



DARK CURRENTS

MIMA

SANDRA J. PETERSON

It's not every day a woman faces down the bitch who owns her man's soul.

Elementals, Book 1

Xia is sick and tired of having her ass served to her every bloody night. Exhausted, she soldiers on, working the Scottish dream beat alone, seeking to identify those who plot to awaken Aqua, one of the four slumbering elements. Should Aqua fully open her eyes, she won't be happy until she picks her teeth with the bones of the last human on earth.

When an assassin tags Xia, her new guardian arrives—a seal shifter linked to the very element she fears. Adam is certain that Markos, Xia's boss and sometimes lover, is putting her in unnecessary danger. But Xia has tasted the inhuman cruelty that is Aqua and will do anything to stop her, even relive a terrifying, perilous spell.

Now that Adam has been assigned to protect her witchy spirit wanderings, Xia has to trust him. It isn't his power or ability she's uneasy about, but the fact he'll have to take all the pain meant for her.

Then the Chamber ruthlessly deploys Xia and Adam in a dangerous ritual. Adam can protect her body and defend her mind...but nothing can safeguard her from the backlash of the world-changing knowledge she discovers.

Warning: This adventure is blatantly Scottish and dives into save-the-world sex with two of the hunkiest magical men you'll ever meet.

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Dark Currents

Mima

Dedication

To Lisa

Author's Note

Any geographic errors in my description of Scotland are mine, or artistic license. The author highly recommends a visit to the Isle of Skye, accessed via the ferry at Mallaig.

Your Guide to the Magical World

Advocate: the manager of a group of morphi, often an elemental. Typically also in charge of any ramparts assigned to the morphi.

Anchor: the magic user who holds on to the morphi's psyche while they perform the subsumation ritual. The anchor's responsibility is to help the morphi re-form to as close to their former self as possible.

Astral Plane: a psychic construct for the magical world where a soul can travel freely. Damage taken there can be reflected in the physical world. Also called the etheric plane.

Chamber: the judicial body of all magic-using races whose purpose is to monitor the magic in the world in order to keep the elements asleep. Most magicals accept the necessity of the Chamber, even if they do not contribute to it.

Dragon: a reptilian race of magic users with the power to shapeshift.

Dreamer Witch: magic users genetically capable of attuning themselves to the elements and riding their unconscious, sleeping minds.

Dreamtime: The time when light fills the sky but the sun is not in it. It is when an element's consciousness is closest to our magical reality, and can be sensed through ritual magic.

Elemental: a magical with an affinity for an element, who also is aware of them. Elementals are strongly solitary and do not like to work together. They can be any kind of magical race. This mutual awareness makes the elemental stronger than others of his or her race.

Elements: one of four conscious ancient entities that rule the natural world and strongly influence the magical one. Air, named Aer, and earth, named Terra, are androgynous. Water is feminine and named Aqua. Fire is masculine and named Ignis. Ideally, they should all be in a resting state.

Gloaming: a Scottish term for extended twilight, a geographical trick of their high latitude.

Morphi: a Chamber-appointed magical assigned to psychically work the dreamtime in order to spy on the elements' dreams and, through them, criminal magicals who are trying to rouse them. Usually a dreamer witch.

Lord and Lady: the two halves of the deity worshipped by a wide range of magicals.

Magical: any race of magic users relegated by humans to religion or mythology, but very much alive and involved in the world. Angels, elves, orcs, werewolves and lamia are all examples. Their existence is known of by many humans, since many of the magicals are not particularly interested in hiding their nature, but they are not publicly acknowledged except by small communities. They can be any nationality.

Minotaur: a bull-related race of magic users, appearing human from the knee up.

Night Watch: the emergency service of the Chamber.

Selkie: a seal-related race of magic users, they can shapeshift with the use of a seal skin.

Rampart: a psychic magical who guards a morphi against any astral attack or tracking while he or she is working during the dreamtime.

Sprite: a fairy-like race of magic users, they are extremely tough.

Subsumation: a ritual where a morphi travels so far into an element's consciousness she becomes part of it, cut free of her own psyche. It is a rare ritual, with the potential for death or mind-wipe. Also called the ghosting or the sinking, it is used only during times of dire need, when an element's intentions need to be determined.

Watcher: a Chamber-designated secret soldier, used as bodyguard, assassin or spy.

Wendigo: a magical whose body is humanoid-hawk, an Algonquin race of magic users.

Chapter One

Xia was an expert on dreams. It was safe to say fewer than a dozen souls on the planet had more knowledge than she. Clawing her way across the sweaty, plaid sheets, she choked, body trembling. Her mind tumbled but already her training kicked in. She gasped in one raspy breath. *Flashback*, she realized. *Not real.*

Coughing shook her. A body could be slow to strip off the mind's tricks. And a morphi, a Chamber-trained dreamer witch, knew that invisible magic killed just as surely as physical steel. With another rasping breath, she wrestled her pounding heart. *It's been twenty years since I survived Aqua's mind. I'm in Scotland. I'm Xia.*

Brushing her long, tangled auburn hair from her hot face, her fingertips grazed wet cheeks. Cursing her own weakness, she scrambled to scrub her face dry. *I'm not drowning in my own bed.* Lady take it, she knew better than to lounge half-awake, even well after dawn. A morphi's magic worked in the twilight hours of half-light, but with so many years of missions, she had plenty of nasty memories. Her dreams were stronger than most, and her nightmares... Well there were instances where morphi went insane overnight. She'd been so cozy, so lazy, and her subconscious had slipped her a zinger.

She rolled to the edge of the bed and curled her mauve-painted toenails into the bland, sturdy beige carpeting of her rental cottage. Her shoulders still heaved with deep breaths. She'd been here for a frustrating month. If it were a normal assignment, failure to glean information out of her dreamlike elemental patrols would piss her off. But when the assignment was this personal, this momentous, this dire... Her fingers clenched so tight around the edge of the mattress she threatened to puncture the sheets.

She surged to her feet and stormed to her closet, rifling roughly through the hangers. Some psychonutjob in the magical community was trying to wake Aqua up. *Was succeeding.* Xia was one of a very few who knew from the inside just how joyous it would make that bitch to drown the world. A huntress's hunger to find the guilty gnawed in Xia's gut. Stupid magicals were trying to upset the balance of the sleeping four elements and she was going to stop them. Despite the stench of fear-sweat still drying on her skin, she chafed at having to wait until later that evening to dive into her patrol again, seeking along the edges of the elements' dreams for answers. She was a soldier for the Chamber, the powerful magicals dedicated to maintaining the four elements' unconscious state. Working despite emotion was second nature.

Xia stared at the meager choices hanging before her. The limited wardrobe was typical. When you travelled as much as she did, your luggage was your apartment. She pulled out a cream V-neck tee, a moss-green peasant skirt, and Aunt Natty's hand-knitted brown sweater. Despite it being July, Scottish mornings on the Atlantic coast were usually cool. Perhaps today she'd try to get online to do some girl-time shopping. A few new outfits were called for, to shake off the funk.

This morning's flashback was the icing on the cake. She was going to get more aggressive. After all, lying low and dogged persistence weren't getting her anywhere. Last night, once again, Aqua had sensed her on patrol and sent some piranhas. Being a psychic chew-toy hurt. The most optimistic view of her failure could be that she was at least keeping Aqua amused.

In the kitchen, she fired up the laptop and the countertop electric kettle. In the bathroom, she went through her morning sequence, thankful for the good skin her witch genes blessed her with even at the young age of 116. In the middle of brushing, she found herself humming "da roof, da roof, da roof is on fire". Spitting her toothpaste in the sink, Xia stared at the faint bruises beneath her gray eyes, making her passably pretty face more pale than usual and her freckles more stark. What was with the fire songs that kept popping into her head the last few days?

"Try not to act any crazier than you already are, Xia. Keep it together or they'll put you back with a counselor." She glared sternly at herself and rinsed her mouth.

She'd fought hard to piece herself back together after she'd Returned. Very few witches suffered the subsumation ritual into an element's dreaming consciousness, and not all of those emerged whole. She was lucky. Xia wasn't about to descend into desperate paranoia again.

She had a new thought about what her brain was trying to tell her with the recent fire songs. *Markos*. Wiping her face with the barely damp cloth to avoid pure water on her face, a coping mechanism Dr. Smith had taught her, she moved into the kitchen, looking for her cell. She'd only put the pattern of odd songs together yesterday and didn't know why she hadn't thought of the obvious.

Markos was her boss of eighty-six years, officially titled an advocate. He'd occasionally been her partner, and even her lover. He was a massive, sexy minotaur in his prime...and also an Ignis elemental. She never thought of Markos without also feeling warm, inside and out. He was a good friend, most of the time. When he wasn't being an irritating bull, a chauvinist Greek or a secretive boss. Xia wasn't outright prescient, being a dreamer witch, but she did tend to get hunches.

Sure enough, a text from Markos was waiting.

New assignment. Pick up package at post. I'm sorry.

After staring at the message for a full minute, she deleted it with cold fingers. So. They wanted to send her back inside another element. The situation had reached critical and the Chamber was ready to sacrifice a few morphi, ordering them to subsume themselves into one of the four sleeping elements. She picked up the washcloth off the floor, where it had fallen. That bastard. He could have called, told her in

person. But he'd been cowardly. She knew this wasn't his choice, so she wouldn't blame him. The order came from above. But he'd handed her a nightmare in a mere text message, which hurt.

If she'd managed to dream anything in the past month, gotten any decent information, would this new assignment still have arrived? If she managed to pull something out of the ether tonight, wringing Aqua's neck for her secrets, could she get out of this order? What about a protest to insist someone else be assigned? After all, it had taken two years for her to be cleared for duty after she'd Returned last time. Yet apparently they were going to send her back, deep inside an alien mind.

Making her tea with extra honey, Xia inhaled above the mug. Stilling her mind, she found control in the nonmagical ritual of morning tea. The first sip braced her and the cheerful print of Highland Terrier puppies over the sink reminded her of the innocence that existed out there, clueless. *I am a morphi. This is what I signed on to do, and now it's what I am. I follow the Chamber's orders. Quit being weak, or the elements will own you.* She took another swallow and almost believed her pep talk.

She checked her email, sent the same depressingly empty report on last night's patrol, and glanced at the headlines. Her gaze caught on one and she glared at it, anger firing in her blood at her failure to find answers. *Malaysia Mauled by Mega Monsoon.*

Oh yes, Xia was born a dreamer witch. But she'd chosen to become a morphi, a spy dedicated to keeping the Four in balance and asleep. She had her reasons why. Their names had been Mom and Dad. That didn't explain the pride with which she'd trained, or the extra reserve of will she fed on to twist inside an element's dream. *I'm a damn fine morphi. I am a powerful guardian of the planet, working to defend all life. I've done it before and I can do it again.*

Xia pulled on her sweater and took her white wicker basket off the counter. Pausing at the door, she smiled at the giant straw hat hanging there. It was much too stylish to be called a sombrero, but it had been made in Mexico. A bright blue ribbon threaded around the base and through the brim, so it could be tied on firmly. She put it on, feeling her sister's warmth from across the planet.

Under the carport waited the Schwinn, her pride and joy. When it had become clear after the first week that this was going to be a long placement, she'd had it shipped from Glasgow. The paint glittered bright royal purple, the handle grips were sunshine yellow, and the seat was contoured white leather. She'd added the wicker basket herself. Once she got it started, it felt like she could pedal all day, and sometimes she did take lovely daytrips through the winding country roads near Mallaig, on this western Atlantic shore of Scotland.

Taking a deep breath of the clean air, she enjoyed the fact she couldn't smell the ocean this morning. Enough. It was time to get on with the day. She set off down the cottage's unpaved lane. She kept her mind determinedly blank of what waited in the package at the post, blank of thoughts of Aqua, or Ignis for that matter. Navel-gazing was a useless activity unless you were trying to prove to a shrink you weren't crazy, and Xia was over that.

When she came into the village, she parked her bike behind a board papered with local advertisements. Stopping first at the grocery, she chatted with Anne, the sweet owner who'd been so friendly to her. She picked up a sausage pasty for lunch. She chatted with Mr. Branough, dozing on the bench outside the post, with his border collie Rougher sleeping across his feet.

She chatted with the postmaster, asking his opinion of Talisker's gold label and agreeing with him that it was their best. She took the small, innocent white envelope being held for her without looking at it, and kept her smile fixed in place. Focusing on the envelope made the sight out the old wooden doorframe that much more of a shock.

Time stopped. Her blood ran cold. *Macgregor the goat was eating her hat.*

"You *beast!*" Xia rushed out of the post office flapping her mail.

The goat remained unmoved, standing planted on the sidewalk, munching with contented, circular jaw strokes.

Xia snatched her sweater off her bike's handlebars and beat it on the rump. "No! Bad goat!"

He started, dropped the straw hat, trampled over it, and clambered up onto a fieldstone wall.

Xia picked up the bedraggled hat and wiped goat spit off it with a grimace. "This is Scotland. You're supposed to be a fluffy, grass-loving sheep, not a goat." She forlornly dusted the wide brim, now containing a missing arc.

The goat flicked his tail at her. If she were a Christian, she'd say its slitted eyes looked demonic. But she'd met cuter demons. Better behaved ones too. This wretched creature was more of an orc.

"Ah, now. There's a shame. Macgregor would eat the pope's hat, he would." Elderly Mr. Branough still sat on the bench against the gray stone wall of the tiny post office. He had on a flat tweed hat, a tweed sport coat over an ivory wool fisherman's sweater, oiled leather pants, and tall rubber boots. If he looked any more like a stereotypical British country gentleman, some tourist would come along and put him in a scrapbook. He thumped his cane. "Young rascal." His devoted old border collie lifted his head, looked at his master, and lay down again with a groan.

"Oh, Mr. Branough. My sister gave me this hat. It came all the way from Mexico."

"Aye, well, take it to the missus. She'll put some pretty plaid across that bit missing and make it right."

Scotland was a land of misty, rolling glens of heather. It was ruins on craggy cliff tops. It was little thatched cottages with roses along the whitewashed walls. But it was also incessant wind, clouds of midges, and people who were brutally matter-of-fact practical. Xia loved it all, except Macgregor.

"I'm that sorry, lass. I was dozing with Rougher, here. Such a bonnie day."

Xia put the damaged straw hat on her head with a sigh, tying the ribbon under her chin. "That's all right, Mr. Branough. You weren't tasked with guarding my things. Enjoy the sun."

“Well done, you. Go shake it off and ride your bicycle out to the beach. Listening to the waves always soothes the spirit.”

Xia pursed her lips against reacting to his outrageously erroneous statement. She tried to keep her face clear of her opinion. “Mr. Branough, it’s always so nice to visit with you and Rougher.”

“Aye-uh. Now there’s a sour puss.” Clearly, he wasn’t buying it. “Haven’t ye found what ye been seeking then?”

Like most people who respected magic, Mr. Branough sensed it enough to suspect Xia of being something more than human, which of course she was. The villagers generally nodded pleasantly, assuming Xia’s presence in the rental cottage was recreational. “Oh, aye, how loovely,” they’d say when she explained her visit was temporary.

The first time she’d met him, Mr. Branough had looked her up and down. He should have seen nothing more than her average height, her gray eyes, and average face with long, thick, dark auburn hair. But he’d given her a small bow. Nothing obvious, just a respectful courtly gesture she’d been used to seeing more in her youth. He had responded with the same words the other villagers had, but he’d stretched each word out with a knowing weight. Then he’d winked before bending to pat Rougher.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Xia put her sweater in the wicker basket hanging on sparkling purple handlebars, along with her mail and the sausage pasty. “Mr. Branough, there’s much in this world that doesn’t want to be found.”

“I assume a smart lass like yourself will know not to bother that which is best left alone.”

Her hands tightened into skeletal claws on the cheerful yellow grips. His simple, wise words brought it all back. Her heart thumped in her chest with memories made fresh from this morning’s flashback. *Drowning in her own bed. Screaming through tears at her lover for failing her. A nightly dose of sleeping herbs for years.* Xia had gone poking into the deepest parts of a very large something that was best left alone, and she’d paid. But orders were orders.

“That’s good advice. Don’t worry about me. I’m good at what I do.” She smiled fondly at Mr. Branough, with his funny eyebrows and kind, sharp eyes. She swallowed, pushing her heart back into her chest.

Saying goodbye to Mr. Branough and Rougher, Xia mounted the Schwinn. With an awkward, hopping push, she strained on the pedals. Soon the large fenders and white-walled tires were rolling with all its considerable retro-charm. It amused Xia to see humans recycle styles round and round, but she was grateful too. So much changed so quickly. It was comforting when familiar items came into fashion again.

Away she zoomed down the street, the breeze flapping the wide brim of her hat. She caught Anne laughing at her in the grocery’s window, but pretended not to notice. No one in this sleepy village just south of Skye appreciated the Schwinn’s glitter paint job. Nor her sister’s hat. Nor her privacy, for that matter. She adored it here.

At the crest of the hill of the main street, she put her foot down, pausing at the corner. She should return home now, read Markos's letter, clear her mind from the crappy morning and rest for tonight's patrol. But she didn't feel like it. She wasn't sure what she felt. Maybe dangerous.

Dangerous made her think of Adam, the only other magical she'd met so far in Mallaig. Mr. Branough's advice to go to the sea suddenly seemed enticing. Well, she was only going to visit the seashore by default. Really she wanted to see the man who belonged to it. She was too upset by Markos's letter in her basket. Macgregor's insensitive greed was just the excuse not to open it. She would delay returning to her quiet little cottage. She was going to the water to talk to Adam.

Xia knew better, of course. There would be a price to pay. After all, she was trying to stay beneath Aqua's notice. Being stationed on the coast and actually going down to the water's edge were two very different things. Aqua could recognize Xia easier tonight, for her proximity. But it wasn't like Aqua hadn't been able to shred her just fine these past weeks anyway. She was sick of it. How about she turn the tables. She wanted to toy with one of Aqua's pets a bit, like a wicked child shaking a hamster awake in its cage. Hmmm. Xia wasn't sure how that analogy reflected on her maturity.

She slowed at the foot of the pier, where the steps went from the raised road down to the cobblestone beach. *Hello, hamster*, she thought with a grin. Propping herself still with one foot stretched out, she looked him over. He was tall and blond, dressed in a ragged brown T-shirt and jeans. She never liked blonds. They were too intimidating, tending to ooze confidence. He was trim and strong. She never pursued lean men, as her soft, wide hips tended to be in a different class than muscular, fit bodies. He was tied to the sea down to his very soul. She feared it like nothing else on earth, above or below. And Xia, of all women, knew there was much to be feared.

The hamster's name—*now stop that*, she chastised herself—the fisherman's name was Adam. Others might wonder what a single man of his work ethic and beauty was doing in this struggling village, working in the freezing, harsh, terrifying sea every day. Xia knew he could be no other place, nor wanted to. This was his territory, settled upon him with ancestral blood. He was working on a thousand greasy pieces of a battered outboard motor strewn across a piece of plywood propped on two sawhorses.

"Hello, Adam." Wakey-wakey, hamster.

He looked up, and his hair glinted in the sun like gilt. He had black eyes. Some would find this color combination odd, perhaps. It suited him. Xia never cared for men with black eyes. Their thoughts were too deep, too private, to ever truly know them. To ever truly trust them.

He straightened, a tool and a cloth in each filthy hand. "Hello, Morphi."

See, now that right there made this trip down to the beach worth it. To be reminded that this was *not* a man she'd ever go for. Jerk.

She smiled brightly from her perch straddling the bike, looking down on him from the tidal wall. She ignored the uncalled-for way he used her title, putting a gulf between them. “Such a nice day, isn’t it?” The steady, menacing swoosh of the waves on the cobbles made her spine shrivel.

“Aye. Nice hat.”

Her cheeks stung in the salt air. Even though he said it without any intonation, it felt ungentlemanly of him to call attention to it. “It used to be. Macgregor found it in the short time it took me to pick up the post.”

“Aye. I was thinking it was him, and not you, that ate it.” Now his tone was sardonic.

Nodding blithely, she gamely changed the subject. “How’s the engine coming?”

“As expected. It’s a piece of shite.”

“Ah.” Teeth clenched, she kept her face pleasant. “Well, good luck then.”

He didn’t say a word in return. She stared at him, smiling like an idiot, brain frozen. Those black eyes were as merciless as the sea. And as cold.

Awkwardly, she bounced the bike’s massive front end around, stumbling when her green peasant skirt caught on a pedal, until she’d turned it, puffing. Finally, she was on the seat and huffing to get it started again. His gaze was a tormenting itch in the middle of her back until she was out of sight. It sucked when the hamster you wanted to play with bit you. People who said selkies made wonderful lovers were morons.

Leaving the cluster of stone and stucco houses that passed for a village, Xia rumbled over the dusty gravel at the side of the one-lane road. She’d journeyed here to spite the bad memories and to delay opening the letter. In her pique, she’d gone down to the water. She’d spoken to the beautiful fisherman, the seal-man, the cold-eyed hamster who plagued her imagination. Now she had Markos’s unopened letter, a chewed hat, churning humiliation, and spindrift on her skin like the touch of poison. Tonight, the nightmares would be very bad.

The letter fluttered in the basket. Markos’s symbol of a tiny, tawny flame was burned into the return address spot, put there with one of his blunt fingers. Xia narrowed her eyes and stood to pedal faster and faster, throwing all her weight into each push. The massive bike surged forward. The letter tossed, only the sleeve of Aunt Natty’s sweater holding one corner. *With Power comes Burden*, she could hear Aunt Natty say sadly. Hating the letter, hating the situation, hating her fear, she stared at the envelope. She pedaled harder, leaning over the basket, eyes on the gravel spattering by under the wheels, and finally the letter swirled into the air.

For one breathless moment, bitter triumph thrilled through Xia. *I’m sorry, Markos, I don’t know what happened to it. It must have blown out of my basket on the ride home...* Gasping, Xia lunged for it, grabbing it with one hand. The bike wove wildly, gravel grinding with an ominous clatter. Cursing under her breath, she got her balance back and sat down. The letter was clenched between her hand and the sunny

rubber grip. She could feel the small bulge inside it. That would be the packet of herbs that would rip her soul away.

Eyes stinging, she blinked the wind-tears away. Powerful scumbags were waking that bitch Aqua up, and so far none of the Chamber's resources had been able to find them and stop them. When things were this bad, the Chamber brought out the harsh orders. And soldiers died. Focusing on the seagulls soaring overhead, Xia pedaled in time to their lazy wing beats, as if focusing on her body could banish her anger. The jagged peaks on the Isle of Skye snarled from the water off to her right. She straightened her spine.

Xia turned into the tire-tracked dirt lane leading to her cottage. She gathered up her belongings, leaving the gorgeous bike in the center of the carport. It wasn't even noon, but oh, how tired she was. What a mess. A morphi who practically dared her mark to notice her. Attracted to a man she didn't quite like and outright feared, probably just to distract herself from her failure. With a terrifying letter from her boss sitting in her basket. And the day only leading to another brutal try at being a spy. Being a morphi wasn't nearly as glamorous as they made it sound in *Magic Weekly*.

For the first time, Xia considered asking for help. She wasn't entirely sure about the wisdom of assigning a morphi to a land that experienced the gloaming, the odd twilight where light lingered long past sunset. It sometimes lasted past eleven o'clock in the summer. Morphi needed twilight to work, but the extended time on the dreamscape was taking its toll. She wasn't getting anything, but Aqua was taking plenty out of her. The gloaming let her wander the dreamscape longer than she ever had before. All she found was horror. But it was simpler working alone.

The little cottage wasn't historic, but she appreciated it wasn't a metal trailer, either. It had a wood frame, with modern stucco filling in the walls and a plain, brown-shingled roof. Xia hung her hat on the pegboard by the door, next to the large front window that looked past the old apple tree to the unmown field. Her flats she placed neatly on the mat. Pausing at the side of the couch, she tossed Markos's letter into the garbage can and laid the wrapped pasty on the laminate counter that separated the kitchen from the sitting area. She set a cup of water to boil. Moving past the bathroom and into her bedroom, she hung up the sweater the morning had required. The view out the back window was pretty, the fence just a short ways beyond her bedroom window thick with massive thistle. No sheep had been in the Glyndon's pasture since she'd arrived. Maybe they thought she'd curse the herd.

