



# **Deeper Than the Ocean**

Book 1 of The Phoenix Prophecy

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## **Blurb**

The life of a merman should be relatively simple, but not for Danyl. His mother's been murdered, his father's responsible and now he's out for blood. Thank the gods, the key to doing so rests in the hands of a beautiful human who is his pleasure to pursue.

Di has hit pay dirt. Years of solo dives on a barely functioning boat has yielded an ancient coin certain to secure her financial future. A chance rescue by a merman knocks her plans awry. Falling for him certainly was never a part of those plans.

Now, the two must depend on each other—extending a little bit of faith, and a whole lot of trust—in a quest for vengeance and their ultimate survival.

## Prologue

*The Phoenix rose from the flames, the scent of charred feathers stinging Ancelin's nose. Darkness held him tightly, the only light coming from the eerie wavering form of the Phoenix and the fire. He tried to move his limbs. Nothing. Awareness flooded his brain as the light from the Phoenix grew brighter.*

*"I'm dreaming," he said.*

*"Of course," the Phoenix replied, although its beak never moved.*

*"This is a prophecy." Ancelin's heart thundered.*

*In all the years he had been mated to Nix, her phoenix-driven prophecies had never touched him. Every night he slept beside her and knew she dreamed of the destinies of others. Yet, not once had she dreamed of him. Tonight, the world as he knew it shifted on its axis as her phoenix—her soul—came to him as he slept.*

*"You have no need of explanations, Ancelin," the Phoenix told him. "You know what I tell you shall come to pass."*

*Ancelin might be a demi-god, but the power of the Phoenix was beyond his control. "Just tell me and get it over with," he gritted out arrogantly, unwilling to admit fear crept into his heart.*

*The Phoenix's flames burned hotter, the image glowing brighter. "Your transgressions shall be the vehicle of your end, Ancelin. The pain you have caused others will turn on you. The trinity will break you, and you shall be no more. Your fate is at hand."*

*Ancelin swallowed hard. If he had been able to feel his limbs, he knew they would be trembling. A phoenix prophecy could never be reversed. It always came to be.*

*The Phoenix's voice grew cold and disdainful. "Three and three have you used for your own ends. Three times have you broken your vows. Your life force shall be the payment for your transgressions, and three hands will bring about your death. With your passing, new lives will be wrought for those whose lives you've torn. With your blood, the circle shall be mended. It has already been decreed."*

*With a start, Ancelin awoke, gasping for air. Beside him, the flame-haired form of his mate lay still as marble, barely breathing. Anger flooded him, and he wondered if he could break the prophecy by killing her as she slept.*

*Her eyelids flickered. "You have not the ability to snuff the Phoenix's flames, Ancelin," she murmured, her turquoise eyes boring into his as she sat up in their bed.*

*Rising to his feet, Ancelin yanked the silk sheet and wrapped it around his hips. He glared at his mate left sitting on the wide mattress, her naked skin glowing in the moonlight. "That's what you think. And even if I couldn't kill you, that does not mean I cannot change the prophecy by snuffing out the lives of those who seek to end mine," he snarled.*

*"I did not dream that on purpose, my lord." His mate's words were cool, but respectful.*

*He stormed toward the bathroom, fury riding his heels. "You did, Nix. You knew I was unfaithful, and this is your punishment."*

*She shook her head, the red-gold curls tumbling around her shoulders. "Ancelin, you*

know I have no control over the dreams, over the Phoenix..."

"Fuck you. I always knew you were a cold-hearted bitch. Why do you think I sought comfort from others?" Ancelin sneered. He went into the bathroom and slammed the door.

\*

Left alone, Nix rose from the bed. The moonlight showcased her perfect form as she crossed the room to an *escritoire*. From a small drawer, she withdrew a hand mirror with a gilded frame shaped like a phoenix.

She brushed her fingers over the glass and a vision appeared in the oval. A young man with dark hair and argent eyes stared at the ocean, watching the movement of the waves. Nix touched the mirror where his arm was, and he flinched. There on his skin appeared a phoenix mark. He blinked in shock and stared at the tattoo-like artwork that swirled over his bicep.

Nix swept her palm over the mirror, and the vision changed. This time, two men, obviously twins, one dark and one light, materialized on the glass. They stood in the forest gazing at the moon. Nix's fingertip touched the mirror, over the right side of one's chest, then over the left side of the other. Both flinched as black tribal lines, the mark of the phoenix, wrote themselves onto their skin.

Again, Nix's palm passed over the mirror. She closed her eyes for a moment, a spasm of pain crossing her beautiful features. Opening her eyes, she gazed at the image of a man with hair as fair as the moonlight, his eyes glittering like jet. He stood beside a fire, his face turned toward her. Her fingertip pressed the glass gently, as if she actually touched the side of his throat. Unlike his brothers, shock did not show on his face. Instead, his eyes seemed to bore into hers.

She passed her hand over the mirror, and it darkened. Putting it away, she returned to the bed she had shared with Ancelin for the last century. A loveless bed. A loveless mating. Soon the prophecy would come true and she would be free. Ancelin thought he could break it. Nix knew it was possible under certain circumstances, but she was determined that it would not happen this time. The Phoenix would win. It almost always did. And this time, if she were to survive, it must.

## Chapter One

Danyl used the powerful muscles of his tail to push through the water. He would not let them see his disappointment. Or his anger.

Another pairing ritual and another humiliation he'd been forced to live through. Coupled with everything else he'd been through recently, he didn't know how much more he could stand.

"Danyl, wait!"

*Of course.* He didn't have to turn to recognize to whom that voice belonged. No one else would bother to seek him out.

He slowed enough to allow Gagan to catch up. He remained facing forward though. If he had to look upon his best friend's luminescent skin or the perfection of his silver fluke right now, he'd vomit. The only things really silver about himself were his eyes. Of course, they weren't quite natural either. Every other mer-person had mesmerizing blue eyes.

No point in mentioning his own tail, which for years had the disappointing habit of becoming legs at a moment's notice until he'd learned to control it. *Legs.* Who in Hades had need for human legs underwater?

"What?" he snarled, forcing the cool ocean through his gill sac. Despite being located in the back of his throat, he could feel it wave in the water with the effort. Yet another thing that marred him as not quite like the others. To them, breathing was just another natural act. For him, it was an ongoing agony.

"Danyl, be patient. You will be mated—"

He whirled on him. "When Gagan? When the maids have decided that they wouldn't mind being mated to a freak? When their curiosity about fucking me overrides their common sense?"

What could he offer a mate? Unnatural sex and perhaps, deformed children who had legs, too. If nothing else, choosing to mate him guaranteed a lifetime of ridicule for any maid, for sure.

Gagan shooed at a school of fish daring to linger and eavesdrop. "Danyl, you are a good man. If none of the maids have realized that yet, it's their loss. When the time is right, you will be mated. And I have no doubt, you will love her with a passion that is unrivaled. With an intensity that will be the envy of merfolk for generations to come."

Good old Gagan. Ever the poet, who wore his heart on the outside for the world to see.

Danyl looked away, for if he looked into his friend's eyes a moment longer, he would fall under their hypnotic spell. His friend believed so truly that a mate existed for him, while Danyl's hope in that belief faded with each passing day. His friend believed so deeply in love and forever that he'd convinced Danyl to attend a pairing ritual yet again, as he had time and time before.

Danyl kicked and rode the undercurrent away from Gagan. "I don't have the stomach for this," he muttered.

"Gods damn it, will you wait?"

He wouldn't wait. Everything about his life had reached a crux. The ridicule, the

alienation and now the abandonment and the loneliness left him shattered in ways that made him an unsuitable companion, anyway. Why this desperate hope for shelter and acceptance he could never dream of attaining?

Danyl pulled his shoulders forward as he swam. He knew why.

Because without the sliver of hope still shining through, he no longer had anything worth living for.

Gagan managed to catch him up, his lean length an enviable sight as he swam. Few of the mer-people could match his strength or speed. How they'd become fast friends was anybody's guess. He didn't so much as breathe heavily when he called out to him again. "Danyl!"

He made a show of swimming beneath Danyl, rising up to his other side without breaking his cruising speed. Fucking show off.

When he did it again, Danyl surged forward, determined to not be outdone. Damned mermen were always playing games. Why couldn't the idiot see he wasn't in the mood for friendly competition? He didn't want to have fun. He wanted to find some dark hole where blind fish nestled and hide from the world.

Putting on another burst of energy, he sliced through the water, almost daring Gagan to match him around the jagged edges of coral and through the stinging wisps of grass growing in crags. Despite his very best effort to not enjoy it, stretching out and gliding through the water at breakneck speeds sent a thrill through him. He thought little of safety or boundaries. He gave no care to mermaids or matings. He almost managed to discard thoughts of family and home, too.

The two mermen whipped past startled schools of fish, scattering them in various directions before they reassembled. Jutting rocks from cliff ledges gave Danyl opportunity to dodge and put distance between them. They swam through hot spots only to be greeted by frigid cold spots moments later. Through it all, the vast ocean fanned out around them in a kaleidoscope of greens, blues and blacks.

By the time Danyl slowed, his earlier disappointment had worked out of his system. Chest heaving, he waited for Gagan to catch him up. To his complete surprise, he'd manage to out-swim his friend by a few lengths and they'd swum at least three nautical miles if not further. More energy must have been penned up inside him than he thought.

"That was awesome," Gagan called as he neared. "I didn't know you could do that!"

That made two of them. "It wasn't a race. I was trying to get rid of your sorry tail."

Gagan chuckled before his face straightened, becoming serious. "I wanted to talk with you alone, Danyl, and out here," he glanced at their sparse surroundings, "is probably a better place than any. It's about your mother. And your father."

Danyl almost looked away, but forced himself not to move. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but we've looked into your suspicions."

"And?"

"You were right." Gagan reached for his shoulder and clamped a supportive hand around it. "The evidence is stacked against him. Based on what we've found, we agree that he most likely murdered your mother."

He wasn't surprised. He couldn't be. And now, he wouldn't let the news affect him. No—that wasn't true.

He *would* let it affect him, for now he had something to live for.

He needed to stay alive long enough to kill his father.

\* \* \* \*

Di ignored the sweat hanging off her brow and wound the winch as hard and fast as she could. It would do no good to wish yet again that she had a crew to do the heavy work. The *Sea Anemone* was hers free and clear. So was the work that went with operating her.

She gritted her teeth and ignored the pull in her muscles. The anchor had to come up now because she wanted to get back to land immediately. The weather had dropped unexpectedly since she'd arrived this morning and made staying out here miserable. Besides that, three years of searching were now over! True, she still hadn't found the true object of her intent but if that little silver coin was any indication, she was damned close.

Cold, salty water splashed over her hands and face as she worked on getting the anchor up. It must have been hung on something. She took a step back and tugged the lead rope directly opposite the winch.

Damn! Whatever it was hooked on had it wedged good and tight. She wasn't going anywhere unless she managed to dislodge it. Most likely, the anchor had found a nice comfortable spot in between two rocks and now made her late afternoon wretched.

She made quick work of donning a mask and jumped over the side. The water temp was an instant reminder of why wetsuits were a necessary luxury, but she'd hoped to be in and out before it made too much of a difference. That wish didn't stop an immediate eruption of goose bumps to overtake her. Better make this quick. It was *way* colder than she'd thought it would be.

Swimming around to the front of the boat, she located the long length of rope with ease and used it to lead her down to the anchor. By the time she reached the large piece of metal, her body felt like one big ice cube. She was further down than where the depth finder indicated the ocean floor should be. Working as quickly as her numb hands would allow, she freed the heavy weight and let it drop to a sandy area. She'd have to work fast to get inside the boat before it drifted, taking the anchor with it, into another inconvenient location.

As she started the ascent, she caught movement, or what she thought was movement, off to the side. A claustrophobic's nightmare, the mask was the ultimate definition in tunnel vision. She had to turn her entire body to face whatever the movement might have been. Probably some curious fish wondering why an air-breather had the nerve to venture below.

Speaking of, her lungs began to remind her that she needed to move a little faster. The slow burn might be a thrill to some divers, but if she allowed it, instead it meant that her anxiety level cranked up a few notches.

