

The Warder's Merman

An illustration of a merman with a human upper body and a fish-like lower body with orange and white stripes. He has dark hair and is looking back over his shoulder with a serious expression. He is swimming in a dark underwater cave with green moss and coral. A bright light source is visible in the background, creating a blue glow. The title 'The Warder's Merman' is at the top in a stylized blue and yellow font, and the author's name 'Viola Grace' is at the bottom left in a white font.

Viola
Grace

Beatrix Warder has spent her adult life avoiding this precise moment. In a flurry of panic, she made a choice and it landed her neck deep in the ocean, facing her worst nightmare. Hector was very good looking, for a merman, but he was also her husband and she had now come to him. When they had wed, she had been young and he had been willing to wait until she made the effort to join him under the sea. Bea isn't happy with the end of her dry land life, but with a little bit of effort, Hector is willing to show her there is more to the wet world than fins and a tail.

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THE WARDER'S MERMAN
BOOK EIGHT

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

Clutching the ring on her left hand, Beatrix wished to be anywhere in the world other than right where she was with the demon bearing down on her.

There was a distinct *pop* and she was falling ten feet into churning waves. “Ssshhiiiiitt!” She was under the waves faster than she could say she was in over her head. Clawing her way to the surface with the heavy load of clothing was exhausting, but she made it before she ran out of air.

It was dark, the surf was cold and it churned around her, dunking her as she tried to tread water. Breathing became her highest priority as the waves slammed her around.

Dizzy, frightened and tortured by the waves that were trying to haul her under, she didn’t even have enough energy to scream as hands grabbed her and pulled her down. Hands held her under, locked around her waist and the back of her head and a kiss that should have warmed her made her scream.

Her captor forced air into her lungs and when she stopped fighting him, held her nose closed to keep her from losing all that he gave her.

It was definitely a him. She could tell by the press of a masculine chest against her. If it was the man she had called for, she had no idea. The depths of the water kept her from seeing much of anything.

They were moving. The grip of the water changed, the temperature surrounding her changed. She blinked in discomfort as he slowed to breathe for her every minute or so. It wasn't comfortable, but it was keeping her alive.

Light was starting to flare and jump around them, a few curious faces flowed past her vision, then they were gone and Beatrix and her rescuer were entering a wet pool. He flipped her out of the water and onto her belly, letting her breathe her fill.

"You know, under all the circumstances that I imagined would bring you to me, demon attack was not one of them."

She groaned and hid her head. *Yup. It was him.*
"Thank you for the rescue, Hector."

"It's the least I could do for my wife. It would be a horrible way for us to start our lives together if you drowned." His sense of humour was not for the faint of heart.

Bea refused to look at him until he had shifted

and wrapped a sarong around his hips. "You are such a prude, Beatrix."

"I know."

"I am covered and you are wearing far too many clothes."

Reluctantly, she pushed herself up onto her knees and then stood. Her jeans were sopping, her sneakers squished and her top was gaping around the neck, exposing her bra. She had lost her jacket in the fight for buoyancy. Her medium brown hair was halfway down her back, a concession to the likelihood of her spending her life under the waves. The mer folk didn't wear much clothing, so long hair served a purpose beyond femininity. It was a built-in top.

Normally if a guy like Hector had come up to her, all rippling muscle and slick skin, telling her that she was wearing too many clothes, she would have felt her heart beat faster. With him, it skipped a beat.

"Come along. I have your room prepared."

Your room. Not *ours*. Relief ran through her faster than it should have. She wanted him and was terrified all at the same time. With him, it would not be just sex, with him it was for forever.

He didn't touch her as he led her down the halls of his domed home. It was quite lavish, unusual for any of the undersea peoples. They generally had a Spartan lifestyle, enjoying the

bounty of the oceans.

"Here is your room. There are dresses and such in the closet. You won't need shoes." He turned on his heel and left her alone in the large, open space. The exterior of the bubble was opaque, another odd concession, but Beatrix didn't question it. She stripped off her soaking clothing and naked, she went to the closet looking for something to wear.

"Whoa." A full selection of gauzy gowns was in the closet. They were all for her height, but the belts and pearl chains tightened them around her waist. It felt weird going braless, but the gowns were open enough on the sides that it would look foolish if she wore one.

To minimize the naked feeling, she took up a brush from the dressing table and covered her breasts with the ends of her hair. There was more jewellery, but she wasn't up to wearing it. The ring on her left hand that she couldn't take off was more than enough.

There was a round bed in a corner of the room, so Beatrix wandered over and flopped down on it. She was still cold from the water, so she wrapped the top sheet around her.

Bundled up safe, she stuck out her left hand and glared at her ring. Her mind spun her back to the week that she got it.

* * * *

The curse was not just her time of the month. It was now a real-life problem. Her father had been the last male descendant of the Elwick family and as the first daughter, she was doomed to death unless she married before she turned sixteen.

Beatrix's parents put out a notice that she needed a husband and that he had to wait until she was ready to come to him. Out of the acceptable candidates, Hector was the only one willing to wait. The others saw nothing wrong with ripping her from the human world and destroying her life.

Bea's hands were shaking as she finished brushing her hair. It was one week to her sixteenth birthday and she was already as weak as a kitten. Her life was draining away and it hadn't even started.

She would meet her husband today.

The thought didn't sicken her, but it did scare her. They would be legally married and he was really old. Like over two hundred. Why would he want to marry a human? Sure, she was a Warder, but it wasn't as if she could control her talent or even ward anything yet.

"Beatrix, it's time."

She grabbed her cane and started walking down the stairs. The cane had become a necessity two months earlier when the magic first started to

eat at her.

She heard voices, her father's and mother's, as well as a few strangers. One in particular caught her attention. His accent was not one that Bea had heard before and her hands went cold. This was him.

She was wearing a nice floor-length gown, but it wasn't white. Her parents stood and looked worriedly between Beatrix and the merman at the end of the room.

He was wearing standard human clothing—a white shirt and trousers with shoes. His hair was an inky blue-black tied back in a long ponytail, his skin was tan with a touch of orange and his eyes were navy blue. He had a calm expression in his eyes, as if waiting ten to twenty years for his bride meant nothing to him.

They stood together, formalized the vows and included the stipulation that Bea would go to him when she was good and ready, not before.

When he slid the ring on her finger, he held it for a moment. "It will bring you to me whenever, wherever you are when you need me, but from that moment on, you are mine. I cannot live my life on land."

"But my family...friends..."

"They will be welcome to visit. The means will be provided to them." He kissed the back of the ring and she felt the power seal it to her. "It cannot

be removed and will not be seen by any who are not magic or are interested in taking you from me."

She frowned down at it. It was definitely a wedding ring and definitely in place. Her warder magic flowed over it in a minute, making it part of her.