Humming, she put the pasty on a napkin and ate a spoonful of honey while she waited for the water to boil. She decided on plain black and filled the tea ball with the delicate leaves. Clearing her throat sharply in the empty silence, she kept her guilty, itchy back defiantly to the garbage can where her advocate's letter sat and finished making her tea. Sitting on the small sofa in the living room, because there was nothing else but uncomfortable counter stools to sit on, she pulled the end table up and ate the filling pasty, enjoying the sizzle of the sausage.

Curled in the corner, nursing her tea, Xia finally let her gaze slide guiltily over to the wastebasket. Markos's flame-mark flickered at her over the edge. She tapped her fingers against her mug. It was too much to hope for that he was merely reassigning her. It would be a blow to be reassigned off his team. Not only did she have a strong relationship with him, but he understood her and let her work alone, as was her preference ever since she'd Returned.

She hadn't seen him face to face since he'd fried that hotel desk in Beijing after she'd painted his hooves yellow while he was sleeping. Naturally, it was in retaliation for him taking all her dresses out of her hotel room and leaving only a pair of painted-on jeans for her to wear to an important dinner with a snooty fenghuang. Chinese phoenixes were renowned for their respected fashion sense, and Xia had simmered every time the elegant, delicate creature had stared at her jeans. Her vengeance had been terrible. Those light-hearted times seemed like years ago instead of months.

Heaving a put-upon sigh, Xia set her mug on the table and fetched the letter. She stroked her fingers along the length of the envelope, feeling the single piece of paper inside and the small, thin bulge. Her nose imagined it could smell spelled herbs. She shuddered, a roll of revulsion cascading down her spine. She wasn't sure, but in her heart she knew what this packet was. Twice before she'd breathed in this spell. Twice before she'd given up all of herself and disappeared into another creature's soul. *Practice makes perfect.*

Closing her eyes, she almost let herself sob. There was no one to see. She'd cried nightly for the last few weeks, when she finally emerged from the gloaming, alone and drenched in sweat reeking of fear. But she wouldn't cry over this. This wasn't just a job. It was who Xia was. *I'm a damn fine morphi. I am a powerful guardian of the planet, working to defend all life. I've done it before and I can do it again.*

But still her fingers didn't open it. Nothing in it would change her standing orders to patrol for clues on who was waking Aqua. Decisively, she decided to go shopping then spend the afternoon grounding herself for a harder patrol tonight. After she'd given herself one more chance to succeed, then she'd face Markos's news. Later.

Chapter Two

Shopping her favorite websites proved enjoyable. A decent income was just about the only perk of being a morphi. Then came a brief, dreamless nap, and it was time for a cuppa. Picking up her tea, Xia went outside and around the back of the house. She walked past the old apple tree and along the thistle hedge, her shadow long with the setting sun. She prepared for the dreamtime.

She did not have to center herself in the physical world, but she liked to. Connecting to the elements this way reminded her they weren't really her enemy, when it was so easy to slip into the habit of seeing them that way. Poor things, they couldn't help their nature. They couldn't help that after the first time they'd slept, an entire world of fragile but determined things had sprung into being, and now wanted with all their hearts to survive.

Xia walked until she crested the small hill, and tipped the last of her honeyed tea into the soil there, an offering of peaceful intent. She lifted her free hand and closed it on the evening breeze, taking from Aer. Squatting, she placed her hand on the soil and took from Terra. Reaching deeper, she took from Aqua and finally, deeper still, she took from Ignis. Poised in grass, she let herself drift in her own mind for a long time, calm and strong, a woman comfortable with her magic.

The walk back was when she began to focus her thoughts and control her breathing. By the time she walked into the house, she'd nearly achieved the trance state. Shedding her skirt and tee, her slip, bra and panties, she then undid the clip in her hair. She piled the plaid bed pillows up and lay down, reclining on the smooth comforter. Pointing her toes, she stretched in one tight, focused wave that settled her, centered her.

The power in her center began to spin. She breathed carefully and watched it build, faster and faster, until her brain spun away when the last of the sun glinted past the horizon. Morphi trained to join elemental dreams that would help the Chamber keep the four elements in balance. She could listen for the Four's secrets *only* during twilight, the time between. That's when she could glide along the edges of their dreams.

Breathing in the cool stillness, Xia triggered the unique power she'd been born with. She slid into the dreamtime, a place as much as a moment. As long as light and dark danced in twilight, her magic could glide among the elements, riding connections, dabbling over patterns, dreaming.

An expanse of shining black stretched out before her. Xia flew over the endless acres of menace. Aqua, cold and silent. Passive, asleep, she was the most dangerous thing on the planet. Xia's horror was she

saw Aqua dreaming of her own awakening, becoming more self-aware night after night. When she was fully alert, another flood would take the world and no one she knew had an ark ready this time.

No one could stop her but Terra. Terra was sullen and sleepy and slow compared to Aqua's speed. Ignis chattered and raged, sleeping as long as it was kept fed. Aer was always delighted with change, a fairly useful childlike being commonly in a sleepwalking state. But now things were in flux and the other elements were paying attention. It was bad when one of the Four tipped the balance and grew dominant. But it was worse when that waking element was Aqua. Aqua, unlike any of the others, hated.

Everything in Xia focused on *stretching*. She needed a clue to who dabbled too close to Aqua's dreams. Slowing, she lost altitude, skimming breathlessly over the puckered waves. Then Xia landed, splashing into Aqua's angry, muttering grip. She twisted and rolled as visions of a nightmare world of dark and rain, cold and wet took her. Breathing through the sudden chaos, the lashing confusion, she struggled to find her footing, to find some grip in Aqua's awareness so that she could go beneath her notice. A morphi was a spy. She needed to be a ghost, a shadow, a faint cold spot...

But today she'd gone down to the sea. She'd even spoken to a being of Aqua's. Aqua wove through Xia just as she struggled to weave through Aqua. Abruptly, an image of golden hair swishing wetly around a gray face. Black eyes filmy in death, flashed by her. *No!* Adam in death hurt her, as sleepy Aqua knew it would.

Xia tried to back away from Aqua's connection to her. But she'd approached the water, and she had a price to pay. When she'd increased her proximity to Aqua, she'd increased Aqua's awareness of her in return. Abruptly, she quit struggling and let Aqua wrap Xia in her dream. There would be precious little spying going on this eve. She swallowed, determined to hold on for one slim chance Aqua's dreams would reveal something.

Aqua's bitter voice filled her head. *Filthy, loud, ugly, flopping things*. Images of drowned bodies flowed past Xia, ghosts Aqua delighted in. *Drown them, eat them, stop them. Hate, hate, hate. Wake!*

Abruptly, Aqua's dream shifted. Xia stood on the cobblestone beach. She looked at the endless, rippling expanse of gray ocean. The salt was sharp, smelling of things deeper than humans could understand. Macgregor was next to her, eating her hat. Someone stood behind her, warm and solid. He was very strong, his will aiding her as she kept her knees locked.

"Markos?"

No, it wasn't Markos. Something about this male presence at her back made her proud, instead of restless and worried like she usually got with a partner. Her breasts ached, and her breath came in short gasps. Sliding her magic between the cobbles on the beach, she anchored herself. Out on the horizon, the ocean lifted. The man at her back faded, and she moaned. Wind swirled around her, excited to the point of frenzy. Xia whimpered. The water a few meters from her pulled back, was sucked away. It was like a fist being drawn back for a strike. The sound came to her now, a thundering rush.

The sky darkened, clouds lowering, and it began to pour. She was soaked in an instant, her long auburn hair plastered to her chest and back. She blinked to try to keep the growing wall in her view. Sending her power deeper, she worked her feet until they were buried in the cool cobbles. The water rose so high in front of her, she lost sight of the peak.

With a massive outlay, she demanded Aer's presence, summoned with more force than she'd ever used. Surprised, confused by Aqua, Aer came, and Xia wrapped it around herself in a sphere of protection. She had time to swallow and take a reflexive breath before the water was on her. Her magic held, and her body was battered and lashed, but remained firm. She'd learned that much. Night after night she'd been torn and swirled in Aqua's ferocious grasp, but now she stayed on the beach, even kept her limbs intact.

The Aer she'd called around her screamed to be severed from itself, as water covered them. And here was tonight's test. Had she gathered enough air tonight to outlast Aqua's fury and hear her secrets? Aqua buffeted so hard some of Aer was torn away. Grunting, Xia staggered in the hard cobbles, holding on to her surrounding cushion of air with all her might. Aqua threw horrors past Xia's bubble view: monstrous fish and bodies ruined with violence and rot. Once, a harpoon launched through the globe of safety she'd gathered. Gasping, Xia threw herself to the side, the red sting of blood a shock.

It went on forever, until Xia was shaking with exhaustion, sweating, crying. Aer shrank, and shrank, used by Xia, taken by Aqua. Her brain ached with the weight of dark water above her. The beach no longer felt like land. The tidal wave settled in as a massive flood. She was in her tomb on the bottom of the ocean. In the end, Aqua was a bare kiss away from her lips, and finally, Xia couldn't help but look up. Nothing. No glimmer of light beyond that coming from her own body, no shimmer of surface above her. Nothing but black water strewn with carnage.

The water bulged in toward her and the first icy touch of it on her left shoulder blade made her shriek. Sucking air too fast, her breaths loud in her ears, Xia sobbed. Then it was pressing to her thighs like an icy dagger and Xia struggled to pull out of the dreamtime, knowing she'd lost again. It didn't matter that the coming torment was only psychic. She desperately tried to rouse herself to avoid it.

Seaweed wrapped around one ankle, the sandpaper rush of shark skin abraded her arm, and the shock of water up to her waist took her chance for a last breath. The current wrenched her away from earth and pulled until she felt bones break. Liquid poured into her lungs, and the world was nothing but writhing pain. Something bit into her knee and shook her body like a rag doll. She felt the warmth of her blood around her leg, an odd relief from the paralyzing cold.

Head throbbing, Xia tried to rise above herself, to let Aqua enjoy her pain and terror while she slipped between. Squid tentacles wrapped around her throat. Screaming, she slipped dangerously far from her body.

Keep Ignis fed. At all costs, keep him fed and happy. Soon Aqua will be too strong, even were he to wake. But until then, keep him busy.

Aqua ripped off her arm with the force of a current, while the shark took her leg. Several jellyfish plastered over her torso, seizing her body with agony, while seaweed flowed into her mouth and pushed down her throat. There was nothing to see in the dark, nothing at all, as the glow from her astral body dimmed. The world was dark and pain.

Xia woke up to the small blue glow of her Cookie Monster nightlight. Gagging, she scrambled for the bathroom on rubbery legs. She only made it to the linoleum before she retched, her body shaking. Gripping her wrist with her opposite hand, she held tight, reminding herself the loss of her arm wasn't real, just the dreamtime. She jerked herself to her knees and finished in the toilet. Listing back against the wall, she gasped, pissed and scared and grateful to be alive.

Then came her usual cry. The tears were bitter, angry. But tonight, after a fruitless month of these visions, as her body struggled to learn it was still whole, there was at least the pumping excitement that she had heard something. She'd caught a tiny clue. When she dashed the tears away, she noticed the blood. Stilling, she stared at the smear on the white tiles. Raising her hands, she saw blood on her right arm and tracked the trail up. A cut, six centimeters long. A cut, leaving a trail of blood. Real blood. *Real cut.*

Shrieking in rage, Xia surged to her feet and stormed into the dark living room. She fumbled in her basket until she found her cell and dialed Sanders, the Chamber's emergency operator for Great Britain.

"Night watch."

"I'm being tracked. I got hit in the dreamtime tonight."

"Morphi Xia?"

"Yes!"

"How bad is your rampart?"

Xia seethed. She knew he was assuming that if she was hurt, her bodyguard was incapacitated, if not dead. That he would think she was raving about being hurt herself if she had a wounded rampart down pissed her off even more. "I don't have one. But I need one now."

There was a long silence. Cautiously, the precise, upper-crust English voice said, "Markos has sent you into the Scottish gloaming with no rampart?"

"Sanders, I'm the one that said no guard. Ramparts just get in the way."

"Unless you get attacked."

"Yeah, yeah. The bastard tried to harpoon me!" She tried to juggle the blood seeping down her arm so that it wouldn't spill.

"Have you called for an ambulance?"

"It's just a scratch. And it was a lucky toss. I don't think he was actually at my location. I'm going to have to remain at this location, so I need a rampart."

"All right. Your rampart will be there by dawn."

"A guy, Sanders. No girls." Ramparts weren't always lovers, but Xia found attraction was inevitable.

“I have your profile. Are you calling Markos, or shall I?”

Xia rummaged in the kitchen drawer for an old towel. Her mouth tasted foul and her arm finally began to sting. She was bleeding all over. Dammit, all these towels were too nice. “You call him.” The thought of what he’d sent her in that letter pushed her blood pressure even higher. Fuck him and his stupid letter and his stupid secrets. “And you tell him—”

A few pissy retorts zinged through her head. She sighed heavily, finally just grabbing up the cute tea towel that said *Hilan’ Coo* with a picture of a shaggy Highland cow on it. She pressed it to her throbbing arm. “Tell him I’m taking tomorrow off.”

“Do you need immediate medical or magical assistance, Morphi?”

“No.” Xia ended the call and set the phone on the counter. She turned on the kitchen light, and immediately some of her tension eased. Fumbling with only her bad arm’s hand, she got out a baggie, filled it with a few ice cubes, and smashed them with a rolling pin, which made her arm scream in pain. Then she folded the bloody towel around them and pressed it firmly to her arm.

Moaning, she went on shaky legs to the bathroom, stepping over the vomit to the toothpaste. She undid the cap with her teeth, sucked in a small mouthful and chewed it up. Rinsing by drinking from the faucet, she flushed the vomit, and stumbled to the bed. Blood stained the sheets, still damp with sweat.

Growling with frustration, Xia pulled her robe off the wall hook and went back to the main room. The couch was cool and scratchy, but at least it was away from the bedroom. She adjusted her hold on the cold pack and pressed it to her biceps tightly. Her robe made a poor blanket and she shivered. Staring at the swirled plaster ceiling, Xia tried to blank her mind, to still her thoughts and steady her heart.

She hadn’t penetrated through Aqua’s conscious front, but she’d picked up an echo. And it was a doozy. Terra was Aqua’s natural opposite. So why were the voices focused on Ignis? Chewing on her lips, Xia considered it all night, until the room lightened with dawn, and finally, she heard a car coming down her drive. It would be her rampart. Oh, Lord and Lady, she was tired. Her body had stiffened, despite the fact her torture had been mental.

Getting up and putting the robe on was agony. The car’s lights blinded her through the front window before they cut off. She tottered to the entrance, dreading the welcoming dance. Footsteps crunched on the gravel, and she opened the door.

“Hello.” Damn, her voice was all froggy. She cleared her throat, which made her sound as nervous as a novice. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Aye.” His silhouette was huge. Broad shoulders, solid thighs, big hands at the end of thick, long arms. The faint dawn revealed light-colored, shaggy hair. He paused on the step down from her, shadowed by the carport.

A man of few words, then. “I’m Xia. Come on in.” She turned and hobbled back to the couch. “What’s your name?”

She eased down on the cushions with protesting muscles, her shoulder aching from continuing to hold the ice pack firmly against her arm.

“Adam McConnell.”

She looked up so fast she pinched a nerve in her neck. And there he was, lit by the kitchen light, standing in her living room, closing her door behind him. Adam the built, blond, black-eyed jerk of a selkie-hamster.

“Ohhh.” Xia pinched the bridge of her nose. Her skin stank, her hair was snarled and stank, her breath stank, and she was sticky with blood. *Magic Weekly* should see her now.

“Let me see your arm.”

“That’s not what I was moaning over.”

Blessedly, the phone rang out to the cheerful tune of “Turkey in the Straw”. She struggled up from the couch. “That’s Markos, my advocate, our team leader. I should get it.” She’d programmed the tune in for his calls after he’d assigned her to the Atlantic coast, in the land of the gloaming. The big, fat bull turkey.

She swept into the kitchen and flipped open the phone. “Hello, Markos.”

His Greek accent was thick tonight. “Tell me the selkie is there by now.”

“He’s here.” She eyed the huge man looking around her living room.

He blew out roughly. “Good. Now you can rest.”

She thought of the vomit on her bathroom floor, of her sheets. “Sure.”

“You signed for my letter. Did you read it?”

She sulked.

“Read it, Xia.”

Turning her back, she lowered her voice, wondering how good selkie hearing was. “I know what’s in it.”

He sighed again. “Xia, the order came from the Chamber. You’re one of our best, love. I checked on your rampart. He’s capable of being your anchor.”

She went rigid. “Are you crazy?” she hissed. “He’s Aqua’s!”

“That’s just superstition. He’s a damn old elemental. I’ve already emailed you his file.”

Frustration bloomed and overwhelmed her pain. Her brain raced with the implications. Elementals were extremely solitary. Born with a closer bond to one of the Four, they were magical elite, and that came with a territorial urge against others. That Adam had agreed to be her rampart, and possibly knew she’d soon need an anchor for a subsumation ritual, probably meant she would be reassigned off Markos’s team and over to him. Adam, the *damn old elemental* that he apparently was, wouldn’t agree to such an arrangement if she was subordinate to someone else. And Markos’s temper would be even worse if he had another elemental on his team. She just didn’t think two elementals would ever be put into such close

proximity. It was asking for trouble, as well as a waste of powerful resources. Markos wasn't her advocate anymore?

It meant a world of difference in their roles. One where he wouldn't be a temporary guest. Instead, she'd be his to command. It would complicate the sheet play immensely, putting her on the defensive instead of setting them up as partners.

Xia took the ice pack and smashed it on the counter. "What! What!" She was so eloquent sometimes.

"Breathe, dancer. Where were you wounded?"

"Don't call me pet names, you fire-fink. Am I being transferred?"

"I asked you a question." That haughty minotaur's sneer just set her back up.

"And maybe I'm not yours to question anymore." Her arm itched. Looking down, she saw the blood had seeped through the sleeve. Dammit. The wound was spelled. She slapped the ice back on it, breath hitching at the pain.

A presence came up next to her in the kitchen. "Get off the phone. Your arm needs attention."

At the same time, Markos was growling. "What's this note you're off duty tonight. If you're not incapacitated, I need you on duty. Reports say we're keeping Aqua distracted and dispersed. This is good work, Xia."

The fact that she needed tomorrow—no, today—to send the ungrateful shit a secret, sealed message with what she'd learned made her pant with fury. "You over-hung snort face! I'm scared, I'm hurt, I'm tired of failing, and I need to prepare for your stupid letter. Give me a fucking break."

"No breaks if we all die, dancer."

She opened her mouth to retort when a huge hand plucked the phone from her and snapped it shut. She spun, snatching at it, and he let her take it.

"Hey!" She glared at him. Now Markos would think she hung up on him, something that really set him off.

He reached for the neck of her robe, face closed, black eyes steady. She slapped at him, but with a twist of his wrist, he captured her hand and pulled it down, taking the bag of mostly melted ice from her. "Stop. It's been hours and you're still bleeding from a small wound. Think."

Xia licked her lips, desperately thirsty. For a whisky. The Scottish knew their whisky, that's for sure. She realized what he'd said and nodded forlornly, setting the phone aside. He put his hands on her ribs and lifted her up onto the counter. It took a second, as if she were a bag of potatoes. The outline of his huge hands burned against her torso after he took them away.

Without arguing, she watched as he peeled the robe off her shoulder and down her arm, baring one breast. He didn't look at it at all. She knew because she watched him carefully. Instead, he wet the bloody towel in the sink and cleaned around the cut, which still bled freely, if mildly, due its size. Holding herself

still, she found it surreal to be sitting on her kitchen counter in front of the local ferry operator she'd met on a daytrip over to Skye.

"What did this?"

"Harpoon."

His jaw flexed. "This will hurt."

"I know."

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a penknife. He flipped it open and moved to the stove, where he heated the blade for several seconds in the pretty blue gas flame. Moving back to her, he wrapped gentle, firm fingers around her arm just below the cut, and set the tip of the knife to her skin. Without any hesitation, he cut a shallow circle around the entire slash. Xia kept her teeth clenched. Cursed when her eyes welled and spilled over against her will.

When he was done, he hovered his cupped palm over the bloody circle. He met her eyes. His black depths sent fear stabbing deep. She blinked rapidly, her lashes heavy and wet.

"Morphi, I am your rampart."

She swallowed, trying not to gasp at the sting. She couldn't get the air to answer and had no words to say anyway. She nodded. As introductions went, you couldn't get more official, more terse. Yet somehow, she was deeply reassured by his simple statement of their assigned relationship. He'd just assumed responsibility for her.

"Look away."

She closed her eyes. He spoke the spell of cleansing. The flash of light exploded even from behind her lids. She jerked back at the bone-striking pain, her head cracking on the cupboard behind her. Her breath caught on a sob. Quickly, the wet towel was tied around her arm, achingly tight.

Then the robe was up onto her shoulder again, and he pulled her forward off the counter to stand. Tucking her face into his neck, he held her carefully. "Ssshhh, lass. 'Tis done." He was warm and smelled fresh. "Shhh."

"Th-thank you. I hate doing that alone." Once an assassin found a morphi in the dreamtime, he could use a spelled weapon to damage her physical body. Cleansing a spelled wound was a matter of brute magical force, quick and owie.

He stilled. "Why does he let you work without a rampart?"

"Oh, don't get all stuffy. I rarely get tagged. Working alone is easier."

The phone rang out in the fiddle tune again. Adam snatched it up and opened before the fifth note. "Adam."

"Hey. Give it." She reached for it but he stepped away, sweeping her arm back easily, turning to give her a massive shoulder in a ratty T-shirt identical to the one she'd seen him in earlier. This one was blue.

She heard the rumble of Markos's angry voice. The fact it was contained in the tinny speaker of the cell phone didn't make him sound any less powerful.

Adam spoke calmly. "The wound was spelled. Any bigger, and she would have bled out by now. Your indulgence could have cost her life."

As if she wouldn't have noticed herself bleeding to death. She'd just been distracted. "I won't stand for such an invasion of privacy. Give it!" She tried to reach around him, but with a twist of his big body, he kept the phone away.

"It's done." Pause, angry chatter. "Of course I did." Pause. "If you were worried about that, you should be here yourself. Goodbye." Adam closed the phone and tossed it into the other room where it landed on the couch.

Curiosity burned through her at the exchange. What had Markos been worried about? "Listen, we need to set some rules." Dammit, her voice sounded more breathless than irritated. She told herself it was from the echoing pain of the cleansing, and not the fact she'd had her hands all over those warm, muscular shoulders.

"You need to rest. You're gray." He leaned in and sniffed.

She reared back. "I'm what?"

"You look sickly. And you smell sick."

"I was sick. By the way, watch where you step in the bathroom."

He folded his arms. "How long have you been getting sick after the dreamtime?"

Oh, terrific, now he'd doubt her ability. "It's occasionally my reaction to some of the more creative visions Aqua shares, not a sign of failing power."

"How do you know if there's no one here to tell?"

Xia gritted her teeth. She gritted them so hard she spoke through them. "I. Know."

"You've been here a month. All of the Chamber's other morphi lasted a week or two. It's entirely probable you've been weakened."

Xia preened. One hand rose to her throat. "Really? I've outlasted all the others?"

"Did he tell you one pair died?"

The hand clutched her robe closer. "What!"

"A morphi, young, and his rampart. On the first night they were here."

A horrible premonition shook her that had nothing to do with magic. "When?"

"Last winter, on St. Stephen's Day."

Xia closed her eyes. So that was how Tibor died. In battle. In vain. The room dipped under her. Possibly in this very house. In that bed. She turned away from him, very carefully opening the cupboard to take down a mug.

“Thank you for telling me. I’m tired of the Chamber’s decision to hide the circumstances of morphic deaths.” She filled the electric kettle. Got the honey with a shaking hand.

His hand came in and took it from her. “You’re missing my point. How well do you know Markos? Because from my end, it looks like he’s trying to kill you at worst, burn you out at best.”

Never let it be said Xia didn’t learn. She wouldn’t wrestle him for her honey. She opened the tea ball, choosing chamomile. “I asked him if I was being transferred to you, and he sidestepped. Am I changing teams? Are you now my advocate?”

They stood in silence as the water bubbled in the little quick heater. The light popped off, telling her it was ready. She made the tea. He put the honey down next to her. She used it.

Belatedly, she asked, “Would you like a cup?” He so befuddled her she lost her manners.