Maybe it was the anxiety. Or perhaps a touch of oxygen deprivation. Hell, it might have been a touch of hypothermia. But when she turned to meet the movement head on, she could have *sworn* there was a man swimming in the distance.

Di blinked twice and squinted through the condensation forming inside the mask. He was gone now, but she was so sure...

Never mind. Get on the *Sea Anemone* and back to land. That coin needed to be dated and confirmed. Visions of men swimming beneath the water also indicated she definitely needed a good old romp in the hay—if only it were that easy.

Pushing aside frustration with her nonexistent sex life, she focused on what had to be her priority now. She kicked her legs, expecting to slice through the water. Instead of an



easy graceful movement, her ankles groaned in protest, muscles in her lower legs burning with the effort. She'd left the fins on board, and truthfully she didn't know if they would have been a help or a hindrance. Her body was so tired. Still, if she wanted to get back to the boat, she had to swim.

She kicked again. Nothing happened.

Medals and trophies from swim meets lined the otherwise stark walls of her apartment, but right now her legs scissored with the grace of wooden logs during a river drive as she tried to make some progress.

The fatigue was only one part of the problem. Di was so cold too. She brought her hand to the mask and noted the blue tinge outlining her nails.

Her lungs burned. Her body refused to gain speed. Goose bumps covered her everywhere. She was underwater with only a mask and none of her other diving equipment.

So not a good place to be.

*Don't panic.* She would get back inside the boat in short order. *Focus on one thing at a time.* There wasn't a damned thing she could do about air, but she could kick her legs. She would, damn it.

There. One little kick, but it was something. She just needed to do it again and in a short while, she'd reach the boat, right?

Di looked up and despite her instructions to herself, panic rocketed through her.

The surface was a hell of a lot higher up than she thought possible. Oh, God ... all of her friend's admonitions about being in the boat by herself came back to haunt her in that single moment. Divers worked in pairs, they'd told her. Boaters knew better than to go out alone. But determined as ever, she'd ignored them all. Finding the sunken Greek transport had become almost an obsession and that meant working without the benefit of a partner.

Now she might pay for it with her life.

The spots in front of her eyes appeared in a variety of colors, her brain desperate and conjuring more reminders that hey, some air would be good. Slamming her eyelids shut, she wanted to cry, but she kicked feebly again instead. If anything, her body drifted down instead of up.

She was not going out like this. *Not like this!*

Di kicked again, but she couldn't tell if she moved because she couldn't feel her legs. Thoughts of the *Sea Anemone*, the silver coin and her life's goals filtered through her mind. For some reason, she thought of that man who'd been swimming underwater with her a few minutes ago.

And then she thought of nothing at all.

## Chapter Two

On her hands and knees, Di swayed with the steadiness of a drunkard. Her stomach lurched and brought up more saltwater. She'd already tried crawling to the ledge and leaning over it, but her weakened body refused to obey. Instead, Di suffered through her coughing and sputtering on the deck of the boat. She shivered uncontrollably, but lacked the strength to do anything about it.

Pulling up her head, she peered once again into the silver eyes of the man hanging on to the aft near the engine. "Who are you?" she croaked. Her mouth tasted like the ass end of a dog. Besides that, she fought the horrible urge to curl up and go to sleep on the spot.

Not that it mattered who he was or how he got there. No one had to tell her she owed him her life. She'd felt those last moments right before death pulled her into its warm embrace. To her surprise, she awoke instead, in his.

He should have been freezing. The sun had long since sunk beneath the horizon and she knew how cold the water had been minutes before the sunset. He didn't appear affected though. He just watched her through cool eyes, bobbing in the green-black ocean water.

Long, dark hair framed his face. Thick, black lashes dripped water onto his cheeks, but it didn't faze him. His features were well-defined; his face a map of angles and lines. She would have guessed him of maybe Scandinavian descent based on his pale skin, but his dark features marred that image.

To her complete surprise, he hauled himself over the back end of the boat before she'd had a chance to finish analyzing his face. And sweet, sweet Mary, she now had a very up close and personal view of the rest of him. All of him, starting with the broad shoulders and chiseled torso, right down to the lovely column of flesh hanging between muscled thighs.

*Breathe, woman. You've seen a penis before. But oh, my God...*

Her shivering became secondary to the immediate need to stand and back away ... or get closer, depending on a number of things.

"What are you doing?"

He side-stepped her and the mess she'd made and walked past her. Not exactly walked. He stumbled along, looking as shaky as she felt. Gripping the safety rail running along the boat kept him upright.

*Great.* Her rescuer was three sheets to the wind.

"Hey," she called, managing to inch her way into a new position that gave her access to see whatever it was he was doing. "Where do you think you're going?"

She had a tantalizing view of his backside as he ducked inside the cabin. Her shivering had subsided a little, but her stupid legs still refused to help her move closer. By the time he stepped out a minute later, she ached from the effort to move. She hoped like hell he only planned on robbing her because if he tried anything else, she doubted she'd have the strength to attempt to stop him.

Her mouth fell open when she spied the bundle in his arms. He still staggered, but he made his way to her and dropped the blanket over her shoulders. "More careful next time," he murmured.

With shaking hands, she burrowed deeper into the blanket. "Thank you," she said with an ache of gratitude knotting her throat. Who knew a square of material could feel so good? Maybe she would curl up beneath it, right here. Just a little nap.

She forced her eyes to open wider when he dipped his chin and stood. She looked up just in time to watch him cast his legs over the edge of the boat and push off. But not before she saw his whisper of a smile.

\* \* \* \*

Danyl had never seen one up close before. A human. A real, honest to gods human had been in his arms.

He'd never met Ancelin, his demi-god father, although his mother said he resembled him. When she was alive, she talked of Ancelin with a far-away look in her eyes, despite the many years they'd been apart. It'd been a brief affair, but she'd loved him with the force of a hurricane. Danyl had never understood the passion she still felt for his father, but after holding that woman, he started to have some idea.

She'd been soft and her skin so smooth. He thought human anatomy, those odd legs of theirs, would disgust him, but that had been far from the case. Unlike maids, she covered her breasts with triangles of stretchy material. It did little to disguise hardened nipples beneath. Since similar material covered the juncture between her legs, could that have been her genital slit? The scent of that place, again different from maids, yet at the same time still seductive, made him want to slide his nose there. Maybe insert his tongue for a taste.

He groaned. The very idea aroused him.

He swam circles beneath the boat now, unable to justify why he lingered when he had other matters to tend to. But she'd been so pretty. Far from what he'd ever imagined. When he returned to the merfolk city, the library would be his first stop. He wanted to know more. Let the others continue to mock him for spending so much time there. He'd spoken to that human, knew a little about her vessel and might have a chance to test his knowledge again. It had taken his brain a minute to catch up, but thank the gods for his deity lineage. Who knew the gifts of language, of shifting and a myriad of others the merpeople found useless would serve him now?

The reasons for staying here were twofold, at least. The key rested somewhere in this vicinity if the hags were to be believed. He could do more than one thing at a time, right? He'd search for the key while keeping an eye on her until she left. Although, what was this protective feeling he'd adopted? Frail humans survived long enough without any sort of help from his kind. Despite his curiosity, she'd fare well enough without him.

But where'd that thought been when he watched her sink earlier? Poseidon claimed her little body for his own, but Danyl interfered, the consequences to be damned. No doubt, there *would* be a consequence to interfering.

Wait, he thought, tightening his jaw. He needed to concentrate. The death of his mother, Simeona, must be treated with the respect it deserved and lust for a human offered none. It'd taken weeks to find a way to get to Ancelin, even with Gagan's help. The time to meter out justice grew nearer. *Concentrate.*

Danyl glanced at the bewitched coral slate, whispered the magical word, and waited for the glow that marked the trail he needed to follow. It grew brighter as expected, but instead of forming a thin line for him to follow, the glow pulsed like a heartbeat. His own

heart lurched.

It was here. Somewhere so close the slate could not pinpoint, the key rested.

He kicked his tail, keeping his attention on the slate. No matter which direction he moved though, the slate brought him right back to his original position. The boat floated above, and darkness greeted him below. And somewhere in between, vengeance waited.

He dove deep, ignoring the change in water pressure that made him breathe harder. None of the other merfolk had to work for the simple autonomic reflex, but he knew every inhalation and exhalation he'd ever taken.

The water was cold down here. The fish no longer vibrant as higher up. But no matter how hard he searched, he could find nothing resembling a key anywhere. He swam back and forth, peering into dark places, reaching into pockets, looking for any place the key could have fallen.

Perhaps the hags had been mistaken or had tricked him just to get him out of their sights, but that went against everything he knew about the witches. So long as he would pay their price, they offered their services.

Gods damn it.

He tilted his head toward the surface and located the belly of the vessel, which had yet to move. Odd. He'd thought she would have sought the sanctuary of land by now.

Working in lazy spirals, he made his way toward the boat, knowing that it would move away at any moment. When it still floated in the same place by the time he reached it, his concern grew. A surge of concentrated energy transformed his tail into legs again and after a brief pause at the aft, he hauled himself over the ledge of the boat. Ignoring the immediate prickling sensation that enveloped his lower body, he took a deep breath when his first step shot a bolt of pain through him. It was somebody's idea of a joke that he could use the stupid things to walk on, but only after suffering for it for a few minutes first.

The open area was small and the last place he'd left her. His heart hammered with every step he took, but none found her waiting. Then he remembered the little cabin and headed toward it. The door swung open and as before, a large resting area waited in the middle. This time, she lay curled up on it.

Shivering and blue.

This was wrong. He knew enough about humans to know she shouldn't look like this. Her entire body wracked with uncontrollable shudders, her breathing clumsy and rapid. Lids fluttered over dark eyes as she fought against something that had taken control of her body. Something to which she was losing.

Danyl rushed to her side, and ran his hand over her shoulder, not knowing how to fix this. Glazed eyes opened wide. "S-so-so c-cold," she ground out through chattering teeth. "S-s-so c-cold."

Gods, he didn't think. She wasn't used to the water he lived in. Her skin was cold to the touch. Nothing like when he'd found her not so long ago. Poseidon would have his way and claim her after all.

Sometimes it helped to have a friend with whom to transition into the next world. He didn't know her, this human, but he would gladly serve as her guide. He'd robbed her of an easy death beneath the sea and forced her through this torment in the dry air.

He climbed in beside her, wrapping his arms around her shivering body. His wet flesh clung to hers, but he held on to her, knowing it had to be better than nothing. Better

than dying alone.

He'd done this to her and he was so sorry. His eyes moistened and he didn't know why.

He was just so very, very sorry.

\* \* \* \*

Di drifted to wakefulness, the soft bed beneath her and a...

Oh, hell.

A warm body was snuggled behind her.

Not just a body. A man's body. There was no disguising the firm length of him—both kinds—pressed against her back and between her ass cheeks. One arm was draped across her belly, the other lay curled beneath her head. While her mind screamed at her to run and get away, her body purred its contentment. Trying to find some middle ground between the two, she turned her head and found herself staring into familiar silver eyes.

"You are well?" he asked.

A nicely-hung, sculpted hero lay beside her on the bed and he wanted to know if she was well? Cutie had no idea just *how* well. "Yeah," she replied on a breath. "Thanks for saving my behind. Twice, in fact."

He broke eye contact to glance between their bodies. "It's a very nice behind. And well worth saving."

Breathe.

She could be outraged. She could be grateful. Instead, her body betrayed her with hardening nipples and an ache between her thighs. Thank God she still wore the drab black bikini. It provided at least an illusion of decency.

*Focus.*

"Who are you?"

"My name's Danyl."

"Daniel?"

He smiled. "Close." He pronounced it again. When she mimicked the sound, he nodded his approval.

"My friends call me Di."

He quirked a brow at that. "Die? And what do those who aren't your friends call you?"

"Aphrodite." Even as she said it, her nose wrinkled in distaste.

"Ah, *Di*. Born of the sea," he murmured.

She lifted a single shoulder and let it drop. "Or goddess of the sea, depending on who you ask."

His gaze followed the motion. A strand of her hair wrapped over her shoulder and she grimaced at the frizz, but then smiled to herself. Naked dude saved her life. Twice. Naked dude now lay behind her in bed. And she was worried about her hair?