"I am done here. I will await your arrival." He bowed and left with the official who had registered the ceremony.

Beatrix collapsed in her mother's arms, pins and needles of energy working into her flesh as he left the house. "Bea, what's wrong?"

"I think...I think I might not die, Mom." The magic grew more violent, but her muscles felt stronger.

Two days later, she was stronger than she had ever been and she was a married woman. Life was less than amusing sometimes.

* * * *

Fourteen years later and she was once again in the same position, thankful that Hector had saved her life.

She just wondered how long he would wait before claiming his reward.

CHAPTER TWO

She was so innocent in sleep, his wayward wife. Hector stroked her hair from her face and then stepped back. "Beatrix, it is time for the evening meal. Wake up."

She muttered, stretching and letting the sheet slide from her body. *Damn. She had gotten dressed first.* He remembered the pale sickly child and compared her to the lush curves of the woman in front of him and he was glad he had agreed to the contract. Waiting was nothing—the catch was everything.

* * * *

Bea was having a wonderful dream in which she swam through sun-spotted seas with Hector at her side. He was calling to her and telling her to wake. She fought it with everything she had, but eventually, she swam out of her dreams. The light in her room was dim, but not terribly, so she was

easily able to make out the figure of Hector at the foot of her bed.

"Come along, Beatrix, it is time for dinner. You need to keep your strength up for your transformation."

She blinked and slid off the bed, a blush riding her cheeks. "You were watching me sleep?"

"Only for the purpose of waking you. Come along." He extended his hand and she took it, marvelling at the warmth. She was cold.

The dining room was at the end of a long hall inside the bubbles. Several of the folk were already seated and Bea felt a little self-conscious in her new clothing. It was thin. Far too thin for appearing in front of this many people.

He pulled her to the head of the table where two chairs were positioned and raised his hand for silence. "My bride."

Applause broke out, polite and formal. Hector assisted her into her chair and took the chair to her left. "Eat."

The food was unfamiliar, but out of a sort of grim determination, Beatrix had taught herself to love sushi, so she ploughed through at a decorous pace.

Hector leaned toward her halfway through the meal. "I am relieved."

She matched his low tone. "Why?"

"I was afraid you would not eat our food."

"Ah. I did research years ago and accustomed myself to raw fish and kelp. It took a while, but I managed it."

"Good. Your transformation will commence after the meal. Metabolizing the fish will be easier then."

She thought of a polite way to ask, but then had to blurt, "What transformation?"

The whole of the table froze and then heads turned toward them.

Hector explained calmly. "Into one of our folk. It was in the contract, but your parents were probably worried that you would not agree if you had to grow a tail."

"You are kidding."

"I am not. Your body already feels the cold. You will not be able to live amongst us as you are. You would not survive. This accumulation of elders is here to assist you in the transformation. Each will give a portion of their lives to you and when you turn, you will be as we are, completely."

Her appetite gone, Bea stopped eating. "Oh."

"Indeed. You are my bride and will always be. My life is already tied to yours. They will merely help take the weight of years from them to allow you a long and full life."

He was giving her a new opportunity. A complete and full life under the ocean, she had

thought she would be confined to a small air-filled home and used as a sex toy. She couldn't decide if this was better or worse.

"They need to meditate for the transformation ritual. We need only leave them alone for twenty minutes and your change will begin." He took her hand and pulled her away from the table. Others came forward out of a side hall and cleared away the dishes.

"I will show you the contract and you will have peace of mind regarding your parents' knowledge of this." He led her to a library that shocked her. Books and scrolls covered the shelves, which reached over thirty-feet high in some sections of the bubble.

"You have a very large house."

"There is a reason for that. I will explain it later."

"Does it have anything to do with me?"

"Not directly, though it became a factor later on." He rummaged through a book and there in gilt and ink was the contract that had changed her life.

The paragraph in question was highlighted by Hector's finger as he pointed it out.

As it will come to pass that the maiden shall take up residence with her groom, she shall be made to live her life to the fullest by all means necessary. Her existence

shall be equal to those around her and her life shall be made under the seas.

Beatrix read her own signature, Hector's, and her mother and father had both signed it above the official who acted as witness.

"I think they were desperate and would have sold my soul to keep me alive. That was actually on the block as an option for a while."

"Ah. I see. So, I was less offensive than a demon? Good to know." His ego was taking a hit, but he was a sea god, he could take it.

"You were not what every fifteen-year-old girl dreams of. Personally, I wanted a koala bear. Maybe a pony." She was laughing at him. She couldn't help it.

"How do you feel now?" He walked up to her, looming over her from his considerable height of six and a half feet tall.

"I am still after a pony, but you make a lovely second choice." He looked down into her smiling face and something flickered inside his eyes. He leaned down to kiss her, so she froze in place. His lips explored hers delicately. Light brushing of his mouth against hers. She felt the flick of his tongue and gasped, allowing him full access.

His exploration was leisurely, she tried to respond in kind, but it was frankly more than she had done with anyone in her thirty years. He held

her waist with both hands, his warmth running through the thin fabric. He lifted his head and pulled her in for a hug. "You are a virgin still."

"Of course I am. I am a married woman." She realized how stupid that sounded the moment it came out of her mouth.

His laugh started as a chuckle and rapidly expanded to a roar of amusement that she would never have expected.

"A woman of honour, I chose well."

"My lord, it is time." One of the guests at dinner was standing in the doorway to the library.

"Excellent. It is indeed time." He carefully put the book containing their contract back on the shelf, then recaptured her hand and led her back into the dining room.

The room had been transformed in the short time they had been gone. Floor panels had been removed to expose another wet entry area, an altar of sorts was occupying the space where the table had been and everyone in the room except for Bea and Hector were now naked.

It was the casual nudity of people for whom clothing was truly optional.

Hector led her to the altar and assisted her in lying down. "Just relax, Beatrix. This will not take long."

"What is the hole in the floor for?"

"When you change for the first time, you will

not have control over your breathing, we need to get you into the water as fast as we can."

What could she say to that but, "Oh."

His hands moved over her and released her belt before sliding the gown off her shoulders and over her hips. She arched her back and hips to assist him, winning his smile of reassurance in return.

Nervous and naked, she tightly clasped her hands together over her belly, the ring gleaming on her hand. She wanted to speak, chat and chatter, but her jaw was locked by fear. She could block the whole ritual if she tried...but looking into Hector's eyes, she relaxed and let them do what they would.

They surrounded her and each placed their hands flat on her body. The warmth was incredible and she trembled under their hands.