“Later.”

Yes. When she was sleeping, he’d be watching over her. Taking the tea, she went to the couch. Numb, she sat on one side and stared out the window. Morning mist hovered over the dim field beyond her scrap of lawn. His car was a beat-up old Rover, nearly antique. She remembered when the model first came out. She’d thought it ugly then, too. Simply holding the cup soothed her, settled her. She was alive. She’d succeeded in gaining some information. And now she had an ally, of sorts.

To her surprise, he sat on the other end of the couch. His thighs sprawled wide and his legs stretched across half the room. He leaned his head against the back, at ease. It irritated her, this comfort he had in a strange home. The presence his big body had on her breathing. Eventually, she drank her tea. By the time she put the mug down, the sky was light blue.

“I’m going to take a shower. I’ve got a fair bit of cleaning to do.”

Adam stirred. “If you’re not going to rest, I should go to work.”

So much for sympathy, concern and tender care. “Sure. Catch you later.”

The thought of working on the bloodstains all over the couch, rug and sheets made her tired. She would not ask again about her assignment. Screw them both for being too cowardly to tell her. Did they think she would rage? Cry? She’d do her job regardless of who her boss was.

An image of the last time she’d been in bed with Markos flashed through her mind. His burning hand in her body, his mouth on her breast, her hands full of his hard ass, tracing his barrel chest with her tongue. She turned her head and finally looked at Adam.

He watched her with those eerie black eyes. His light hair was tousled, curling behind his ears and boyishly laying over one eye. His skin was tanned, and he had nice crinkles at the corners of his eyes. Lips in a thin line, he was silent. Oh, this relationship was going to be fantastic. Simply ducky.

She stood abruptly, summoning a bright, fake smile. “Well, thanks for coming over and dousing that spell. I’m not going into the dreamtime today. I’ll be running Markos a message before I go to bed. Why don’t you come over around midnight?”

He stood, ruining her advantage as he towered over her. “All right.”

Chivalry was dead. No arguing that she pushed herself too hard. Just an accusation of treason at Markos and an “all right”. Half expecting some pithy comment at the last moment, she watched him walk out and get in his car.

The Range Rover drove over her lawn as it turned to go down the long path to the road. She gathered cleaning supplies, hissing at the burn of her arm. Fighting not to cry, she lifted her chin. Xia was a psychic warrior, and she’d scored a hit last night. But war wasn’t glamorous. And it was damn lonely to boot.

Chapter Three

The day consisted of cleaning, laundry, going for a walk, *inland*, and preparing for the hailing she'd send Markos. Even if he wasn't her advocate anymore, he had been when she'd dreamed last night and he would want this information. She knew it. Of course, Adam would get the information too, as he'd be her rampart while she performed the ritual to pass the message.

The smell of warm gingerbread filled the house as the sun set. Her body was exhausted from last night and today. There would be no naps without her rampart to watch over her and make sure the assassin didn't finish the job while she was unconscious. A cup of tea and a plate of the soft, spiced cake accompanied her outside where she sat on a blanket under the apple tree.

The gloaming was truly beautiful, and she was always working the dreamtime during it. She rested and enjoyed the peace of extended twilight. The sky held rich, deep pastels for hours, roaming from peach to pink to lavender. The regret she held at missing this beauty was mild. She had a duty, and it was more important than admiring a pretty evening. When it got dark, she went inside.

One side of the couch was still damp from her cleaning the upholstery. Curling up in the corner, she called her sister.

"Hola." Tony's voice sang clearly straight from Xia's ear to her heart.

"Antonia, it's me."

"Xia! I got your email from last week. Those shoes are to die for, but not while you're stationed in the wilds. Those shoes say New York, love."

Xia smiled, resting her head on the couch back. When things got this tough, it was good to be reminded of the reason she faced the dreamtime night after bitter night. "I could wear them around the house while I clean."

"Shuh. Sexiest maid in Scotland."

"I'm nobody's servant."

"Sister dear, you're the world's servant."

"The world's Four are in constant flux. I'm proud to assist the magical community."

Tony sighed, deeply. "You have a responsibility complex."

Mom. Dad. The police telling her they were gone while Tony slept in the other room.

She tried to distract her memories and her sister with humor. "The world is in deep shit, Tony. I can help."

“The world is in deep water, Xia, and you’re so in over your head. You already played in her pool and shouldn’t have to anymore.”

Xia shuddered, a memory of Aqua’s hate and violence swirling through her. The mission where Xia had become subsumed into Aqua’s consciousness was the blackest moment of her career, personally and professionally. *I Returned. I’m out.*

“When are you going to take a vacation?” Her sister posed the usual question with deceptive mildness.

“Actually, I took tonight off, so there.” Small fib. Since she wasn’t going into the dreamtime, it was technically true.

Silence. In the background, some tropical bird shrieked. So pretty, but so obnoxious. Like her sister, actually.

“What happened?”

It was Xia’s turn to sigh, deeply.

“Xia?” Her sister’s voice was high and tight. “It’s time to leave Scotland. You’ve been there too long.”

“I’m fine, Antonia. Just called to talk.”

“Oh, Xia. Please, be careful. Let Markos get you a rampart, at least.”

Xia laughed weakly, rubbing her gritty eyes. “Yeah, funny you should say that. I picked one up today.”

“Wonderful. Oh, I’m so glad! You resist this, but you’re not Wonder Woman. Everyone needs help, and this is a tough assignment.”

“It is.” Xia’s grip on the phone tightened. Woops.

Silence.

Damn. Just that admission slipping out would get her sister going. “Just leave it, Tony.”

More silence. Miraculously, she did refrain from her usual diatribe against Xia’s job. “Is he cute?”

Xia swallowed, considered her old jeans and shirt. “Yeah.”

“Cuter than Markos?”

Markos’s Greek masculinity flashed into her mind’s eye. Golden skin, warm brown eyes under a heavy brow, arrogantly sharp nose and chin. Tall, thick arms and stocky legs, with a soft black pelt running down his torso. Hung like a bull took on a new meaning when you were a minotaur.

“He’s really different than Markos. Not at all the same class of cute.” Curling her feet tighter underneath her, she rubbed her neck.

Adam was lean, each muscle sculpted with a sharp edge. His face was broader, yet more aloof. His narrow hips beneath wide, strong shoulders were just made for a woman to wrap her thighs around. Xia shivered.

“Is he married?”

Her heart stung. “Widowed. Twice.” Reading his file hadn’t taken much time. For a being 237 years old, it had held few details.

“Ahhh, too bad. Is he a witch?”

“Want me to just send you his file?”

“Would you?”

Xia laughed. “You goon.” They both knew she couldn’t.

“So is he?”

“No. He’s a selkie.” Pausing, Xia debated sharing the bomb. She knew she shouldn’t, but the ache that had driven her to call Antonia burst from her in words. “And he’s an elemental.”

“Whoa! Not Aqua, though, right?”

Xia swallowed. “Yeah. He’s Aqua.” She held the phone away from her ear in preparation.

“That is fucking bullshit.” Tony could out-screach a harpy. “What a fucking asshole to make such a fucking colossal mistake. You go back to Markos and tell him to shove his Aqua elemental right up his black hairy ass.”

Laughing, Xia stood and began to turn on lights. Her arm barely ached. “I can always count on your eloquence in my defense.” Her sister’s fury calmed her.

“Xia! You call him or I will.”

“If you think about it, it’s not as stupid as you’ve concluded. Fighting fire with fire, as the case may be.” She sat back on the couch.

“Puh-lease. A raindrop against the ocean. When you’re up against the element, you don’t take one of its minions as a guard.”

Still chuckling, Xia defended the poor man who had put up with her only sibling’s ire for many years. “Markos didn’t assign him, Tony.” The file had had one ominous word listed in the box for Adam’s supervisor: Chamber. Adam played in the big leagues. It explained why he seemed to have no morphi team of his own already. “In fact, I’m not sure Markos is calling my shots anymore.” *Raindrop*. Xia mentally snorted. He was no raindrop, but she’d have to remember that one.

“Oh, Xia. I’m so sorry.”

The quiet mourning in Tony’s voice made an image of Markos’s crooked pirate’s grin spring into her head. Not that moving to a new team would sever her eighty-six year relationship with Markos, but it was hard to imagine working with anyone else. Her belly fluttered with uncertainty. It didn’t seem real, that her life was possibly out of Markos’s trusted hands. “The thing is, I’m not sure. They won’t tell me.”

“Weird. Irritating, secretive bastards.”

“Yeah. Exactly.” Xia switched the phone to her other ear.

“How can they not tell you who your boss is? They have to tell you sometime, don’t they?”

“You’d think.”

In silence, both women mulled over the puzzle that was bureaucracy.

Xia changed the subject. “How’s the volcano?” Tony was a volcanologist. She was also a witch with a recessive gene and no powers. Her bitterness at this twist of fate had led to her choosing one of the most dangerous jobs on the planet. Xia lived for the day her little sister would retire from fieldwork and get a nice, boring university position.

“She’s a talkative one. Got lots to say. Before we leave this, Xia, I want you to know that I worry about you. I’m really happy you have a rampart, and please, please, please don’t try to limit him.”

“I—”

“You know what I mean. You try to control your ramparts, worrying like a mother hen. You’re totally overwhelmed with responsibility, and it’s ridiculous. Let him do what he signed on for. Quit being everyone’s big sister.”

“I found out how Tibor died. It was here. He died here.”

Silence. “Fuck.” The word vibrated with the echo of their shared despair.

“His morphi died too. He was young, a boy.”

“Not a boy. A man, even if he was young.” Tony’s voice was scratchy.

Tibor strong and tall at his rampart graduation ceremony. Tibor holding her during her own difficult morphi training, giving her his elven peace. Tibor’s orange hair bouncing against the green hill as they rolled down it like giggling logs. “Now we know.” Xia rubbed at her eyes, determined not to cry. She was old enough to know tears didn’t help.

“Yeah. It’s good to know. I’m sorry the morphi died.”

It was a rampart’s creed: If the element takes notice, save the morphi. To fulfill their role as shield and protector with the ultimate sacrifice was a vow of honor that Xia had never accepted with grace. Just one more responsibility for her to shoulder as she sank into the dreamtime.

“I’m sorry too. Tibor... I hope he went first. I don’t want to think of him knowing his morphi died.” Xia felt her throat swell up at the thought of her friend believing he failed.

Tony’s soft sob came over the other end. “Oh, dammit. *Dammit*. Tibor... I miss him.”

Hearing the wild grief in Tony’s voice over the loss of their childhood friend, even after half a year, stabbed at Xia. She tried to speak with a steady voice. “He was practically our brother. We’ll always remember him, and be stronger for it.”

Tony snarled at her. “Oh, shut up with the strong-soldier routine. It *hurts*.”

“Yeah.” A tear slipped down her cheek, cool over her burning cheeks. “Yeah.” She dashed it away, then wiped her hand on her jeans, erasing the liquid.

“I mean it, Xia.” Tony’s voice was hard as the volcanic basalt she studied. “You focus on listening and watching, and let your rampart guard your ass. If you’re dancing around trying to watch *him*, you’re not doing your duty and you make his job harder.”

Xia nodded, but inside, she remembered the horrible pain, real even though the damage was psychic, that Aqua subjected her to. The thought of letting Adam take that pain, all so she could get a few more seconds of focus, made her nauseous. She wouldn’t even consider that a rampart could and did sometimes die to save the rarer morphi who acted as the world’s window into the elements. “A goat named Macgregor ate your hat.”

Silence. “Damn goat.” Her sister sniffled and cleared her throat. Both of them were very good at packing pain away. “I thought there were supposed to be sheep in Scotland.”

The conversation turned to Mexico as Xia scrubbed her tears away. By the time their chatter ended, she only had time for a quick shower. Well, all her showers were quick since she’d had this assignment. The touch of water on her body was no longer pleasurable, ever. She dried off hard enough to make her pale skin blush.

Tucking the towel around her breasts, she was glad their first pairing wouldn’t be a dreamtime romp in Aqua. Tonight she’d take Adam on a simple astral walk to give Markos last night’s news, and then he’d guard her sleep against the assassin. But soon, he’d be more than her rampart. He’d be the anchor her soul depended on. Her stomach churned and she lifted her chin.

Chapter Four

Xia was listing in the corner of the kitchen counter when Adam came in at midnight on the dot. If she sat down, she'd fall asleep.

"Xia?" His voice rolled out through the small room.

"Here." She heaved a sigh and found the energy to shuffle forward away from the counter. "Hello, Adam."

"Hello." He hung his thumbs in his belt loops.

She swallowed when the ridge of one hipbone appeared from the sagging cloth. No other conversation came from him. No follow-up on her arm, no inquiry to her health. She would be professional, calm and mature.

"I have a private message to send off. The ritual is set up in the bedroom."

He raised one eyebrow. "You have the energy for that?"

Through gritted teeth she managed, "Yes."

He folded his arms. "I'm surprised you had the wisdom to wait for me. I was sure you would attempt magic without me today."

She folded her arms, recognized she was being influenced by him, unfolded them and breathed through her nose. "I'm not reckless. You have no reason to think I'd be so irresponsible."

"You've worked the gloaming without a rampart up until now, and you come down to the ocean's shore regularly."

Her hands clenched into fists. It was a good thing he was standing across the room. "Can we get on with it?"

He stepped forward.

"Tut!" She pointed a dagger finger at his sandy feet. "Shoes!"

He obediently toed them off revealing strong, high arches. Even his perfectly descending toes were sexy.

Whirling, she went into the bedroom. "Do you know this ritual?"

"Aye."

Duh. He was 237! Of course he did.

He filled the doorway, shrinking the room. Studying the items on the bed, he said, "You're going to ride air."

“Yes.” Glad of her cloak of irritation now, she shrugged the robe off and climbed onto the bed, sitting with her legs tucked to one side, fussing with the arrangement that had slid when she sat down. She wouldn’t think about her still damp hair tingling her spine, or how the sudden exposure hardened her nipples. She wouldn’t think about the fact that her reckless, irresponsible, terrifying crush was pulling his ratty red T-shirt off, undoing his jeans.

“This is why you demanded the night off.”

Relief burned through her, that he understood why she hadn’t worked the dreamtime tonight and wouldn’t think she was merely avoiding her duty after last night’s disaster. “Yes.”

His scent, a salty musk, tickled her nose as he sat in the opposite corner of the bed. Delicious. It made her thirsty. She kept her eyes off the acres of chiseled, golden muscle on the edge of her sight. Without further ado, she lit the oil flame, sprinkled the small stones in a circle, picked up the feather, and dipped it in the cup of water that had come from a stream. Burning the tip, she laid it in the middle of the circle.

Adam reached one huge, square hand forward and covered the feather. One of his fingernails was bruised. Hers ached in sympathy. Xia picked up the mirror and closed her eyes. She steadied her breathing. In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. She centered her energy. She blanked her mind, and when a hint of Adam’s presence winked into her consciousness, she did it all again. Breathe, center, clear, focus. Then she formed her intent.

Opening her eyes, she stared in the mirror at her plain gray eyes, fringed with their long red lashes. Her auburn hair was still damp from the shower and mostly just brown. Her face looked pale and pinched, with shadows painting the hollows of her eyes and cheeks. Her freckles stood out starkly, an army of childish cuteness marching from cheek to cheek by way of her upturned nose.

“Hello, Markos. I caught a glimpse behind Aqua last night. It’s definitely witches, at least three, all male. They’re deeply concerned about Ignis. I’d take a look at who’s been on duty with feeding fire’s flames lately, because that’s their main goal. I’m enclosing the full memory, so you can see it complete.” She let herself grin a bit with sadistic pleasure. “You might want to sit down.”

Opening the gates in her psychic center, she saw her eyes shine briefly, and then the memory poured forth. Her panic at water’s nearness, her despair at the coming pain, her rage that she’d failed again, the burning in her arm, the horror at the objects glimpsed in the water wall so close to her, her determination to hold, hold as long as she could—water winning, dragging her body outstretched, the shark attack, then the jellyfish, the shattering pain, the ache as her lungs drowned, spinning dizzily in the dark cold.

Keep Ignis fed. At all costs, keep him fed and happy. Soon Aqua will be too strong, even were he to wake. But until then, keep him busy.

Kindly, she cut off the memory there, not sharing the loss of her arm. Shutting herself back down, she sealed the entire message in the mirror, closed her eyes and laid her hand on the feather. Then jumped when she encountered Adam’s hard hand, his hair coarse on her palm.

Breathe, center, clear, focus. She stepped onto the astral plane, her psychic self surrounded by Adam's. It felt like opening a door in your mind and peeling your psyche free of a shell. The power of his age and elemental status, invisible with her real eyes, was unmistakable in this psychic working realm. Here he pulsed with energy and control. But so did she.

She returned to the task at hand. She would psychically ride Aer to Markos's real location and deposit her memory in person. This kind of spell was direct, involving no messengers or technology, providing pure privacy. Except if you had a rampart.

Bringing Aer was easy, directing it was not. Ignis was male, Aqua was female, but Aer and Terra were both androgynous. Today, it was thankfully mostly obedient, being steered with calm nudges as it flew south over the psychic ether toward Majorca, Markos's position. The island emerged through the mist of the duplicate astral world just as it would in real life, towering rough cliffs cut with thin switchbacks, dotted with ancient stone homes. When Xia found his trail, she sped forward on air and connected.

Markos always throbbed with power in the ether, pulsing with a fire elemental's energy. She wove into his familiar power and knocked. None too gently, because she wasn't happy with him. He was in bed, so she had to wait while he oriented himself that she wasn't a dream. When she had his mind conscious and open, she dumped her message, tipping the mirror into his power. The brush from him filled her with glimpses of his current thoughts—admiration for her, concern and remorse, and iron determination. Markos had not been an advocate in charge of sending morphi into danger for over a hundred years without his own strong sense of duty.

Without staying, she closed her side of the mental portal and let go of the comforting warmth. Markos was better than any quilt for emotional and physical shelter. Aer bumped happily along back north, towing her psychic self, with Adam a humming shadow under her.

When they were about to leave France, someone else summoned Aer, quite sharply. Calmly, Xia tried to redirect, but whoever called was more powerful than she. Aer went where it was of most use. That Xia's task wasn't finished and hers a prior claim meant nothing. This thread of Aer had been distracted, and there was no point in arguing with it.

Xia launched herself into the nothingness of the astral plane, stalled over Europe. Without Aer's help, it would be a long, utterly draining journey back to her body in Scotland. She didn't want to admit she couldn't do it and wasn't about to let Adam rescue her on their first pairing. Looking for a new connection, she calmly called for Aer, her pulse of power the equivalent of shaking a toy at a bored cat. Something stirred. Not fond of free-floating, Xia called again. And this time she noticed that it hurt to push the call. She was exhausted. A new strand of Aer caught her call and suddenly came galloping toward her like an enraged lion. Damn. Aer had no rhyme or reason to its reactions.

She adjusted the call, bracing, ready to jump and grab and wrestle with Aer, but just as the shard of element approached, a shimmering sheet of water rose up and smacked it sharply. The thread halted with

Adam's rebuke, and Xia felt herself psychically shoved onto it. While it was confused, she directed it and stroked it with a pulse of power, *ow*, and it went, bounding with considerably more energy than the first trip's thread had.

As they neared their bodies, Xia caught her breath. There was her psychic thread, waving like a ribbon in the ether, seeking her missing mind. But her body's weak ribbon was entirely encased in a vivid, roiling mass of purple. Deep amethyst, it was nearly black, gleaming with rich tones as they dove closer and closer. The purple parted, flowing past her, and she grabbed her silver thread, feeling the *ping* as she rejoined herself.

Opening her real eyes, she met the deep black gaze of Adam. Once again, they were nude, sitting on her simple bed in her simple house. His hand was under hers, so that he was the actual contact with Aer. Her fingers felt heavy where they held the cold mirror. He blinked, his free hand going out to pinch the flame off.

She breathed, her lungs fluttering a bit. "I could have handled that overeager Aer. It wasn't out of control." He'd kept a piece of himself behind, to guard her soul's base. The concentration, power, and intense skill that took left her breathless. Despite her intention to remain aloof, she was impressed. Okay, maybe even a little awed.

"You could have. But you don't have to. I am your rampart." His fingers came up and took the mirror from her, laying it on the bed. His hand under hers turned, his fingertips feathering along her sensitive wrist, zinging shock up her arm. He laid his other hand over the back of hers. She was captured in his gentle grip. "And I tell you, Morphi, you will never face Aqua's attack like that alone, again."

Her lips parted, dry enough for her to be hyperaware of the seam opening. Of course, he'd seen the memory she'd set in the mirror when she'd poured it into Markos. "I don't want—I don't want you—"

"Whist." His face, usually so closed and still, flexed with some emotion. "Lie down." His hands pulled from hers and a shiver rolled down her spine.

Weaving without his support, she could do nothing but follow his command. She tipped over, avoiding the objects on the bed. He took the oil lamp and the dish of water away and put them on her dresser. He took up the little dustbin she had sitting there and whisked the stones into it. Then he took the lighter, the mirror and the feather. She battered her way under the comforter, pulled a pillow into herself as she got her head comfortable. She felt dizzy with exhaustion.

He came to the side of the bed holding a glass. Cradling her head, he helped her drink. It tasted so cold and refreshing she was able to focus on him again.

"Let me in." His order was matter-of-fact. Simple.

But it had been over two years since she'd last had a rampart. It was hard to let him in, where he'd twine with her energy and watch over her as she slept without her conscious self, protecting her against any spillover from the dreamtime or an astral psychic attack. Now that she'd been found once, it would be so

much easier for the enemy to find her again, especially when she was in the same general location. She could safely say she wouldn't be seeking Aqua in her dreams, but the unconscious mind could never be predicted. For the duration of this assignment, he would remain connected to her whenever she slept.

Her eyes rolled, her body impossibly heavy. His big hand tightened on the back of her head, shook her. "Xia. Let me in."

She stared into the bottomless, cold black of his eyes. "I—"

"Let. Me. In." His eyes shone with his power as he slid his own gates open, and in that second, she saw it. Amethyst. Deep, rich, gorgeous. *His eyes weren't black.* They were purple.

She slid her gates open and felt her lungs compress with the force of his otherness sliding around her.

"Breathe."

She breathed, and her lids sagged. He set her head on the pillow, his thumb caressing her fluttering pulse. She pulled the extra pillow closer, hiding in the softness. And she was done.

The scent of coffee mixed with the sharp salt sizzle of black pudding in the kitchen. Bathroom first. Her arm only ached a bit in the shower. When she got out, she had a moment to be grateful that the bloody mess had at least led to a sparkling clean house for her guest.

When Xia shuffled into the kitchen, still finger-combing her hair, she stopped in awe. An acre of food stretched out along the counter space between the living room and the kitchen. Sausage and bacon and toast and fish and scrambled eggs and jam and butter and scones and yogurt and granola and Cheerios and strawberries and orange juice and a china teapot that was not hers, along with a new two-cup personal coffee brewer.

"Whaaa?"

Adam stood in the kitchen, wearing the clothes he'd come in with last night. He clicked off the stove and slid the crunchy mess onto a plate. He added it to the last spot on the counter.

Taking the serving platter she'd never used from the highest cupboard shelf, he began to fill it with a bit of everything. "I need to leave in a few minutes."

Xia closed her gaping mouth with a snap of her teeth. "Good morning."

"Aye."

See, now, this man was going to drive her to drink. During breakfast. "Where did all this come from?"

"Anne."

"Anne? Delivered this?"

"Most of it, aye."

"How do you know Anne?"

He just slid a look at her and went to sit in the living room. With his platter.

"I didn't know she opened so early."

"She doesn't." He began to eat the food like he'd never seen any before.

Xia looked over the impressive outlay. "The teapot is beautiful. Is it hers?"

"'Tis yours."

Delighted, Xia picked it up, studying the wild roses hand-painted on the side. "Really? Where'd you find it?"

"I asked Anne to pick a nice one."

Oh. She put it down. "Adam, what is all this?"

"Breakfast."

She was going to brain him with the lovely teapot. She got a mug and filled it half-full with honey, then poured her tea. Taking it to the couch, she sat next to him. Maybe it was time to buy a chair, a nice lady's recliner. He stood and went to the counter, filling his plate again.

"Are you going to eat any of the pudding and kippers?"

"No, thank you. I don't care for meat at breakfast."