Danyl curled the errant strand around his finger and pushed it aside. He kept his eyes on hers when he lowered his head and swept his mouth across her skin. The goose bumps that erupted this time had nothing to do with the temperature.

"That's also true," he said before dropping another tender kiss. "And where I'm from, there's only one thing to do with a goddess."

Heart thudding so loudly people the next continent over probably heard it, Di asked,

"And what's that?"

Danyl didn't hesitate. "Worship her."

### Chapter Three

*Oh, God.* What did she say to that? Already he was kissing a trail of fire over her shoulder and down her arm. And his hand worked at the knot keeping her bikini top tied in place.

She'd never been one to sleep with just anyone who happened by, but from the first time she'd looked into those beautiful eyes, something sparked between their bodies, connecting them on a fundamental level and elevating them to an ethereal one. But this made no sense. It couldn't be real. Friends of hers dreamed of soul mates and instant attractions, but in the real world relationships came and went, passing her by and leaving with a greater bang than that upon which they arrived.

"Danyl, wait," she gasped, her body burning with need. It'd been so long. Did it really matter if she gave in to a whim just this one time? After another long hesitation she wanted to growl her frustration because of course it did. "I don't know you. I don't know who you are or anything ... and I'm grateful, believe me I am—"

He stopped moving, but kept her body pressed tight to his. "I want to be near you, Di. With your permission?"

He shifted as if to kiss her body again, and despite the very warm flush it sent through her, she shook her head. "Wait."

She couldn't think with him pressed against her, every hard inch of him a testament to his thoughts. Shimmying away, Di turned so she could face him directly.

Only that was worse. At least before, she had the stark wall of the cabin to stare at. Now, she had the daunting task of gazing at his glory. He wasn't the least bit embarrassed to be nude in front of her. If she didn't know better, she'd think it was just a normal part of his life.

"Why would you be out here in the middle of nowhere, Danyl? I know why I'm here, but you?"

"I'm searching for something."

"As am I."

"The uh, map I have says it's somewhere around here."

She narrowed her eyes. "So does mine."

"What are you searching for?"

"No way, buddy," she said, shaking her head. "You first."

His mouth edged up in a reluctant smile. Then he did the most unexpected thing.

He rolled in the opposite direction and off the bed. Her gaze dropped again to his heavy cock and for the first time she noticed the lack of hair on his body. Not on his chest. Not on his arms or legs. Definitely nowhere to be found near his shaft.

"You are well now, goddess, so I don't feel remiss in leaving you." He backed toward the doorway and despite the protest and millions of questions poised on her lips, Di said nothing. "But I'll be back when I've found my object. And we'll continue this."

"Danyl..."

He grinned. "Whatever this is."

Her heart fluttered in such an uncharacteristic show of excitement, by the time it slowed, he'd left.

But wait. This wasn't right.

Her boat sat in the middle of the ocean, practically in the middle of God's nowhere and this man kept appearing and disappearing like an illusion. Di unfolded her legs and climbed off the bed. At a trot, she headed toward the aft, wanting to catch him before he could vanish into thin air, or water as the case may be, again.

Before she could reach the door, however, the distinct sound of displaced water came from the side of the boat. She could distinguish the waves crashing against the side. Certainly knew the sound of a large body hitting open water. But this sound, this was the quiet welcome of a swimmer into his element. Whoever Danyl was, he knew how to handle himself in the water well.

She tried to peer at where he might have left from, but darkness greeted her from the horizon. Although she would have loved to search for him without the use of fluorescent lighting, she flicked the switch to the running lights. The moment they illuminated, she could see everything she needed to on the boat, but was blind to anything more than a foot or two out of its circumference.

The chill of a brisk wind electrified her exposed skin, and Di shivered. Stupid bikini had been a bad idea from the very beginning. With a sigh, she located her worn duffel bag. After a little rummaging, she pulled out a musty wetsuit and pulled it on. Better than nothing against the elements. A single bout of hypothermia was enough for one lifetime, thank you very much. The lightweight sarong she'd brought on this trip should have never even been packed. But hell, she hadn't planned on being out here all this time. In fact, she needed to get back. She had what she came for.

A splash in the distance caught her attention and before she could catch herself, Di looked up, expectant. Her heart raced with anticipation. A few minutes of staring into the darkness, searching for him, went by before she realized what she'd been doing.

*Calm down.* Why was she so hung up on this man? She had bigger fish to fry and none of them were named Danyl. It was time to head home, and see what secrets the coin provided.

She ran through a quick mental checklist of tasks that needed to get done and set about making preparations to leave. Getting the anchor to rise this time took little effort at all. Neoprene gloves ensured her fingers didn't freeze while she worked and the wetsuit guarded against the almost frigid temperature. She didn't recall the weatherman saying the night air would drop like this, but she had no intention of getting in the water again tonight.

By the time she cranked the engine and headed toward shore, she'd stopped trying to see if Danyl might be just beyond the bow of the boat and concentrated on Greek freighters carrying exotic coins. Just think! If she'd found one coin, there were others—hundreds of others—waiting to be found. A simple carbon-dating test at the local university would ensure this clue was the right one she'd been searching for. One coin would lead to the others which would then lead to the freighter. Obtaining grants to conduct other searches for even more valuable coins beneath the sea would then be child's play. Her future would be secured.

Excited, she pushed forward the throttle, ramping up speed. Her hair whipped about her face, stinging as it touched down before flying away again.

She'd buy another boat, maybe name it the *Sea Anemone II*, and hire a crew for it. If her searches became large enough, famous enough, maybe she could then buy larger



boats, more staff, better equipment. It would be hard work, but damn, one day she'd be able to pick and choose which hunts they went on. Her prerogative would decide when she felt like being a part of the crew and when she felt like pushing paper back at the office.

Another glance at the GPS verified her heading, but the stupid thing had a bit of condensation in the corner. A quick swipe with her fingertip made the screen blurry, but readable. By the time she looked up, she was right on something protruding from the water.

Di tried to swerve before they made contact, but if she moved too quickly, she'd end up with a capsized boat for her troubles. She moved way too slowly to avoid it and the fiberglass of the boat screamed as the rock jutting out of the water sliced through its hull. Where the hell had it come from? Damn it, damn it, damn it. She worked fast, throttling down until the boat drifted to idling speed.

Why hadn't she used the spotlight the entire way in? Of course she knew why. It would run down the battery and that was yet another tragedy for today that she didn't need. Then again, the night was as black as pitch. If only the stupid running lights lit the way in and didn't just alert other boaters to her presence.

Her heart sank as she grabbed the light mounted next to the control panel and inspected the side. A tear big enough to put both arms in stretched from the back end of the boat to where she stood. And worse, waves crashed against the side, some of the water entering the original puncture point.

*God damn it!* It wouldn't be long before she started to sink.

This was now officially the worst day of her life.

\* \* \* \*

He was going to find a way to keep track of her. Before he left the area, Danyl memorized the markings on her boat because he *would* find her again.

*Aphrodite*. She could be called nothing less. Gods, she even looked like the deity. Long, curly hair tangled in locks that swept down her back. One look into her tantalizing green eyes or upon the generous curves of her body made his stomach clench and mouth go dry. He fought against every urge to kiss full lips that couldn't have been made for anything else. Except when he thought like that, the appendage between his legs grew hard and lengthened of its own accord.

On second thought, whoever heard of that kind of reaction? It was like he had zero control over the thing whatsoever.

Gross.

When she'd awoken next to him, something soothing warmed through him. He'd been relieved to find her better, no doubt, but the way she looked upon him strengthened the beat of his heart. For a little while, he'd forgotten that he lay beside a human. The world of merfolk became a distant memory. The curiosity behind her stare brought him back to the present and the importance of a task he kept conveniently placing to the side.

A loud vibrating roar echoed through the water and he looked up in time to see the boat moving away. His pulse quickened, but he supposed her leaving was for the best for now. She kept becoming a distraction and he needed to find the key.

He descended and located the coral slate hidden between rushes along a stone ledge. A whispered word activated it and the glow pulsed to life. It still showed that the key was

somewhere close by. Why then couldn't he find it?

The noise in the background drifted away and he made a mental note of its direction, but kept his attention on the glow ... that soon began to move, too.

Danyl looked up, and searched frantically for the lights on Di's boat. It was the only thing moving out here. Holding the slate up to the lights in the background confirmed it. The pulsing glow moved away from him and toward the beautiful human.

She had the key on the boat. Maybe she knew it was there, or maybe she didn't, but *she had it*.

He released a litany of swearing and pushed off, his sight never leaving his new target.

## Chapter Four

Did it get any worse? Really?

She'd almost drowned, battled a minor case of hypothermia and was now sinking in the middle of the ocean with nothing but darkness surrounding her. If days got any worse than this, please God, please never let her encounter one. She didn't know how much more her frazzled nerves could take.

One would think she would know how to get out of these types of messes, except nothing wanted to go her way today. The stupid flare gun, her last hope for a quick rescue, had fired just fine. Too bad it didn't spark against the sky.

Okay. She could defeat this disaster if she kept her head about her. First, put on every piece of gear she had available, because she knew all too well how cold the water was tonight.

Di stripped out of the wetsuit and donned a diving skin. Before sliding the zipper all the way up, she stuffed the coin in between her skin and the silver-colored material designed to provide additional heat. She picked a new wetsuit out of her bag and slid it on. This one was a thicker model with cushioned booties. If she didn't make it out of this mess, maybe they'd find the coin with her still and at least know she'd done what she said she would do.

She decided that all she could afford to take with her besides her regular diving gear was a single dive knife and spear gun when she went overboard. She didn't know how long it would be before the tank on her back would begin to act as a hindrance instead of a help. Additionally, at some point she might be forced to discard it and good old manual power would be all she had to rely on.

With those preparations taken care of, she cast a last forlorn look at the deck of the *Sea Anemone*. If she could get help in time, maybe they could come back and retrieve it. Doubtful, but maybe.

Gritting her teeth, she stepped onto the ladder bobbing in the water, her fins in hand. Tears stung her eyes and she had to lift her mask to wipe them away before taking this incredible leap of faith.

"Goddess."

In her surprise, she almost stumbled headfirst into the water. With a frantic wave of her arms, she regained her balance. Her heart pounded like she'd just run a marathon and she couldn't honestly say whether her surprise or her relief drove it. She had to squint, but there he was, bobbing in the water just beyond the boat. "Danyl? How..."

"Has something happened?" He rode the waves toward her and she had to stifle a smile of admiration. But wait ... how did he always manage to find her just when she needed him?

"I hit a rock and my boat's sinking. Can you take me aboard yours?"

His response was slow in coming. "Your radio?"

Heat rushed her cheeks because any boater knew better. But damn it, she just didn't have the money to fix or replace it. She'd been counting on this find to break the dry spell she'd been facing. She'd been so close, how could she give up now? "Broken," she mumbled. "Has been for weeks."

The resulting silence hung like an accusation over her head. He drifted closer, and she could finally see the fine details of his face. A sudden image of him leaning over her, their mouths poised to touch, rushed into her mind and she had to push it aside. Rescue now. Hormones later.

"I'm not supposed to—" he said after another minute passed.

"Not supposed to? Are you seriously going to let my ass drown instead of helping me out?"

"You didn't let me finish."

Oh.

He stretched an arm toward her and beckoned her closer. "As I was saying, I'm not supposed to interfere, but since I've broken that already today, what's once more?

Only..."

He blew out a breath as if stymied on how to continue. *Whatever*. Di brought the mask down over her eyes and moved closer to the edge. Whatever reservations he had, she didn't want to know about right now. They needed to get back to land if she had any hope of saving the *Anemone*. She jumped off before he'd have the chance to change his mind.

"Di, wait!"

The suit did a miraculous job of maintaining her warmth. With the exception of the splash onto her face, she would have never known how deceptively cold the water truly was. Her rebreather hung idly by, but if Danyl had swum here, perhaps she wouldn't need the scuba gear. He didn't seem to need any.

Her gaze traveled over him and her mouth dropped open. *Wait a minute*. "Danyl, are you even wearing a suit?"

Wide-eyed, he shook his head. It was the deer-in-headlights look that captured her attention the most. She knew that caught-in-the-act expression just a little too well. What the hell was he up to?

It didn't matter. He would catch his death of pneumonia if they didn't get him on board like now. Damn it, what was he thinking?