No words were spoken aloud, but on a signal that Bea couldn't hear, power started to run over and through her. Their hands wrapped her from feet to ribs, covering her in magic and heat. Nothing happened for what seemed like forever and then the most peculiar feeling took her over. Her skin was getting tight, her body was getting hotter and her legs were twitching furiously. The hands held her down as she began to thrash in their grip, her body shaking in violent bursts as the magic inside her began to change direction and emerge through her flesh.

She screamed as the pain of the transformation finally took hold. It was as if a switch had been thrown and her nerves were washed with acid. At that same moment, she heard voices all around.

I hate it when they scream.

I know, but it must be done. Did you feel how cold she was?

Like the base of an iceberg.

It must be horrible living like that.

If you could call that living. Marching around on dry land seems rather dull to me. Restricted travel, no easy transport, you can't just swim away when you wish to.

Wow. Her colours are wonderful.

Lovely depth, nice and bright.

Bea was going to scream again, but she couldn't get her breath. Her lungs burned and she gasped, then again.

"Come, little one. Into the water." Hector lifted her and she saw her tail for the first time. It was a brilliant purple with bands of green. She didn't have much time to dwell on it though—she was drowning on dry land.

With her in his arms, he walked to the pool and jumped in. She fought the urge to breathe in the water even though her body was screaming for it.

She gasped once, then again and finally started breathing. Too bad she was floating tail up in the water.

CHAPTER THREE

If I had a fish doing this, I would scoop it out of the tank and flush it. The speech in her mind came all too easily.

Don't worry, you will get the hang of things soon enough. Wave your tail through the water and push with your hands. Hector was swimming in front of her, his coral and white tail and fins flaring out as he moved with lazy elegance.

She righted herself with some difficulty. Up was the way his head was pointing and it took some delicate waving of her *legs* to get her to face him.

Are you all right? How do you feel?

Warm, strong, naked.

Good, good and hooray.

His wink disarmed her. She stopped concentrating on keeping upright and slowly drifted upside down again.

Bobbing with her head where her feet, or tail, should be wasn't too bad, but it was very

disconcerting when Hector grabbed her tail and flipped her around. The damned thing was sensitive.

As a rule, we don't mess with someone else's tail, but you seem to need a bit of help.

I think I do. Can I practice swimming or something?

I don't know, can you?

It was a challenge, pure and simple. Bea flicked her tail and shot upwards. Unfortunately, they were still under Hector's home. Extremely unfortunately, she had drifted away from the open hatch. The clang was tremendous.

Ow. She was drifting head down again, but this time, Hector grabbed her by the waist and hauled her out from under the house of bubbles. Hard bubbles.

Are you okay?

My head hurts and I can't swim. I make a crappy mermaid. She was close to tears.

Well, you have the maid part down. You just need to work on the mer part. Come with me and don't use your tail.

He pulled her back against his chest, looping an arm around her ribs with her breasts resting on his forearm. With a flick of his tail, they were moving through the water and she was looking in every available direction.

A city of domes and bubbles was around them, making a rather large splash of light in the watery

depths. They cruised straight out of the environs, past a number of merfolk who sent telepathic greetings.

Bea didn't know what to do, so she remained silent, but Hector greeted them back as he swam in a direct line out into the open sea.

She had an idea of her location when they passed the leviathan. It was not something one would see at home, so she was in Realm.

Yes, we are.

The ring moved me between worlds as well as in space?

It did. It was simply a charm to bring you to me, wherever you were. I can tell you that I was both shocked and pleased at your arrival.

People greet verbally and swim by, is that normal?

Well, since we use our hands and arms for propulsion it is a little awkward to wave at other folk as you swim by. You might change your trajectory and end up crashing into someone or something.

Oh. That makes sense. Where are we going?

There is an open area, fairly shallow, it should help you with your tail control to swim around there for a while.

Excellent. She was ignoring his arm under her breasts as best she could, but it was becoming more difficult as he moved against her. As her body started to come under her control, his body against hers was causing a strange tingling sensation down her back.

Wait. Do I have a fin on my spine?

You do. As do I. Why?

It feels...never mind.

His snicker of laughter communicated silently. *Don't worry about it. Your body will be sensitive and your fin struts will feed new sensations to you for some time.*

What about sex?

Hector laughed so hard he almost dropped her. *We don't mate in this form. This is why we build cities and had to move to Realm. Humans were getting far too adept at finding us. Fortunately, when we do travel back, we give off similar signatures to dolphins.*

It was nice how he turned the conversation from sex to dolphins. It was quite the jump.

She kept an eye on her surroundings, but it all looked the same to her at this point. Blue, green and grey in the distance.

Here we are, off you go. Work on circles and counter circles. With that, he launched her through the water with a heave that sent her ass over teakettle into the centre of a large, sandy space.

Lying on her back, she looked up and could see the surface of the water. Curious, she tried to swim up and ended up face down in the sand.

Circles first. Up and down will come later.

Fine.

It was not as easy as it sounded, so she took up an experimental mentality. First, she needed to know her new body. Hector was swimming in

circles around her, slow, large, lazy circles.

She lifted her hands and saw the transparent webbing between her fingers. That was new. She felt lightly around her neck and the flutter of what must be gills caught her attention. She explored lower and had to admit her boobs were now perkier, even though her nipples were the same vivid purple as her tail.

The spines down her back were a fan of tissue. Hector rolled so that his back was exposed to her and she saw how it was set between the strong blades of his shoulders down to the narrowing of his waist. A long fin down the length of his tail made her reach to grab her own butt and sure enough, there it was. Her tail fins were loose and flowing though, much like her hair. Her hair had grown. It reached to the centre of her thighs and billowed with the steady stream of currents and it was green!

Okay, she had a tail, fins and propulsion in her hands. Time for a kick off. Gingerly, she flexed and shifted forward in a smooth motion. *Cool.*

It took some experimentation, but eventually, she was lapping Hector as he swam, then shifting direction and swimming counter clockwise.

Good, Beatrix. Now, breach the surface and speak. I will come with you.

Grinning, she snapped her tail and popped out of the water and kept going. She was up, out and

doing a back flip that turned into a belly flop. *Ow.*

Your tail has a lot of power, the littlest motion can having you breaching the waves.

I noticed that.

His laughter was silent, but it was definitely there.

She tried it again with a slow motion. She rose out of the water and used her hands to keep her head above the waves. Her tail moved absently with the currents and kept her near the surface.

"Stop holding your breath, Beatrix. Keep your gills below the water and speak to me."

It took a few tries, but the air she pulled in through her mouth eventually emerged through her voice. "What should I say?"

"How are you feeling?"

"Can you stop asking me that? I am fine."

"Excellent." He surged toward her and then his hands were on her waist. She was so surprised that she sank below the waves. He drew her upward.