He shoveled it all onto his plate and sat back down, eating with a steady motion. Between bites, he managed, "Only one nightmare, and I detected no magic in it."

Xia froze. A sudden image flashed and faded in her brain. *A tiny round boat, a rawhide stretched over a wood frame, very old, strangely deep, but the edge rode only a few inches above the water. A storm blowing up. She crouched in it, wearing a wool dress and leather shoes that were cold and wet. Staring up at the seething sky, she despaired as the gray water around her began to toss.*

Looking over at Adam, she blinked to see him considering her as he thoughtfully munched through a strip of bacon. His eyes looked flat today.

She snapped, "You look like Macgregor with your jaw working like that."

He nodded. "There's something you should know." Standing, he put his platter in the sink and poured a glass of orange juice in his coffee mug. Ewww. "Do you remember the nightmare you had last night? Of being in a boat on a stormy loch?"

"Just a bit."

He nodded, his gaze going far away, a tic pulsing twice in his jaw before he downed the juice and set the mug gently on the counter. "I cooked. You get the dishes."

She bit her lip against her protest. The mountain of dishes in the sink, the four pans on the stove, and the still-full army of offerings on the counter was not what she preferred to face in the morning. Drawing in a deep breath, she kept back her words. She did not want to start this partnership arguing over dishes. They'd work out their patterns soon enough. At this point she didn't know if this was his preference after a night watching over her, or an offering to her, like a gift for a hostess.

He went to the door and bent to pull on his battered hiking shoes. He now had wool socks on. She tried not to look, but couldn't help glancing at his ass as he presented it so. His jeans were old and outlined the hard globes nicely. Pulling open the door, he said, "Around seven?"

That would give them an hour before sunset. It would be enough if they were merely facing a normal dreamtime foray, but for what Markos had in that letter...

"Just a minute."

She went and got the letter from the top of the TV. Handing it to him, she said, "Read this today. Come earlier if you can."

He turned it over, his thumb brushing over Markos's emblem. "You haven't opened it."

Crossing her arms, she shrugged. "I know what's in it, mostly."

He stared at her, but she couldn't hold that black gaze.

"Your dream was mine."

"Pardon?"

"Last night. In the currach. 'Twas Meg's death."

Xia blinked at him, her throat swelling shut as her body utterly froze. Her heart gave one hard thump, her brain reverberating with his words, understanding them, but stupidly denying it. "What is a currach?"

His face looked as frozen as she felt. "The little ox-hide boat you were in is a currach, at least as they were then. Meg. My first wife. She was a sprite. She drowned in Loch Mhòrair in a sudden storm. I wasn't there, you see."

Xia felt her heart thump again. *I don't know what to say.* "What does it mean, that I dreamed her memory?"

"That nightmare wasn't yours. 'Twas mine. It means naught but that we will work well together."

She stared at him for another heartbeat. He tucked Markos's letter into his back pocket and went out into the morning mist, closing the door. Xia blinked at it. They'd work well together? Her own nightmares weren't enough, now she was having his? His Rover revved, and he turned on the lawn and went away. She'd have to tell him not to always turn on the lawn or he'd ruin it. Long after he'd gone, she was able to move again, stiffly.

Revolving, she stared at the decadent food spread before her, stomach churning and the taste of anguish in her mouth.

Chapter Five

It was about five kilometers to Loch Mhòrair from the village. The journey would have taken a few minutes in a car, but Xia didn't have a car. So she packed some of the extra food from breakfast, tied on her hat with the missing piece in the brim, and put her cell phone, wallet and raincoat in the basket on her Schwinn.

It was a blustery, overcast day, again. Summer was very touchy in this part of Scotland. She rode down the lane at top speed. She caught herself humming "We didn't light the fire! It was always burning, since the world was turning!" Shaking her head and cursing Markos, she leaned into the wind, her brim bent upright as the Schwinn purred down the road.

She passed not one car on the entire way there. Eventually, she came to the loch. It wasn't very developed, ringed by pastures mixed with woods. She left the Schwinn by a fence. Following the fine Scottish tradition of tramping wherever she damn well pleased, she walked down to the water. It wasn't as boldly challenging as going to the beach in the village, but it was still a rebellion that had her jutting her chin as she scanned the wide, landlocked pocket of water. Sitting in a grassy section where a gap in the reeds let her see a good bit of the length, she put her basket in her lap and unwrapped the strawberries.

The burst of tart sweetness in her mouth made her lips pucker. She stared at the picturesque islands in the middle of the lake. It looked like even she, plump and sedentary, could swim from one side to the other, or out to the pine-covered island. The sky was bright blue, the light gray clouds low and skidding on their flat bottoms. The lake shone deep blue in the sun, darker blue-black in the center. It was a positively idyllic place to live, and die.

Xia sat in the grass and considered the coming night. Markos's letter that she had refused to read had held a Chamber order to undergo one of the most rigorous of all rituals. They wanted her to undertake the ghosting. Again. There would be pain and fear. There would be danger, real, deadly danger, to her power and life. The ritual, like most, was simple, more of a framework for the mind to build on, while the real magic unfolded internally.

Two nights ago, Xia had tried to slip and trace into understanding Aqua's rising power. And failed. Last night, Xia had ridden Aer on an ethereal journey, sharing odd but fresh information with Markos. And she'd had help and done fine. Both of those tasks were mental. The wear and tear on her body wasn't real, the effort mostly on the psychic plane. The trip to Majorca that had taken hours of mental concentration had in fact been approximately five minutes.

Flicking the stem of the strawberry into the water, she watched it whirl, floating. It wasn't an easy thing, what she'd done, but it wasn't nearly as advanced as what she knew had been sent in Markos's letter. *Subsumation*. The witches could call it communing, sinking, or ghosting. But what it meant was total erasure of yourself.

You disappeared into an element, learned its secrets, and you came back through force of will and psychic focus. Then the witch knew the element better than anyone in the world, along with key secrets, but the witch was also never really herself again. Xia had survived it twice before. Once, as part of her morphic trials, she'd gone into Ignis, with Markos as her anchor. She'd woken screaming every night for months and still had a shiny burn scar on the side of her right foot. From what, she'd never remembered.

About twenty years ago, she'd performed the ritual again, with Aqua, when one of the Chamber members had disappeared through foul play. She'd asked a long-time lover to be her anchor. Ry had barely pulled her out, and her fear of water was born. Xia knew what it felt like to drown, because she had, in her own bed. Their relationship hadn't survived the strain of the ritual even though she'd been one of a handful of successful witches who retained her sanity, and had contributed to pinpointing the Chamberman's body.

This time, Xia would go into earth. Deep, enigmatic and slow earth. The only element that had historically been able to stop water from destroying the world. Not that earth hadn't exacted its own terrible price on the planet. The western world didn't pay much attention to Krakatoa, but all witches were taught about the most modern of earth's sleepy moments of awareness. Every element was dangerous, but earth was commonly thought to be more benign because it preferred to sleep and worked so slowly it rarely outmaneuvered the Chamber. That didn't mean she wanted to commune with it.

The seeds of the strawberries caught at her teeth. She worried at them with her tongue. Last time Xia had been subsumed, the person she'd entrusted to anchor her soul had been a man she'd known for years. She'd known his likes and fears, his habits and dreams. She'd known his body and he'd known hers, and they'd cared for each other. Ry hadn't quite been able to pull her back, and she hadn't quite been able to remember him when she'd begun to re-form. It had been bad. It had been ugly and awful and a failure most personal.

In a few hours, she'd give herself to a man she didn't know from...Adam. The thought made her snort. And yet, looking across the deepest water in Scotland, she wasn't as afraid as she'd expected to be. Adam had no frills. No graces, no charm. But he knew how to get things done. Like cleansing a tainted psychic wound, guarding her body while her mind was in the ether, and smacking Aer into submission. And buying her pretty teapots for no apparent reason.

In theory, an anchor merely needed the psychic strength to pull her soul's etheric force back to her body. Most magicals had the power to be a simple tugboat. In theory, he simply had to recognize her psychic signature and hold up a metaphorical mirror that said, "Hey, you. You're Xia." In theory, a total stranger could do this job.

In practice, no morphi came out of a ritual of subsumation without some psychic damage and often some physical as well. The weaker the anchor, the more the damage. Unlike being a rampart, there was no danger for the anchor. Yet very few ramparts ever volunteered to be anchors, because there was nothing for them to fight. The clarity of an anchor's ability to help a morphi re-form him or herself was brutally clear: either you supported the morphi and she still functioned, or you failed and she sat in a pretty garden and drooled for the rest of her long witchy life. There was no way to practice and no way to tell how well an anchor would perform with a specific morphi until it was too late.

Shivering, Xia banished the vision of failure. She would make this sacrifice, and she would re-form. She would take meaning from the horror of losing herself, and she would recover. And she would damn well make Adam tell her who her advocate was, and she'd demand a vacation, soon. Preferably in a nice resort in the middle of the Sahara, far from Aqua's taint. A Bedouin tent with some cardamom tea sounded lovely. She heard you could visit the sets of Star Wars in Tunisia. She'd always liked those movies.

Tossing the last of the granola into her mouth, she crunched determinedly as she tidied up. She stood to go. But she left one perfect strawberry on the banks of Loch Mhòirair. "For you, Meg. He misses you."

Xia hadn't been home long before Adam drove up. He had what looked to be an overnight bag and a bulging cloth grocery sack. He was solid, strong, and strange to her, blond hair glittering as he came in the door with the scent of fresh grass and the sea.

He toed off his shoes at the door, set his things on the floor by the couch, and tossed the tiny packet of herbs on the counter. She noticed he didn't return the note that accompanied the spelled herbs. Suddenly, she was dying of curiosity to know what Markos had written. Looking at the teabag-size plastic Ziploc bag, she thought it was the little things that could kill you.

"Are we doing this tonight?"

His question was so casual. *Are we gambling your life tonight?* Xia fiddled with her honey spoon, her chest tight. "Are you willing to be my anchor?"

"Aye." No reassurance. No elaboration. No declaration of duty or honor.

"No, not tonight. I want to train with you first."

He came up and stood opposite her against the bar. He just stood there, big and male and unknown.

She poured more tea from her lovely pot. "I don't know you. I need to run through some tests. Would you like some tea?"

"Thank you, no. You have the right to request any anchor you choose."

She shrugged, feeling sad and defensive. "Markos would have come if he could. There's no one else."

Pulling out a stool that looked like it would break under him, he sat across from her. Sort of. His legs didn't fit under the counter's edge. "You want to test me?"

Shoulders beginning to ache from tension, she shrugged again. “Us, Adam. I want to test us. And with each success, we’ll build a more intimate bond.” She fiddled with the honey, but didn’t pour it. Suddenly, her throat was tight with tears and she was angry about it. “I’ve done this before. Survived it before. Twice.”

“I can only understand the task intellectually. It is not something anyone would ever fault you for fearing.”

She nodded, a rush of emotion gathering with his matter-of-fact words. “I won’t go into it so stupidly again. The first time I was overconfident. The second time I was sentimental, believing success was based in emotion.” She’d thought her relationship with Markos had been the secret of her first ghosting’s success, and had thought Ry would be an even stronger partner in her second subsumation due to their relationship. She’d been mistaken about them as a couple, but worse, she’d discovered that emotion had no place in the function of an anchor. “I was wrong. This is magic. This is...” *Insanity. Suicide. Blasphemy.* “...a skill. If it is a skill, then it can, to an extent, be practiced.”

“You want a night to increase your confidence.”

She played with the honey, tipping it and letting the golden slide coat the jar.

“What would you have us do?”

Standing, she went to the fridge and took off the little pad of paper that hung there on its convenient magnet. It had the name of the local Indian restaurant on the bottom. It seemed every village in Scotland had its own Indian restaurant. She got a pencil and sat.

Without letting herself think, she wrote out the three acts she’d thought of over the years, on the long nights when she’d relived the horror that was her trip into water with Ry as her anchor. They were hard tests, all of them, and all directly applicable to what an anchor might have to do. She ached to know if Ry would have succeeded in any of these tests if he’d had to perform them before their ritual. Water under the bridge. She shivered.

Integration in meditation

Hide and Seek/Tug of War

Forced orgasm

She put the pencil down with a click and slid the pad into the middle of the Formica. Adam reached over and tapped the last item on the paper.

“This.”

Tension coiled in Xia’s stomach, curling tight around anticipation. “Yeah.” Her voice was throaty.

He looked at her steadily, putting his hand back in his lap, out of sight where he sat behind the counter. “You think it will be an exercise in trust, a bonding experience. In the end, I will master you and

you will fear me. I would not go into the ghosting with this between us. It is something only longtime lovers or partners might be able to handle. I would have your regard, not your resentment. With a forced orgasm between us, you might try to even subconsciously avoid me, instead of being drawn to me.”

Her nascent sexual need withered abruptly. “Why are elementals so universally, astoundingly arrogant?”

“I’m not sure why you’d even consider this. You’re not submissive. This would be a humbling bond you’d come to resent.”

“If the psychology 101 lesson is over—based, I might add, on colossal assumptions from a few casual interchanges—I’d like to know if you’re willing to accept the terms.”

He continued to stare at her with those flat, black eyes. “This is an ultimatum?”

She breathed deep. “I need this. I need to know my anchor can handle this, before I can...” Swallowing, she fought the sudden churning in her gut. She petted the cooling china of her mug. There was a chip at the base she hadn’t seen. Kind of like how it had been with Ry.

“You will take a stranger to be your anchor. If I do not do this.”

She gave him a hard look. With his sun-and-sea crinkled eyes and thick, waving golden hair. “*You* are a stranger.”

He put both of his hands on the counter and folded them. “I want the order reversed. If I sense any fear or resentment from mastering your body, I will help you seek another anchor. I fear you are wrong, and that test will instead weaken us, but you are experienced in this, and we will see.”

Abruptly, Xia tossed back a big gulp of tepid, unsweetened tea. It was bitter and she shuddered.

He pushed the list back toward her. “The first is a good idea. The second is useless. You want to complete these tests tonight?”

She ignored his dig at the other test she deemed important. “Did Markos order a date for the ritual?”

“By the new moon.”

They had two nights. No time to waste. If Adam failed, she’d have to do this again with someone new. Her stomach almost revolted. She swallowed grimly. “Yes, tonight.”

Thoughtfully, he rubbed his chin. “And the dreamtime?”

Oh, Lord. She wanted to whimper. She wanted to rage. Being a soldier sucked. “I don’t know. Markos wanted me on duty...” She looked at him sharply, drawing her brows down and trying to be as commanding as possible. “Whose team am I assigned to?”

Adam tipped his head in acknowledgment of her ire. “His. I’m a...free agent.”

Free, her ass. He was the Chamber’s man. For all she knew, Markos was on Adam’s team. She avoided discussing his Chamber connection. “If we do these tests first, I may not be able to patrol. I suppose we’ll patrol first.”

Standing, Adam turned to his gym bag. “I need sleep. Wake me ten minutes before sunset.”

Yet another touching, revealing conversation concluded. He went into the bathroom. The irony of having a rampart was that a morphi rarely got to see them. They were either on opposite sleep cycles or in the dreamtime. Taking her cell out to the apple tree, Xia called Markos.

He answered immediately. "Just a moment." She heard voices, doors, traffic and then "Xia."

"You put me in his territory on purpose, didn't you? You've known about the subsumation order from the first. This is your attempt at psychic matchmaker."

"I delayed sending you the order as long as I could, hoping you'd gather something in the dreamtime to avoid it. He's powerful, honorable and experienced."

Silence. Xia chewed her lip.

"I want to be your anchor, Xia." The words came heavily, reluctantly from him, in his lovely, accented, deep voice.

Please. It was an ache in her throat, a pulse on the tip of her tongue. *Come to me.*

"You've read my letter?"

"No."

He sighed, a familiar exasperated sound. "Read it. Now. I'll wait."

"I don't have it. I gave it to Adam."

Silence. "Without reading it?"

"Yup."

To her surprise, she read hurt in the silence this time. She frowned. "Why, what did it say?"

"Apparently, you do not care to know."

Oh, Lady. Now he was all stiff-necked. She didn't have the energy to talk him out of it. She got defensive. "I knew it was a Chamber order of subsumation. I've known it was coming for weeks. You shouldn't have put something personal in it."

Silence.

"I'm sorry, Markos." She was.

"So am I."

Silence. She felt small. She tore at the grass.

"You can do this, Xia. You need to believe that. I know you can."

"I already have." *Heat, and agonizing light. Cold, and agonizing pressure.* "Twice."

"Yes. I pray that earth is...aware enough for you to seek its knowledge."

"How many of us are going in?"

"At least five."

"One of us will find something. Earth knows water's secrets. We'll find them." She talked a good game because she had to. She wouldn't believe she was risking a suicide mission in vain. The odds were that she'd live, and if she did they were even better that she'd glean something to stop Aqua's awakening.

And if not her, then one of the others. That the odds also said this would alter her magic was beside the point. The five morphis subsuming into earth were a game changer for the planet's enemies toying with Aqua. The Chamber wouldn't have let it go too late.

"You will." There was no false bravado at all in Markos. "But I am sorry for the task."

She nodded. "Thanks," she whispered.

"Your message has been passed on. It was extraordinary."

"Good." Pride and satisfaction radiated through her bones. She leaned her head against the trunk. "Good."

"Lord above, water is a bitch. I'm so glad you're no longer alone. Patrol tonight. I wish you hadn't been off last night."

She ground her teeth together.

"Xia." His voice was tired now. "Give me credit. You are bait, dream dancer. I want them uneasy and focused on you, because you can handle them."

She heard Adam's accusing voice in her head. "Bait. And you didn't assign me a rampart?"

"You wouldn't have accepted one until you were faced with proof that you need one. And you do much better work when you're not pissed off."

The thought of all the terrified afternoons she'd spent in Scotland, of the lonely, shaking nights...

"It is my fondest hope that you will learn to swallow your pride and ask for help sooner, before it is a necessity. I think you are close to realizing this skill."

"You pompous, patronizing asshole."

"You cannot deny it, Xia. If I'd sent a rampart to you in the beginning, your patrols would have been stiff and cautious. You probably would still be giving me the silent treatment."

"Manipulative, cruel, cud-chewing jerkwad." Her fingers cramped around the phone. She wanted to transfer the choking hold to Markos's thick neck.

"I love you."

Whaaa? "Whaaa?"

"I love you, Xia. I've been worried sick for weeks. He will keep you safe on patrols now. And he will call you back from earth, a sure anchor. You will return, and you will be Xia."

They had never said it. They knew it. They gave it euphemisms. But the words were never said. She was speechless, still stuck on those all-important three words.

"I remember putting you over me, and you took me inside you, tight and hot. Your face was strained, and your eyes like polished pewter. My hands covered your soft hips, and you danced on me. Because I was inside you, I learned how to dance through you. I am yours, Xia."

The whistling, gasping sound of strangled air was unattractive in her ear. Oh, that was her. She choked again, coughing, as his words detonated the memory of one of their nights. Her mind froze. Her body softened, eager to repeat the intense pleasure of his body.

“Adam will not fail you. I’ll see you again. Be brave.” He hung up.

The dial tone sawed and she closed the phone automatically. Listing against the tree, she stared into the soft shifting shadows in the canopy of leaves. The apples were small and green, still fuzzy.

“Markos.”

The word floated in the saturated ocean air. She closed her eyes against the welling tears. He was still manipulating her. Trying to shock her into fortitude. Using three generations of friendship. Damn him. Because he understood her, it always worked.

Chapter Six

Xia tramped the countryside until it was time to return for Adam. She wasn't going to moon around the house with him sleeping on her bed. She took from the elements and focused herself as she walked home from the little ruined croft she liked to go out to sometimes.

Standing in the bedroom doorway, she shifted awkwardly. He was big, his feet coming right to the end of the bed. He looked good against the green and white plaid. Disgustingly, finger-curling good. His T-shirt today was some indeterminate gray from age.

"It's hard to sleep with someone staring at you." His voice came soft but was startling in a room so tiny there was just a walkway around the bed. A man's voice hadn't come from her bed in a long while.

"It's time."

He opened his eyes and stretched. Okay, that went beyond finger-curling into toe-curling. He was all honed muscle, trim and dense. Her tongue swished in her mouth but she would *not* lick her lips.

"You're not going to undress?" He swept his fingers through his hair, rubbing his scalp as he lay sprawled in the middle of her bed.

"The term is skylad. I only do rituals skylad. I undressed for patrolling the dreamtime before simply out of comfort."

He considered her. She knew it made no sense to be modest around him, but didn't move to take off her dark orange top.

He held out his hand. "Come, then."

Powerful ramparts did not have to be in contact with a morphi to shadow them in the dreamtime. After all, the work was entirely psychic. She'd bet her knickers Adam could guard her from Glasgow if he wanted to. She stepped forward, folded her cold fingers around his rough, steady ones and climbed onto the bed. She lay down facing him and he curled his arm around her. Settling her head on his shoulder, she put her hand on his chest. The feeling of a man against her sang through her skin.

Letting herself snuggle forward, she sank into his warm body, inhaling his salty, musky scent. She could smell the ocean on him, and still her limbs relaxed. Taking a big breath, she held it, closing her eyes and clearing her mind. A memory flashed through her—bone-numbing cold, a web of intestines covering her face—but she banished it. For the Chamber, for her sister, for the world, she had to let Adam take that bitch's horrors now.

“Xia.” His voice rumbled under her ear. The gentle rebuke was accompanied by a spine-shivering sweep of his arm from her shoulder down to her wrist, where his free hand settled gently. “I am your rampart. I know water, and I am a predator, too. I am ready.”

He was certifiable, boastful and foolhardy, but she was going to trust him. She focused, setting her inner energy spinning, growing. He slid up against her doors, a heavy presence, as clean as his scent, and she let him in. He flowed around her without making her feel crowded. Much the same way he held her. With technique like that, he should have been a morphi.

The dreamtime formed around her, directed to water as per her order. Once focused on an element, morphi weren’t in control of the dreams. They were merely bystanders and occasionally playthings. What would Aqua throw at her now?

Tonight, she was in a little bowl-like boat. The frame was lashed wood, the body tight hides. By the Lady, water was cruel. A sleek seal head popped up out of the inky-blue water. He was adorable, with whiskers as long as her hand. She grinned. Adam yawned, revealing dagger sharp teeth, and sank without a ripple.

There was nothing. Absolutely nothing around her but acres of water, the sky a flat gray, turning the world monochrome. Then the horizon lifted, the wall of water that would swamp her moving forward. Her heart stuttered. In the early days, she’d learned she did not want to get taken without being anchored to earth. She was lost from the first if water could toy with her, tossing and lashing Xia as she pleased.

A graceful, lean shape circled the little boat, dark body undulating powerfully. He looked so at ease. So...happy. Breathing deeply, Xia closed her eyes against water’s threat. Letting her body rock on the still-gentle patch of sea, she focused on the rhythm, on the smell, Adam’s smell, and forced her fingers to uncurl from the edge of the boat. Her fingertips brushed the soft wet of a wave, and in that second, she slid her psyche into the flow, letting Adam guard the rest of her.

Aqua was muttering with discontent, irritated and snarling. Xia faded along the slipstream of primal thoughts, seeking the touch of another sentience. Somewhere, a magical was teaching Aqua to wake. The child was still in its bedroom, but in the huge house of the planet, a sloppy, selfish parent was howling for it to get up. *Eels, striking, stinging, biting, ripping—*

Xia felt the boat rock gently, but trusted Adam. She let her mind sink deeper into the weightless state that was water. She flowed with water, drifted, coasted. And there, that was the thing. All of water was being drawn, even across currents. Aqua was being drawn to one point.

They were standing in a circle, in a cavern with slanting rays of harsh sun. Vines and ferns cascaded through the gaps in the ceiling. The air was moist and thick, the water they stood in shallow and turquoise.

“Rise and take your due. Remake the world as you please. Nothing can stop you. Nothing.” The woman’s voice was a plea and a curse, full of rage and sorrow. Her voice echoed in the enclosed space, the peaceful light dappling and sprinkling the creamy rock, incongruous with her hate.

The six were ankle deep, holding hands. The power in them was like nothing Xia had ever encountered. These were not garden-variety magicals. Drawn by their background chanting, Xia shifted her attention. Since she was riding water, they were all blurry, flicking like funhouse mirrors. She made a quick perusal of the whole circle and went back to the woman leading them for more details. But then she felt the tug.