In a split second, every memory of her encounters with him rushed in to toy with her mind. It reminded her that the first time he'd come aboard, he'd been naked as a newborn. The second time, too.

Why before now had she not thought to question how he'd been coming and going into water that sent her body temperature dropping like a stone weight? "Danyl," she said on a strangled breath.

Her stunned mind refused to form any other words. What was going on?

She must not have hidden the shock well, because he swam closer but stopped after a respectable distance separated them. Di tracked his movements, unable to focus on anything except his bare skin above, and presumably below, the water line.

"Di ... do you know what a merman is?"

\*

This would not have been the way he would have liked to approach the subject with her, but what choice did he have? She'd already proven what happened when a human ventured into the sea without adequate protection. Look at all the stuff she outfitted herself with now for proof of that.

Already he could almost see her mind forming question after question. Most of them

were probably not ones he wanted to address. She didn't seem capable of answering the single question he posed to her. Probably too wound up to think straight.

"Take my hand, goddess, and let's go. I'll get you to safety and we'll talk. I have a feeling you want to." He stretched his hand forward again and waited to see if she would take it. Mistrustful eyes searched over him. He waited with infinite patience though. As far as he was concerned, nothing had cooled between them and he had all the time in the world to wait for her to realize that.

He held open his palm, and let her study it. His hand and fingers looked exactly like hers, he already knew. Where his species and hers differed showed most prominently below the waist.

Another few minutes passed and he started to doubt whether she would indeed come with him. A sorrowful study of her boat's demise helped make up her mind though. Di slipped her hand in his and Danyl curled his fingers around hers.

"I'm not fully aware of your limitations, so if I go too fast or if you can't breathe or something happens, tug on my hand and we'll stop, okay? I'll keep us as close to the surface as possible, but there will be times when we'll venture below."

Her hesitant nod didn't flood him with good feelings. Nor did the fact she hadn't spoken yet.

"Ready?" he asked. It was a final chance to change her mind, but she really didn't have much of a choice. Besides, once he was able to get her to safety, he could return and locate the key in her boat. Her life in exchange for the necessary tool to avenge his mother's death. A fair trade as far as he was concerned.

Once he had the key in his possession, he'd be allowed to enter the underworld and traverse to the place where gods and their demi-god children resided. And he'd see to the being formerly called his father, once and for all.

He started off slow, uncertain as to how far he should test her faith in him. On his own, he could have made it to the secluded side of the island in no time. With her drifting behind, he moved slower. Had he thought it wise, he would have pointed out some of his favorite secluded spots. As it was, swimming with her near his side fitted him with a sense of comfort that almost made him forget everything but her presence.

A pang of jealousy stabbed him because this was what travelling with a mate felt like all the time, wasn't it? This rightness and ownership of belonging to someone.

Of course, it was ill-advised as well as just plain insane to associate this feeling with Di. Any attraction that might have been on her part evaporated the minute she realized he was a freak. In his world, he would forever be abnormal for his ability to use legs and for her, his kind lived in mythology only. Neither his home nor hers would ever be a sanctuary for him. His mother, his only ally in life, did her best to provide for him. In truth, she would have served him better by never allowing him to be born. Once he eliminated his father, he would truly have nothing worth living for. Perhaps when this was over ... perhaps...

The change in water opacity and a new flush of temperature interrupted his self-reflection. He hadn't realized he'd taken them exactly where they needed to be without conscious thought. The secluded beach would be uninhabited in most circumstances. With only the moonlight to see by, only someone with a purpose would venture here now. It would be an ideal place to talk to her. Also, when he left, Di could walk to a populated area with ease and get the help she sought.

So why did that make him feel like whale vomit?

He pulled her to his side, and just as he thought, she began swimming the shallower water on her own. Once she was closer inland, he lingered behind long enough to push energy through his tail and make the necessary transformation into legs. By the time they solidified, Di waded onto land.

The temperature here wasn't as biting as when they'd been on the open sea and Di stripped without speaking, her wary eyes looking up on occasion to watch him approach. It was a struggle to remove the metal contraption on her back, but she managed without his assistance. He would have offered, but she didn't seem as trustful as before.

As for the dark bulky material, when she stepped out of it, Danyl's stomach tightened and he had to swallow hard. The tight, silver material she wore beneath hugged every soft curve of her body, leaving little to his imagination. Her fingers tugged on a metal piece near her neck and she dragged it down. When it opened, she revealed her lovely flesh beneath.

Water dried on his skin, and his hair dripped more of it down his back. The shiver that ran down his spine might have been from its cool caress, but he didn't think so. A century of time crawled by as Danyl watched her near-nudity be exposed. The sight of that stretchy black material covering the barest parts of her coaxed a low growl from his lips.

*Gods.*

When she looked up with both seduction and innocence in her eyes, the ache between his legs grew unbearable. He had to take this chance, because it might never reach him again. Not with her.

"Di," he said hoarsely, "come to me."

## Chapter Five

She didn't hesitate and that made his heart pound even harder. But an eternity must have passed before she slipped into his embrace.

"Who are you, Danyl?" she murmured. "*What* are you?"

"I'll explain everything, goddess." He placed his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face toward his. The moonlight reflected in her rounded eyes, but in them a hint of trust waited. Her guileless expression, the way she tightened her arms around his waist prompted him to lower his mouth to hers. The heavens met him in their kiss.

Her lips parted beneath his. Caressing him. Teasing him. The tight buds of her nipples pressed against his chest and he pulled her closer. Every part of him wanted to be next to her, in her. He remembered the simple knot holding her top together and he tangled his fingers in it, working quickly to release her. Her nude breasts were as lovely and as enticing as he knew they would be.

"My people are born of the sea. It's where we live. Where we thrive." He kissed her again. "Where we love."

Oh, yes, he knew that word. And he knew this feeling coursing over him as he ran his fingers over the soft curve of her breasts, memorizing them.

"But ... God, Danyl, am I in shock? The hypothermia..."

Once the foreignness of an external arousal had subsided, he recognized his body's natural reaction to her. Its hardness pressed against her now, the sensitive head on her belly spilling waves of pleasure through his groin. "Do you feel that, Di? My need for you is no dream. No sickness induced illusion. Touch me and know."

"But, Danyl—"

He captured her mouth beneath his, and savored the salt lingering on it. His tongue teased between her lips, meeting hers and heating his blood from a simmer to a raging boil. Together, they wrapped their fingers around his cock, and stroked its length. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, his moan of satisfaction drowned by it. If he didn't stop her now, this mounting pressure making his testicles ache would devour him.

The strength it took to pull away from her rivaled his need for air to breathe. "I don't know how... Show me how to please you, Di."

There was a question in her glittering green eyes, but she lifted their entwined hands and placed them on her breast. "Here," she whispered. Danyl rolled the delicate peak between his fingers. She made a low sound in her throat but then moved his hand lower. When she slid it over her belly and into the material covering her genital slit, something within him roared its approval.

"Here," she said again. He thought his heart would burst when his fingers slid past the curls of her mound and over her folds. Gently he probed her softness, and his throat tightened when she moaned again. Slick heat greeted his touch and he glided through it. One finger pushed inside and her slit surrounded it, so he pushed deeper. Her fingers grasped his hand harder and her head fell back, her lips parted. When she released a series of soft cries, he curled another finger inside of her with the first.

His thumb brushed her tight curls and she gasped. Studying her face, he deliberately stroked that same place again and her slit pulsed around his fingers. He twisted them

inside her, plunging and withdrawing at an unhurried pace. *So very, very nice.*

Her hips rocked against his hand now and all lingering doubt as to whether he could arouse and please her evaporated into the night air. She gripped his hand almost painfully, but the way she panted out his name, her eyes clenched tight, encouraged his exploration. He circled the hard nub he'd discovered and her body trembled. For a split second he was confused by her reaction, torn on whether to keep going. When Di tensed and then screamed, however, it was a sound of pure, unadulterated eroticism that traveled straight to his cock.

She rested her head on his bicep, her body still shuddering against him. His fingers continued to probe inside her slit for he couldn't release her yet. The scent of her tight sheath had amplified and a desperate hunger for more gnawed at him.

"It was good?" He asked just to be sure she'd been satisfied. For some reason he couldn't explain, he craved confirmation.

Her cheeks lifted, her smile evident against his skin. "Oh, God, yes Danyl. You don't even have to ask."

She whimpered when he withdrew his hand, but then pulled away to watch as he spread her moisture over his shaft. If he thought he'd been aroused before, each stroke sent a multitude of shockwaves streaking through him now.

"You would never know you're not human," she said. "Your features, your body, your words and actions are all very much human. If I hadn't seen for myself..." She raised her eyes to meet his. "Show me how to please you, Danyl. I want to be sure I do."

\*

There was something endearing about the way his face flushed. He seemed all at once shy. Certainly unlike the man who'd just given her a screaming orgasm only minutes ago.

"This is not my element." He looked toward the waves crashing on the shore. "I—I don't know ... I'm not used ... I've never..."

She took his hand, led him to a grassy area and sat down. "I understand. As strange as being with a merman—I can't believe I just said that—is for me, doing this on dry land must be awkward for you, too."

He dropped to his knees, shaking his head. "That's not it. Well, not all of it. I've never done *this* before."

The fine lines of his muscles rippled any time he moved and she'd been so studiously observing them that she almost missed his meaning. But then she got it.

Oh my.

"You've *never*...?"

Danyl shook his head again. "Never. Where I'm from, my ability to walk on land makes me ... an unsuitable match." His shoulders slumped. "I understand if you don't wish to go any further with me, goddess."

The way he said that last word was a shock to her system. It was a reminder that he must have truly felt unworthy of her. Self-confidence that flared only moments ago now became a distant memory. Now, more shy hesitation bloomed.

To hell with that.

His proud erection hadn't waned in the few minutes they'd been talking and she had zero doubt in her mind of what he longed for.

She reached over, splayed her hand over the wide expanse of his chest and gave him



a gentle shove. He fell back on his elbows, and his brows lifted in surprise. "Not on your life," she said with a low growl.

She could have spent the next hour studying the cut of his lower abdomen, and the definition of his legs. She wanted to savor running her fingers over the lines of his chest, and tracing the cobblestone perfection beneath it. The beautiful cock rising from him, leaking its arousal, captivated her attention. She had to lick dry lips to stave off the urge to wrap them around him and taste his hard length.

"You're killing me," he moaned. The way he kept watching her mouth told her more than she needed to know.

"Yeah?" She ducked her head closer to him, inhaling the gentle tang of musk and salt wafting from his skin. "Is this killing you?" The first run of her tongue down his shaft made his thighs twitch. She licked again, starting at the base of his cock and working her way up to the dip leaking a pearl-colored drop. "Or should I do it like this?"

She used her hand to hold his cock steady and circled the mushroom-shaped head, teasing the sensitive area beneath. Danyl threaded his fingers in her curls, pulling the fallen hair out of his way so that he could watch unobstructed. "Or, baby," she said huskily as her head descended once more, "like this?"

His hips lifted from the ground when she engulfed him. His fingers threaded into her hair, guiding her head as she feasted on him. She pulled him deeper into her throat, loving the wonderful fullness he provided. The taste of him was unlike anything she'd ever known. The expected salty tang lingered on her tongue, but a heady sweetness greeted her senses as well. A triad of arousing flavors filled her mouth, his heavy breathing and heaving chest encouragement that she continue her worship.

By the time she released him, they were both panting. Di stood, and pushed the bikini bottoms down over her hips. Her heart hammered, every fiber of her being screaming for his attention.

Danyl lifted his arms to her and she lowered herself between them. Her nipples brushed against his chest, her curves molding into the dips of his muscles. He lay stretched beneath her, his hands travelling over her sides, caressing her breasts, kneading her ass. It was as if he needed confirmation that her body existed. She knew the feeling. She couldn't stop herself from learning every line and shadow of him. From committing to memory his beauty.

The head of his cock nestled at the entrance to her pussy. She tossed aside the notion that she would tease him with it, for her own desire's thirst needed to be quenched. She had to shut her eyes as she slid down his erection, impaling herself in a series of short rocking motions. Her lips stretched deliciously around him, spreading and welcoming him inside her.

"Gods." His low groan made her pulse race.