She was nervous now, as she hadn't been before. Becoming an adult who was already married, she had avoided this kind of closeness with strange men. The humming of her body at his proximity was startling on several levels and the hum increased to a roar when he kissed her.

This wasn't the lifesaving kiss that he had given her when she landed in the cold darkness. This

was all heat. She marvelled at his taste and the soft but firm texture of his lips. She was going cross-eyed until she closed her own eyes and surrendered to sensations.

Her breasts were tingling, her tail was lashing and when her hair floated around them, she realized that they had sunk back under the waves. Laughter bubbled up, breaking the spell of seduction that he was weaving around her.

You find my touch amusing?

No, I am still getting used to breathing under the waves. I was just thinking that more men shouldn't need to breathe directly.

He leaned back in astonishment and a stream of bubbles escaped his open mouth. Laughter followed.

You laugh really easily.

It took him a while to calm. Not usually, no. But you have been a constant surprise since you splashed into my life.

You laugh when surprised? Good to know.

Come on, we are expected back at the house. He held her hand and tugged her around so that she was facing the correct direction.

How do you tell which way you are going around here?

Practice. The currents are our roads, the coral are the sign posts. Most of the folk will help you around if you get lost, so stay near the city at all times so that you can get help when you need it.

They don't seem too friendly toward me.

You are not listening with your mind yet. I had to inform them that you could not hear the greetings and would be friendlier at a later time. Many have not learned the language of the dry landers.

But I can hear you speak just fine. I can understand you.

You understand my thoughts, not the language they are in, there is a difference.

He had a point. She had heard the greetings as they swam out, but she hadn't known if she should respond. They weren't speaking English or any other language she could understand, but she heard them and understood.

This wasn't too bad at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Beatrix had no idea how he found their way back to the city, but he kept hold of her hand the whole way. When they reached the point where other merfolk came near them, she heard and returned the greetings, noting absently that the male-female couples were also holding hands in much the same manner as she and Hector.

It meant something and she was almost sure that those couples were married.

When he pulled her to the hatch, she balked. Entering the water had been a little awkward and leaving was not her idea of a fun experience.

Don't worry. Your body will know what to do.

Images of a flounder with her face on it, flapping on the floor was sent to his mind. His lips twitched and he faced her, putting his hands on her waist. The next thing she knew, she was flying through the water and into the air, landing and skidding across the floor, her arms and legs

pushing for a stop.

"Huh. You were right."

"When will you learn I am always right?" He was crouching next to her and she couldn't help but notice that he was aroused. And naked.

Blushing, she averted her eyes.

"You will have to get over your nudity issues eventually, you know."

"Yeah, well I just learned to breathe water today. One thing at a time."

"Fair enough. Come along. Your new hair colour looks lovely, by the way. It sets off the purple in your eyes."

She sighed. "They are purple now? Great. Why do you get away with normal colouring?"

"It is considered a birth defect among my people. Bright colouration indicates health and strong magic."

"Well, your tail is lovely."

His lips twitched again. "Thank you. I have risen to my position despite my unfortunate colouring though."

"What position?"

"That is a conversation for another time. Dinner is being served."

"We go to dinner naked?"

"You can wear the food if you wish, but I think you would do better with the nutrition."

She pattered along the hall, noting the dining

area that they had been in before was now reset. "Aren't we eating in there?"

"As soon as you finish eating, you are going to bed, young lady. Your body has had a bit of a shock today and it needs time to acclimate."

Her room had a new addition, a table set for two. Sashimi for dinner. Bea didn't know if it was the swimming or the magic, but the food tasted better than any she had ever eaten.

There was no water or anything to drink with dinner and she asked about it.

"You absorb enough water when you swim to keep up your moisture levels, but you will need to swim once per day for at least an hour."

He was getting fuzzy around the edges as he spoke. She felt hands on her skin and blinked as he lifted her and tucked her into bed. He crawled in next to her and spooned her against him. In less than a minute, the world slipped away.

Waking with someone else in the bed was a little traumatic. Bea screamed and flipped to the floor.

Hector leaped to his feet and looked around with battle readiness in every part of him.

She meant *every* part.

"What? What's wrong?"

She was a little embarrassed. "Nothing. I am just not used to having someone in bed with me.

Sorry."

He knelt beside her and helped her sit up. "You will have to get used to it."

"I will try."

He sighed and pulled her to him, tucking her head under his chin. "This is new for both of us."

"Oh, is that why you haven't..."

"I thought to give you some time to get used to us. Life amongst the folk is a little different than what you are used to and since your body has changed, you may not be prepared for the reactions that it now has."

"Reactions?" She didn't have reactions to anything. Hell, she hadn't even bothered masturbating. With her future up in the air, she didn't want to get used to anything. Celibacy had come easily.

"Allow me to show you." He lifted her, flipping her to her stomach on the bed. His hand trailed lightly down her spine and she almost came off the bed. A slickness emerged from her core and her heart started pounding in places other than her chest.

"What the hell was that?"

"This?" He did it again and she mewled, making fists in the sheets. This time her hips rolled as he stroked her back and her body was wet, preparing for entry. She didn't care what entered her as long as it filled the hollow feeling

inside her.

She was panting, her fingers clenching spasmodically. When he stroked the inside of her thighs, they parted without any resistance.

Magic was between them. She knew that feeling and now realized how closely linked to sex it was in the merfolk. As a warder, the flow of magic was in her blood and now that blood was pounding in her veins as Hector ran his hands over her body in all the places transformed. She closed her eyes tightly when he slid a finger into her and her whole body vibrated with tension as he began to stroke in and out of her with that one digit.

His other hand continued to trace her spine where the fin would be if they were under water and as the tension built inside her, it only needed the touch of his lips on her tailbone to set it free. A maelstrom of sensation rippled through her, her surprised squeak gave way to hoarse cries.

Another finger slipped into her and she moaned. Hector continued to stroke, slide and work his way around her spine and thighs. When he flipped her to her back, she looked at his dilated pupils and knew that hers looked the same. His cock was dripping with precum and she reached to touch. He was hot, smooth and slick when she stroked her fingers and thumb through the liquid he was producing.

His eyes closed as she handled him, letting her

curiosity be satisfied before he was. It was endearing, so she tortured him a little more, sliding her hand up and down his length before she arched her hips to bring him to her.

Knowing it was going to hurt when they came together wasn't a problem—his easy entry, however, shocked her to her core. "What the hell?"

He leaned in to kiss her into silence. "The folk don't have hymens. You don't want blood in the water at any time."

She felt full, hot, confused and irritated, but that all faded into nothing when he started to move.

Thrusting carefully at first, he picked up speed and strength as he worked into her and she arched up to receive him. She started to blush at the noise of their bodies slamming together until he grabbed her hands and forced them over her head, resting his chest against her as he rocked into her.

