumped into one another, she'd never wanted a man like she wanted Deverel Yonar.

Was it his exotic appeal? And why had she been so irritable with him? She wasn't psychic, but she could usually sense others' feelings. His interest seemed genuine. He wanted her as badly as she wanted him. The only thing that held her back was if she gave in to him, once wouldn't be enough. The last night of her stay on Seamyst wouldn't be sufficient. Hell, a lifetime wouldn't be enough! The thought both pleased and disturbed her.

Kass stood beneath a body dryer before returning to the bedroom. Once she changed clothes, she faced the mirror and ran a comb through her russet-brown hair then braided it again. Though she knew the color looked good on her toasty colored skin, the high-collared, sleeveless shirt in dark pink would make sure no one stared at her cleavage, and the matching slacks were loose enough to discourage ogling, too. She slipped her feet into rubber-soled sandals and strengthened her resolve to put Deverel Yonar out of her mind. Surely, after she had breakfast, the computer would be fixed and she could finish her research. She turned to leave the room, but stopped in her tracks.

The tall bulk of Deverel blocked the doorway leading from the corridor into the sitting room. His broad grin made

her wonder how long he'd stood there and how much he'd seen. "What are you doing here? Get out of my room."

"I couldn't help myself. Your door wasn't secured. I thought you deliberately left it unlocked for me."

"No, it was an oversight. Even if it was unlocked, don't you have better manners than to walk in uninvited?"

"On Seamyst, an unsecured door is an invitation—especially between male and female."

"Well, I'm from Earth, and I'm not familiar with your customs. Shouldn't you take that into account before walking in unannounced?" She didn't give him time to answer. "Apparently, my first warning didn't make an impression. I can do worse if you don't leave me alone."

Kass took a deep breath, hoping he'd take the hint and leave. He had too much nerve and overconfidence for her peace of mind...and her body wouldn't stop trembling at his nearness. What was happening to her? She felt as if she were losing control of all her faculties. She liked being in control...and...he made it hard for her to think rationally.

Deverel didn't move away. Instead, he stepped closer to her. "Wherever you are going can wait a few minutes. I intend to hold you for a moment."

She clenched her fists at that intimate statement, but was too shocked at his audacity to say anything.

"Are you angry because I forgot to tell you how lovely you look?" His voice was a sensuous whisper. "Although I like the way you look in that color, I rather enjoy you without so much fabric on."

Kass let out a groan and started to swing one of her fists his way. Deverel, quicker than she thought a man of his height and bulk could be, and with such large webbed feet that should have made him clumsy, easily sidestepped out of the way. He obviously learned from her earlier attempted blow. He reached out and grabbed her waist with one arm,

pulling her against his hard body.

Kass's breathing came erratically as he held her tightly against him. "I specifically told you never to pick me up again. I don't care whether you take offense or not, you're going to pay for your impudence."

His full lips curved into a grin. "I merely defended myself. I've never seen a woman with your moves. You could easily steal my heart, sweet siren." Then he frowned and rubbed her arm, speaking more quietly. "I'm sorry your soft skin bruised so easily from our encounter in the chute. I'll be more careful in the future."

"As far as I'm concerned, there won't be another encounter, you peeping-tom."

"I understand Earth slang, siren. I studied your world's base-language. I didn't peep. I openly watched and thoroughly enjoyed myself."

Kass gasped. Of all the gall! "You're a jerk."

"You're breathtaking," he countered.

Before Kass knew what was happening, he raised her above his head. He held her at arms' length as if she weighed nothing.

"I'm getting sick and tired of you picking me up whenever you want. Put me down. Now!" She shouted the last word and kicked out.

His body jackknifed to avoid her foot in his groin, and he set her down roughly. She felt the jar all the way up her spine.

"Don't you dare call me your siren or hoist me into your arms again." Kass swung around him and opened the door. "If you won't leave, I will."

He followed her out and walked alongside her, keeping his pace even with hers. "Don't think you're free of me, Kass Martijn."

"Why do you insist on bothering me? We just met. We

don't know each other. On my world, what you're doing is called stalking and assault, and it's criminal. I could have you arrested on Earth.

When she realized he no longer walked beside her, she stopped and turned to find a troubled expression on his handsome face. His eyes had lost their twinkle and appeared dark with worry.