Danyl's hands cupped the backs of her thighs and with a slow, deliberate motion, tilted her hips over him. She rocked until her heart threatened to gallop away from her chest, sliding over his length and building her passion until it sent tremors echoing through her limbs. Her breasts swayed with the effort, but Danyl kept his silver-eyed gaze fixed onto hers. She leaned back, and the fullness from him intensified. Their rhythm increased. The sounds of their rapid breathing and low moans in chorus with the crashing waves beyond them.

Her fingers trembled as she stroked his face. This connection between them, starting

where his body entered hers, cascaded over her, curling around her spine and sending a sensation of rightness and belonging through her.

"Aphrodite," he whispered, "*agapimeni*..." Looking into her eyes, he chanted the foreign word repeatedly. "*Agapimeni*, Aphrodite..."

Without knowing its meaning, she knew his tone. It was the one spoken between her grandmother and grandfather, married forty-seven years. It was the one she heard between her best friend, Ella, and her son on the day of his birth. It was the one her heart clung to and waited for all these years.

Danyl trailed his fingers over her lower belly, stopping to rest when he located her clit. One long index finger tapped a cadence over the hardened nub, and her pussy clenched around him in response. A cry rumbled through her chest, exploding onto the unsuspecting night air.

The breeze caressing their bodies swirled around them, lifting her hair into a curtain that fell around her shoulders and touched his chest. The waves' thunderous clash with the shoreline tried to drown out the sound of her racing heartbeat, but it would not be stopped. It would not be silenced in this maddening race to pleasure.

"Danyl," she cried. Tremors shot through her, each pulse skittering away from where his fingers danced over her clit. His fingertips dug into her hip, his body pushing faster and deeper inside of her.

"Aphrodite..." He swallowed hard, his throat bobbing as similar shudders made his stomach clench and unclench against her thighs.

She rocked her hips faster, the pleasurable pain of his grip concentrating the surges emanating from where his body impaled and completed hers. He said her name one final time, a last strangled gasp of breath before he tensed beneath her. She threw her head back, arching her spine, and screamed hoarsely as his cock pulsed inside her. Danyl buried his cock inside, his hips rising from the ground in an effort to push himself deeper, to empty all of himself, all of his cum in jets against her womb.

Di fell forward, her weakened limbs unable to support her own weight. Her chest heaved against his, both of them struggling to get their frantic breathing under control. Danyl's arms wrapped around her back. He caressed her in long, luxurious strokes, bringing to her more comfort than she'd ever known.

"Thank you, *agapimeni*. Thank you," he murmured.

## Chapter Six

They stood hand in hand and let the soft, foamy waves tickle their ankles. She'd donned the silver skin again because her previous assessment had been premature and the weather too cold for less. Besides, she had about half a mile's trek in front of her and no one had to tell her that she'd invite strange looks if she emerged in the skimpy bikini.

"I don't want to go," Danyl said, "believe me, I don't, but I have a task that I have to complete. In fact, I'll be near your boat again. Is there anything on it that I can retrieve for you?"

She turned over a broken shell with her toe. A wave carried it into the sea a minute later. "No, I have everything from it that I need."

Palming the coin when she'd first undressed and then redressed hadn't taken much effort or skill. It was the only thing from the *Sea Anemone*, beside the boat itself, that she needed.

Why then did she carry this ache in her chest? She should be exuberant that her life's work, her dreams, were about to be realized. The victory felt hollow, though.

The orange sun began its ascent into the sky, lighting a path across the ocean horizon. Clouds in the distance reflected purples and reds, an arrangement of color that invited her gaze back to what had always been her first love.

"Will I ever see you again?" she asked shyly.

Danyl's grip tightened before he released her. Turning, he stepped into her space and cupped her face. She stared into his eyes and for the hundredth time decided she could easily live an eternity in them. "If ever you need me, ever, *for anything*, stand at the ocean's edge and call my name. I'll come back to you."

That knowledge should have made her overjoyed, but it simply wasn't enough. She didn't want to release him back to the sea, probably never to see him again. Besides the millions of questions she wanted to ask about mermen and mermaids, the fact of the matter was, she didn't want to lose him.

"Anywhere?" she asked, pulling her chin from his grip. Her gaze dropped because she didn't want him to see the stupid tears she held back.

Tears? Had he even earned them?

She held back a sigh too. Since the effort to keep the moisture from spilling down her cheeks burned her eyes now, he must have.

His thumb caressed her cheek and then caught a drop of moisture that managed to escape from the corner of her eye. His touch was gentle when he lifted her chin again. The kiss he pressed to her lips was as soft as a cloud. "Anywhere."

He walked deeper into the water, but her feet remained rooted to the sand. She sucked in her bottom lip, worrying her teeth along it. There had to be some reason for him to stay a little bit longer, right? By now, her boat was a total loss. She really had no reason to scamper away herself.

"Danyl," she called. The water level splashed above his knees now. There was no telling how much further in he would venture before changing back to a merman.

A merman. Dang. She still had trouble with that one.

"Danyl," she said again. *Don't go*. Those two words lodged in her throat, locked

behind a voice box that refused to budge. It had taken one look into those soulful eyes when he'd turned to make her lose her nerve. Thinking quickly, she added, "What did that word mean?"

He knitted his eyebrows together before recognition flashed across his face. The smile he gave her could have melted ice. "The next time I see you," he said, backing deeper into the tide, "I'll let you know."

*But what if we never meet again?* The thought flickered in her mind before being squelched by the surety in Danyl's tone. He knew they would meet again. Everything in his voice said he counted on it.

"Until the next time then," she whispered. Still, her eyes burned while watching the water rise the deeper he went. When at last the water hid his waist, Danyl did an impressive backwards flip into the water to disappear from sight.

Her mouth fell open of its own accord before he'd completely submerged. Gone were his lean, muscled legs that wrapped around hers as they lay on the beach. In their place, a tail of blue-green hues extended. Its ends tapered into a flare tipped by delicate-looking white. There were no scales to speak of, but the pattern swirled in a unique decoration that could understandably be mistaken for individual scales. Her background in marine biology and the play of burgeoning sunlight helped distinguish the outlines, however. She also couldn't prevent herself from reflecting how the ventral portion of his tail now lacked one very important, titillating detail.

Oh well. It showed up when it counted.

Amused by her own disturbing, sex-laced concerns, her heart lifted a fraction and a smile threatened to form. She would see him again. She was sure of it, too.

It took only a few minutes to gather what gear she planned to take and locate the trail leading to the private beach area for the local hotel. Once there, she'd borrow a phone and make arrangements for her next moves. She'd need to replace her trusty steed as soon as the insurance money arrived, speak with her university contact and then once everything was settled, crawl into her bed for a month-long sleep.

After about a quarter mile of walking, she frowned. Lifting her head, she turned to face the beach and scanned the horizon. Had she really heard...

"Aphrodite!"

The wetsuit tumbled from her hands, but she didn't care. As if in a dream, Di ran toward the water, slowing once inside and only when the drag against her legs forced her to do so.

"You have it, Aphrodite," Danyl called when he broke from the waves again, his voice tremulous with excitement. A span of no more than ten feet separated them. "You have the key I seek!"

\*

It had been a hunch. Just a niggle in the back of his neck. But thank the gods, he'd picked up the slate almost immediately upon locating it and tracked the key's location... Right back to his goddess.

"We've got to put some clothes on you before someone sees," she muttered as they waded ashore.

Danyl didn't know about that. He'd gotten used to the slow crawl of her gaze on his body every time he approached her au natural. With every inch she took in, his body warmed in gradual waves, stopping when just short of combustion. Now that he'd also

gotten used to this cock he'd been equipped with, he kind of liked its reaction too. The pulse of need, the lengthening and gentle ascent. He had to fight every urge to throw her down against the sand and plunge himself into her wetness again. What an amazing sensation!

Reason took over and he shook his head. "It doesn't matter because I'm heading back out as soon as you give the key to me. I'll be gone before anyone sees." She stiffened beside him and he grimaced. In retrospect, that sounded bad the way it came out. "Di, I need the key."

She guided them inland, stopping in between brush that would provide adequate cover on three sides. "I don't have a key, Danyl. I don't know what you're talking about."

"I've tracked it to you more than once. I thought it was on the boat, but when I just checked again, it tracks to you. Are you sure?"

She shifted her gaze away and asked softly, "What does it look like?"

Something about her look, her tone made him wary. "It's a flat disc. Etched with a face on one side, writing on the other. It's old and..." The way she crossed her arms, hugging herself, still unwilling to look him in the face was all too familiar. His goddess edged away, a complete turnabout from earlier. His voice dropped low and even he heard the anguish in it. "You know what I'm talking about now, don't you?"

"Why do you need it?" Challenge peppered every syllable in her question.

Before he could catch himself, he threw back, "Why do *you*?"

Her eyes shone when she looked at him at last. "The coin is all I have," her voice grew bitter. "No job. No boat. No money. Just this coin."

"No family. No honor. No future. Just a key to regain a little bit—just a hint—of that back," he retorted, staring her down. *Fuck*. Something inside him died with each second he stared into her water-filled eyes, but he couldn't back down. Not about this.

"But you still haven't said what you need it for." Her entire body shook.

His upper lip curled into a snarl. "To avenge my mother's death. To gain entry to where my father lives and kill him for murdering my mother. What could you possibly want it for?"

"To take back my life," she sobbed. "I have nothing without this coin. Can you understand that? Nothing!" The tears tracking down her cheeks ripped his heart from his chest.

Gods, they stood at an impasse. He couldn't move on without the damned key and obviously, neither could she. Unclenching his jaw, he pushed back mounting anger and frustration. Her body was rigid when he pulled her into his embrace. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm sorry. We'll work it out."

When she unfolded her arms and wrapped them around his waist in return, he released a relieved breath. They rocked together, holding each other tight, until at last his roiling anger settled and he could talk to her without attacking like a shark after blood. Di ceased trembling a few minutes later.

"What you said is horrible, Danyl. Are you sure it's him? Will you really kill your father?"

He glanced over his shoulder at the sun that had long since risen above the horizon. Soon enough, people would be wandering the beach and just as she'd stated, someone would see. He had to convince her to hand over the key quickly. "He murdered my mother for having me. And I'm the only one who cares enough to avenge her, Di. He's a

very powerful being and where he lives is inaccessible normally. But with that key..."

"Is he powerful enough to kill you, instead?"

He should have known she would ask. "Yes. Perhaps if I'm not fast enough, not smart enough, he'll destroy me long before I get the chance to kill him."

"Danyl," she gasped, "you sound like you accept that." She shook her head. "No, like you *want* that."

"I have to leave before someone sees, Di."

"Danyl?"

"The sun is up and people will be coming soon."

She pushed away and bore into him with her piercing gaze. "Even if I could forget about my situation, I am not going to stand here and hand you the key to your death. I won't."

Her green eyes brimmed with concern. *For him*. That recognition was enough to make him stop breathing from stunned joy. Gods, could he really dare to dream, to hope, that the life he once dreaded living might instead forever include her? Because if it did, an early death no longer called to him as it once did.

"What if I gave you a promise, a guarantee, would that satisfy you? If I could borrow the coin, as you call it, from you and then give it back to you when I'm done, we would both get what we want." Once he handed over the key, he wouldn't be able to give her back this one, but others like it had to exist. He'd make sure he led her to them. That assumed, of course, he made it out alive. He couldn't be certain of course, but he'd do his damndest to try. It would have to be enough.

She regarded him suspiciously, her head cocked. "You wouldn't take any unnecessary risks? You would ... wait, how can you guarantee me something like that?"

There was no way she would make this easy. He recognized that now. "It's all I have to offer. My word."

"Which doesn't matter if you're dead, you idiot!"

Another impasse. Did other men have such a hard time reasoning with their mate?

The thought startled him. Mate? When had Di gone from being that beautiful human to *mate*?

Di planted her feet into the ground and balanced her fists on either side of her hips. Looking him dead center in his eyes, she said, "If you want this key, Danyl, the only way you'll get it is if you have someone to watch your back going with you. And that someone, baby, is gonna be me."

## Chapter Seven

Nothing he said would sway her. Even now, she stood balancing on one leg as she slipped the other into the wetsuit. How in Hades had it gotten to this point? Danyl wanted to scream with frustration. Instead, he paced the beach, cursing under his breath.