When the hard plane of his chest came in contact with her breasts, her reaction arced out of control. He kissed her as he thrust into her, she felt surrounded, taken, owned by him in that moment. She felt the stars go out as she came apart in his embrace.

Maybe sex wasn't a complete waste of time.

CHAPTER FIVE

“How do you tell if it’s morning or night?” Bea was lying across Hector’s chest, his fingers trailing gently over her spine.

“You just gain a sense of these things. Right now, it is sunrise.” He sighed as she snuggled closer. One of her thighs draped over his while he was stroking her.

“How can you tell?”

“Close your eyes, wife. Breathe deep and think of the surf, the light sparkling on the waves, the open air.”

She did and as she did, he wove her fingers with his own. She could feel the air, see the pink sunrise and sense the weather of the day. If she wanted to, she could twist the weather. She knew it in her bones.

Surprised, she opened her eyes to meet Hector’s dark amber gaze. “How did I do that?”

“It is one of your senses.”

"No it isn't. Warder's can't do magic. The geas, the curse keeps us from any true magic aside from our own wards."

He chuckled and played with her hair. "That is true, but all curses lose power after a certain amount of time. The time for the Warders has come and gone. Add to that, the folk were not included in the curse. We were not dealing with the other races at that time. Our magic is not tied to yours, but yours now is to ours."

She blinked, working that out. "How did you figure that out?"

"Years ago, long before your parents were looking for a husband for you, a dark elf called me using magic and reflection."

"Communication mirror."

"Precisely so. He contacted me and spoke of the Warders, their exceptionally varied bloodlines and the power that they contained. He said that if I was ever offered one, for whatever reason, I should take her as mine before the opportunity passed."

"So that is why..."

"Indeed. When your parents put it about that you needed a husband and they were searching for not only a necessary but a good match, I contacted them and offered my services as your groom."

"Once groom, now husband."

His hand clenched on her hair and then smoothed it down her back. "Exactly."

"So, you came forward to assist because a strange dark elf told you to?"

"More or less. Knowing that you would not need an...active husband for some time, it allowed me to set my house to rights. So to speak."

"I see. Well, it was darned inconvenient for me. I had to skip all usual social activities of a woman my age and was forced to be a bridesmaid more times than I could count." She shuddered at the memory of all those hideous dresses.

"As lovely as this is, I need to get to some matters of state. If you would let me up, I will show you the bathing room."

"You have a bathroom, even with all the water?" She realized how stupid she sounded the instant that the words left her lips.

He merely smiled, took her with him as he entered a room that she hadn't even bothered to notice before.

There was a smaller necessary in the room behind a privacy curtain and as soon as Bea saw it, she realized that she hadn't felt any urges in that department until that moment. "Excuse me."

She darted behind the screen and used the facilities, washing her hands in the nearby basin when she was done.

"It is a trick of magic to get the plumbing and

fresh water working, but this whole place is laced with it." He gestured to a pool the size of a minivan. The fresh water was steaming gently and it looked very tempting. "I will meet you in a few hours. You know your way to the library, so indulge your curiosity as you wish."

She took a few steps forward, "Where will you be?"

"Attending to the matters of state." He walked to the door and looked back at her, "You see, against my better judgement, I became the king."

Beatrix was left staring at the open doorway. "King?"

She wandered into the water just to relax the muscles unused to the unusual activities of the last few hours.

Her mind spun through everything she had just learned. Something was telling her that nothing in her life was coincidence, right down to the curse on the Helger family. If her father hadn't been from a cursed family and pursued her mother relentlessly, she would never have been born. She had been a surprise baby, she knew that much. Not one part of her life had been planned or at least not by her.

Soap and a loofa were on the right side of the bath, so she did a head-to-toe exfoliation and got out of the tub. A mirror caught her by surprise.

Her hair was indeed green, her eyes purple and

where her pubic hair had been was now a purplish discolouration that bore no resemblance to hair. The skin was tinted, as were her nipples. The rest of her body was the same except for the sensitivities that Hector had so skilfully used. She had a dark thought that he must have been practicing. He had commented on her being a woman of honour, but was he a match for her?

Complete nudity freaked her out, so she wrapped a floor-length sarong around her hips. Her longer hair covered her breasts and the floor was comfortably warm under her feet. Almost alive.

He had told her to spend her time in the library, but she wanted her question answered first. Her feet pattered on the stone as she looked into room after room. Finally, she discovered his study or stateroom. He was scowling at documents on the table, making notes and muttering to himself.

"Hector?"

"I thought I told you to go to the library this morning."

"I have a question to ask you."

"Ask it." His irritation was unmistakable.

"Were you faithful to me for the last fourteen years? Did you take a lover?"

He looked astonished, "Why would you ask

such a thing?"

"It doesn't matter. Did you?"

He sighed and turned back to his paperwork, dismissing her. "We will discuss this later. Go to the library."

"But —"

"Go." His attention was back on his documents and he was again muttering to himself as he worked on something.

Dismissed, frustrated and vulnerable, she walked the halls looking for a distraction that was *not* the library.

The wet pool called to her and she only hesitated a moment before stripping off her sarong and lightly jumping into the water. Her body knew what to do and after a few seconds of panic, she breathed in the life-giving water.

Now, where should she go? Her tail propelled her through the sea, she greeted the few startled merfolk who saw her and simply moved in a straight line until her feeling of hurt and rejection had faded. Her sigh sent a froth of bubbles through the water. This wasn't doing her any good.

She turned back to home and felt a chill settle low in her belly. She had no idea where home was. The sea was incredibly non-descript and a mist of plankton was fogging her vision through what had been crystal-clear water.

Fuck. She tried calling for help, Hello? Can anyone hear me? Hello?

Nothing. The water around her had no sound at all. Slowly, keeping an eye on her surroundings, she started to move in a straight line back toward what she thought was home.

She moved carefully and if her senses hadn't been wide open, she never would have seen the leviathan in time. A snap of teeth tried to make a meal of her, but she flicked her tail and it just grazed her sensitive tail fins.

Shit, shitshitshitshit. The magic of her body kept her from being able to ward herself for protection, so she needed somewhere to hide. The creature wasn't giving up. She must have been the tastiest thing swimming by today.

Stands of coral were crushed as she swam around them and her predator swam through them. Her mind chanted thousands of curses, repeating its favourites. Finally, Beatrix saw something she could make use of. She just needed a second or two more between her and the beast trying to eat her and she would be fine.

Three points for sunken treasure ships.

She darted left, around more coral, then moved with everything in her inside that ship. She gripped the ship's frame tightly and warded the ship against intruders.