"On Seamyst," he said quietly, "we have no such laws. No one would pursue another if the other didn't want it. Apparently, our courting rituals are very different."

Kass felt her eyebrows shoot close to her hairline as her eyes popped open wider in surprise. First he used the word mate and now this. "Courting!"

"The male pursues aggressively, and the female responds in an equally aggressive but negative manner. It is a mating dance of charge and retreat, attack and defense, until the couple decides how the dance will end." He bowed his head and stepped back, putting even more distance between them. "Earth women who live here or visit for extended periods know of our customs. I've never met a human woman who didn't...but then I haven't encountered very many human women at all. I've never been attracted to one the way I am to you. I ask your forgiveness and hope you don't think too unkindly of me or my people because of my bad behavior. Good-day, Kass Martijn."

He turned and walked away from her, his long strides eating up the corridor floor quickly.

Kass took a step to go after him but stopped herself. That was what she wanted, wasn't it? For him to leave her alone? Then why did she suddenly feel abandoned and lost?

Chapter Three

Kass found a seat in the corner of a little café and ordered breakfast. She pondered what Deverel told her while she ate. She'd had no idea of the Seamystian courtship ritual and all that it entailed. She now wished she had studied Seamystian customs before coming here, but time had been of the essence.

Now that she knew Deverel wasn't a jerk or a stalker, she wanted to see him again. Perhaps if copying the research files didn't take as long as she feared it would, she'd try to locate him. The attendant at the archives could probably help her...if the old Aquinian didn't find her questions about Deverel too suspicious.

After paying for her meal, she made her way to a trans-chute and traveled to the archive center. The same attendant was on duty and told her the computer wouldn't be ready until midday. She could check back then.

With a few hours to kill, Kass decided to return to her suite and nap. With the delay, she'd probably be copying files all night long. Her starflight was scheduled to leave first thing in the morning. She had already managed to squeeze in some sight-seeing because of the Archive Council's delays.

The first day, she'd taken a tour of Aquinia deep inside the mountain. The cavernous belly of the mountain resembled a gargantuan sparkling sapphire and reflected in the sea that flowed through the middle of the underground city. In the center, a magnificent waterfall cascaded over the blue rocks to replenish the sea. The tour guide informed the group that the scene was typical of each mountain-city on Seamyst, except the jewel-tones of the rock were different

colors—such as emerald green, garnet red, or topaz yellow.

The day before, she swam in the sea, guided by a bonded pair of males—a Uni and a Bi—who overcame their racial and political differences to fall in love and mate for life. The stunning pair, both with flowing pale green hair and peridot-colored eyes, had shown her an underwater Uni village not far off the coast of Aquinia. With houses made of coral and seashells, the village seemed to be a magical place out of a fairytale.

Now, she needed a nap. She packed up all her belongings except for a fresh change of clothing for the trip home, set the alarm for noon, then stretched out across the uncomfortably lumpy bed.

She had trouble falling asleep at first. Thoughts of Deverel wouldn't let her mind settle. She probably wouldn't have time to find him to apologize and accept his apology. If she didn't have time to talk to him, she'd write him a note before she left in the morning. The decision calmed her mind, and she was able to sleep.

The sound of a bell awoke her, but it wasn't the alarm. Her door chime rang again. She scrambled from the bed and hurried into the sitting room. Maybe the computer had been fixed earlier than expected and they'd sent her a message.

She opened the door to find a Seamystian Bi-Fin wearing a courier uniform. He carried an aquarium vase and two bow-topped boxes and handed her an envelope. She showed him in where he set the vase and boxes on the service table in front of the sofa. She reached into her pocket for a tip—even aliens expected gratuities—but the messenger waved it away.

"It's taken care of, and I'm to wait for a reply," he explained in English.

Curious, Kass opened the envelope, pulled out the sheet of paper and read the handwritten script.

Dear Kass Martijn,

I hope these gifts will atone for my atrocious behavior. Please accept my invitation to share the midday meal with me so that I may apologize in person. If you choose to honor me with your presence, please meet me in the Seaquarium Room atrium at midday.

Your humble servant, Deverel Yonar

The note sounded sincere and it only took a few seconds to make the decision. She told the messenger her answer was yes then let him out.