It was like someone inside her pulled on her belly button. And that quick, she was back in the boat, the currach, in a bubble of air, at the center of chaos. Black water enclosed her, and through the swirling currents that pressed on her fragile container, she caught glimpses of sharks, orcas, nets, and blood.

“No.” With ruthless command, she severed the dream. The word reverberated and she was on the bed, against Adam’s sweating, panting body. With a force of furious will, she’d ended the dreamtime, taken control of the vision as she couldn’t do when it was her own mind being tortured.

Scrambling to her knees, she grabbed fistfuls of his T-shirt and shook him. “Come out!”

His hands clamped on her wrists and she was rolled under him, his face stark and tight. For a moment, his teeth were bared in a ferocious grimace, and then his head hung down to rest on her shoulder, his body shuddering.

Xia wrapped her arms around as much of him as she could, ignoring his sticky dampness. Unbelievable how she’d wrenched out of the dreamtime before water dealt her psychic death. Victory sang in her blood. She spread her fingers and pulled him in tight. “Are you wounded?”

His gasping breath scalded her throat. In a moment, he pulled against her grip. “Let me check.”

She knew that feeling. When the psychic damage had to be separated out from the physical. The mind needed reassurance it hadn’t been real. She relaxed her arms, letting him pull from her hands. He rolled to sit on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands as his chest continued to work like bellows. She put one hand between his shoulder blades.

He stood and shucked his pants, studying his thighs, front and back. She studied them too, with worried eyes first, admiration second. The tighty whities were lovely and tight. He rotated his spread hands, coughing, considering his fingers. Then collapsed on the bed, falling back so that his shoulders landed on her legs. Sweat glistened on his face, darkening his hair. She put a hand on his shoulder, feeling useless. Feeling guilty.

Swallowing, she whispered, “Mostly, I wasn’t there. I didn’t know. I saw a bit of it, at the end. Was all of it her, or did the tracker tag us again?”

“Tagged us. Just one, I think. He had two harpoons, and I got rid of them both. He left and came back with a net.”

When an assassin worked in the dreamtime, their tools were psychic weapons that the target’s brain understood and feared. By using a net against a seal, the assassin had used a subtle attack. Unlike a fast, violent death, the net would drown Adam, even though in the dreamtime, no one needed to breathe

underwater. But in the time it took for him to realize it wasn't one of water's ploys, he'd called her back, and she'd taken them out of the killer's reach in time. Adam coughed roughly. Her gut twisted. Just in time.

"I shouldn't have gone so far. If I had been there to help you, we probably could have taken him."

Adam slung his arm over his eyes. Fisting his hand, he brought it down on the bed with a *whump*. "Damn it!" Adam had shown her so little emotion, his anger unsettled her.

"We got out, Adam." She took her hand off his tense shoulder. "And...I got through. I was able to get a guiding vision."

He took his arm from his eyes and glared at her. "Call Markos. Tell him, and then listen to my report."

She blinked at him, propped up on her hand, staring at him across her legs. "You don't think we should send it privately?"

"I know our tracker, and I wounded him badly. We need to move fast."

Xia blinked, mouth agape. Scrambling from under Adam, she raced into the kitchen and grabbed the phone. Markos answered by the time she was sitting back down next to Adam on the bed.

"Xia."

She knew it was okay to talk when he said her name. "I had a guiding dream, and Adam wounded our tracker."

"Tell me."

"They were six, three women and three men, in a tropical cavern. One of the males was a werewolf, one of the females a lamia."

"Bald or black-haired?" Markos was alert, his voice tight.

"Bald. An Asian woman was leading the invocation, and it was heartfelt, not formal. I didn't get a sense of the base chant, except it wasn't a language I know." Xia only knew four languages, so that wasn't much help. "They were so powerful, Markos. Really, really strong. I'll capture the memory and send it soon."

"Yes. Xia, I knew you could do this. I *knew* it." He was practically vibrating with excitement. She felt it too. So long without a break, and now they had something. Her memory could be shared with hunters who could possibly identify the perpetrators. Exhilaration flooded her, erasing all the long, bitter nights before.

"Adam wants to talk to you."

She handed the phone to Adam, who still hadn't sat up. He had one arm folded under his head, his face again closed. The position showed off the muscles in his arm. She wanted to lick that hollow where the sinew came together.

Adam spoke hoarsely into the phone. "It was Gavin. I took his right arm."

Silence, and then, a minotaur's roar. Adam held the phone from his ear, then returned it when Markos's rage ran out of breath. Despite the small tinny sound of it coming from hundreds of miles away through a cell phone, Xia wrapped her arms around herself.

"She's fine. He never touched her."

The rumble of Markos's voice.

"No, he was much closer than Hawaii. Try Bermuda. The bastard likes his comfort."

Rumble, rumble.

"I'm calling my people in."

Rumble, "...chain of command!" She heard Markos's shouting clearly as Adam pulled it from his ear again.

"Your chain is compromised, and you damn well know it."

Rumble, mutter.

"Whoever finds him first gets the kill. Even with his arm, he won't go easy. Don't send amateurs."

Rumble, rumble.

"No. We have more work to do. You'll get her report." He hung up.

Xia couldn't be mad he'd ended the call. She chewed on her lip. "Was he a friend?"

Adam gave her a disbelieving look. "No. An old enemy."

She shrugged, defensive. "Well how should I know?"

"What kind of friends do you think I have?"

"Dangerous ones?"

He grinned suddenly, his human teeth looking just as deadly as his seal teeth. "True." He finished kicking off his pants and stood. "I'll go shower. We'll get the report off, and then I'll jump through your hoops like a good little circus selkie."

He strode from the room, pulling his shirt over his head. Xia blinked, still stunned by the force of his face when he smiled. Adam looking pleased and happy was a sight a woman would never forget. Nor was the view of his nearly naked backside.

Chapter Seven

They'd eaten the last of the breakfast leftovers, and Adam had made an enigmatic call to a selkie named Lily, who was doing his footwork. Back on the bed, Xia had captured the memory of the glimmering cavern and its six creepy residents and sent it to Markos. Aer had been agitated and highly distractible, but no one had called it away from her this time, and Adam had let her drive. After that, she'd put on her robe, and he began to cook.

Xia watched him move around the rental's kitchen like he'd lived there forever. Thinking of how she'd boldly demanded he master her body sexually as a test of power and ability, she tried to keep her irritation at this delay from her voice. "We just ate."

He pulled the dishes she'd put away a few hours before out of the cupboards. "I spent a lot of energy, and I need my strength for later."

That shut her right up.

He browned some beef, broiled scallops, and added in peas and snow peas.

"Where'd you get snow peas?"

"Anne."

Xia hadn't seen anything so exotic available in the grocery when she shopped there. She began to wonder if Anne had a separate, secret store for Adam.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

The question came out of her mouth without passing through her brain.

Adam didn't look up from dusting herbs over the simmering mix. "No."

He turned the stove off and served himself in a cereal bowl. He took it and sat on the couch, eating steadily. Xia sidled over to the stove. She'd just had a bowl of Cheerios and fruit but it smelled delicious. She took a small portion of the stir-fry over and sat next Adam in the small room. The food was flavorful and filling. She could hear crickets outside. Calm settled into her bones after the whirlwind of the dreamtime and sending Markos her report privately. She relaxed, liking his quiet strength at her side.

His voice asked quietly, "Do you?"

"What?"

"Have a lover."

Xia considered the question. "No..."

"Markos."

She nodded. “We’ve been together, although it’s been awhile. We’re friends, although I wouldn’t say we’ve been close lately.” She shrugged. “I’m not sure what we are. We have a bond, of course, from a ghosting I did about eighty years ago with Ignis, and all the years we’ve been teamed. But he’s got no rights with me, or I with him.”

“So after you come back from Terra, we can be lovers.”

Xia choked on a pea. He didn’t assist her with her breath, just watched as she struggled. She put her dish on the end table roughly. “Excuse me?”

“You’re interested in me. Now we’re teamed. You’ve given me permission to use sex for rituals. We’re good together. I’d like to be your lover.”

“Okay—” She struggled up from the couch. Snatching her bowl up like a shield she rounded on him, hating that he looked so normal, with his drying hair beginning to shine in the kitchen light. “You don’t just say stuff like that! It’s arrogant and personal, and not what I need when I’m going into”—she flapped a hand awkwardly in the direction of the tiny spell packet—“that.”

Storming into the kitchen she threw the dish in the sink with a clatter. Noting she had a scallop left, she snatched it up and ate it. Delicious. She chewed angrily, staring at the picture of the little white puppies above the sink. Spinning, she braced her hands by her hips, shoulders squared aggressively. “And I haven’t given you permission to use sex.”

He calmly rose from the couch, coming at her. She flashed to the relentless wall of water rushing at her from the horizon.

“If you want me to prove I can manipulate your body into orgasm, then you’re giving me that tool to draw you back during the ritual.”

She backed deeper into the U shape of the kitchen. “It’s just a test, just something I thought of, to see what kind of focus—”

She’d avoided his trajectory. He stopped at the sink. “I read your file, Xia. I know your lover failed you. I will not.”

“I’m here, aren’t I? Ry didn’t fail.”

Adam turned from rinsing the dishes. He crossed his arms, mirroring her. “He didn’t exactly succeed, either. Markos said you haven’t been in the water in twenty years. I’m thinking it was your own will and power as much as his anchoring that pulled you back.”

Xia felt her face flush. “*That* is not in my file.” She was getting the feeling Adam and Markos knew each other better than she’d thought.

Adam’s hand came away from his body, lifting toward her. It came slowly, so smoothly. At any time she could have stepped away, spoken. She watched it come. It was the hand with the bruised nail. Snugging her arms in tighter around herself, she held her breath. His finger skated along her jaw and curled around

her neck. He was warm. His hand settled heavily on the top of her spine. He flexed his fingers into her, and the hair on her arms erupted.

“A forced orgasm is an exercise in brute dominance. I don’t want you to lie passive under my touch, resisting and rejecting me, my hands manipulating your flesh to a physical reaction. Trust me when I say I have that skill. Instead, let me share my body with yours. I won’t need to control you to bring you back.”

He could have pulled her to him with a flex of his arm, but he stepped up to her. His face lowered, hovered over hers. His lips were parted, his breath caressing. “Do you really doubt that I can master your pleasure? Wouldn’t you rather have a partner? I’m strong enough to force you, Xia. I would in a heartbeat, if I had to, to save you.”

The heat from his mouth poured onto her lips, swelling them. She trembled. Her lashes fluttered, unable to bear falling into his dark gaze. His fingers curled against the edge of her neck, his short nails scraping gently. The shiver of sensation, so different from the firm press of his palm, cascaded over her chest. His thumb swept into the downy hair at the base of her skull. Pleasure tumbled down through her torso, rushing faster and faster.

She was going to allow this. He was nothing like she’d ever thought she wanted, and suddenly she ached to grab on to the release swelling in her womb. Adam was so unexpected and amazingly devastating. He took her from safe to unsteady and back again, with nothing but a sensual rub of his lips.

He shifted, and his other hand settled, so lightly, across her rounded belly. It hovered, flowing through the fold in her robe expertly, barely coasting over her skin. Her breath caught, but he inhaled, drawing hers back out.

“Xia, you are so lovely. Strong and bold, lively and shining with power.” His lips brushed hers now as he spoke, and her knees shook. His palm settled low over her tummy, the press of him above her pubic bone freezing every muscle. She was held taut, suspended between his firm hands. Her breasts brushed his chest with every quick breath, aching. Her thighs felt the steel in his.

Lids lifting, dragging open in a daze, she focused on his eyes, the blond-dusted lashes sparkling even as he shadowed over her, his eyes opaque, riveted on her. His hand tightened on her neck, supporting her straining body. Her jaw sagged, lips parting in invitation as light began to pulse in her belly.

From his dark gaze, purple gleamed in triumph, and his mouth sealed over hers, pushing her mouth wide as he ate at her, slicking inside with his tongue. He reached deep and she tangled with him, thrusting her hips forward into his grip. His hand at her nape slid higher, fingers reaching into her hair. His palm on her belly slid lower, cupping her lower lips without opening them, lifting hard against her softness.

She shook, her arms bursting from their hold on herself to grab at him. Her fingers scrabbled at his ribs, finding purchase on the muscle high on his chest. He slanted his head steeper, sealing their mouths harder, reached deeper into her mouth, daring her teeth. She closed on him and suckled. It was his turn to

jerk, his hips knocking his hand against her heat. His fingers tightened, the heel grinding against the beginning of her folds.

His hand flexed hard into her softness, seeming to reach for her uterus. Eyes meeting, holding, he pressed his lips over hers and ordered, "Come."

Light exploded inside her, low, trickling in a glow of wetness between her legs. Her breasts throbbed, and her head rocked minutely in his hold. "Oh," she breathed.

She sagged, but he held her, his hand leaving her hair to go tight around her back.

His lips moved hard and eager over hers, his tongue lapping at her lips as if she was his last meal. His body was rigid, so tight to her she could feel the fine tremor that ran through him. When it eased, he slid his middle finger firmly through the slit in her hood. The hard, hot touch of him pressing her up into her own wet heat came so shockingly strong.

"Watch." The word tore from his throat, spoken into her mouth as he kissed her, his lips sweeping strong against her once more.

When he pulled back, just enough for her to focus on him, he moved his finger on her buried clit, shifting just slightly on it as he pressed deep and steady. She stopped breathing as she watched her own orgasm roll through Adam's eyes, erasing him for a moment as pleasure blinded him. She blinked, and the purple swirled to black. They each took a breath, and Xia thought his body against hers, his arm around her, was the only thing holding her together. Otherwise she would have disintegrated, subsumed not in one of the Four, but in pleasure gone to light.

He kissed her again, his finger sliding from her secret self, his hands wrapping around her hips, holding her tight as he rolled himself gently against her belly. She lifted her hands, holding his smooth cheeks, feeling his jaw work beneath her palms as they kissed, mouths wide as they tasted each other deeply. A shudder coursed over him, and she slid her fingers higher, threading into his soft hair, coming around his ears to fold his head close so she could drink down the last of his orgasm.

Huge, rough hands roamed up her back, pulling her into a tight hug she returned, wrapping both arms around his neck, burying her face in his throat when she could take the intimacy of his mouth no longer. They held tight for long moments. Xia learned to feel the knob of one lower cupboard sticking into her ass, and the coolness of the floor on her bare feet.

He kissed her gently on the forehead, and she reluctantly loosened her arms, letting him rise up and back. Her breath still came in small pants. She licked her lips. They tasted...surprised. But oh, so satisfied. Her fingers toyed with his shoulders, and she couldn't believe he had his T-shirt on.

He sounded extremely satisfied when he murmured, "See? Sharing is so much better."

Her lips buzzed, her jaw ached, and her breasts felt swollen and heavy. Wetness smeared her thighs, and her heart was pounding hard in her chest.

Adam's thumb brushed against her lower lip, wringing a gasp from her as a shiver ran down to her toes. "We'll be lovers." He sounded downright smug.

He was irritating, but her body was so pleasure laden, the feeling felt far away. He bent and she squeaked as he lifted her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom, maneuvering her awkward bulk through the doorways easily. He laid her on the bed and pulled open her robe like he had a right to. The irritation swelled, especially when she saw something that looked like greed and possession sweep over his face.

"Adam." Her voice was hoarse.

He sat on the bed, his hands in his lap, his eyes tracking over her thighs and belly and breasts and back again. "Xia."

"What was that?"

He met her eyes. Frowned at her hard, indignant tone. "You're not going to be angry. It was so good."

"Quit telling me, ordering me, carrying me around!" She pulled the robe over her chest.

He frowned deeper. His face began to change subtly, around the eyes and mouth, becoming the mask she was used to. "Why are you angry?"

She licked her lips and had to keep her body from shuddering. She sighed. "You just bulldozed me."

His shoulders pulled back, and his face was fully closed. "Instead of forcing your body, as you would have had, I shared myself with you. I showed you my skill and I did it respectfully."

Before she could think of a response, he stood and walked out. Xia slung an arm over her eyes. She heard the water running in the bathroom. It pissed her off that she wanted to watch him clean himself. He finished but didn't return to the bedroom. She heard him begin to wash the dishes. She felt like a slug and was bitter about it. He was the one who was all high-handed.

She went into the bathroom and washed the thick come from her thighs. Her face in the mirror was a revelation. Her auburn hair was tousled and loose around her shoulders, her freckles stark and her cheeks flushed. Her eyes glittered like mirrors and her lips were...indecent. Movie-star plump. Her nipples were still hard, and washing herself didn't do anything to settle them.

In the kitchen, he was on the phone. From the discussion of locations, she assumed it was about Gavin the rat-bastard harpoonist. She took a freezer bag and put the leftover stir-fry away. Adam took the pan and washed it, while she began to dry. He finished the call and put the phone on the bar. They worked in silence that blessedly didn't feel angry.

"Adam?" Crap. Her voice was high and uncertain. She cleared her throat.

"Aye." He undid the drain and rinsed the sink.

"It *was* good. Very...very good."

He wrung out the dishcloth. "Aye." He turned only his head and watched her with those deep eyes. "It will get better."

She felt her jaw come unhinged and closed it with a snap.

“Time for your next hoop.”

“They’re not hoops. These are training exercises. They’re extremely useful.”

The phone rang with a generic trill. He reached out for it without taking his eyes off her. “Adam here.”

Murmur, feminine murmur.

“Try St. Lucia.” He powered it off and set it down.

Xia realized she was still holding a dripping bowl and put it down as well.

“Let’s do the integration. You’ll see then that I’ll never give up on you. No matter where you go in Terra, I’ll find a way to get to you.”

The thought of the intimacy of sharing Adam’s conscious and unconscious thoughts was overwhelming after their first kiss. Oh, she needed to be honest here. After their first sex. Standing up, clothed. It was cowardly but she wanted to delay that test.

“Not the integration. Let’s do the tug of war. See if you can get me.”

He wrung the sponge particularly viciously. “Where do you want to do your test of wills?”

“Not the kitchen,” she said dryly. “I’ll take the bed. You take the couch. I don’t want to risk us touching.”

He slid a look at her and went into the living room. She finally noticed he was wearing different jeans. She had a thought that she had enough energy to go through this tonight because he’d taken on Aqua for her during the dreamtime.

“Are you sure you’re up to this? Would you like to rest?”

“I’m ready.” He folded his hands behind his head, his legs stretched out and crossed.

“We’ve already gone through quite a bit tonight—”

“If you’re too tired, say so.”

“Why do you always do that! You’re so brusque and cold.”

“I’m not being cold, merely truthful. I’ve no patience with social dithering. I’m too old for that shite.”

“I’m sorry, okay? I hurt your feelings, and I’m trying to be more careful with you.” She’d asked him to force her and he’d tricked her instead. She’d been maneuvered and had gotten defensive when she had no right to be.

He moved his laced hands over his head and down to his lap. “If the Chamber wasn’t behind the order to send you into Terra, I’d have you on your back in that bed, buried balls deep. I haven’t had a lover in thirty years, and if you don’t get your round soft ass back in that bedroom so we can finish this tonight and send you to bed, *alone*, to rest, I’m going to get up and walk out.”

Xia stared at him.

“Close that gorgeous mouth. You’re giving me ideas. *Go*.”

She whirled and threw herself onto the bed. She lay there panting for several moments before her brain engaged.

“I’m waiting.” His voice sounded decidedly tight.

Licking her lips, *shiver*, she focused and spun her power up. Stepping into the ether was like shedding her skin. She had no body, but she was Xia, and she had her own space. She bobbed at the end of her silver tether. A royal purple ribbon rolled toward her, and she felt the brush of Adam. He felt like fur. In this realm, sending thoughts was a push of energy and receiving them felt like an internal echo.

“I’m going to go hide. You try to find me, catch me and haul me back, and I’ll try to stay away.”

“I won’t hurt you. If you’re strong enough, I’ll give up.”

“But that’s not what I want. I want to see if you’re strong enough to force me.”

“Unconscious, you’ll be ten times stronger anyway.”

If Xia had teeth to grind, she would. The astral plane around them was soft and fuzzy, like being inside a cloud. “Then I want proof you’re at least as strong as me awake.”

“I think you’ve learned by now, I can do force, but I don’t like to. If I’m trying to wrangle you, I’ll use trickery and teasing, not brute strength.”

The thought made her pause. “Really? But you’re not a tricky or teasing person at all.”

“I don’t see you still demanding a forced orgasm.”

Pride detonated inside her. “The kitchen was still mostly about force.”

“I seduced you. Not quite the same thing. I gave you your mastery, just not in the form you envisioned.” And then he pulsed with self-satisfied energy.

Fury made her soul’s tether shine. Her psychic essence gathered.

“You look like a storm cloud.”

“You look like a—a—*raindrop*.”

She cut her cord and was off like a rocket, soaring into the misty plane of no-space, soul-space, magic. She wasn’t trying to travel, she wasn’t trying to contact or spy. She was looking for a passing thought to hitchhike on and disappear.

She roamed the countryside. A bit to the north was a good cluster of powerful minds, probably based on the Isle of Skye. Xia dropped into the middle of them and shrank herself. She was good at hiding, because of her morphi nature. She slid and hid in the very elements’ inner dreams. Surely she could hide from one old selkie.

She watched the sky, oozed into the shadow of what felt like a demon, and was still. For a long time. She began to grow tired, but held to her patience. The demon’s etheric self bobbed gently. She might be sleeping or just living a mundane life without accessing her magic. Time was hard to gauge here, as much could be accomplished in a short amount of real-body time or, conversely, a person could be held here for what felt like a moment, while the real-body was trapped and aging.

Suddenly a shower of red sex magic exploded like a firework over the small cluster of magical minds. The demon shivered with pleasure, and nearly all the souls turned to look. Xia knew it for the trap it was and stayed crouched. Even though her curiosity was killing her. What had he done to set off such a display? She felt a little guilty he'd expended so much power to no purpose.

Then the shadow she curled against expanded between one moment and the next. She was surrounded. Panicking, wondering if she'd blundered against an enemy, she burst herself wide, the mental equivalent of a jumping jack. The shadow trembled, but held. She was about to get more violent when she heard the demon who controlled the astral shadow speak. It had an incredibly seductive voice, low and calming, like a purr.

"So beautiful, Adam. Come take her, she izz very, how you say...surprised."

"Thank you, Omneiloscadum. I appreciate your help."

"And I appreciate your...self." She sounded interested.

Adam rose up and in the time the shadow left her, he had her in a gentle grip. Xia growled, pulling and twisting, wondering how best to resist. "You weren't supposed to use reinforcements. This was a test for us."

"Oh? I thought it was a test of how powerful I was."

"*Exactly*. No fair using others."

"I have allies. They are part of my power." Adam's voice was matter-of-fact as he towed her southeast.

Xia did the mental equivalent of digging in her heels.

He sighed. "Must we, Xia?"

She turned on him, slapping him with her power. That it stung her, too, mattered not. "This is my life I'm offering, Adam. My life!" She stopped fighting. "Pardon me if I happen to want some safeguards in place before I disappear."

His presence rubbed against hers. "Come. I want to look in your eyes."

The comment surprised her, but not as much as the speed he tore off with. She flowed along behind him like a lure on a line. The anchoring bit of ribbon rose from her real-body's location. She was slung at it without a bit of care.

Her lungs expanded hard and loud with the mental shock of being back. Her body went rigid, and her eyes opened. He came storming into the bedroom. Slapping the wall plate, he flooded the room with light.

"Let me in."

"What?"

"Let me in."

She sat up with difficulty, her abs trembling from the strain. "I'm not sleepy."

"I'm not coming in as your rampart. I want you to see me. From the inside, so you won't doubt my power or dedication again."

Rolling onto her knees, she stared at the blank-faced and tight-lipped man. "I don't doubt your dedication at all, Adam. And I'm aware you're powerful, and I'm very grateful you're willing to anchor me. I just wish I could know you're more powerful than me, to rescue me from myself if you have to."

"I told you before. I even showed you, twice. *I won't need to control you to bring you back.*"

He stood with his legs pressed to the edge of the mattress as if it were a magical fence. His chest was working and his hair disheveled and softly waving.

Xia licked her lips. "Tell me what you mean, please." She carefully kept her words modulated and calm.