Less than half a second after the ward snapped

into place, the creatures slammed into the ship. And bounced away. *Oh, thank goodness.* She sighed in relief at her immediate danger being mitigated.

Now to find a way past her attacker and back to the city. Frustrated she ran her fingers through her hair and cursed as her ring became stuck on her new green locks.

Her ring. How could she have forgotten it? Crossing her fingers, she held onto the ring and wished to be with Hector.

Nothing happened. Well, almost nothing. A light throb happened inside the ring and as she extended her hand while turning in a slow circle, almost crying when she reached a point where the ring pulsed. Hector was that way.

Unfortunately, so was the leviathan.

CHAPTER SIX

He had been far too dismissive. She had a genuine question and he had blown it off. His fourteen years of celibacy had not been easy for him, but he had managed it.

Hector summoned a servant, "Go to the library and fetch my wife." Wife not bride. His body hummed with frustration that it had not been allowed to satisfy earlier.

The servant took a step and then paused. "Sir. She is not in the library."

A cold chill ran through his body. "Then where is she?"

"In the sea, my lord. I thought you knew."

"How long has she been gone?" His muscles were tense, something was wrong and the more he thought of her, the worse he imagined her predicament.

"An hour my lord. No more."

He started toward the wet hatch. "Bring my

trident."

A telepathic relay began and by the time he reached the exit, his trident was held in the hands of a trembling girl. He sighed, his fear and fury must be manifesting. There was a reason he was king, his body became one with the waves during a temper and his worry for Beatrix qualified.

She should not be in the sea alone yet, she had no idea where she was going, let alone where she was safe. He had not bothered to give her a lecture on the hazards of the deep. He had been too busy making sure she would like being with him to worry her over their dangerous living conditions.

Trident in hand, he jumped into the water sending his senses out to find his wayward wife. She was out in the untamed lands, pinned in a wreck by a sea creature. He quieted his fury and swam determinedly toward the signal that her ring was giving off.

Hector gave himself a pat on the back for that particular bit of foresight. He had watched her carefully when she was in danger, ready to step in at a moment's notice. His assistance had rarely been needed. She was a very level-headed woman, most of the time.

This was not one of those times.

He held his trident and prepared to do battle with the leviathan and with his wife, when he found them both.

* * * *

The ring was pulsing faster, a steady thumping on her hand like an accelerated heartbeat. The creature had taken a few shots at her, but the ward kept him at bay. A few fish nearby were watching her curiously, but they didn't come within touching distance, so she kept her focus on the beast that was trying to get in, not the ones already inside.

When the ring got to the point of constant vibration, she knew that Hector was close. Very close. The leviathan was blasted with a vortex of water from a trident in the hands of a very angry merman.

Hector's skin was covered in power, gleaming and glistening as if he had been oiled. *Beatrix, where are you?*

In the wreck.

Are you safe?

Yup. Warded to the gills. Literally.

Good. Stay put.

She didn't reply as he started to do battle with the hungry creature. Blood filled the water as he stabbed, struck and blasted away at it. He was swimming so fast that she only saw an orange and black blur as he flicked past. His fury came off him in waves, literally. The little fish she was hiding

with pressed as far back as they could in the empty hold of the ancient ship. They didn't want to get too close to an angry Hector either.

The leviathan finally limped away, leaving a trail of blood for any larger predator to follow, if there was one. Bea had a hard time imagining a larger creature with a mouthful of teeth.

Come out. Now.

She didn't even think about refusing, his glow was very much in evidence and the power rippling through him looked like it wanted an excuse to cut loose.

Uh. Hi.

Indeed. What are you doing out this far? You are way beyond the barrier.

What barrier?

The fury abated somewhat as he scrubbed his face with his free hand. *I will explain later.*

Are you sure? This seems like the thing I should have known yesterday.

Before or after you were swimming upside down?

Why not during? She didn't have a leg to stand on and she knew it. Or fin to flip with, whatever.

Very funny, Beatrix. How did you keep the creature out?

A ward. I am a Warder. It's what I do.

His glow faded as she swam out to see him. He spun her around and checked her for damage. *You are unhurt.*

Yup.

*You are either faster than you look or very lucky.
He just grazed my fin and yeah, I was hauling.
Well, you will haul your tail back home and we will
have a nice chat.*

Fine, which way is home?

It was almost funny to watch him cover his face with his hand in frustration. *You were lost.*

You betcha.

He took her hand in his unencumbered one and pointed her toward home. *Come on, I can't paddle your butt in that form.*

You are making going back soooo tempting.

Interesting, you can even think in sarcastic tones.

You should hear me whistle.

His lips were twitching all the way home, but he didn't respond as he led her back through the plankton cloud.

She boosted herself through the hatch with a flick of her tail and squealed as she over shot the edge of the hatch and slipped and slid her way through the room until she smacked into the wall. "Ow."

"Are you all right?"

"Yup. Just fabulous. Is my nose bleeding?" She leaned her head back for him to check.

He laughed at her. "No. Your nose is fine."

She waddled over to her skirt and tied it on quickly.

"You really are rather prudish, aren't you?"

"I am. Sorry, but I was raised to keep the interesting bits covered." She eyed his interesting bits and they swelled in appreciation.

He sighed in resignation. "I need to inform you of the hazards of your new life. Come with me."

He held out his hand and when she took it, Beatrix was surprised at how deeply the small gesture of his thumb across her palm shook her. It was as if he was sliding his fingers into her over and over.

She swallowed heavily. "Is it always like this?"

"What?" He stopped and looked at her, really looked as if seeing her for the first time. His fingers caressed her jaw line, making her bite her lower lip.

"Beatrix, this is the initial stage of your transformation. It is designed to bring you and keep you close to me at all times. I am sorry that I didn't pay attention to your earlier question, but I simply forgot how strongly the new magic would take you."

"Oh." Sure, it had to be magic. What kind of idiot was she that she thought it could be something silly, like true love?

"I don't think you understand. Here we are." He walked into the library and pulled a scroll down, took it to the stand and unrolled it.

Hector gestured for her to take a seat and

started to roll the scroll until he reached the portion that he wanted. *"And should any of the folk be taken by the charms or elegance of those who walk on land, they shall first prove their love and then, upon the proof being made, they shall join their lives completely. One shall not be done without the other and love shall be taken and given with an open heart."*

"I still don't understand."

He returned the scroll to the stacks and sat next to her. "It means that unless I could and did love you, your transformation could not have proceeded."

"So, you love me? Sort of?" Her spur of hope was pathetic.

He grinned and kissed the back of her hands one by one. "I do. I have been watching over you and waiting for the moment to make my move, as it were."

"But you didn't."

"Only because of the binding in our contract not because of my own will. I would have brought you to me six years ago if I had been able to. I had to content myself with watching over you from a distance."