The delicately curved sealed aquarium vase was nearly a meter tall and filled with seawater. Inside, dozens of miniature red, pink and white sea roses floated around each other, constantly moving. She had seen sea roses in other similar vases while on Seamyst. The sea roses looked remarkably like Earth roses except the small blossom was the entire plant.

Smiling at the beauty of the sea bouquet, she opened the larger box first. Inside, she found a layer of shell-shaped confections. Biting into one, she moaned as the chocolate-coated creamy center melted in her mouth. She'd never eaten anything this delicious on Earth. When she unwrapped and opened the smaller box, she stared at it for a while. Sea roses and candy were one thing, but a woman didn't accept jewelry from a male she hardly knew...no matter how physically attracted to him she was.

The beads in the set of necklace, bracelet, and earrings were hand-carved from coral in the shape of the sea roses, the colors swirling from pale red to pink to white, matching the colors of her sea bouquet. She went to stand in front of the mirror hanging on the wall beside the door and put them on. They were beautiful, and Kass hated having to return them.

After putting them back in the box and snapping it shut, she retrieved a white sundress and matching sandals from her luggage. She sighed. The jewelry would look gorgeous with the dress because the plain white would emphasize the colors in the coral.

By the time she brushed out her long hair, twirled it on the back of her head and pinned it in place, it was time to meet Deverel. She grabbed the box and left her suite.

The atrium of the Seaquarium Room was beginning to fill up with people waiting to be seated. By the look of the long line, they'd have at least an hour's wait. She didn't have time for it because she had to return to the archive center and copy those files.

Kass had just about decided to leave Deverel a note when she caught sight of him across the room. He stood a little taller than anyone else, even most other Seamystians. She waited for him to come to her.

He kept a respectable distance from her, but his aquamarine eyes sparkled with sexual interest. "Thank you for accepting my invitation."

"You're welcome. I wanted to let you know in person that I accept your apology." She glanced at the long line. "But could we find somewhere else to eat? The archive computer is supposed to be ready soon, and I have a lot of research to do before I leave in the morning."

"We won't be going to the Seaquarium Room." Deverel held out his arm to her. "There's a private area below where we'll be dining."

Without hesitation, Kass took his arm. "Lead the way."

She allowed him to take her through the growing crowd to a trans-chute marked *Private* in the corner of the atrium. They traveled down at least a dozen levels before the chute doors opened and they disembarked.

The corridor here was hewn smooth from the rock deep

under the mountain.

“I visited Earth briefly several years ago, but I wasn’t there long enough to learn all your customs,” he said as they walked side by side. “I do apologize for what seemed to you like an assault.”

“Now that I understand, don’t worry about it,” Kass said. “It was just a miscommunication between alien species.”

He looked down at the box she held. “Did you not like my gift?”

“Oh, no, it’s not that. The jewelry is gorgeous, but I can’t accept it. The vase of sea roses is beautiful and the candy is delicious and I thank you for them, but I never accept jewelry from men I hardly know.”

“Ah, perhaps after today we will know each other better.”

She didn’t know if he meant what she thought he meant, but they had reached a door before she had a chance to ask. He used his key ring—a band on his right hand—to unlock it then ushered her in.

Chapter Four

The foyer was a small room with an arched alcove to the right acting as the service room for coats, hats and the like. Soft aqua light illuminated a set of stairs leading up directly in front of them. Kass didn't have time to make note of anything else in the room because Deverel took her hand and began leading her up the steps.

At the top, he backed away, watching her closely, as if to gauge her reaction. "Welcome to my home."

After a moment of disorientation, Kass' senses adjusted, and she gasped. The room was huge, a transparent bubble-dome over an equally see-through floor. The calming aquamarine water of the ocean surrounded them, and sea life—schools of darting fish and squid-like creatures—swam and drifted by. Beds of red, pink, white, orange, yellow, green, and indigo sea roses clung to the dome in small patches, accentuating rather than obscuring the view.

Kass felt as if she had come home. To be able to live like this would be a dream come true for her...the sea, always the sea, overhead, underfoot, and all around.

"Wow, this is..." Words failed her, so she stepped farther into the room and let the sea completely surround her.

Deverel came to stand by her side. "This is the living area. There are similar but smaller areas for kitchen, bedrooms, bath, and other rooms."

"It's..." Kass laughed. "I don't have the words to describe how beautiful it is."