Adam stared at her opaquely, then turned and left. The fridge opened and closed, and he returned, handing her an iced tea and opening a bottle of Guinness for himself. Since iced tea was a sacrilege in the UK, she knew he'd paid attention to her American tastes. He sat on the foot of the bed. His throat was a thing of beauty as he swallowed. Flipping the bottle cap in his hand, he stared blindly at the cream-painted wall.

Xia took a sip of her iced tea. Pleasure burst in her at the cool, dry relief. She drank deeply. "Thank you. This is perfect."

He snorted softly. She ignored it, waited.

"I've been an anchor before."

It had been in his file. He'd been an anchor four times, with Aqua, and Aer. All of the morphi who had gone into the elements had come out, although one had taken a year to learn how to speak again. All were men, one of whom he'd been a rampart for.

"Your track record is impressive." But every time a morphi was subsumed it was a roll of the dice, and the odds were just slightly better than seventy-five percent.

"I got them back, without sex by the way, and I'll get you back. People don't get that it isn't brute force. That's fire's way. It's about persistence and alternate thinking. That's water's way."

Xia sank off of her knees, sitting with her legs folded to the side. She fixed the gaping lapels at her robe and stared at Adam's back. "I...understand. Intellectually. I never thought of it that way. The teachers who mentor new anchors must have many ways to model how to counter the elements. You should think about sharing your experience."

"Intellectually. No one thing will work for any two people. Not in this." He took a swig from his bottle.

She could smell the fear on herself. "I'm scared. I told myself last time, never again."

Adam nodded. He stood and set the bottle on her dresser. Took her iced tea and did the same. Crawling on the bed, he came toward her and drew her down in his embrace. Her heart beat and it was hard

to breathe. His arms were long and solid, his scent so very...nice. It smelled good and right, and she licked her lips.

The room's light was still on. His hand soothed down her back and she wished her robe to Timbuktu.

"You're going to meet me, get to know me better. Inside and out. You're going to remember I'm experienced, and you're going to rest and focus. You'll do what you can, but in the end, Xia, you'll still be scared. There is no preparation morphi can truly make before they give into the ghosting, and there is no proof I can offer as an anchor."

Her mind was still stuck on "inside and out". She concentrated on breathing and her brain caught up to his words. She'd asked him to do this, but the other hoops—*tests*—he'd already passed had been so unpredictable in their outcomes. Somehow she knew that with Adam, the integration she'd demanded as a reassurance wasn't going to be what she expected. Maybe the ghosting into Terra would be different than she feared as well.

"I can do this. I've come back before. I'll be fine."

"You won't be fine. You'll be new. You'll be Xia-touched-by-Terra."

Her heart ballooned into her throat.

"And I'll be here to meet the new you. I will help you."

Her heart beat and sank back to where it belonged. She believed him. "I know." She reached out and touched the dimple in his chin. It was powerful to hear him admit what everyone danced around and tried to euphemize. Sure most morphi came back alive, functioning. But the experience changed your life, and rarely in positive ways. That was the cost of looking into the heart of one of the elements and teasing out their secrets from the inside. There was no falseness around Adam. Suddenly the confidence and sheer gratitude she felt having him as her anchor settled her. "We can do this."

"We will do this." Cupping her hand in his big, rough one, he kissed the back of her fingers and pulled it down to his chest. "Let me in, Morphi."

Her lids fluttered closed, and Adam eased in. She knew well how to allow another psychic to float into her thoughts and settle there. She watched him come in, but not too deep. Then Adam opened his own gate, and Xia joined him, threading them together. Adam was not a dreamer witch. It was not his nature or his skill to shepherd someone in his mind. He had no control over where she went.

Xia hovered at the edges of the selkie's mind. So easy to forget he wasn't a man when she admired his strong human form. Not in here. He was wild. Everything about him worked in rhythm to the ocean. He swayed, he sank, he swelled with the waves. He sang to the moon. He hunted.

Swallowing, Xia suddenly understood. He wasn't a morphi, he wasn't a human. Adam was a water elemental. He would never be anything other. She knew after her subsumation into Aqua with Ry that Aqua was much, much more terrifying than the other elements. And Adam was part of water. He scared the shit out of her. She was frozen with memories of violence and power. Both of those attributes were part of him.

Adam's awareness found her, furred and curious and oh-so-dangerous. "Xia." His mental self accepted her without hesitation. He wasn't nervous to have her so close. He had no reservations about showing her anything at all. He liked her, wanted her. She was powerful, which turned him on, and fascinating despite his caution toward relationships. He considered her his. Swimming into her, twining through her thoughts, he twisted them together.

If the speed with which Adam had flung Xia into her body had been a shock earlier, it was nothing compared to the mental whiplash Xia gave herself as she ran from the black depths of Adam. She shuddered against his warm body, closing her own mental doors, closing him out. But that didn't silence the knowledge reverberating through her. Xia was absolutely shocked to discover that she craved danger. She lusted after it. She'd been so drawn, so inexplicably and irritably drawn to him, and she now understood why. Pitting herself against the elements was a thrill ride that would pale in comparison to the challenge of taking Adam as a lover. She was insane.

His arms pulled her tight, his chin rubbing over her head as he soothed her.

"Mokay. 'Sokay." She clenched her teeth so they wouldn't chatter.

One of his hands went down to his pants. She heard a zipper and squeezed her eyes shut. Oh Lady. Oh Lord.

Moving his hand to her ass, he squeezed the generous mound just to the point of pain, then rubbed over the sting of his grip. Her breath was coming in near gasps now, but she stayed pressed tight to him. Adam, golden and beautiful and strong. Deep and wild and relentless. His other hand wrapped around her back and settled against her rib cage, encircling her. His fingers burned through the robe's flannel softness, brushing the edge of her breast.

"Xia, do you see me now?"

"Y-y-yes." It wasn't nerves, she told herself, or terror. She didn't know why she stuttered or what she agreed to. Her brain was frozen, understanding nothing but his hand on her ass, his arm compressing her tight. That Adam was a wild creature of the sea, and he wanted her.

He shifted her and they rolled. Xia felt her hair catch under her head, keeping her jaw tipped up, pulling at her scalp. His hand moved from beneath her and his knees shoved hers apart.

"Xia," he ordered, low and steady.

She drew up her knees, tipping her hips, and a round knob of hot skin set against her. She cried out, grabbing his upper arms tightly. He lapped at her offered throat, nipped along her jaw. His weight crushed her down, and his jeans were rough against her legs. He pushed against her. He pushed his whole body on that single point, and her body gave, as it was designed to.

His tip was in the clutch of her open channel, and it had been long enough that the pleasure shocked her. A sound left her throat, desperate and grateful.

"Shhhh. Look at me, storm cloud."

Her eyes barely focused before she began to drown in his black depths. The sound squeaked a bit higher. She tried to swirl her hips farther onto his hard length, but he threw a thigh over hers, stilling her. The change in pressure made her mew again.

“Fuck.” He lost whatever point he was trying to make, a shudder racing down his body, and then he was in her, with one smooth, decisive stroke.

The mew grew into a short, hoarse call as Xia tossed under him, her fingers scrabbling at his muscled arms.

“I can’t hold back, Xia, but I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

The waves began to pound her, rising up and tossing her high, then setting her spinning and dragging her down. His flesh was like silk inside her. She couldn’t grip him tight enough, he was too strong and she too slippery. He flowed in and out of her body, drowning her. Literally. She couldn’t breathe but it didn’t matter, because it felt so good, and the light was so beautiful. It was the stuff of her nightmares when she relived her mission with Ry. It was the nightmare that left her longing and aching, but now it was real, and it was Adam.

The man who had drawn her to the edge of her nightmare when she barely knew him as a taciturn puzzle was the man who took her to the edge of sanity now, deep in her body. His thick length pushed her open, the cream from her desire spattering her thighs with every strike. His body worked over her, and all she could do was roll underneath, tightening, reaching. Her gut twisted, her thighs cramped, toes and fingers curled, her scalp smarting from the pull of her hair under her shoulders.

“I’ve.” Gasp. “Got.” Shove. “You.” Drag.

The overpowering sensations at the center of her body spilled over. He was just as terrifying as water, because he was water’s. But he was Adam. Adam had her, so she was safe. She was free. She dove into the maelstrom and he never let her go, diving right along with her. His head crushed the pillow next to her face, his roar rattling her ribs as she crested the pleasure. Liquid shock blackened her vision.

“Lord, Lord, Lord,” she chanted. “Good gracious me.”

He laughed and choked, his breath so hot in her ear. His body shuddered, hips grinding against hers. The pressure sent ripples down her legs, as if she’d been running for hours. Or swimming.

Goodness gracious, great balls of fire! rang out in her head. She shook her brain, dislodging the odd song. Peeling her hands off Adam’s biceps, she lifted them and struggled to get her hair free, relieving her neck. Sighing with contentment, she settled her hands on his sweaty hair and cradled his skull. He kissed her breastbone, but his body was arched between their sealed hips, so he rose up. Xia trailed her nails down over his collarbone and across the front of his T-shirted chest.

“I think I already asked you this question tonight, but what was that?”

Adam eased his body from hers, and her pelvis swayed with a wash of residual pleasure. She mewed.

He darted in and kissed her lips quickly, gently. “That was some alternative thinking.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I hated you to be scared of me. Never. Never, Xia. In the end, at the final moment, you weren’t.”

She wouldn’t meet his eyes, but he pressed another kiss to her mouth, lingering this time, grazing on the swell of her lower lip.

“Plus, having us blended together like that was beautiful and made me hard.”

Rising up, he left the bed and went to the bathroom. The water ran, and then he came in with a washcloth. Xia finally became aware that she was lying splayed open on the bunched folds of her robe. She went to close her thighs and reach for the cloth, but he merely twined his fingers with hers and jockeyed back between her legs. He wiped her folds with firm strokes, knowing that gentle would be too much sensation. She noted with disappointment his jeans were closed.

“Will we get pregnant?” His words were carefully empty, but the question was high-damage anyway.

“Oh. My. Lord.”

Xia used a condom, always, unless she had a regular lover and used a spell. Magicals couldn’t get diseases, but the interspecies mix of eggs and sperm were not always quantifiable. A story she’d heard as a teen of a fawn getting pregnant four years after she’d had sex with a centaur had freaked her right the Hell out. Her fingers tightened on Adam’s as she closed her eyes and counted.

“It’s the wrong time for me, but...” Who knew what would happen between a powerful witch and a selkie. Selkies were notorious for their lustful ways. In the lore, the more lustful, usually the more fertile.

“Then you are safe.” Oh, that empty, flat voice. “Our sperm has no special longevity.”

She jerked up with a quick, crunch-like movement and shoved at his shoulder. “What *was* that?”

He grabbed her wrist in a firm but gentle grip. His eyes glowed amethyst. “Stop hitting me. You are much more violent than I would have guessed.”

“Adam! I always use a condom or a spell. Always.” Except for that one time when Markos had incinerated the one she’d tossed at him during an argument and he’d taken her anyway. He’d made sure it was the wrong time of the month, but still, it had pissed her off. After she’d come down from the gasping orgasm.

“You have no children.” He stated it like a robot. Was it some kind of indictment?

She sat up, not bothering to pull the robe closed. It was a little late for that. “I want no children, not as an active-duty morphi. Maybe in a few dozen years, when I’m older and ready to retire.” She wasn’t too sure about that, though. Most years, it was hard enough to take care of herself, her aunt, her sister, and Markos.

“I regret that I swept you up before we were sure we would not have an ill-timed child, but I do not regret sharing with you.”

She studied him, heaving a gusty sigh. “You don’t know what that was either, do you.”

“I know it was good. I know you no longer fear me.”

Averting her gaze, she nodded. “You are a beautiful selkie inside, Adam.” There was no deception in him. None. His focus was simple: the sea, food, shelter, community. His narrow world was actually very calming. She thought of Markos’s constant emotional upheavals, how they were always so tempestuous together. She was often exhausted after Markos, even without sex. As advocate to a group of morphi, he was involved in so much politics and bureaucracy. Adam would never be like that, not because he didn’t want the responsibility, but because he had no subtle social skills and needed to be near water, always. Things would always be simpler with Adam. And more brutal.

“Thank you.” He reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The gentle, possessive motion sent a zing of warmth to her center. “You should rest. Tomorrow, when the sun is on its rise, we’ll take our journey into Terra, to try to gain insight.”

We. He’d twined himself with her when he spoke of a child as well. Xia didn’t know what to do with him. She felt battered. “You need to rest as well.”

“Aye. Eight hours for you and four for me, and then we’ll begin.”

She nodded, her heart jumping once, hard, in her chest. She took the robe off and crawled under the covers. He turned out the light. Cookie Monster smiled his cheerful blue glow. He stood by the bed and she looked up at him.

“I understand now.”

He waited.

“When you say you don’t have to control me, that you can anchor me without force.”

He crouched on his haunches, the back of his fingers grazing her cheek. “I will flow around you, and if you do not come back in a straight line, I will be able to guide you patiently. I will draw you, not drag you.”

Her stomach churned.

“Shhh. I have to go work on the computer to check on the capture of Gavin. I’ll come hold you when I can.”

She nodded, rubbing her cheek against his touch. “Good night, Adam. Thank you for humoring me with my tests. Thank you for proving yourself for my peace of mind.”

His thumb brushed the seam of her lips. “Thank you for letting me share this. When I got the call to be your rampart and your anchor, I feared you would not accept me.”

“Really? I thought I was sadly obvious in my fascination with you.” Lord and Lady, was it really only two days ago she’d thought of him as a hamster to torment? She’d been arrogant. And lonely.

“You were interested, but deeply suspicious. I couldn’t believe you’d stay, when you arrived. With your shiny purple monstrosity—”

“Schwinn.”

“And your Mexican hat and your natural, warm way with the villagers. You were never haughty, but never expected. Such a gorgeous woman, with fire-tinted hair and ice-tinted eyes. And you were alone. Then you stayed on, night after week. I couldn’t believe it when no partner followed you.” His finger delicately traced her lower eye socket. “I would watch the sun set, and I would get so upset thinking of you up here, dreaming alone, I’d go into my fur. I got nothing done at the marina.”

Xia felt her eyelids droop listening to his steady deep voice with that amazing Scottish inflection. “I go’ nuthin’ done a’ th’ mareeena.” The sea was even in his speech.

“Tomorrow, you will begin the woman’s spell that will keep us from getting pregnant.”

She studied him through her lashes. Her heart stayed steady at this pronouncement. “Yes.”

“Open to me, Morphi.” His low voice soothed.

She opened her mental gate, and he slipped around her, a strong, solid rampart to guard her sleep. Then she slid into rest, safe.

Chapter Eight

Xia woke twice in the night. Once to pee and once from a nightmare. When she woke from it, she was in Adam's arms, and he crooned a Gaelic lullaby to her. Knowing he'd shared it, knowing he'd suffered it, she wiped a tear on his T-shirt-covered shoulder.

"All those people, so scared, so cold..." she whispered over his song. Aqua had given her a memory of taking down a ship full of people. Four decks of hundreds of children, women, families, raging men, all gone, to Aqua's delight.

Adam sang on and she stopped shaking, and slept. Breakfast the next day was a more modest affair, with only cereal, toast, tea in her new pot, and a half pound of bacon for Adam.

As they sat on the couch to eat, Adam said, "We found him last night. He was in Miami."

"We?"

"Selkies."

"Ah." The thought of being hunted by a pack of Adams made Xia shiver. She crunched her honey toast. "And?"

"I wanted him sent to me, but an elf interfered."

"Damn elves. Always so persnickety about the rule of law." She swallowed on the coarse bite of toast, trying to breathe through the memory of Tibor.

"I was within my rights. There was no doubt to his identity or his evil intent."

Xia fought a grin at his indignant voice. Inside, she was relieved she would not have to watch him be part of the ugly business of ripping a confession from a criminal. "So, no Gavin."

"That particular witch will not bother you again. They've already extracted the name of Gavin's patron from him. It was a powerful Yoruba witch. He in turn is denying any connection to a greater ritual, but he's a known worshipper of Olokun, a goddess who summoned a great flood."

"Hmmm. I don't know any Yoruba witches. That's...Nigeria?"

"Aye."

"So, a random African witch hired another assassin witch to find and kill a random morphi roaming the dreamtime for love of a flood-causing goddess?"

"That's the initial story. They only picked the patron up an hour ago. You can follow the developments while I sleep."

"I will." She breathed deeply over the humid scent of her tea, desperately trying to avoid thinking of the coming day.

"Don't wander, Xia. Stay near the house."

She gave him a sharp look.

"Please," he added, but ruined it by saying it with irony.

"I know how to do my job. I'm very well not going to jaunt into the village to chat with Anne over scones when I'm about to be subsumed."

His hand settled over her knee. She froze. Seeing it on her leg made her aware of just how very big he was. "I worry. This is the one time I cannot guard you."

She dragged her eyes up his long arm, now clad in a ratty red T-shirt. She met his deep black eyes. "I'll guard *you*. I won't wander."

The tiniest shift at the edge of his mouth, and she knew he smiled. "Thank you."

They finished breakfast as the morning mist burned away. He dried while she washed, and after he'd draped the dishtowel over the oven handle, he settled back against the counter, legs braced and spread. He held out his hands. "Come."

Eyeing him for a moment, Xia considered the fact she hadn't showered or brushed her teeth. He curled his fingers at her. She came at him with a hesitant sideways step, and another, until his hands closed over hers and drew her close.

She was between his thighs, thick with muscle in his jeans, and before she had time to warn him of her breath, he'd slid a hand proprietarily into the opening of her robe. His rough palm closed over her breast, pressing it up, gathering its weight and squeezing.

"Uhhhh—"

His mouth met hers, and she melted against him. He tasted like orange juice with a hint of bacon. Strong lips, bold tongue, sharp teeth, he kissed her like he owned her, and she shivered, remembering the previous night. She'd pressed him for proof against unquenchable fears and he'd offered her beautiful strength, sex and honesty.

His hands pulled the robe down, dragging it off her shoulders, trapping her arms.

She ripped her mouth from his. "No."

He froze. His heavy-eyed gaze cleared with caution.

"I am not, yet again, going to be the one undone while you're fully dressed."

The tiny lip's-edge smile softened his face as he relaxed. Both of his hands cupped her breasts, thumbs brushing her hard nipples with the edge of his nails. "Undone. I like that."

"And I thought you were all about 'sharing'."

"Oh, aye, with my morphi Xia, I'm very..." pinch, "...very..." twist, "...into sharing." He compressed her nipples in his fingers and actually pulled on her, using them to draw her back to his mouth.

He kissed her again, drowned her, soaking her thighs, then pulled away. He stripped his T-shirt off and put her hovering hands on his chest. "There now, share and share alike."

His mouth took hers like a tidal wave, carrying her completely away. His hands on her breasts squeezed and plumped in time with his surging kiss. When he finally ceased, she had to think about how to breathe. The big breath she took set her sensitive breasts on fire in his warm, encompassing hands.

Dazed, she listed against him, hands petting his chest and shoulders mindlessly, feverishly. "What was that?"

"A good-morning kiss."

She laughed weakly. He gathered her into a hug, arms squeezing her, making her feel real. "I'll rest. You stay calm. If you must think, think about my kiss, my touch, how you want my body to move on yours."

She squeezed him back. She needed him to be real.

Eventually she let him go to bed. Xia meditated but kept being distracted by the sensation of entrapment. She showered, emailed Markos about Gavin, and called her sister.

"Hola!"

She sounded happy, and Xia relaxed. "Tony, it's me."

"Sis! How's your rampart?"

"He's...good. Powerful."

"Oooooo. That means he's getting under your skin. Have you done him yet?"

"None of your beeswax."

"Xia, I'm not asking for a play by play, just a generalization. How far?"

Sighing, Xia put her gaze on her cheerful straw hat hanging by the door. "Far."

"Awesome. It's about time you had someone at your back. This is such a relief."

Xia closed her eyes. "Yeah."

Silence. "What. What is it?"

"I've been taken out of the dreamtime's watch. I have a new assignment."

"Wonderful! You've been there too long. Well, your rampart will go too, right?"

"Yes. I'm not actually relocating."

Silence. "Tell me, Xia."

"I'm going to subsume into Terra."

Heavy, awful silence.

"I called to say..." *goodbye*. "I love you."

"No." Tony's voice breathed. "You're one of the best dreamtime workers. They can't risk you."

"Yeah, they can. This is important."

"I'll kill him."

"It's not Markos's decision. This is coming from the Chamber."

"Well, he should be there."

"He would if he could. He's on a different project, and my rampart is going to anchor me."

"A stranger."

"Not at all." The denial shocked both women into silence.

"You knew him before?"

"No. I mean, I met him when I first got here, but we'd only talked a few times. He's just...not a stranger. It's not like that."

"Isn't this the dude who belongs to Aqua?" It was very common to have an anchor be the same element the morphi was going to sink into.

"He's old and powerful, and I trust him."

"OhmyLady. You've finally had your brain scrambled in the dreamtime."

"He's the right anchor for me."

"You're thinking with your crotch and not your head. They're sending you into Terra because they know Terra knows how to stop *her*. Giving you an anchor of water is stupid. Hello! If earth knows how to stop water, then a water anchor is fucking useless to a morphi who gets lost in earth."

"I won't—"

"*Don't* tell me you won't get lost. Don't pull the wise big-sister thing. You're not prophetic and you were in therapy for years after that spineless shaman Ry got scared and fucking dropped you."

She should never have told her sister the truth of what had happened. Xia truly feared for Ry's life should he ever cross Antonia's path. "Adam made me believe in him, Tony. He even went through some training exercises with me. I'm scared, but I know this is the right thing to do. I know nearly every damn morphi in the world is in use stopping Aqua's rise to consciousness, and I know I've done this before and survived. So has Adam. We...talked it out last night, and I feel as confident as I can be."

Her sister's voice was flat with anger, utterly unconvinced. "A raindrop against a rock isn't going to do a damn thing to carve you free."

"I disagree. Last night, he showed me how a raindrop can weave inside a rock and burst it open." Alternative thinking. "He'll do right by me, Tony, calm down."

Tony sobbed.

Oh, Lord and Lady and all their stars.

"Xia. Come back. Please, please, come back. Remember me, and come back."

The thick emotion in her sister brought up her own. Whispering, she answered, "I will. If I can, I will."

"No ifs. Do it."

The dial tone rang in her ear. Xia closed the phone and put it gently down on the table. Bringing her knees up, she wrapped her arms around them and buried her face. The tears were right there. Tears of self-pity and fear and denial. She sniffled, fighting to hold them off.

“Tony is your sister.” His sleepy voice came from behind the couch.

She held her position. “Yeah.”

“She fears for you.”

Sniffle. “Yeah.”

“But you are strong, Xia, and skilled. You have me. If you come hold me, can you stay awake?”

She nodded. Following him to the bedroom, he drew her down into his arms. His chest was still bare. She’d noticed before he was utterly smooth, without hair on his jaw or chest...hmmm. Within three breaths, Adam’s body sank heavily against hers, asleep. She held him and believed in them.

Closing her eyes, she began to meditate. First, she cleared her mind and drew up her power. Second, she drew up her mission. *Stop Aqua from waking*. Water needed to be turned back. She believed it and was ready to dedicate herself to that. Xia was one of a handful of people who had ghosted with Aqua and come out well. All of them knew how important it was to stop her.

Then, she began to build a conglomerate memory of herself. She delved into her happiest and her earliest memories, but she also dragged up the darkest, losing her parents. Then she imagined her most humiliating, her most shameful. Moments of cruelty and selfishness she could never take back were studied. She remembered the lovers she’d had—not many for a woman of 116. The pets, the vacations, the professional triumphs. Her favorite foods and places and styles, and how she laughed too loud and too rarely.

Finally, she reviewed all the people she loved in her life...and included Adam. Forming a mental image of each person and choosing a distinct memory of them warmed her and made her strong. The memory that came for Adam was of the look he gave her when he carried her to bed and spread her robe. That look of awe and need and wonder and pride and triumph.

Holding all this in her mind while she held Adam in her arms, Xia listened to the echo of her sister’s words. *Come back. No ifs. Do it.*

He woke with a stretch when his watch alarm went off. He blinked at her sleepily and smiled that slight, soft smile.

“What did you do, when you distracted that demon on Skye?” she asked thoughtfully.

“Masturbated.”

“That’s what I thought. It was quite a show. Was she an old lover, that demon?”

“No. But she was an old lover of one of my old lovers. We commiserated together.”