"Watching me? Like stalking?"

"More like waiting for the trouble you constantly fell into to come to a head so you would summon me and I would be nearby."

"You could sense me through the ring?"

A light blush coloured his cheeks. "Yes. The same way I found you today."

"So, what is with the trident?"

"It is the traditional weapon of the folk since we tend to fight only each other or fish."

"You are still carrying it around because..."

"I will use it to keep you from jumping back in the water if I have to."

The glint in his eye told her he was dead serious, even if his tone was light. "Ah. Good answer."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hector explained all of the little details to Beatrix, like why only the city and certain paths were safe.

"Why don't you just ward them? Increase the size of the safe zone to keep the large animals out." It seemed fairly simple to her.

"That is what I was arranging. The magic users within our community charge quite a lot for their services."

"Well, warding is a hard skill for people to learn. I can do it for free." She shrugged as she made the offer.

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You aren't asking, I am offering. It will give me something to do during the time when you are in your office. You can attend to matters of state and I can increase your square footage."

"No."

"No? It seems like a good arrangement to me."

"No for two reasons. One, I want you to read the history of your new people and that will be an extensive effort. Two, I don't want you out there alone. Ever."

"Can't you just assign someone to come with me?"

"No. No unmated males are allowed near you and the mated ones would not bring their wives to such dangerous outcroppings."

"So, do you think you could make time to come with me? You could quiz me on the history of the folk." She was gaining enthusiasm for the idea, so much so that she didn't even notice when he lifted her off her chair. She did notice coming down on his lap, her thighs straddling his and her body heating as he used his knowledge to touch her most sensitive spots. She arched her back as he stroked her spine, feeling the light tug as he removed her skirt.

The curve of her waist where the magical skin met her own was so sensitive, her body started convulsing when he sharply drew both hands over her hips and down to her navel.

His cock was more than ready. As she gasped for air, he lowered her onto his shaft. His hands supported her as she rose and fell on him until she was squeaking with the nearness to her release. He remained embedded inside her and stroked around her hips and belly once again. This time he

was in a position to enjoy her spasms and rapidly joined her as she shuddered, awash in sensation.

Locked together, Bea clung to him, reaching around to caress his neck, shoulders and spine in the same way he had hers. He shuddered and his hips jerked against her. "Stop that."

"You have explored me and I haven't had the chance to explore you."

"There is time for everything, love. You merely have to let each moment have its own meaning to the full."

She blinked, still a little hazy from the pleasure that had just blasted her. "What does that mean?"

"It means now we are together and when the time is right, you can go exploring. Fourteen years of celibacy have made me a little eager to be inside you whenever convenient."

She had her answer. A small smile grew on her face and settled in her heart. She felt cherished and just a little bit respected. He called her love and eventually, she would feel it. If not, she would have to settle for cherished.

She slumped down and laid her head on his chest. Cherished was a great place to be right about now.

"But I want to!" She was ashamed to say, she stomped her foot. The bare skin made a slapping noise on the stone of the floor.

"No. It is unacceptable." Hector was at his desk and scowling at her next to the companion desk he had brought in so she could study and he could keep an eye on her.

"If they use a stone that I pre-charge, there is no danger. They only need to drop the rocks where you tell them and I only have to go to one of them to bring them all online."

"It is dangerous. All of the outlying areas are dangerous. I don't want you out there. Another leviathan could be faster than you and I could not bear that."

Bea sighed. She had been trying to get out, but her first outing seemed to have traumatized poor Hector. He didn't want her out anywhere if he wasn't there. It wasn't all bad. They had attended dinner parties and spoken to some of the folk that she hadn't met before.

Due to her land-walking nature, there were a few factions of folk who were not too fond of her as their queen. They weren't too fond of Hector either, but the strength that he could exhibit when provoked was proof that he was their destined ruler. She didn't have something like that to impress them.

The budding families that had welcomed her, however, filled her with a sense of protectiveness that she hadn't previously known. The existing wards around the city were weakening as the

leviathan population grew. They were the only large predators that the folk had to worry about, but they killed close to a dozen folk every year. The population of the folk was dwindling and it seemed nothing could stop it.

Hector calmed and drummed his fingers on the desk. It made her smile. It meant he was reconsidering. "Are you sure that you only need to visit one site?"

"Yes."

"How far apart do we need to lay the stones?"

"No more than half a mile. The closer the better in case a rock gets shifted by nature or direct contact."

"Okay. You can ward the city, but I will have the stones brought here and you will lay the initial ward on them next to our main hatch."

"Good and once we shore up the protection, you can expand the wards by frog jumping the rocks. Lay out the next row and then move this row forward. Foot by foot you can increase your hunting grounds considerably. Get some of the larger fatty fish in here."

His eyes gleamed at the possibility. "Can you also ward nets?"

"Sure, but it would work better if there were stone beads or weights on them. Those are easier to ward than rope."

"Tridents?"

"Yes, anything with stone or metal embedded it in. The longer lasting the item, the longer lasting the ward."

He sat quietly for a moment. His fingers steepled and a calculating look in his eye. "You can do it. I will have the first round of stones brought in tomorrow morning. The carriers will go out in twos and threes for protection. I don't want to lose any men in the effort."

"Done and done. Now, I believe it is time for dinner."

She was halfway to the door when Hector stopped her. "Beatrix, you have a call."

He moved from behind his desk and waved for her to take the chair. She sat down and looked at the large swirling mirror that held her name. Smiling, she touched it.

"Beatrix! Oh, my God, I was so glad when Hector sent word that you were all right. I was going out of my mind."

"I love you, too, Mom. How is Dad?"

"He is hanging back in case your hair doesn't cover everything, but it does. So. Come on, honey, talk to your little girl."

A second beloved face took up a post behind her mom, "Hi, Dad." She waved.

"Hello, Bea. The green hair and purple eyes really set off your features. You look lovely. Has Hector been treating you well?"

"For the most part, yes. But he is forcing me to read the history of the folk and that is some dry reading for a race living underwater."

Her parents chuckled.

"So, I am fine, Hector is fine, you are fine, Dad is fine...anything else?"

"No. We just wanted to check in on you. We had no idea where you had gone."

"Well, with a demon bearing down on me, I didn't have a lot of time to make calls. I grabbed my ring, wished to be where Hector could help me and then I was drowning until he arrived."

"He rescued you?"

"Yup, and I am now hale and hearty and I grow a tail in saltwater. Life is kinda strange."

"I am glad to see you alive and safe."

"I am fine, Mom, but feel free to check in from time to time. I like talking to you."

"Ah, your normal subtle signal to get off the phone. Or viewing station, as the case may be. All right, I will call you in another week and check on you. You are still my little girl."