"Thank you." Deverel took her hand again and led her to the seating area.

Kass held onto him tightly, feeling as if she would sink away into the water below with every step.

"You get used to it," Deverel commented and let go of her when she sat on the long, comfortable, low-backed sofa.

"I think I could get used to it. Easily. I love the water, which is why I became a marine botanist." When she leaned back, the sofa automatically adjusted to her comfort level. With the sea above and below and thoughts of the hours ahead she'd have to spend at a computer, she'd have no problem taking a nap either.

"I'm glad you love the water," Deverel said and sat down in an armchair that matched the sofa.

Kass sat up straight. "If we can see out, then anybody swimming by can see in. I'm not sure I like the lack of privacy."

Deverel laughed and shook his head. "The dome and floor are made of a special material that allows us to see out but no one can see in."

"That's a relief." Kass leaned back again and that's when she saw the pool in the center of the room. The opening in the floor was randomly curved to simulate a natural pool shape instead of manmade. "Oh, how wonderful. You can swim whenever you like."

"I was hoping we could go swimming later, after we've eaten."

Kass looked at the pool longingly. "I would love to, but the archive computer is supposed to be ready now. I'll be copying files the rest of the day and most of the night. I'm sorry."

Deverel smiled at her frown. "I have a surprise for you."

"You shouldn't have. The bouquet and candy was more than enough. I can't accept the jewelry or any other gift."

"You'll accept this one." Deverel stood and walked to the service table. He opened a small side drawer, withdrew

an item, and presented it to her.

“A data-cube?”

“I had tech support run your keywords, in English and Seamystian, through every system we have, no matter how obscure. They copied every file that even mentioned a word once—some translated into Earth English, but most not. They put them all on this data-cube.” He handed her a polyslip, too. “This is the code to access a universal backup copy of the files in case something happens to the cube.”

If he ran all her keywords and copied all the related files she’d been looking over, her team back home would now have everything they needed to probably complete their research project. This was just too good to be true, and she didn’t have to wait in that stuffy computer room again!

“Oh, Deverel, how can I ever thank you?” Impulsively, Kass stood and threw her arms around him. She meant to give him a light kiss, but when her lips met his, everything in her seemed to catch fire and go off like fireworks.

His arms went around her, holding her close, and his mouth pressed harder to hers. Their tongues touched tentatively at first then more boldly. He tasted like the sea—fresh with a touch of salt tang. She had lived near the ocean her entire life, and the familiarity of his taste and scent drew her in more deeply.

The kiss lasted longer than she’d planned, but not as long as she wished. When they parted, she was breathless...and wanting so much more. With her work done, she now had the luxury of entertaining thoughts of bedding Deverel.

He placed one extra kiss on the side of her mouth and let her go.

“You just did,” he murmured.

She blinked at him. “What?”

“You asked how you could ever thank me.”

“Right.”

“I’d do a lot more to be thanked like that again.”

Kass smiled. “And I’d thank you in a better way for a lot less.”

He laughed at her flirtatious remark, but didn’t move to take her in his arms again. Disappointed, she set the data-cube on the service table.

Deverel retrieved the jewelry box and opened it. “I hope you’ll wear them while we dine. I want to see how they look on you—at least once.”

Kass agreed. After what he’d done for her by having the research files copied, she supposed it wouldn’t hurt to wear the jewelry for him while eating their meal. She removed the simple gold studs from her earlobes and inserted the thin wires. The dangling strands of tiny coral sea roses felt heavy momentarily, but she soon grew used to them.

Deverel fastened the bracelet around her wrist, and then moved behind her. He dropped the necklace in place, secured it, and planted a kiss in the curve between her neck and shoulder. A shiver raced through her, intensifying her physical awareness of Deverel as a desirable male.

He walked around her, and his eyes turned smoky as he gazed into hers. “You’re beautiful with or without accessories, Kass.” He offered his arm. “Are you hungry? Our meal is in warming dishes on the table.”

Kass nodded...but she was hungry for something other than food. She behaved herself, though, and took his arm. He released her, only to seat her at the table in the dining area next to the bubble wall opposite the entrance. She hadn’t noticed it before. There had been too much to take in all at once.

She watched Deverel uncover the dishes and listened as he told her what he was serving.