“Broken heart?” Her stomach knotted.

“Poor choice.”

“Ah.” Her stomach relaxed. “So, how did you find me? I knew it was a trap, and I stayed put.”

“That’s how. When a sexual release is offered on the open ether for everyone, the only person who doesn’t sit up and look is guilty or hiding something. I asked Om to help me look. Bad luck for you to be hiding underneath her.”

“That’s...a lot of thinking. You *are* sneaky.”

“I prefer clever.”

She smiled at him, her hands playing with the ridges of his ribs.

He smiled back, that barely there, pleased tilt on his lips. “You seem...well.”

“I am. I focused. I’m ready...ish.”

“Ready-ish?”

“As close as I’m gonna get.”

His hand smoothed from her crown to her nape. “All right. Then let’s begin.”

She nodded, trying not to tense as he slid from the bed and put his tee back on. He ate again, while she laid out the ritual materials. She glanced uneasily at the overcast, stormy day. It was still before noon, and intellectually she knew they had many hours. But in her gut she knew that if she wasn’t back by the dreamtime, by sunset, then she’d probably never be back. It was one thing for a morphi to slide and slip around in the dreamtime. It was another to recreate yourself out of an element’s very grasp at that dangerous time of the Four’s greatest potential.

When she was done, she lay nude in the middle of the bed. The room was dark. No light shone around her curtains, and no cheerful blue Cookie Monster glowed. Adam sat with her feet in his lap. She prayed to the Lord and Lady.

Then she gestured at her anchor. He took a bit of water and sprinkled it over the specially spelled herbs that smelled sharp and bitter. He then lit a sage smudge with a lighter and lit the herbs on fire with that. The smoke rose, curling, beautiful, and the sharp scent became strong and astringent. He passed her the bowl, just a cereal bowl. She picked up her athame, gripping the silver knife hard in her fist. She was a soldier. She was Xia.

Licking her lips, she let the black of Adam’s eyes gather round her. He had no words of encouragement or advice. He stared at her, solid, strong. She nodded to him. And closed her eyes. The spell washed over her body like an attack, her skin prickling, shrinking. She forced herself to lie still through the nips and terrible itching. Stretched on the bed, she lay with the smoking bowl in one hand and her weapon in the other, and her feet anchored in flesh and spirit by an elemental.

“I give myself to Terra.”

The intent was announced. She breathed deeply of the herbs Markos had sent in his unread letter. Her body was heavy, so heavy, so thick. Adam’s hands on her feet were warm, cupping them loosely.

“I give myself to Terra.”

Her ceremonial knife, crafted by her own hands, swished in the air, and her inner psychic power was abruptly lost. It wasn't floating on the etheric plane. She hadn't gone inside herself. She'd cut herself loose, dividing most of herself from her real-body. Around her, a new reality began to form. Lush green things grew, moist and airy above, sharp and tight below. They grew around her, into her.

Distantly and with great effort and focus—*I am Xia*—she made her real-body mirror her free-self. Together they uttered the words that would send her off. "I give myself to Terra."

She couldn't breathe. Xia let the last connection to her real-body go, and sank. First, it was familiar. Like the dreamtime, she settled onto the surface of Terra, dripped down into crevices, and knew stillness. There was nothing to fear. There was life.

But then she began to fade. And she knew it. She knew she was losing time, because Terra did not understand time, did not care. Earth moved, always, through space, always. Earth was ground away by air, smoothed away by water, burned away by fire. It didn't matter because earth could remake itself. Earth could grow new material that settled and compacted and collected and remained. Ever-changing, constantly in motion, earth was eternal.

Xia hovered on the last precipice. She remembered that the living things still above were precious to her. Aqua was going to take them, swirl them all away like she'd done to Tibor. Xia would help stop it. She wanted to. Xia sank, and communed, and was no more.

Earth had a heartbeat. It was the pulsing swish of the core of fire it contained, molten earth, the two entwined together. Earth loved fire. It disliked air. For a long time, new-earth drifted, peaceful, unconcerned. Then it encountered something that sparked a thought.

Water? asked new-earth, following the slow spin of its bigger self.

Water is, earth answered.

New-earth didn't understand that. Love water? It seemed important to understand.

Water is life, earth intoned, low and deep and so slow, the meaning more of a reverberation, like a gong.

Love water. New-earth sighed.

Never, earth warned.

New-earth questioned without words. It didn't understand. So important to understand. Important to life, which it loved.

Earth thought, then earth slept. New-earth waited, because it could do no else. When earth woke, it poked at new-earth.

Earth? new-earth questioned.

You are not earth.

I am new-earth.

Earth thought.

New-earth remembered. Never love water?

Earth thought. Deep, slow, heavy. Water is all.

Is water life too?

Water is all. It is itself, and it is us.

Water is earth?

And fire, and air. Water is.

The images came at new-earth quickly: molten earth twisting like water, fire flickering like water, air blowing like water.

New-earth was content. It understood. Water could never be stopped, but it could be changed. There was only one.

Earth poked new-earth. Go. You are not earth.

New-earth did not understand.

You are life. Not yet earth. Go.

New-earth did not understand.

Earth went back to sleep. New-earth waited, drifting. Water tickled. That was important. New-earth followed water up, up, up. Water was all. Never love water. Love life. Love...

Pain and confusion rocked new-earth. Roots stabbed at her, singing of green and sun and air. Seal eyes watched her while he lazed on the stone, waiting. Her...new-earth remembered she was a she. New earth was life. No, new-earth was a she who was alive, above.

New-earth thought about that. Slow, turning in space, being. New-earth questioned, Who is she? Images came to her.

By the Lady, Xia, don't do this. It's too dangerous. The woman with the short red hair and big brown eyes was loved.

Our parents died because a greedy, selfish shit of a witch thought he'd rape their blood. A morphi caught him, and I want to be just like him. No, I want to be better than him. I need to do this, Tony. I won't pick up the trail after the crime, I'll find the evil before the crime happens. The woman with the long red-brown hair and gray eyes wrapped her arms up tight, the anger pulsing inside, heavy and hot.

New-earth thought about that strange scene. Life moved so fast it was hard to understand. New-earth thought about loving life, the unfolding, and the withering. Who is she? Another image came to her.

A man's hands grabbing her, pulling her from fire's need. Xia, you will return! She kicked, wanting to dance in the heat, but he forced her and she became herself again.

Dancing. New-earth knew a bit about dancing, because earth did. Swaying, shifting. New-earth would like to dance.

A man spun with her, laughing, his brown hair the same shade as hers. Then the man cried as he held her, shaking, while water poured from her lungs. Breathe, Xia, please please breathe. The man angry,

stalking from the room, punching the wall. Get out Ry, this isn't your home anymore. The man looking at her with closed blue eyes, bitter eyes, as bitter as hers with love lost.

New-earth stirred, rising higher still. She could feel the strange touch of air.

A dream self, a soul self, riding with a man, twining and trusting and flying with him. A man with seal eyes and royal eyes and magic eyes.

Xia. A male voice called to her.

New-earth began to understand. She was only supposed to dream here, like she had with air. She was only supposed to dance here, like she had with fire. She was supposed to escape, like she had with water. She was not earth. Not yet.

I am Xia?

The soil crumbled around her, but the roots were driven deep. A spirit danced around hers and drew her up, but it hurt and she sank back.

Xia.

The flow of a river roared around her, ripping away the roots, rinsing away the pebbles. She shrank from it. Afraid.

Xia.

A silver ribbon as fine as a hair hovered over her. Rushing, everything was rushing and chaos. She tried to sink, but the stone was becoming too hard for her, too heavy, too tight.

Xia.

Blood pumping, lungs expanding, flesh encompassing, touching, heating. Lips tangling, mouths joining, tongues dancing, sharing. She reached for that memory, to recover more of it, and the water seal-spirit was back, and the silver ribbon, and the flowing water that bubbled and buoyed her up, up, up.

She was exposed, cold, frozen with terror at the change, the expanse, the air.

Take your soul line, Xia. Take it.

She waited, because there was no need for such upheaval. Scared, she looked for earth.

Take it, storm cloud. Come back to me. Your sister, Antonia, waits. Markos would not give you up to me. We want you.

She was exhausted. Too much. She wanted to sleep.

The line tickled her. It was warm wherever it touched. It slid against her, then away. Slid against, and then away. Slid against, and then away. She began to wait for the soft heat of it instead of shrinking. Slid against, then away. She began to rise up to meet it. Rhythm reminded her of a huge, solid man, hair black and thick. He was strong, vivid and steady. Slid against, then away. Rhythm called to her, and the next time the silver ribbon slid hot and gentle against her, she grabbed before it could slide away.

Pain. Confusion. Too much. So tired.

The first time I saw you, you were sitting perfectly upright on that huge purple bicycle, a massive straw hat straining in the wind. I thought you were the most absurd thing I'd ever seen. Then your hair blew like garnet silk and your red skirt billowed against your curves. The cows stopped and stared at you.

Air, blood, so loud. She turned, looking for a way to sink back.

Witch, you have work to do. Water is waking. She must be stopped.

So tired. So dizzy from the shushing of the blood. It never stopped. Like water never stopped. Couldn't be stopped. Could only be changed. Somewhere in her low middle, pleasure bloomed, sliding in and away, a rhythm so lovely and natural she calmed, remembering it. Then a touch came in her high middle. It curled through her, exploded in pain. But the pleasure struck harder and the pain held steady. The two twined, and she surged, desperate to get closer, and away, to have it end and to have it grow.

Come back, Xia. I'm right here, and I'm not leaving. I've got you.

She took a breath, filling the flesh up, claiming the blood. The rhythm soothed her, and strangely, so did the pain. She was both. She knew both were necessary. She was alive.

She said, I need...

The pain stopped. Warm and wet, the rhythm of pleasure took its place, working opposite the rhythm below. A mouth, and a hand. On her breast and in her core. She understood it now.

Anchor, she called.

Xia, he gasped, his voice low and gritty.

I need...

Tell me.

She whispered. Sleep. Still. Quiet.

Xia?

Yes. I am Xia. Too much. All too much.

The rhythm stopped. It had seduced her, but it had confused her too. Heat wrapped tight around her, so tight, and it was good. She hummed, remembering earth's heavy grasp, not with fear, but longing.

Don't let go, she whispered.

I will not.

Her body settled, and her blood slowed, and he was tight and heavy and warm around her. Her last thought as she drifted into the black peace of waiting was...Adam.

Chapter Nine

When Xia opened her eyes, she was staring into the haggard, desperate black depths of Adam's. She could even see the pale oval of her own face reflected back at her. Her bones ached. His arms were wrapped around her, binding her to him, and his strong legs were rough against hers. He was nude, his skin hot.

She stared at him and breathed. Waiting, watching. He had dark hollows under his eyes and his lips were two white slashes above his clenched jaw. Xia felt a tingle in the fingertips curled against his chest. She wanted to touch his face.

Adam's eyes searched hers, and she could feel him hold his breath. But she waited, and eventually even selkies had to breathe. He did, and she watched his brows flex in thought. Straightening her fingers and shifting her arm just a bit, she brushed the edge of his jaw. It made her happy.

"Xia?"

She let her happiness come into her face, like a flower furling open for the sun. "Yes."

"You didn't dream."

"I slept."

His hands, already firm around her, tightened. Her breath caught. The pressure was perfect.

"You never dreamed. At all. There was only...darkness."

"Hmmm." It wasn't a sound of interest or discontent or worry. "I feel rested." She brushed his jaw again. "You came for me. You...coaxed me."

"I used as many ideas as I could think of. But first, you reached out to me. If you hadn't become aware again, there would have been nothing for me to claim. When you were in Terra, you were—" He swallowed. Licked his lips. "Gone."

"I was Terra. I was subsumed."

"I've done this before." His eyes narrowed, the edges crinkling. "I couldn't even find a ghost to watch over. You vanished."

"I was Terra. I spoke with it. I remember everything."

Finally, his grip lessened. "You are Xia."

She smiled at him, her face becoming used to the movement. "Touched by Terra."

He pulled from her, rolled onto his back and flung an arm over his eyes.

"Tell me my name."

“Adam. My selkie lover, and my rampart.”

He surged around and she was under his weight, his shoulders looming over her in the low light of the room. “You came back.”

She put her hands on his back. “You anchored me.”

His hands gripped her head fiercely and he kissed her. It was wild and deep and needy, so she gave him all she could, lifting into his mouth, using her tongue and breath and teeth to return her presence. He broke off, his forehead against hers. “You came back.”

“I did.” She laughed softly.

So did he, his bouncing chest interesting against hers. Then his head lifted, neck arching back, and he gave a barking roar. Folding into a sitting position, he hauled her into his arms and hugged her, rocking her, covering the side of her face and neck with hard kisses.

“Xia, Xia.”

She laughed again. Then her stomach growled with a ferocious gurgle. It made her giggle all over.

He stood and pulled on his jeans, then picked her up and carried her to the kitchen, putting her on the counter. Taking out the frying pan and the eggs, he poured her a bowl of cereal.

“Eat,” he commanded.

Soon, bacon was sizzling and fluffy eggs steamed. The toast popped and the electric kettle’s light blinked out. She sat on the counter, swinging her legs, totally nude. Her belly rolled a bit, and her thighs oozed wide, and her hips spread even farther, but she didn’t care. She was Xia. Without concern she touched the mouth-sized bruises across her breasts. She took up her tea and drank it bitter, without honey, and dunked her toast in the sweet milk of her cereal. Adam looked at the honey bottle sitting on the counter but said nothing. Humming, she crunched through the bacon like a squirrel on a mission. Adam was lucky to get three pieces for himself. She wrinkled her nose at her eggs and reached for the salt.

“I’ll make more bacon next time.”

“Sounds good.”

When they were done, he said, “Leave the dishes.”

She drained her orange juice and hopped down. “Shower, then report. Come with me.”

Adam leaned in the open doorway, arms folded. She kept the shower curtain open. The water felt so good. She liked it hot and pounding hard. When she’d rinsed, she stood dripping in the tub. It was impossible to keep from grinning at him. Pride, relief and joy pumped in a heady cocktail through her. His jeans were zipped but unbuttoned. She licked her lips.

“You weren’t afraid, in the shower.”

“Nope! Felt great.” Reaching for her towel, she understood his comment. “I used to be though.” She could remember, as if from a distance. Just like the honey in her tea had changed to the need for meat, she was altered.

“Aye.”

She scrubbed at her hair. “I still fear Aqua, but not so...personally. I understand her power now.”

Adam stood up right, shoulders squaring. “Terra gave the secret to stopping her?”

“It did.”

His fists clenched. “Terra will take a long time to awaken. I fear too long, with Aqua’s head start.”

“You’re right. But Terra is not what will stop Aqua at this point.”

“No?”

“No. Now, we need Ignis and Aer.”

“That bit you took from the dreamtime, the night you were attacked and I was summoned to join you. In that memory you sent to Markos, they feared fire.”

“They did. Rightfully so.”

“Water conquers fire easily. She has no fear of it.”

“She’s not afraid of herself.”

Adam frowned, moving out of her way as Xia went into the bedroom. She chose a long, soft lavender dress.

“We were talking about fire.”

“I know. I should meet with the Chamber. I will explain.”

They both knew there was no sense in delivering her memory to Markos as she had before. Being subsumed was not something that could ever be transferred so easily. You had to live it to comprehend it.

“The Chamber.” Adam’s voice was as blank as his face, utterly without inflection.

She frowned at him. “Yes, the Chamber. This is important. Too important and too hard to explain. I won’t have the kind of amazing idea I learned get passed through all the couriers and minions until it reaches them.”

“You’ve never had an audience with the Chamber. Neither has Markos.”

“So?”

He tipped his head. “You are bolder. More settled in yourself.” His lip curled in a little lift of a grin that made her heart curl and grin too. “I like it. Very sexy.”

Adam’s steadiness came from his wild nature that didn’t deal with typical neurotic emotional clutter. Now earth’s still dance settled deep in Xia. She knew what it meant to simply...be. “At the still point, there the dance is.” What a beautiful truth.

Adam walked up to her. He took the comb from her fingers, gathered the thick tail off her shoulder and began to work the ends smooth. “That’s lovely.”

She sighed as his deep accent drifted into her tummy. *Tha’s loovely*. “It’s T.S. Eliot, an English poet.”

“He was American, actually. I met him.”

Xia stared at him. “Wow. I would have loved to have met him. Was he as intense as his poetry?”

"I've never read it. He was very withdrawn." He kept working higher into her hair.

"Well! Tell me how you met him."

Adam sighed. "It was during the war. The second one."

"Ah." Magicals had long lives. The shifters even longer. "I met Winston Churchill during that war."

Adam threw the comb onto the bed and drew her into a tight hug. "You are amazing. I'm still shaking from getting you back, and you're reminiscing about minor memories. You are complete, no damage whatsoever."

She hugged him back. "I'm not the same, Adam. But yes, I am complete."

Framing her face, his hands heating her through her damp hair, he stared at her. She stared back, steady, watching the shifting depths of his eyes, unafraid.

"You are different. Stronger. I am so proud of you."

"I'm proud of you. I couldn't have done it without you. There was pain, but the return was perfect."

He stilled, his eyes flattening as he considered her.

"What is it?"

"You don't know."

"I guess not."

"Xia, it is not the same day. You didn't come back out of the ghosting on time. But I stayed, and I held to your soul line. I waited, and finally I sensed you yesterday afternoon, the day after you left."

"I was Terra through the night? I Returned even after passing through the first day's gloaming and yesterday's dawn dreamtime? And I'm still here?" She stared at Adam, her eyes huge, lips parting. Then the absurdity of being scared now hit her. She grinned. "I guess I am!"

With a growl of impatience he wrapped her up tight, so crushingly tight, and she sighed, going lax, loving the constriction. He was comfort. Her head fit under his chin, and she could hear his heartbeat. "Thank you, Adam, for believing in me."

"You swam the gloaming on your own for a month. How could I not?"

There was a soft buzzing sound, like a wasp against glass. She lifted her head. "The phone?"

"I never left you. I did not trust your natural sleep last night. And you asked me not to let go, so I took you literally, not knowing if you still needed it. It's rung every half an hour since sunset two days ago."

Anguish at what Markos and Antonia must be thinking broke over Xia. She tore from Adam's arms and rushed to the phone. It had stopped. Taking the time to read only the last text message from Markos—*I will kill you*—she dialed.

He answered before the first ring could finish. His voice roared, hoarse with agony. "You whore to Aqua, you said you could do it. I believed you, I told her you could. I'm going to rip you apart and piss on your ashes."

"Markos," Xia whispered, horrified at her selfishness in not calling as soon as she woke. "It's Xia."

Silence. And then she heard, distantly for he'd thankfully moved the phone, the deep keening bellow of a bull. Silence. He was still panting a bit when he came back. "Xia, my morphi, I welcome you back to my team." A formal, cautious greeting, reminding her of her relationship in case she didn't remember.

"I'm all right, Markos. Everything seems to be...right. I'm me." She remembered how Adam had known it would be. "I'm Xia-touched-by-Terra."

Xia-touched-by-Ignis had been an emotional storm. Having a fire elemental as a lover hadn't helped. They'd burned each other time and again before they learned distance was essential to their love. Xia-touched-by-Aqua had been terrified, beaten, fighting to regain every scrap of self-esteem. Xia-touched-by-Terra was clear-headed, her thoughts slower, but more careful.

His voice was tight with incandescent rage. "You. Didn't. Call. The Chamber sent me a condolence."

"I'm so, so sorry. I only woke up this morning, and I didn't understand I'd lost two nights. I thought I'd just taken a nap on the same day I went in, Markos, and that I had an hour to eat and recover before you'd expect news. Adam should have called after he pulled me out yesterday, but my sleep was unusual and he was afraid to leave me."

"I'm going to rip his arms off." The rage crackled.

"Markos, I'm sorry, truly." She bit her lip. He needed to be distracted, or his rage would simply feed on itself, burning warm and well for days. "I need to go, I have to call Tony."

"You called me first."

She smiled. Oh, the ego. "Yeah. You're the boss."

Silence.

She shook her head. He was too wounded to tease. "I love you. I'm sorry I frightened you. It was bad, but it was worth it. I have important information, Markos. What I learned will stop Aqua and reshape how we work the Four. I need to see the Chamber."

"You do?"

"I do. I'm not going to pass this mess in my head along a bureaucratic chain for a day. When they hear what I have to say, they're just going to summon me anyway."

"They are?"

"Yes, they are. Terra has exploded my beliefs, everything we've been taught. There's a new paradigm coming, Markos, and it's going to rock the world."

Silence. "Check your email in an hour. Delete my old textings. They were for Adam. The Chamber secretary will send you flight tickets."

"All right." She took a breath. "I'm back, Markos. I did it."

Silence. "Say it again."

She smiled. "It's me, Xia."

"I'll try to arrange to be with you at the Chamber."

"I'd like that."

Silence. "I suppose your rampart will go too."

"I'd like that."

"Lady bless you, Xia." His voice was still tight, but softer. "It is so good to hear you."

"And you."

"Goodbye." Breath. "I might have to call you again later."

To check on her, to reassure himself. She understood. "Do that."

"Yashou."

She loved it when he spoke Greek to her. "Bye."

Ending the call, Xia took a deep breath. "That was bad."

"He needs to think more of you and less of himself." Adam propped himself up against the living room's window, staring out at his Rover.

"He was terrified and hurt. It was rude of you not to call or at least to remind me first thing of the lost time. The Chamber even believed I was lost."

Adam grunted. "You are my priority."

"What did his letter say?"

"You said you knew."

"I think I was wrong."

"I don't have it anymore."

"That's very telling. What did it say?"

Adam looked out the window. "Ask him."

Sighing, tense, Xia glanced at her messages. Sixty-five texts from Markos, thirty-nine from Tony, six from Sanders the Night Watch, and at least a dozen from other friendly morphi. Her voicemail box was maxed out. She cringed, and called Antonia.

The phone rang and rang. When voicemail kicked in, she cleared her throat. "Tony, it's me, Xia. I'm alive and well. There was a delay in my return, and I'm sorry it took so long to get back to you. I'm back, and I love you."

Closing the phone, Xia rubbed at her aching chest, feeling sad that she was glad not to have to face her sister's initial reaction. "Markos said to check email in an hour. We're going to the Chamber."

"I should go pack."

Just like that, with no fuss, he was ready to go. Looking at the line of his shoulders, she said, "You should sleep."

He looked at her. "Do you want to share?"

Tipping her head, she asked, "You mean have sex?"

"Yes, while we share ourselves."

She'd never have guessed the curt selkie would have this romantic streak. The thought of sex with Adam right now actually made her a little dizzy. Life was just moving so fast. "Ummm..."

"Then it's best I go." He went into the bathroom while Xia stood frozen.

He stepped out of sight, and time stopped. No air was in her lungs. Her blood did not pump.

"Adam?" The house closed in around her, binding her, burying her.

He came back out with his bag. "Aye."

She swallowed. "Don't. Don't punish me like this. I'm sorry, I'll lie with you."

He stared at her. "It wasn't an ultimatum, Xia. It was a question. The practical thing is to ready for the Chamber. The only thing that would keep me from my duty would be sharing you, but you're not ready."

She felt her knees buckle and reached out. He lunged, dropping his bag, and was there to catch her.

"You can't go. I don't want you to leave me." The fear was immediate and total. She began to shake. "I'll sink."

He gathered her and they staggered to the couch. "Xia, stop. I'm right here."

"I don't want to go back." Her voice was high and tight, not sounding anything like the confident, calm woman of an hour ago.

He gave her a little shake. "You're here. You're not going back. You're out, Xia."

She clawed at him, clinging. "Adam, don't go." She'd had no idea how much of her confidence was tied to his presence. "I need you!"

He grabbed her jaw and wrenched her face up. "*Cease.*"

Gasping, she stared into the depths of his eyes, and calmed. But she still gripped him tightly. "I'm afraid."

He softened his hold on her face. "Morphi, you walk the land. Your soul waits on the ether again, in your possession. You are Xia, and I am your rampart. You are safe from Terra."

"Kiss me." She begged him with her eyes. He had to stay. She would do anything.

His eyes narrowed. "Why."

"Kiss me!"

"No. You are still held by your fear." He stood, leaving her on the couch.

She cried out, folding in on herself.

"Get up. Get your hat, it's sunny out."

Stilling, she rolled her eyes up at him, her arms wrapped tight around her torso.