Gods, it would take everything he had to keep her safe when he sought Ancelin, but the infuriating woman barged right into the danger with her eyes wide open. Whether he liked it or not, he would have to make sure he survived this trip. Her life depended on it.

"I'm ready."

His curt nod was all the response he could muster without starting an argument all over again. Why would she do this?

For heavens' sake, look at the preparations she had to go through. He hated that she needed to outfit herself thusly, but the morning sun wouldn't have warmed the ocean enough yet. Then again, her preparations also meant one less thing they had to worry about in their travels. He'd already explained that the underwater cave, the passageway to the underworld, sloped up until they would be able to walk above ground with ease. Closer to the top, the water would be tolerable for her to swim in, if not altogether pleasant. He only had to guide them there and then the hard part would begin.

She started forward, but stopped when she reached the water's edge and he wasn't beside her. "Danyl?"

He had one last chance to stop this madness. Danyl raced to her side and swept her into his arms. He stared at her lips, her beautiful full lips, and crushed his mouth to hers. All of his frustration, all of his passion reverberated in that kiss. It was his last plea, his last hope that she would stay behind and let him handle his family's affairs by himself. It was his promise that he would return.

But Di wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Her lips parted, her tongue teasing between his to toy with his teeth before sliding over his tongue with equal fervor. And as he breathed in the sweetness that was her, he knew it was her winning play, her final say on the matter. It was her promise that she would stay by his side, no matter what the consequence.

A catcall in the distance cleared his fuzzy mind as he began to lose himself in that kiss. They still stood on a public beach and his nudity wouldn't be appreciated by others. Especially now with his arousal on proud display.

With a final groan of resignation, he pulled away and slipped his hand in hers. "Let's go, goddess. Let's go find my father."

\* \* \* \*

Being underwater had always filled Di with a calming peace she'd yet to replicate elsewhere. The smooth, rhythmic flow of her breathing was the only sound. Under the sea, it was just her and her thoughts.

Right now, her thoughts revolved around the merman swimming at her side.

She'd forgotten to ask him about mer-people and how he knew the English language. Every time he left, she reprimanded herself for forgetting to ask about his legs and his

ability to change his tail. She'd meant to ask about his life, his family ... everything. The moment he appeared, however, none of those things mattered any more. She wanted to bask in whatever time they had together.

Now she was accompanying him on some crazy quest to avenge his mother and on any other day she might have chastised herself for agreeing to go along. Today though, she couldn't think of another place she would rather be. She had no family; her friends could be counted on a single hand. Her life centered around one stupid little coin, but so did his.

He swam much faster this time, and everything whirled by. At one point, she closed her eyes, and luxuriated in the magical pull of the water as they sliced through it, hand in hand. Soon, they dove deep and she forced herself to focus on their surroundings when he changed their position to ascending. She couldn't see shit. Just blackness on all sides. Danyl tightened his hand around hers and the little flurries of fear that tripped her heart ebbed somewhat.

They broke the surface, but instead of the light she'd assumed would be there, more darkness greeted them.

He laid her hands on a ledge. "I'll create some light for you. Stay here." A loud crack sounded a moment later and she had to squint against the flare.

"What is that?" Now able to see where she was going, Di hauled herself over the ledge. Despite the use of the oxygen tank, her chest rose and fell quickly. She only now realized the exertion, and subsequent fatigue, of travelling next to him. Danyl, on the other hand, didn't seem the least bit fazed.

"I think you call it quartz. When rubbed together, it produces a little bit of light. Wrapped in a solastine casing, the property intensifies to what you see now. If it starts to dim, you only need shake it and it'll light up again."

"I've never heard of solastine," she murmured, eyeing the light source. "Amazing."

She held up the light and scanned the cave. It was nondescript and really looked like every other cave she'd ever ventured into. Stalagmites, stalactites and little streams of trickling water decorated the ceiling and ground. If she tried to peer into corners, tiny creatures with multiple sets of legs scurried away. The air smelled and tasted damp. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation, but still not one she wanted to linger in if at all possible. Beneath her feet, sand crunched and shifted.

"Let's get moving, goddess. When we've completed this task, I'll show you sights of the ocean that you've never before witnessed, I promise you."

Her pulse surged a little at that. "Lead the way."

About fifty yards in, they stopped before a large stone face, apparently the end of the cave. She held the light up, shaking the little device harder to see if it would stretch to the reaches of the corners, to no avail.

"We're here," he said softly to her unspoken question.

Question was, here where?

"Charon!" Danyl bellowed. He called that name twice more and waited. She thought she recognized the name, but couldn't place her finger on where she knew it from.

The last thing in the world she expected to see was the wall slide open like two elevator doors to reveal another cave, this one darker and more terrifying than the one in which they stood. The even greater difference flowed down its center.

Still, Danyl reacted to the river that abruptly halted at their feet as if bored. Arms



crossed over his chest, he stared into the darkness. Di took the time to drop the oxygen cylinder from her back, but kept the wetsuit and accompanying booties in place. If they had to leave in a hurry, the fewer items she had to put on, the better.

*Charon.* She knew that name. She was sure of it. "Danyl, who is Charon? I feel like I should know, but it escapes me now."

It could have been a play of the light, but his enigmatic silver eyes turned stormy. A shadow hung over his fine features and for the first time, she realized how determined he was about completing his quest.

"Charon is the ferryman for the river Acheron ... which flows before you now."

*Jesus.*

It all flooded back to her in a single outrageous moment of remembrance. To get to Hades, the underworld, souls were transported across the river Acheron by a ferryman. He exacted his fee in the form of a single obolus—her coin—that family members usually buried on or in the mouths of the dead. Perchance a family was too poor to perform this ritual, the soul could still cross Acheron, but only by spending a hundred years on the shore line, waiting its turn.

With trembling fingers, she searched beneath the silver skin and pulled out the little coin. In its day, the beautifully handcrafted piece was worth a pittance. The miniscule price served as a reminder to both poor and rich that almost anyone could gain admittance to Hades.

"Come with me," Danyl said, holding his hand out. "Let's go wait by the water's edge. I think it'll be several hours before he gets here and I'm sure by now you're hungry."

She put the coin back and pressed a hand against its hard edges as if reminding herself of where she placed it. Her stomach chose that moment to rumble, and a smile curved her lips. "Wow. I don't remember the last time I've had something to eat. It's been several hours at best."

"I'd like you to be clear-headed when we meet my father. I'm afraid I don't have anything you're used to, but I saw some plants over there that will provide nourishment." He wrinkled his nose. "Be forewarned, goddess, they don't taste very good."

After glancing over her shoulder into the mysterious hollow, she nodded and walked with him. They plucked a few of the bitter plants that continued to repeat in her mouth, long after she'd swallowed them. Every time she took a mouthful, she had to close her eyes and clench her stomach against the viscous coating that refused to come off the plant no matter how she scrubbed.

"Ugh. Does this taste ever go away?"

Lying on his back and reclined on one elbow, Danyl dangled a long stem above his mouth. With great relish, he sucked on its end until the entire thing disappeared. He swallowed, and with a grin said, "In about an hour."

Her stomach turned over once at that thought and another small burp escaped her lips. "I think I'm gonna be sick," she muttered.

Danyl was on his feet in a flash. The look on his face was heart attack serious as he rushed to her. He gripped her chin between strong fingers and searched her eyes. "Are you ill? What's the matter?"

Somersaulting insides fairly melted at the concern in his voice. "No, I'm fine. Really. It's just an expression of sorts."

"You're certain? It's not too late to go back."

She shook her head. "You don't get rid of me that easily. I've already told you once, and I still mean it. If you're going to face off against your father, you need someone there who's got your back. That someone is me."

The grip on her chin softened until his fingers grazed gently across her jaw. The brooding rage had long since left his eyes and been replaced by an almost hopeful glint. "*Agapimeni*, how did I live without you in my life before? You are one of few who would stand by my side in this."

The corners of her mouth lifted in a smile. "You were supposed to tell me what that means."

With casual ease, he backed away until his hand on her face dropped to her neck and then arm in a suggestive caress. A low burn smoldered in his gaze and she knew that look well.

"Come with me into the water," he murmured, "and I'll show you."

## Chapter Eight

He dove into the water, heedless of any danger. Di on the other hand, eyed it cautiously. The bout with hypothermia still registered too sharply in her mind to forget.

Danyl did a form-perfect flip into the water, the grace of his tail a wonder to behold before it disappeared beneath the dark depths. He came up to the surface again and held his arms out. "The water's fine without your clothing. Trust me."

She did.

\*

Watching her remove the clothing almost took every vestige of restraint he possessed to not join her on land and couple with her there. But with a drumming heart, he watched and waited. He almost went to the ledge for an up-close view, but didn't think his fingers could stand the pressure of him digging into the compact earth. Already his jaw took a beating as he clamped his teeth together to fight back the urge to impale her on his cock. He knew with certainty that at this moment, if he went too close, he would forget himself. He took a deep cleansing breath because he wanted to share this with her.

Still, it was torture when dark nipples on rounded breasts were revealed. His throat went dry and he forced his tongue over his lips. Then that damnable skin dropped lower to reveal her tummy and its perfect smoothness. Di shimmied a little, the flare of her hips an immediate draw. A low sound echoed in the cavern and it took him a minute to realize he made it. By the time her slit was bared before him, his mind was hazy with lust. Thoughts of mating and fucking and loving tumbled upon each other until only the cadence of her name would drown them out.

Aphrodite. *Agapimeni*. Mate.

Di squatted down and his gaze dropped to the slit between her legs. Its pink folds glistened as she moved and he groaned another guttural sound. Somehow he'd drifted closer to her and had to force himself to back up. But knowing that her body was already waiting for him to take her made his heart ache with longing. He would go slow. He would make this her pleasure. But he needed to do so now.

She dropped into the water feet first and let out a squeal as soon as she came up for air. The locks of her golden hair tightened into a crown around her face, and the effect was dazzling. Her broad smile called to him. "You said it wasn't cold."

"It's not."

"Liar."

He chuckled. Each slow circle he made around her might have seemed puzzling from where she bobbed, but to him, it was the only way to cool down his maddening urges. He drew in closer though, his gaze locked with hers as she treaded water. Surrounded by the lapping waves, she was grace and beauty and he wanted to admire her there a little while longer.

"Danyl, how do you... In the water, I mean."

That's exactly what he was going to show her. "To me, goddess."

Her arms wrapped around his neck when he pulled her into his embrace. The tight buds of her nipples scraped across his chest and sparked a bolt of electricity that ricocheted through his tail. The last time he would be able to kiss for a while, he covered

her mouth with his hungrily. He left her intoxicating lips to drag his mouth to the pulsing hollow at the base of her throat before travelling up again. To stay in that moment with her as his mouth learned hers could have fed at least part of his need for hours, but by now, his body all but screamed for more.

"Hold your breath, Di."

She looked deep into his eyes and nodded. The intensity behind her green eyes told him much. Her complete and absolute trust resided with him. Her chest expanded and when it did not lower, he secured his grip and took them beneath the surface.

At first, he waited. If she couldn't handle this, if she needed to resurface, he would do so immediately. Whatever she needed. But when she relaxed in his arms and allowed him to direct their movement, it was a gift.

Using one arm, he guided her leg around his waist. She caught his intent and wrapped the other around him as well. The moment he released his cock from its sheath and probed her slit with it, her hands tensed on his back. Lazily, he pushed them toward the surface, allowing the drag on her body to slide her down on him until her slit engulfed his tip.

"Where did that come from?" Surprised laughter amplified into the air the moment she caught her breath. His hands gripped the rounded globes of her ass and pulled her further onto him. Her laughter morphed into a moan.

"Feel." He moaned this time when her hand gripped the base of his cock still not yet embedded in her soft walls. She rocked forward and he pushed further inside. Still, her hand pumped on the base of his cock, the sensation shooting through him and making him dizzy. "A sheath encases my organ until I'm ready to use it. Hold your breath."

The water swallowed them as soon as she nodded. Surrounded by its cool caress, it became a third in their love making. But all Danyl could focus on was being buried in Di's heat. Every time he withdrew, the ocean stroked his cock and urged him to find her center again. He would have loved to stare into her eyes in those moments, but settled on watching the ecstasy rippling in her expression.