“Seamystian caviar and seaweed crackers, local fish

marinated in citrus juice, sea rosettes and other local vegetables tossed with seaweed pasta in a light vinaigrette, and Aquinian white wine. For dessert, we'll have sweet mountain berry sorbet."

"It all sounds delicious," Kass commented as he placed fish and salad on her plate.

After he'd served himself, he poured a little wine in his own glass, tasted it, then filled hers and finished filling his.

Kass had never eaten any kind of caviar before, even an Earth variety; but she spooned some of the deep purple eggs on a crisp cracker and took a bite. She didn't find it disagreeable, but the fish and sea salad were delicious, the baby sea rosettes especially tasty. The wine was sweet, sharp, and cold.

"What kind of work do you do?" Deverel asked.

"I'm a marine botanist with a research team in the marine branch of SEA," she explained between bites of fish and salad.

"Sea?"

"The Space Exploration Agency—S.E.A. We just call it SEA."

"Tech support said you seemed to be researching some kind of algae disease from what they could discern by the keywords you'd used on the computer. Any thing related to those words are on the data cube."

Kass frowned. "I'm sorry. After all your help, I wish I could tell you, but I'm not at liberty to say. I do appreciate all you did though."

He waved her apology away. "It's not important. I wouldn't expect you to break a confidence, but your work sounds fascinating. We'll talk about something else. Did you have a chance to do any sightseeing?"

"Oh, yes." Kass laughed. Now that she had the information she needed, she could make light of her efforts

to obtain it “The Archive Council took their time granting access to the older archives, so I explored Aquinia and took a tour of one of the underwater villages.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a good taste of our world then.” Deverel opened a small freezer chest and brought out two dishes of sea-blue sorbet. He set one in front of her.

“Yes, I did. It’s lovely here. I’m already planning to return one day—on vacation, not work—and do nothing except explore and swim.” She took a bite of the frozen dessert and let the ice melt on her tongue. It was the perfect balance between sweet and berry, the flavor something like raspberry but not as tart.

When they’d finished, Deverel escorted her to the seating area again. From the second tier of the service table, he brought out a tray which held a carafe, two cups, and a beautifully carved wooden square container, that looked like an old Earth cigar box. He poured a dark, steamy liquid into the cups and handed her one. “Seamystian coffee, from the mountain island of Marinia, our closest neighbor to what you would call the east. Aquinian coffee is very good, but Marinian coffee is superb.”

Kass took a sip. The delicately sweet and naturally creamy flavor took her by surprise. The black liquid held no hint of cream. “This is delicious. Our worlds seem to have a few similar customs.”

“Yes, we do. But while on Earth, I once dined with a friend who showed me one of the customs of having after dinner coffee and a cigarette. I understand it is polite to offer it, but acceptable if the guest declines. We have a similar custom here and I have always enjoyed this part of the meal immensely.”

Then he opened the square box and offered it up to her. Inside were several tubes of tobacco ranging from the thick circumference of the finest Earth Cuban to the slender

cigarettes of one hundred millimeters in length. She chose one of the delicate filtered cigarettes wrapped in leaf. He picked out a cigar of medium size no longer than hers. He lit hers and snipped the end of his before lighting it.

Kass inhaled the smooth smoke. When she exhaled, she watched the graceful, swirling plume cross the room, drawn to the ventilation ducts at the stairwell, and create a misty screen over the sea view. The taste was far superior to any produced on Earth. When she looked at Deverel, he was watching her.

“The plant from which these are made grows only on Aquinia, on the southern part of the island.”

“I may have to take a box of these back with me.” Kass took another draw and let the smoke drift lazily from between her lips.”

“I’ll have a box delivered to your suite.”

“Oh, no, you’ve given me enough already. The aquarium vase of sea roses and candy were more than enough. And the jewelry, which I really can’t accept.”

“I wish you’d change your mind. You make them look stunning. The dark spots in them remind me of your glorious blue-black eyes.”

Kass felt the heat rise in her cheeks. “Thank you. They are simply gorgeous, but I can’t.”

When they’d finished their sweet coffee and she had crushed out her cigarette in a shell-shaped ashtray, she started to remove the bracelet.

Deverel moved to her side. “If you insist, please allow me.”

With nimble fingers, he removed the strands of coral beads from her wrist and neck and the dangles from her ears.