"And you are still my mom. I love you, Mom."

"Love you too, baby."

"Love you, Dad."

"Take care, sweetheart."

She removed her fingers from the glass and the connection was lost.

Bea smiled. Suddenly, the world she was in got

a lot less hostile. Knowing that her family was up there and rooting for her gave her a strength that she had previously taken for granted.

She was Warder, hear her roar.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rose quartz was the chosen stone. Beatrix spent the next two weeks putting a primer charge into each and every chunk of rock that was brought to their home. Since each of the rocks weighed in at over fifty pounds, she made warding them part of her daily constitutional.

For the final rock, a keystone of onyx was brought to her. Two hundred pounds, thigh high and perfectly round, it was the egg that would hold everything in place, once Hector let her go with him to the outer border of the safe lands.

“We will go tomorrow and you can activate the screen from there. We will have a guard with us and you will be kept safe at all times.”

She felt like throwing a tantrum, but that would only get her dropped into the wet entry to cool off. He would follow her and she would work on swimming to avoid a predator.

It was a fun game, but he always won. And

when they got to their home again, she won.

I need that stone moved two feet to the left. Over, over, there you go. Two of the folk, Lor and Davin, were out helping them while guards stood by. When the stone rolled into position, she felt the click with the other stones in a lap around the city. That was what she wanted.

Hector was floating on the other side of the stone, holding the trident. She gestured for him to hover above her in case the barrier was too effective. It would be horrible to trap him on the other side even for a moment. Though, after she had refused her lessons in history and received that spanking he had threatened her with, it was tempting.

All right. It's show time. Floating toward the rock, she sighed happily as her hands connected and the familiar feeling of magic, *her* magic came through her.

With all of the rocks primed, she only had to pour warding energy through the keystone and the net of protection sprang up around the city.

Setting the ward was a relief. Having an outlet for her emotions, her frustrations and her urge to protect the new life that was starting for her here, in this peculiar city under the waves.

It's done.

Hector swam and looked in her eyes. *It is?*

It is. There have been two impacts of large predators on the northern border. The ward has already held.

Lor and Davin were looking confused. *So fast? The wizards and such who usually do the protection take hours if not days.*

She looked at them and gave them the biggest grin she could, *I am a Warder. It is what I do.*

That seemed to answer their silent queries and when a leviathan appeared in the distance, it was time for them to see the efficiency of her work – up close and personal.

Hector shoved her back, putting his body between her and the predator, but he needn't have worried, seeing a tasty bunch of the folk, the leviathan darted forward to consume one of them and slammed into the barrier.

Bea felt the hit, but only absently, the same way she used to hear cars honking or occasionally colliding in the streets. She was aware of it, but it didn't hurt her.

The creature shook its head and tried again. The impact was not as strong, but the wards were stronger. That was a trick that Bea had learned from her cousin, Anryn. Use the power of the impact to strengthen the wards and each time they were challenged, the challenger would lose some of themselves.

Well, all done. We can go now.

Hector kept one eye on the befuddled creature as he moved away, keeping himself between her and danger.

Lor and Davin were looking at her with a new expression in their eyes. The other guards were sharing it. *Why are they staring at me like that?* She had learned how to use the private channel between the two of them and he responded in kind.

They have never seen a dry lander become one of the folk and then use magic to assist in the protection of generations.

Well, we Warders are a strange breed.

I would have to agree on that. But I think that wedding you was one of the best decisions of my life.

With a snap of her tail, she faced him, inches from his nose. *You only think that it was one of the best decisions of your life? Well, tell me when you know it.*

She snapped her tail again and raced home. Her dudgeon was faked. She could feel love sparking between them. He had told her of his love in a thousand small ways and one big one. He had let her join her life to the very land that they swam in.

It had taken Bea over a week to explain the basics of what a ward was, how she could use her body to tap into the life of the land where the stones were to be planted. Warder energy was simply the primer that drove the process.

She whipped through the city, past new friends and flicking greetings left and right as she sped with determination toward their home.

She had perfected landing on her feet and with Hector right behind her, she launched into the open halls of the bubble collection that was their home. She skidded to a halt and then screamed, back pedaling as fast as she could.

It was the same demon who had stalked her the night she came to the city.

Hector was right behind her and stood in front of her in an instant, trident at the ready. Then he did something that completely threw Bea for a loop.

"Solar, what are you doing here?" He reached forward to clasp the hand of the demon, obviously familiar with him.

"I came to ask your lady a question, King Hector."

Hector still stood in front of her. "It will have to wait a moment. Beatrix, go and throw something on."

Aha, so there was something to be said for putting clothing on. In front of another bipedal male, he got a little possessive.

Bea didn't want to miss a moment of whatever was going on, so she sprinted to their room, grabbed a toga with a pearl belt and raced back to the dining room where she heard masculine

voices.

A luncheon had been laid out and Bea approached at a stately pace. Her body didn't blush too readily anymore, but the knowing look in Solar's eyes told her that he remembered her as she had been coming out of the water.

"Beatrix, this is my friend, Solar. He is an incubus and has been searching for his destined mate." She took the hand of the demon, noting his dark skin that had a problem settling on a colour and waves of inky black hair. He was turning into Hector before her eyes.

Startled, she released his hand.

"Pleased to formally meet you, Beatrix Warder. I have come here with a question."

She sat at her regular spot next to Hector and nibbled on a bit of tuna. "What is the question?"

"Where is your cousin, Elhara?"

"Wait. Is that what you were doing the night that I first saw you?"

His grin was all the answer she needed.

Hector began to laugh, loud and long.

Bea covered her eyes and thought back to that one moment that had shoved her into a life she could not have imagined.

"Elhara is staying with her goblin grandparents. They are warded against intrusion so that is probably why you haven't been able to find her. Eckar and Helora."

"I wish I could stay, but I have to find her. Time is running out." With a wave and a cloud of smoke, he disappeared.

"What exactly was that about?" Bea was sitting, bemused as Hector started to fill her plate for her.

"My guess is that he is reaching his mating time and she is his destined mate. He will change shape for any woman who is not destined for him, to turn into their ideal match. I happened to notice that he was starting to look a lot like me."

Bea was blushing again. "Well, despite your tendency toward bossiness, I do have to admit that you are my idea of a perfect match. I love you, Hector."

"And I knew the moment I saw you that I would be willing to put up with your insanities for any length of time. As a young woman, you were courageous, but as the woman you are today, you are magnificent." He raised her hand to his lips and gave her a kiss that sent shivers running through her.

"I am rather impressive, aren't I?"

The laughter that rang through the halls brought smiles to the faces of the servants and rippled through the city.

The love that Bea shared with Hector echoed through the city and brought on a new age, the age of the Warder.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.

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