Twice more they resurfaced only to descend a minute or two later. All of his life he'd waited to love one of the maids like this. The chance to love Di instead was worth the price of another thousand lifetimes of waiting. They rose to the surface again and he swam them toward the embankment ledge until her back pressed against it. "My goddess. My *agapimeni*," he murmured against her lips.

Each thrust inside coaxed a low groan from her that made his heart pound against his ribs. It wasn't enough. "Open your eyes, goddess. Look at me."

He increased his pace, driving into her. Beneath hooded eyes, she begged for more, for a reprieve, for him, before burying her face against the side of his neck. Indeed, her cries gained in volume, but he wanted more. "Call my name, Aphrodite. Let the heavens hear our love."

She moaned again and the sound vibrated through his chest. "Danyl, please..."

"That's it, *agapimeni*..."

Still he wanted more. Danyl slipped his hand between their writhing bodies and found that glorious place between her curls. The one that sent her body into shudders and made her slit clench around him. She matched his urgency with her own lusty cries and they echoed a beautiful sound.

"*Danyl*," she screamed.

*Gods, yes.* His body began to vibrate with liquid fire. His stomach tensed and when she spasmed around his pistoning cock, he came undone.

A hot tide of passion raced through his body and poured into her. It was a raw act of possession to push himself harder, deeper into her depths. The more of his seed she milked from his distended cock, the more lost he became in her hold.

"*Agapimēni.*" He kissed her mouth tenderly. "My beloved."

\* \* \* \*

They held hands as the boat approached several hours later. She looked to Danyl for reassurance, but he kept his gaze trained on the ferryman. He did, however, give her a gentle squeeze. Proud to stand at his side, she straightened her shoulders and waited.

It did little to squelch a shudder of revulsion when the boat finally stopped. Charon, the ferryman, stood as nightmarish a figure as ever she could have imagined. Hollow, soulless eyes stared forward on a gaunt face. If he noticed they stood there, she couldn't tell. His unkempt beard hadn't seen soap in his lifetime, she'd bet. The tattered red-brown robe he wore fared no better.

He held a pole directing the boat in one hand, and opened the gnarled skeleton of the other toward them. Danyl slipped the obolus into his hand as he stepped aboard. The boat remained stock still regardless of the shift in weight. Di stepped in beside him, but frowned when Charon extended his hand toward her.

He'd been given his penance. What more did he want? "Danyl?"

His jaw tightened. "I was afraid of this." He moved in between Di and the ferryman. "Charon, I am Danyl, son of Ancelin and Simeona. I am bringing my mate to the place of my father's home for his blessing of our union. She and I are one soul and I demand passage for us both. You've been paid adequately in this regard."

For a moment, she didn't think he would acquiesce. The ferryman's fingers curled around the coin however and he withdrew his hand. Apparently, the matter was resolved.

Except this business about being mates. She glanced at Danyl, a man who'd laid claim to her heart in the short time she'd known him. Did he really believe they were mates? Then again, he'd lied to Charon about their purpose for visiting his father, so it was possible that he'd lied about their being *mates*.

But just hearing that word come from him sent a thrill racing through her body. Would it be unwise to latch on to that idea, no matter how much it appealed to her?

She looked into his face and knew the answer with unwavering certainty. In this short time, despite the impossibility of such a sudden bond, he held her heart.

Danyl pulled her into his arms, and they stood pressed together during the ride. She breathed in the masculine, slightly salty scent of him and let it soothe her fluttering nerves. The contentment vanished when the boat settled against a new embankment. It might have taken Charon hours to reach them, but he managed to approach the gods' home in what couldn't have been more than mere minutes.

"Di, please stay here. Please." Danyl's exasperated voice would have normally been reason for concern, but damn it, she was not letting him out of her sight.

Ignoring his final plea, she moved toward the complex ahead of them. He released another frustrated breath and moved in beside her. They passed a huge cavern, and though tempted to peer inside, she hurried past it. Her skin crawled like a thousand millipedes had just run across every part of her flesh from the idea of lingering outside of

the hollow.

"When we get inside, he'll know I'm here. He may know my reasoning, he may not. In either event, please, Di, don't get in between us."

"You know, it's not too late for you to change your mind. Two wrongs don't make a right. Doing this will not bring your mother back."

"I made a vow."

"And I wouldn't think less of you if you broke that vow."

He placed a restraining hand on her arm, turning her to face him. "And I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't at least try to uphold it."

She studied his face, trying to understand. There had to be another way out of this. Didn't his gods have to face some sort of tribunal or something for heinous crimes? They'd spent the passing time while waiting for the boatman with a history of his people, and an explanation of their beliefs. She couldn't say she agreed with a lot of it, but then again, before yesterday, she wouldn't have believed in mermaids and mermen either. Funny how twenty-four hours could change her world.

Di touched his cheek with a wistful gesture. "No matter what happens, Danyl. I'm here."

"His power is extremely limited within the walls of his home." His statement might have been a reminder for himself. "It's possibly the only advantage I have. That and he's not expecting me."

"Squabbling between the gods, right?" She knew enough about infighting between the omniscient beings. If the gods could manipulate the elements and their followers with just a simple thought, imagine if they took advantage of their abilities on each other. There would never be peace without the restriction.

"Yes."

"You can do this."

He nodded with a taut jerk of his head and led them inside the expansive gate. She couldn't say what she expected to find beyond the tall walls, but the inside underwhelmed her. Expensive marble lined the floors and walls, but other than that luxury, nothing about the complex screamed opulence. This was the place where gods made their homes?

There was scant furniture to speak of. No decorations or busts of the inhabitants in sight. In fact, they encountered no one as they trekked through the place. The echoes of their movement were the only sounds. She would have expected choirs of rich voices to float down from above. Exotic scents and sights should have teased her senses. Instead, the place seemed more sterile than a hospital ward and just as enticing.

With long, purposeful strides, Danyl led the way. For someone who'd never been inside this place before, he moved as if the layout had been memorized a long time ago. Before long, they entered a long corridor lined with golden doors. None looked different than the others, but it didn't slow Danyl. He stopped before one in particular, but turned to give her one last imploring look. Di met his gaze with a hardened one of her own.

He turned the knob and pushed the door open. They walked inside with Danyl in the lead. He paused after only a few steps and Di moved to his side to see what had caught his attention.

The man standing near a window turned to face them and Di gasped. Danyl was the spitting image of his father. The *very* image. If she ever wondered what he might look like in another thirty years or so, she no longer had to guess. They might never have met

before now, but only a blind man would ask for DNA confirmation of their relationship.

"Father," Danyl growled beside her.

## Chapter Nine

Pure malevolence poured from Ancelin's eyes. His upper lip curled into a snarl as he studied his son. "Danyl, son of Simeona. You *are* the last person I would have expected to see before me."

"This is no social call Ancelin." It seemed to her that Danyl had forgotten she stood with him. His focus remained trained on the man he held responsible for his mother's death. The last vestige of hope that this might end amicably evaporated into the emotion-charged air.

Ancelin's gaze drifted to her. "And who do we have here?" He drew back in horror. "A human?"

Danyl stepped in front of her, blocking his view. "You are not worthy to look on my mate."

Never before had she thought laughter could bellow forth with such venom. Ancelin truly despised his son and cared not who knew.

"Your mate?" he gasped out in between jeering laughter. "Who would dare to mate with you, an abomination? I admire this woman much already."

Abomination? Oh, hell no.

With a yank, she pulled her hand from Danyl's and ducked from behind him to face his father head on. "Fuck you, asshole. You don't deserve to have a son like Danyl."

"Son?" he screamed, spittle flying. "His mother went against my wishes when she bore him. I would *never* claim him as mine. He is the product of a quick, unsatisfying fuck. Nothing more."

Beside her, Danyl vibrated with anger, but she knew his father's words stung him to the core. He reinforced Danyl's fear about his worth with those hateful words. "She loved you," he choked out. "Right up to her death, she loved you."

Ancelin leveled a bored gaze on Danyl. He took a deep breath, settling himself against the outpouring of rage he showed a few seconds ago. "We fucked a few times. There was no love there."

"Don't say that Ancelin. For gods' sake, tell me that you loved her even a little."

Di's heart broke to listen to this exchange. For as much animosity he showed toward Ancelin, his strangled voice and labored breathing belied how deeply these words cut him. One look at the shadows on Danyl's face, at his red-rimmed eyes, stabbed her like a knife.

"Tell me," he continued, "tell me that when you killed her, you regretted it even the tiniest amount."

Ancelin steepled his fingers together before resting them on his lips. A long stretch of silence passed where he studied the merman. He exhaled loudly. "So, this is why you are here? You think I killed your mother?"

"I know you did."

Ancelin stepped forward two paces. His eyes narrowed. "And if I did? So. What."

Time stood still then. The thunderous beat of her heart was the only sound she knew. Her mind slowed, her actions not fast enough. She knew what would happen next and had a feeling so did Ancelin.



Danyl charged.

Ancelin's head snapped back when Danyl's fist crashed into it. He held nothing back as he pummeled his father's head and torso, venting all of his penned-up anger. "You bastard," he growled between breaths and punches. "She loved you ... she loved you!"

Not to be outdone, Ancelin brought two fists together and swung them at his son. Danyl managed to duck, but caught a blow to his ribs on Ancelin's back swing. "You, my boy..." A loud crack echoed when Ancelin swung and brought another fist down on bone. "Are the bastard."

Danyl cried out and doubled over. He held an arm over his head, trying to block the next blow, but clearly he was on the defensive. Ancelin kicked and a sickening crunch and spray of blood indicated the breaking of Danyl's nose.

There was no way she would just stand there and do nothing. Di scrambled forward and let her foot fly. She caught Ancelin unsuspecting in the center of his balls, and listened with cheerful glee to his enraged squeal.

Whirling on her feet, she dropped beside Danyl while his father recovered. Asshole. She should have stood over him and stomped on the family jewels until he passed out. Instead, she had to focus on Danyl. This was no evenly matched fight and he would lose if he insisted on getting back up.

"Come on baby, we've got to go. You can't win this." She ducked beneath his arm, trying to bear some of his weight. He pushed her away for her effort.

"I can and I will," he said hoarsely. Turning his head to the side, he spat out a wad of mucus and blood. Unsteadily, he rose to his feet. "Father!"

Ancelin eyed him from the ground, his chest heaving as he caught his breath. Wild-eyed, he volleyed his glare between them both as he stood. He rubbed his testicles in a lewd manner. "Your mate is well chosen, Danyl."

"Simeona was a good woman, too, and deserved better."

"She was a whore."

*Damn it.* His father knew how to push every single button on his son. Danyl weaved forward, his face twisted into a hateful mask. It didn't matter though. Ancelin had fewer injuries to tend and threw a fist into Danyl's sternum. Thank God he dodged it and brought his arm around in a swing that had the power of the universe behind it. The blow landed on Ancelin's jaw and his head whipped around from the force.

Her heart in her throat, Di watched the fight and knew it would not end well. Ancelin was the more seasoned fighter and brought wisdom and dirty moves. Danyl only had righteous indignation and youth behind him.

Somehow Ancelin managed get behind to wrap an arm around his son's neck. He tightened until Danyl's face reddened, his hands scrambling for purchase, trying to loosen the grip blocking his airway. Unamused laughter wheezed out of Ancelin. "I haven't had to get my hands dirty like this in more than a century."

Throwing his elbow back, Danyl crushed Ancelin's testicles again, and Di almost winced in sympathy. He'd be resting those things on ice for the next week. His pained surprise gave Danyl a reprieve and he slid from beneath Ancelin's slackened hold. In a quick coordinated effort, he chopped Ancelin in the throat, and then backhanded him.

They separated and Danyl gasped unevenly, still trying to get his wind back. Already Di could see him get ready to charge again. So did Ancelin.

"Enough!" Ancelin roared.

"*Enough* old man?" Danyl taunted back. He rushed forward. "I'm only just beginning."

Ancelin bounced out of the way, barely missing another powerful blow. "Leave this place now if you want to save your woman and child, Danyl."

That caught Di's attention. Danyl's too. He chanced a look at her. She caught his gaze and held it, clueless as to what Ancelin referred to.