After he’d replaced them in the box, Kass stood. “Thank you for lunch. I enjoyed it very much.”

Deverel stood as well. “You’re leaving? With your research completed, I’d hoped you’d spend the rest of the day with me. I want to swim with you.”

Kass bit her lip. “I hoped you’d ask me to stay, but I didn’t want to presume. I want to swim with you, too.”

“Good.” Deverel took her hand. “I have swimsuits for guests in a dressing area off the service room where we entered. If you like, we can change now.”

She followed him down the steps and through the service room to a paneled square room with two walls lined with shelves.

He showed her the swimwear in the small closet and grabbed towels and gear from the shelves. “I’ll change in my bedroom and meet you by the pool.”

When he’d gone, Kass looked through the swimwear, selecting a one-piece white suit. She changed into it, then unpinned her hair and braided it into one long rope down her back. She took a pair of flippers from a shelf.

She didn’t know how the day—or night—would end, but she was enjoying herself more than she had in a long time. She suspected she’d end up in Deverel’s bed, and that was fine by her.

Chapter Five

When Kass entered the living area again, the beauty of being surrounded by the sea struck her anew. She joined Deverel, who sat on the sunken ledge just inside the rim of the pool's edge and dangled his webbed feet in the water. He wore a pair of swimming trunks the same shade of light mint green as his skin so that it almost seemed like he wore nothing at all.

She tried not to imagine what those trunks hid and instead concentrated on tugging the flippers onto her feet.

Deverel held what appeared to be scuba headgear and mouthpiece...but no tank.

"I believe this is similar to scuba equipment that you have on Earth," he explained as he fitted the goggles around her eyes and nose. "Recent advances in technology have made them smaller. The mechanism—the small pack at the back of the headband and where the tubes from the mouthpiece attach—filters oxygen from the water. The battery is limited to several hours of usage. A blinking light on the edge of the goggles and a slight vibration will signal when you need to return."

Kass felt the small rectangle pack at the back of her head and the tubes leading to the mouthpiece. "This is amazing. We don't have anything this compact back home."

"It's experimental and hasn't yet been put on the market. I can assure you it's been thoroughly tested. This is a sample model. They'll be on the market within a few months."

"We land-bound people will be clamoring for them," Kass commented. "Maybe I should buy stock in the

company.”

Deverel laughed and tapped the device hooked over his ruffled ear. A wire ran near his mouth. “This is a transmitter and your headband is fitted with a receiver. I’ll be able to talk to you.”

“Too bad I won’t be able to talk back.” Kass placed the mouthpiece between her lips.

He took her hand. “Are you ready?”

She removed her mouthpiece with her other hand. “Don’t you need one of these?”

He turned and pointed just behind his ear and below his hairline. “Gills. I can breathe underwater.”

“Ah. It must be wonderful to be able to breathe both air and water.” Kass replaced her mouthpiece.

They jumped in feet first at the same time, still holding hands. Illumination outside the bubble allowed them to be able to see quite a distance. She could see through the pool opening, but the rest of the bubble was opaque, as Deverel had told her.

As they swam apart, Kass noted Deverel’s bubble home was positioned in the shallow sea over the mountain shelf—the extended underwater perimeter of the Aquinian montane corresponded similarly to the continental shelf on Earth. She spied several smaller bubbles landward and situated out of view of the large living area bubble. They were attached to where she thought the main entrance to his home was located underground.

They swam side by side, in sync, and Deverel pointed out interesting flora and fauna as they passed by. None of the creatures reacted to their presence with aggression or fear. Most went on their way, ignoring her and Deverel. A school of tiny silver and blue fish swam along with them, and then surrounded them.

Deverel took her hand and squeezed reassuringly.

“They won’t hurt us,” he said into the transmitter.

The fish touched their mouths to her skin and hair. The tickling sensation made her laugh.

“That’s why we call them tickle fish,” Deverel told her.

After a few moments, the school went on its own way.

Deverel led her closer toward land and took her hand again.

They squeezed through a narrow opening in the rock, and her body had to press close to Deverel’s. She enjoyed the feel of his skin next to hers, and he seemed to like it, too. His hands ran over her shoulders, arms, waist, and hips briefly. Then they were inside the cavern and drifting apart.

A soft glow, allowing them to be able to see, came from some kind of crystal formations embedded in the rock. When she looked closer, she realized they were living creatures, not embedded and not crystal. They shifted and slid ever so slightly.

“What we call them translates roughly to crystalites.” Deverel picked one up and handed it to her.

About the size of a baseball, the crystalite fit comfortably in her hand. Its faceted surface was soft, reminding her of a firefly’s light but not as delicate, and emitted a soft white glow. She held it on her palm and ran the fingers of her other hand over it. It shivered at her touch, but moved into it, much the way a cat would.

“Some keep them for pets, but I’d rather visit them in their natural habitat,” Deverel said.

Kass nodded in agreement and carefully replaced the crystalite in the spot where Deverel had removed it.

Skin to skin, they slipped through the crevice again. On their way back to the bubble, Deverel amused her with a variety of acrobatic moves. She watched his strong body move effortlessly through the water, the fluted tips of his ears swaying with each turn. After several tries, she was

able to duplicate a few of them.

“Very good! But we’d better head back. Your air pack is probably getting low.”

About the time he spoke, she saw the flashing warning light and felt the vibration and nodded to him.

When they reached a few meters beneath the pool, they came together as closely as they had when entering the crystalite cave. Deverel’s arms went around her, and his legs entwined with hers. He looked deeply into her eyes, the color of his darkening with desire.

Kass took a deep breath, held it, and dropped the mouthpiece. She wrapped her arms around him and placed her lips over his. She heated from the inside out, her body trembling with her need and want of him.

She felt the motions of his legs as he propelled them upward, and by the time they broke the surface of the pool, she was ready to draw a breath. Deverel pulled away, allowing her to breathe. He slipped the scuba pack from her head and tossed it to the side of the pool. He held her, the lazy motions of his legs continuing to keep them above water.

His hands traced the curves of her back, waist, and hips as his eyes searched hers. What did he seek? That she wanted him as desperately as he seemed to want her?

She touched him, too, running her hands over his smoothly muscled shoulders and across the soft ridges of his gills until her fingers reached his hairline at the nape of his neck. She kissed him again and enjoyed his strong, fierce response. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, hooking her heels at his back, Deverel’s hands ran along her thighs, pressing her closer until his cock rubbed her intimately through the fabric of their suits.

Kass’ breath quickened and her heart pounded. She heard and felt him groan against her lips. His legs moved

faster, and he used one arm to guide them to the edge of the pool. With one hand supported on the edge, he heaved up until he sat on the ledge with Kass sitting snugly in his lap.

Somehow, he managed to gain his feet. When he stood, he ran his fingertips along her cheek, and she turned her head to place a kiss in the center of his palm.

"I'll show you my bedroom now," he said, his voice husky and low.

"Please do," Kass whispered and kissed him again.

He carried her across the living area, down the stairs, and then down another flight of stairs she hadn't noticed before. Another short flight up led to a much smaller bubble room, five or six meters in diameter. A large round water mattress on a transparent frame sat in the center of the room. When a fish swam up to the mattress then quickly darted away, she realized the frame and mattress were actually built into the floor so that the sea filled the mattress.

Deverel knelt on the mattress and laid her on her back. The mattress covering was firm but as smooth and soft as satin. This was as close as she'd ever get to making love in the water without getting wet or having to wear breathing apparatus.

She watched as Deverel pushed his trunks off his hips, his long, thick cock jutting free. He dropped the swimwear on the floor. Then he joined her on the mattress and lay beside her, his shaft nudging her thigh. She took it in hand, wrapping her fingers around its full hardness and rubbing up and down, firmly but gently. Deverel groaned deeply, but her busy hand didn't deter him from slipping the straps of her suit off her shoulders.

When he pushed the suit down enough to expose her breasts, his head dipped and he took one nipple between his lips, his tongue massaging the hard tip. Kass moaned and

arched toward him, nearly bursting with the sensations he aroused within her.

Deverel finished pulling the suit from her body and wedged a leg between hers, his shaft nestled against her sex. He licked her other nipple, bringing it to a hard peak and doubling her desire. Her moans of pleasure seemed to entice him to caress every centimeter of her skin. With tongue, lips and fingertips, he explored every curve and dip. He kissed and stoked and touched until Kass squirmed.