The older man gave them both a wicked smile. "Oh, you didn't know?" He straightened. "I truly love being a demi-god sometimes. Gives me insight that no one else has."

Danyl's hands curled into fists at his sides. "What are you telling us?"

Ancelin used the back of his hand to swipe the perspiration dripping into his eyes. Go figure. Gods sweated.

A chair materialized out of nowhere, and Di took a step back. So that was the secret of this place. Residents could call things into existence at their whims. He dropped into the chair as if a lifetime of burden weighed him down.

"Your seed has taken root. A new generation of bastard is growing in your mate's belly. I can feel its tiny life from here."

Di's hand flew to her stomach at the same time Danyl drew a ragged breath. Could she really be pregnant with his child? The horrified expression on his face did not fill her with happiness. He shook his head from side to side. "No ... gods, I would have never brought you here if I knew. Oh gods..."

"Your life in exchange for theirs, boy," Ancelin sneered.

"Yes."

"No!"

Their simultaneous cries clashed against each other. "Danyl, this is crazy. He holds nothing over you. *Nothing*. Why would he make threats against us now?"

"It's not a chance I'm willing to take." His silver eyes softened, his shoulders slumping in resignation. "This is a precious gift and I thank you, goddess. Please ... take care of our child."

From where he sat, Ancelin studied them with an amused expression on his face. "Kneel before me."

Bile burned her throat as she watched her love walk toward his father and drop onto one knee and then the other. His head hung low, but he kept it angled so that he could keep an eye on her. Ancelin stood and towered over him. A curved blade materialized into his hand. Immediately, the hair on the back of her neck stood.

Danyl's surrender made absolutely no sense, but the expression on his face said he was determined. Then again, so was she.

Di rushed forward and grabbed the chair still behind Ancelin. Swinging with all her might, she aimed it for the broad portion of Ancelin's back. He anticipated the move and brought his forearm up, twisting his body to deflect her. The chair bounced off of him harmlessly, and threw her off balance. Her foot slid on the marbled tile as she scrambled backwards and she came crashing down, bringing the chair on top of her.

"Aphrodite!"

Ancelin rounded on his son and pointed at Danyl. "Move and she dies!"

\*

He slammed his fists against the ground in frustration and watched his father stalk

his fallen mate. "To me Father!" he cried. He elevated himself on his knees, and threw his head back, baring the unobstructed flesh of his neck. "See? Here I am. Come for me!"

If Ancelin heard, or if he cared, he couldn't tell. But then his father turned his dark gaze on Danyl. Pure evil stared back at him. "I'm coming for you soon enough," he retorted as he grabbed Di by her hair, "as soon as I cut that thing from her womb. You, boy, get to watch."

Searing pain branded itself on Danyl's bicep at the same moment he vaulted to his feet. He ignored it, and sprang toward Ancelin and Di. For the first time, he felt as if his legs would no longer support his weight. They were as flimsy as sea kelp as he tried to reach her before his father harmed even a single hair on her head.

Di's green eyes were wide with fright. She kicked out with her feet, trying to get away from Ancelin, but his fingers curled into her hair tighter. He yanked hard, and she yelped. She kicked out again, but he brought his foot down on an ankle in response. She screamed, the sound tearing a hole in Danyl as his legs refused to obey his commands.

*Gods, please. Whatever it takes, please don't let him hurt her.*

She batted at the curved knife, her arms coming away with thin lines of blood trickling down them for her efforts. Danyl knew he stood only two feet away from them both, from the battle for her life, but in his mind, it might as well have been two hundred feet. He would not reach them in time.

Ancelin threw his weapon arm back and brought it down in a wide arc. Horrified, Danyl's eyes filled with tears as the blade plunged into her belly. His legs—his damned human legs—collapsed beneath him, unable to sustain his weight. He fell forward, the strength of his arms alone keeping him elevated as he watched the blood pool in the center of the silver skin.

Aphrodite screamed.

## Chapter Ten

Ancelin pulled back, bringing the blade out of her flesh. He poised himself to stab her again. Di's hands flew forward to protect her stomach, but she was already too late.

Adrenaline pumping, Danyl found his strength, launched himself at his father and slammed into him. There was no fucking way he'd let the bastard do that to her again.

The knife clattered to the floor, and skidded out of their reach. A trail of Di's blood smeared across the floor from its movement. From out of the corner of his vision, he could see she lay curled in a ball, her arms wrapped around her waist. Her legs pumped against the dry air, as if trying to ward off the pain in her torso.

Danyl slammed his elbow into his father's throat, hopefully crushing it in the process. Ancelin made a gurgling noise instead of the scream he tried to give voice to. He wrapped his fingers around his throat, gasping for air.

Thinking quickly, Danyl scrambled to the fallen blade and retrieved it. He knelt over his father, anger boiling his blood. He tightened his fingers around the pommel and readied himself to rid the world of one last plague.

"Wait, Danyl. You need him alive."

Cool hands wrapped around his wrists and although not strong enough to stop him, the unfamiliar woman's words gave him reason to pause for a split second. Her voice was soft, husky. He glanced up to become momentarily captivated by the soulful depths of her turquoise eyes. A fan of red and gold hair framed her pretty face.

"To save your mate, you'll need him alive," she repeated.

"Who are you?" he growled. He brought his gaze back to his target, willing to slice open Ancelin's throat without another hesitation.

"I am the Phoenix." She slid one hand over his burning bicep. The touch reminded him to glance at it and his breath caught. His once clear arm now had a swirl of artwork decorating it. *The mark of the phoenix.*

"Where ... how?"

"I am called Nix. I am Ancelin's mate and unlike him, would see no harm come to you or yours." She held open her palm. "Please give that to me. I will help you."

"Damn you, Nix," Ancelin rasped.

Something about her calm manner despite the chaos surrounding her, and the soothing tone of her voice, made Danyl consider her request. Not to mention the fact Ancelin seemed genuinely perturbed that she helped him. "Why should I believe you?"

"I assure you I am neutral in this matter."

"But you are his mate."

Her gaze flitted to Ancelin before her face darkened. "By prophecy. Not by choice." She beckoned with her outstretched hand. "We don't have time for this, Danyl. Your mate will be beyond even my help before long."

"You can help her?"

"I can."

If Aphrodite died, it wouldn't matter anyway. He dropped the knife into her waiting palm. "Please..."

After taking the blade from him, she stood and walked to where Di lay dying. Her

bloodied hands no longer tried to stem the flow coming from her wound. She fought too hard to stay conscious instead.

Danyl dropped his head next to Ancelin's ear. His voice low, he said, "If she dies, I *will* kill you. I promise that neither you nor your mate will be able to stop me."

He rose and joined Nix in kneeling next to Di. Her golden hair lay in a halo around her head and he pushed a few errant strands out of her face. His hand next to her pallor was an instant contrast. She'd lost so much blood. Enough to ensure her mortality.

Nix's eyes filled with tears as she looked on. She rose on her knees and bent over Di. Her long, tapered fingers rested on Di's lower lip and gently tugged her mouth open. Nix blinked twice and a large tear rolled down her cheek and fell into Di's mouth.

"Be well, child of man," Nix whispered.

His chest hurt. He watched helpless, hopeful, his breath held as Nix tended to Di. It wasn't until he felt the sharp pang in his sternum that Danyl remembered to breathe. But with every breath he took, the rise and fall of her chest appeared to slow.

He looked up sharply. "Phoenix?"

"Shh ... patience..."

An eternity passed. When he'd just about given up hope, after he'd resigned himself to taking the knife away from Nix and finishing the job he started, Di blinked twice. Her eyes opened all the way and she gave him the sweetest smile he'd ever seen in his life. His throat tightened until his voice box locked in place. Afraid of the fragility of her state, the kiss he planted on her lips next was tender. A promise of more to come.

She tried to sit up, but he rested his hand on her shoulder, gently holding her down. He looked up at Nix. "The child," he said hoarsely. He couldn't bear to ask the actual question, but he needed to know his child survived the ordeal. "He said she is pregnant."

Turquoise eyes turned sad. "There is no child here, Danyl. Only the empty words of a desperate man."

His heart lurched, but he bit back his disappointment. Aphrodite survived and that was all that mattered. If she would have him, a lifetime of having children waited ahead of them.

"And him?" he snapped.

Nix looked to her mate. "He can guarantee safe passage home for your woman. She would have never left this place without him."

Di shoved his hand aside and sat up. Danyl smiled his satisfaction at her obstinacy. She felt better already. "Why not?"

"When you walked past the entrance to the underworld, you felt uneasy?" She continued when Di frowned and nodded. "You couldn't see him, but you felt Cerberus, the three-headed dog who sleeps at the entrance that also serves as the exit."

The blood drained from Danyl's face. "Oh, gods ... I hadn't stopped to consider..."

Di looked between them both. "I don't get it. It didn't bother me when we got here."

Danyl shook his head. "He won't prevent you from coming in, goddess."

Nix finished the explanation. "Danyl is a creature of mythos and has access to this place almost whenever it suits him, so long as he appeases Charon with payment. You, my dear, are mortal and possess a soul. Cerberus would have kept you here because souls that enter the underworld are not allowed to leave." She looked toward Ancelin who'd propped himself upright by now. "Not without help from one of the gods ... or demi-gods who reside here."

Danyl's face tightened. "That's your price, isn't it? His life for hers?"

"It is, son of Simeona. And I know that Ancelin is agreeable to this arrangement if you promise to leave this place, never to seek him out ever again."

So, he had a choice. He could still kill his father, and take the chance that someone in the underworld would take pity on them and allow his mate to leave. It would satisfy the burning need to avenge his mother's death as owed him. Because he knew the reputations of the underworld's selfish gods, it would also most likely damn Di to an eternity here.

Or, he could accept the mate-of-his-father's proposition and secure a way home for Di—the woman he loved and wanted to spend the rest of his life loving.

It was no choice at all.

\* \* \* \*

"You still owe me a coin, Danyl. In fact, I'd still like to know how you'd planned on returning it to me after you gave it to Charon in the first place."

They lay on the beach, letting the rising tide tickle their feet. Di curled herself beneath his shoulder, her arm draped across his waist. Nix had healed them both of their wounds before they left as a last show of faith. Now, the morning sun had not yet risen, but the new day held promise. They could enjoy this private moment a few minutes longer.

He thought often of Nix's parting words when they'd left the underworld. *Have heart Danyl, son of Ancelin and Simeona. Your mother's death will be avenged. Not by your hand, but by another's. It has been foretold.*

"What does that mean?"

"I gave you my coin, my future. Remember?"

Di's near-death experience pressed on his chest like a weight now. He didn't know if he could survive another event like it. "You are my future, goddess," he said softly.

She lifted her head and regarded him. "And you know that you are mine, mate."

*Mate.* Just hearing that word from her mouth made his cock twitch. He would hear it again and again. For now and for always. Still, there would be challenges. "Mate of mine, will you be able to release me to the sea as necessary? It is my home; where I was born. Where I was raised. I fear I won't always be able to ignore its call."

"Danyl, of course. I understand that. *Mate of mine*, if you promise to always come back to me, I would gladly share you with her."

He angled and captured her mouth with his. Looking deep into her eyes, he said, "The gods themselves couldn't keep me away, *agapimeni*. My love for you rivals the number of stars in the sky, is as unending as the heavens and flows deeper than the ocean." He writhed away from her, and settled his torso between her thighs. Carefully, he lifted away the bottoms of that damned black cloth covering her slit.

"Are you trying to distract me from my original question, Danyl?" she murmured as she lifted her hips from the sand.

He inhaled deeply, the scent of that place as enticing as ever. His mouth watered in anticipation of tasting the very core of her. "I haven't forgotten goddess. This is just something I've been wanting to do. When this is done, I'm going to tell you a story of sunken ships and gold coins."

"Gold coins?"

"More than you can carry." He lowered his head and ran his nose along the join of

her thigh.

"And you would help me find these coins?" she asked, her voice husky.

"Every blessed one. Right after ... I do ... this."

### **The End**

#### **About the Author:**

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later—which, despite good intentions, she never finished. Almost ten additional years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again, and her love for storytelling was rekindled. Now, Dee is a best-selling, award-winning author who lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs and a cat. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

To learn more about all of Dee's books, please visit her at  
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