He placed more kisses across her belly, his fingers raking through her curls. "Your body sings to me, Kass, luring me in," he murmured against her skin. "That's why I call you my sea siren. You have my heart, whether you can accept it or not."

Parting her thighs wider, he lowered his head. Her body bucked when he touched her throbbing center. His tongue and lips caressed all of her tender flesh, and then he gently licked her nub of pleasure until she cried out in desperate need.

Deverel slipped up along her body, licking his way back to her breasts and settling tightly between her thighs. Her hips arched up to meet him, cradling his cock, her clit thrumming in anticipation of his entry. She hooked her legs on his hips and reached between them, taking his long, hard erection in her hand.

He pushed and pulled through the grip of her fingers in a steady rhythm, a harsh sound vibrating in his chest. With each of his forward thrusts, Kass' hips automatically rose to meet him. After several strokes, he pulled free of her hand and rested the tip of his shaft against her.

With no more hesitation, he drove deeply inside her with one hard stroke. She cried out, her body pushing to meet his with equal fervor. Their wild coupling caused the mattress beneath them to undulate, and Deverel's cock

plunged within her each time they crested a wave. Her arms around him, she let her hands run over the smooth silky skin that covered his taut muscles.

Then she clung to him, digging her fingers into his skin as pleasure seared through her. She felt as if he were a shooting star raging fiercely within every part of her body.

He lowered his head closer to hers and teased her neck with his warm tongue, trailing hot wet kisses to her earlobe then back down to her shoulder. She moaned with delight as she reached the height of bliss, bursting with the heat of a thousand suns. Kass felt Deverel's body stiffen as he too experienced the ecstatic explosion of completeness.

Together, they rode the final waves of an ascending, rampant star, rising to the peak with heaven only centimeters away.

Drifting down, Kass lay panting against Deverel and felt his arms surround her in a warm embrace. She snuggled closer to him, her backside to his front, her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder. When her breathing had evened, she peered over his arm into the depths of the sea. The outside lights enabled her to see a variety of fish swim by and the tops of plants growing from the montane shelf.

"You know, now, I really don't mind being called your sea siren." She sighed. "You're amazing, and you have a beautiful home. And this bed—I've never seen anything like it. I've always dreamed of having a home like this, where I'm always surrounded by the sea."

"It's not an unusual home or bed for Aquinians. We like to be enclosed by the water even though we're more suited for the land and air."

She patted the mattress. "I expected it to be cold because of the seawater filling it."

"Miniature heating units keep the fabric warmed." He cupped her chin and turned her face toward him. "I have

another surprise for you if you agree. I've arranged an open-ended extension on your visa. I can have the data sent to your research team instead of you taking it to them personally. You can stay on Seamyst as long as you like...if it's what you want."

"I..." Kass started to protest, but while it was imperative they found a cure for the algae disease, it wasn't urgent that she return to Earth immediately. They would either find the answer in the data or they wouldn't. Her presence wouldn't make a difference in that respect. Most of the files would have to be translated and that would take time—weeks, maybe months—before the team could study them anyway.

Deverel nuzzled her ear, his warm breath tickling her. "I fell in love with you, sweet siren, the moment I bumped into you at the chute. I knew you were the woman destined to be mine. When I said your body sings to me, I meant it. It hums a melody I want to dance to the rest of my life."

His words swept away any doubts she had. She couldn't let this chance at happiness slip away from her. "I think I'm falling in love with you, too, Deverel, and I want the opportunity to let it grow. But—" She bit her lip and frowned. "I can only stay a few weeks at the most then I'll have to go back. My work at SEA is very important, and I enjoy it. It's not something I can give up now."

"I would never ask you to, Kass. I'll go with you to Earth. I'll turn in my notice tomorrow and have everything arranged by the time you're ready to leave."

Kass sat up and looked down at him. "Are you sure? It's a big step to take when we've only known each other less than a day."

He placed his hand in the bend of her neck. "My job here is just that, a job. But you...I know in my heart and soul, my destiny lies with you."

She didn't want him to give up this beautiful home of

his. In time, they could live on Seamyst and be happy here. They would work it out, and she wanted to open her heart and life to him. Kass covered his hand with hers and bent closer until her lips almost touched his. “Oh, Deverel, I look forward to dancing with you, in my sea or yours.”

The End

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