"Come on, Morphi. I need to pack and visit my mistress. It's no light thing for a selkie to leave the scent of the ocean."

"Y-you'll take me with you?"

He held out his hand. "It's not efficient, but yes."

Xia looked at his hand. The purple half-moon bruise on his nail was smaller, higher, healing. His palm was tan and calloused, the fingers long. She pried one of her hands free of her body and put her own small, soft, pale hand in his. Her heart calmed.

Chapter Ten

Xia sat on the bench outside the post, wondering where Mr. Branough had gotten to. Her hat was on her head and her hands were in her lap, but she now understood Mr. Branough's dog Rougher. She quivered with tension, eyes on the grocery, waiting for Adam to appear. It was all she could do to stick her bottom to the silvered wood of the bench, remain seated, and pretend she was not screaming inside.

Anne came to the door of the grocery and waved. An excuse, good. Xia hurried across the road and down to the store.

"So you're off to Austria!"

They were? "Just for a bit." Xia leaned to look for Adam, but Anne did not move.

"How wonderful. Bring a sweater. 'Tis chillier there, between their cold, stiff ways and their mountains."

"I'm sure we'll meet some kind people. Is Adam still shopping?"

"Hmpf. Not like Scotland, tha's for sure." Anne ducked into the doorway to peer into the store. Darting back around the doorjamb, she grabbed Xia's arm and stepped in close to her. "God above, you have to tell me. Say 'tis true he's the hottest thing this village has ever known, or will."

"What?" Where was Adam! Xia pressed her hand against her chest to slow her racing heart.

"I know we're not close enough, I know I'm being too bold, but I have drooled over that man since I was old enough to know what a man was. Is he good? I mean, really good?"

Xia caught on Anne was trying to gossip about Adam's skills as a lover. Despite her pounding heart, she smiled at the kind woman who'd chatted with her whenever Xia had come to the village. "He's fucking spectacular. He's taken me with a kiss alone." It was an exaggeration, but not much of one.

Anne's reaction was totally gratifying. "Ohmygod." Her hand fluttered up to her throat. "Ohmygod. You...are the luckiest woman on the planet."

"Aye. She is. This morphi has ridden great danger. We all owe her." Adam's deep voice came up behind Anne.

Xia's legs shivered once, but held. The relief flowed through her body, turning her bones to jelly. She listed in the doorjamb.

"Oh yes, our luck was high when they sent Xia to us." Anne smiled brightly, too bright, her eyes still as big as saucers as they darted everywhere but Adam's face. "Well, Xia, have a fantastic triss. I mean, kip. Uh... Did you find everything, Adam?"

Adam looked at Xia and his dark eyes grounded her. "I always find what I go searching for." He gave Xia his tiny smile and sidled past Anne, his arms full of two bags of supplies. His ass as he walked in a long, flowing stride toward the Rover made Xia's palms itch to grab it.

She drifted down the street after him, like a good collie dog. "Bye, Anne." Glancing back at the pretty brunette, she grinned to see the woman had taken Xia's place, holding up the white frame door of the old stone house.

They climbed in the Rover.

"Anne's a sweet girl. You torment her." He started the car.

"Anne's a lonely, horny woman. She needs a little fantasy in her life." Her equilibrium returned with his presence, her sense of self and strength again solid.

Xia waved to Macgregor, standing on an upturned plastic bucket near the ferry ticket booth. He paused his determined chewing when he saw her and seemed to glare at her. A song popped into her head. *I am the god of hellfire! And I bring you...FIRE! Fire, fire, fire, fire!* Prodigy. A good angry song to work out to.

She smiled to herself, now understanding why her brain kept throwing fire songs at her. She'd known all along, subconsciously, that Ignis was at the heart of the solution she'd been seeking. She'd been on the right track, but wouldn't have puzzled it out until too late.

Down the road about six kilometers was a dirt road, and down that winding, pine-crowded road was a tiny white cottage. One room, thatch roof, stone beach, an old shed, and a more modern carport with a small machine shop attached. A large generator sat against it. A small undulation of grassy dunes separated the pines from the perfect stone crescent. An overturned white dory lay on one of the closest hills. No other sign of life was around.

Adam got out of the car. He ran his hands through his hair as he turned his face up to the sea. "Xia..."

She came around to stand by him. Stared at the heaving swells that cut across the mouth of his small cove. "Lord and Lady, she's just so overwhelming."

His hand settled on her nape, her hair caught between her skin and his touch. "She is, but I am her creature. I've learned to master the fear and often find joy. And I know you understand the thrill of living to your fullest abilities, of rising to a challenge. It's a hard life, but a good one."

Looking at him from under her lashes, she saw the ease come over his face, how his mouth actually formed a slight, but real smile. She looked back at the gray-black ocean, feeling the salt in the wind. Bitch.

"I need to swim. Will you wait in my home?"

Xia looked at the house more closely, the one tiny window, the small door, the fresh lime coating. "This is your true home. You built it."

His hands soothed against her neck, his fingers finding their way through the strands. "How did you know?"

"I'm not sure. It made sense. The house is from about the right time." The time of his first wife, early 1800s construction. Her grandparents had had one similar to it. They'd built in Maine, to remember their home country of Erin. Several happy summers were spent in that cottage.

"I don't think... Perhaps you should not come down to the water."

Her skin shriveled. "No, thanks. I'll watch you from here." A shower was one thing, but the ocean was something else.

He handed her a key, normal and modern. He stripped, his body lean and chiseled. Oh, yes, her thought from before was correct—he was hairless except for his head. She'd never seen a man hairless down there before, and she found it worked for her. She licked her lips, and he chuckled.

She shot him a glance. He touched her chin and walked barefoot down to the shore, stepping carefully over the sea's debris of sticks and tangled piles of seaweed. Her heart quivered. She took a step after him. *No. I will stay here.* Every step he took away from her made the world dip beneath her. Hungrily.

His shoulders above his naked ass looked so broad, and his thighs were revealed for the powerful force they were, thick with muscle front and back. His hair shone like a golden halo as it blew around his head. He paused where the stones darkened beneath the inward pressing waves. She found the self-control to stand there and let him, although her breaths came in small pants, like a panicked dog.

As usual, the mundane humans had some of the legend right, and some wrong. Selkies did have a sealskin, which transformed them to their seal body. And if a human was extraordinarily lucky to somehow find it, they could capture a selkie and bind her human form to them. They could also kill the selkie's seal soul by destroying the skin and drive the human shell left mad. But selkies did not leave their skins lying on the beach. Nor did they come to shore on full moons or solstices. No, a selkie's skin hid itself safely in the sea until it was called.

Xia stood on the rocks and listened to the achingly beautiful tenor of Adam calling his other half.

"Hohhhhhhh." He poured out the long, masculine cry over the waves. It was full of command, a raider's cry to push forward through the storm when he went a-viking.

"Hohhhhhhh," he sang again, his palms lifted out toward the sea. It was the mournful cry of a long-wandering sailor seeing his homeland rise on the horizon.

"Hohhhhhhh!" The roar of triumph winged above the water, a fisherman's pride at landing the hard-fought marlin that would feed his family for a month.

Adam knelt in the stones and reached down to the sea. The water lifted up to him, and a rise of brown fur nudged his fingertips. He closed his hand and stood, hefting it free. Water streamed off the pelt, which glistened thick, nearly black in the sun. He held it gently, turning it a bit, laying one end on the shore. He stepped on it, graceful, then rolled his shoulders as he drew it up behind him.

The movement reminded Xia of putting on her snowsuit as a child. The fur rose in a wall from his feet to his shoulders, covering him like a full cape. His hands lifted and he drew a hood up over his head, and

his sun-gilt hair disappeared. His body shrugged, and she could no longer make out his arms. As he began to fall forward into the water, trapped in his cloak of fur, from one moment to the next, even within the same breath, a massive seal thrust with its flippers and sleeked into the ocean.

She held her breath, staring as the white ripples disappeared. Four body-lengths away a brown ball popped up, only it did not rise with the water as a ball should. Xia stared at Adam's wild self, his furred seal self, and remembered his sleek danger as he circled her bubble of air, driving Aqua's torment away from her. *Come back. Don't go. I need you.* She got as far as opening her mouth to beg. Then he disappeared between the waves' rise, and she was staring at the expanse that had tormented her dreamtime work for a month.

Heart in her throat, she rooted her feet in the cobbles and stared in horror at the horizon. She waited for the tidal rage of water to rise up, while she kept her feet from running crazed, desperate down to the water after Adam. It was long, long moments later when she realized water was not going to attack, and she was still managing to breathe without Adam, although a heart attack was possible.

Stiff, nearly blind, she picked her way down the crushed-oyster-shell path to the small cottage. She had to use both hands to get the key in the lock. When she opened the heavy plank door, it was like stepping back to her childhood. She almost expected to see her grandfather at the table mending nets and her grandmother at the fire stirring raisins into the oatmeal. For a minute, she even smelled the cinnamon. They'd died before her parents, and she missed them all.

Her gaze swept the dim room. The corner bed, the long heavy table, the counters and shelves. The log ladder up to the rafters with a plank floor. An assortment of old tools and bits and objects hung from the ceiling.

She sank into the big chair by the empty hearth. It smelled of the sea and the wild, peat and love. Her cell phone buzzed and she shrieked. Slapping a hand over her hip, she recovered her breath and pulled it open, her heart heavy when she saw Tony's picture in the outer window.

"Hey, sis."

"I don't know what to say." Tony's voice was oddly flat.

"What do you mean?" She couldn't deal with this. She needed Adam by her side.

"I mean I'm so mixed up right now, I couldn't even return your call for an hour."

"Yeah."

"I thought you were dead. And then I was so happy and proud to hear you were well." With every sentence Tony's voice went higher. "Then I wanted to punch you in the nose and rip out your hair and was so hurt that you didn't call sooner. I'm afraid, of what it will take from me the next time you do this. I'm really pissed that you did this at all."

Tony had never wanted Xia to be a morphi. She'd only grown more dismayed as Xia's power grew and her trips became longer and more challenging. More dangerous.

"I didn't want to do it either, Antonia." Xia's voice grew hard at rehashing the same old argument. "But I'm a soldier and glad to be one. I like helping. If I didn't use my gift to try to help balance the evil in the world, I'd go insane. Mom and Dad didn't die in vain."

"Is that a dis? Are you judging me?" Tony's voice went into the supersonic range.

"Don't, Tony."

"Not all of us are superheroes. Not all of us want to dabble in the sacred, literally. Not all of us—"

"Tony! Don't."

Her sister's voice shouted through the phone. "Don't you dare dismiss me. I just lived two nights thinking you were *dead*."

"I'm sorry! Forgive me for not managing the correct timetable for being psychically subsumed!"

"You're a butthead."

Heavy breathing came from both phones.

"No, you are," Xia muttered sullenly.

"You are more," Tony whispered.

Silence.

"Markos called me," Tony said tiredly. "We talked. It helped. He called again just a little while ago. He's going to consult for the Foundation. Maybe he'll even come do some field research with me."

Xia wasn't surprised Markos had been able to help her sister. She was convinced that if her sister's powers had manifested, she'd be a fire elemental as well. "Good. That's good. He works too much and is too often alone." Eighty-six years of working with Markos had led to her sister and her boss having a tangential relationship. It calmed Xia to think of them as friends, like her world was aligning.

"I love you, Xia."

"I remembered you, Tony. When I was Terra. It helped."

"Yeah, I'm glad I can contribute to the war effort in small ways." Her sister's voice wavered. "Did you get it? The precious answer worth your soul?"

"I did."

The bitterness in Tony's voice only increased. "I don't care, Xia. Do you hear me? I don't care about the damned answer."

Xia breathed, hurt, but understanding.

"I should go now." Tony's voice was back to being flat.

Xia closed her eyes, overwhelmed by her need for Adam. "Sure. I'll be in Austria for a few days and probably out of contact."

"All right. Email me if you can."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Xia shut her phone and stared around the cottage. What was this overwhelming need for Adam? She'd never felt anything like it. Her feet were frozen, being pulled into the earth. Her psyche felt naked, stripped of all ability and skill without him. She knew that was illogical. Knew that she had psychic skills he did not have.

Beijing. She tried to remember her success there, and in Peru. Thailand, that had been a hard job, and Greenland. It didn't matter. Her breathing grew short. Intellectually, she knew her success was based on her abilities, but now, here, she needed Adam. The space around her was strange and she ached for his surrounding strength. She couldn't get enough air. She couldn't move her feet.

Staring at her tennis sneakers, Xia desperately wanted her feet off the floor. She had to pick them up, prop them on that table, get them out of Terra's reach. But they wouldn't move. She was gasping now, her breath sawing in her parched throat. Feet. Up. She couldn't move them. Did Terra have her? Was she sinking? Did she hear it calling her back?

Vision shrinking to nothing but her feet on the hand-hooked rug, a keening filled the air, low and grating. Her. That was her making that horrible, wounded, terrified noise. She couldn't stop. She couldn't breathe. Adam. Adam was gone. He was the only one who could find her, keep her here. Xia folded in on herself, sight going black. The keening swelled, and all she knew was terror. She had to hold. Hold on to Xia. Remember Adam, remember Xia.

Time left. It did not matter.

When she was Xia again, she ached through to her very bones. Adam's tenor hummed against her scalp, his sea-chilled arms tight to her. Salt scented his skin sharply. She shook, her arms and legs flopping with a movement that reminded her of hypothermia. Where was she?

As she grew interested in her location beyond Adam's arms, she wondered why she was shaking. It came back. His croft by the sea. Her panic attack. "Y-y-you l-left."

"I did. We'll get through this, Xia. We were hasty to think that Xia-touched-by-Terra was unmarred in her return. You've got some psychic trauma, and I didn't recognize the severity of it earlier, at your house. I won't leave you like that again." His hands swept her back, big and steady.

"W-will too. Ssselkie. S-s-sea." Xia knew he'd have to go into the sea daily. They'd be in Austria as briefly as possible, and still it would diminish Adam's spirit to leave the ocean's range.

"I'll find a way. If we can just send Aqua back to her slumber, you can come with me. You will be beautiful in the sea."

Xia realized her fingers were sunk like claws into Adam's shoulders. Her joints ached as she concentrated on releasing him.

"The Chamber is in Austria? We'll go there today. I have the answer, Adam. I have Terra's secret to stopping Aqua, though it isn't Terra's role. As soon as I've delivered it, we can leave and come back."

A long breath eased from him. “Aye.”

The tremors stopped, and her breathing steadied. She wiped her itchy cheek on his chest and realized the salt there wasn’t from the sea, but her tears. Her face was soaked. Her throat hurt.

“I’m sorry.” So much for being strong and capable.

His hand settled on her nape, while the other covered half her ass. “Never be. When I heard you from the strand, my heart stopped. You’re mine to protect, awake and asleep, in body and psyche. I’ll find a way to fight this, Xia. But I have a feeling it will not be quick.”

Dread unfurled inside her. He felt obligated. She’d been damaged on his watch, and he’d never quit until she was better. He’d stuck by his previous morphi’s side the entire year it had taken the man to learn to speak. By the time she was cured of this dependency, he’d be sick of her. She was weak, and he’d miss his freedom and his own kind.

“Your breathing is steady, heart rate normal. All right to sit up?”

Xia despised women who clung to their men as if they had no strength of their own. Now that she felt normal, she didn’t even recognize how she could have gotten to this point.

“Yes. Lord’s grace, yes.” She pushed away from him, finger combing her hair from her face. She crawled from the cradle of the rope bed’s feather mattress and scrambled to her feet. “So, packing for you and me, and then we’re off.”

Adam lay on the bed, regarding her with those deep eyes. He was nude, and it made her breasts ache, but she certainly couldn’t express desire after that pathetic display.

“You’re thinking too much, Xia.”

She smiled at him, brightly. “How often have you met with the Chamber?”

“You have no cause to be ashamed.”

“I’ve heard that two of them are a couple. Boy, wouldn’t it suck to have that pairing as your parents?” She hustled over to look out the small window with the thick warped glass of old.

“Xia.”

She braced one hand on the inner stone wall. “This stinks, Adam. It’s no good at all. I’ll talk about it later, all right? I can’t take one more person riding me about the ghosting. It’s too new, too hard.”

He stood up from the bed with embarrassing grace. “You talked to your sister.”

“Yeah. She’s upset.”

“You need to stop worrying about soothing the people in your life and take care of yourself.”

“It’s not like that, Adam. They love me and support me in many ways.”

He didn’t answer. Moving to a chest of drawers, he pulled out clothes and dressed in socks, underwear and jeans. She had not a single urge to giggle watching him stand in nothing but socks. When he burrowed to the bottom of a drawer full of raggedy, faded tees and dug out a lovely plum-colored one without a single tear, hole or unraveling edge, she grinned.

“Oooooo, pulling out the nice duds for the Chamber, huh? They get a new T-shirt.”

He merely put it on. His abs flexed in a beautiful dance. Picking up the same duffel he’d taken to her house, he packed another nice tee, this one dark red, a pair of underwear and socks, a toothbrush, and unscented shampoo that was made specifically for the magical community. Having animal in your makeup played havoc with using human hygiene products. He made a move toward the fireplace and stopped. Glancing at her, his shoulders stiffened.

“What is it?”

His eyes flickered away, then back. One shoulder twitched, in a sort of half shrug. He went to the mantel and lovingly took down a shell. It was the size of his fist, smooth and speckled, a compact spiral. He put it in a sock and wrapped the other sock around that to cushion it, and put it in his bag.

“It’s beautiful, Adam. Don’t be shy that you want to travel with it.”

He looked at her with his closed face. “Thank you. I have my own superstitions and comforts.”

Xia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that duffel is just full of comfort. Are you sure you don’t want to bring an actual pair of pants? How about a sweater? Something to read on the plane?”

He shrugged. “I thought we’d bring your laptop.”

For some reason the fact that this selkie was treating her laptop like joint property warmed her heart. She smiled. He blinked, and that tiny curve to his lips was so wonderful she walked up and hugged him. He stood for a moment, then hugged her back. His arms tight and strong.

“Ready,” she said after a peaceful moment. Not even the steady sound of the close surf could dim her happiness. “Ready.”

Chapter Eleven

They arrived in their hotel in downtown Vienna that evening. Xia had taken a bit more time to pack than Adam had, although she was limited in her choices. When she'd come to Scotland she hadn't known she'd be staying for a month. The only comment Adam had made was when she'd taken her hat down off the wall.

"Really?" he'd asked, perfectly blank.

She'd rethought the large and now-tattered hat and hung it up.

The flight had gone smoothly, with Adam surfing on the web and Xia reading a magical-community gossip magazine. Vienna had kept the airport far away. The drive in to the city center was tiring. Now they were in the pedestrian zone of Wien, with the lovely medieval cathedral St. Stephen's anchoring the space. Xia had once emailed the angel who lived there a few times regarding a pesky demon, and she hoped to have time to visit since they were so close.

She washed her face and changed into a nice dress and nicer shoes. She brushed her hair and pinned it back with a beautiful clip she'd bought from Anne's shop. When she nervously left the bathroom, she was disgusted to find Adam asleep on the deep down comforter. Women had to do so much primping to be respectable, and men didn't have to fuss at all. She called Markos.

"Just a moment." She listened to him talk to someone else distantly, and then heard a burst of chattering background voices. They quieted and he said, "Xia."

They'd had two brief conversations. Once as she was packing, and once during her layover in Heathrow. Yet he still sounded relieved to hear her. "Gröss Gott, Markos. We're here."

"I'm at the morphi office. I just have to settle one more thing and then I'll come pick you both up. Maybe twenty minutes."

"We're room 354."

"I'll see you soon. Are you hungry?"

"No, we snacked on the plane and in the airport. I'm too nervous to eat."

"I'm not." Adam announced.

"Adam's hungry," Xia conveyed.

"Tell him to get something from a street kiosk. They're good here." He hung up.

"Markos said—"

"I heard him."

He had? “I’ll walk down with you.”

Adam was just finishing his second Austrian version of a hot dog, an aromatic cheese-stuffed wonder, when Markos found them. Xia’s heart did a little flip on seeing him come at them in a direct line, huge and stocky. His gaze switched rapidly between her and her rampart.

“Adam.”

The men nodded to each other.

“Ignis’s minotaur,” Adam responded.

Markos’s shoulders went back. His brows lowered. “You got a problem with me, Aqua’s selkie?”

Xia stepped into him, pulling his solid body into a hug.

He hugged her back, whispering, “Dream dancer. So good to hold you.”

It was shocking how different Markos felt to her now. After being with Adam for such a brief period of time, his body felt thick and bulky, strangely short. At the same time, he was so familiar. His spicy scent and immense body heat brought back a flood of memories, mostly good. She melted against him, comforted.

“I have no problem with you, Markos. I merely give people the title they’re due,” Adam interjected. His voice was cold.

Markos lifted his head.

Xia sighed. “Let’s go, Markos. Time is important.”

Walking through the vendors and crowds in the darkening sky, Xia began to feel nervous for the first time. She was going to meet with the powerful magicals who were charged with the planet’s safety. She smoothed her hair, checking for bumps. She hadn’t had to worry about her looks for weeks.

“You look lovely,” Adam purred in his brogue. “That’s the dress I first saw you in. It matches your hair.”

It came down to midcalf, bias cut and double layered, darted to let the gauzy maroon fabric flow.

“I bought it for her.” Markos oozed satisfaction.

A glance at Adam confirmed that stoic mask was firmly in place. Xia pinched Markos. He grinned at her. Adam went rigid. Surprised, Xia looked at him, to see his gaze riveted on Tasha. The delicate woman stood in her typical black pantsuit, holding the door open. Her white-blond hair was in its constantly perfect, intricate chignon.

“To the Chamber, Tasha.” Markos spoke to the sprite who had worked for him as his bodyguard and aide for a hundred years. He slid into the new limousine.

“Da,” Tasha replied, as usual.

“Hello, Tasha. Nice to see you. This is Adam, my rampart.”

Tasha looked at him. How strange Tasha's opaque demeanor was so similar to Adam's. She poured a torrent of Russian out at him. Russian was not one of Xia's languages, but she knew a few phrases. She recognized "go with god" among the words that Tasha spoke.

Adam moved past Xia to fold the delicate but powerful creature in his arms. Tasha hugged him back, her face buried in his neck. Xia stood in shock, listening to Adam quietly speak back to her.

Markos called from within the car. "Xia, come. Give them a moment."

She blinked a few more times at how Adam curved over the woman, sheltering her. That must have been how he had looked with his first wife two hundred years ago. She moved into the car. Markos flipped his cell shut.

"You knew they knew each other?"

"I did."

Flicking a glance at the still-embracing couple, she leaned into Markos and hissed, "And?"

"She's his first wife's sister."

Xia sat back, relief pouring over her. So, he wasn't reconnecting with an old lover. She frowned. That she knew of. "Tasha is older than I realized."

"Margarethe was old when she died. Tasha is her much older sister."

Xia swallowed. All magicals grew more powerful with age. "She doesn't mind being your driver?"

Markos laughed a big belly laugh, the one that always made Xia forgive him and soften. She smiled at him.

When he caught his breath he said, "My driver! She'd kill you for saying so." He shook his head, chuckling.

Xia felt the smile freeze and wilt on her face. "Does she have cause to kill often? Have you needed that much defense?"

He slid her a glance. "All morphi advocates have a bodyguard. If we are taken, the names and secrets of our morphi can be tortured out of us."

Xia's breath froze in her throat. "I prefer to think of you as a harried civil servant, a paper pusher, organizing us like a chess match."

"You're a pawn, my dear, none of us want to sacrifice. I'm your rook." With a wry twist of his lips, he gestured to Adam. "He's your knight. And now we must be off to meet with the kings."

He leaned across her, taking the excuse to put his massive, burning hand on her knee. He spoke something in Russian out the open car door, and Tasha said, "Da."

Sitting back, his hand drifted down her thigh in a caress. Xia shifted, frowning at him. "Stop, Markos. I'm with Adam now."

He raised one eyebrow, an irritating habit. "Are you? And is he with you?"

She gritted her teeth. "I am. He is."

He pursed his lips. "Who is the queen on this board, Xia? Do you know?"

She felt doused by an icy sea. The import of why she was here struck her anew. "I do. But I don't know if everyone else does."

Markos reached out a hand to trace her jaw and she let him. It felt good, sending shivers of warmth down to her belly in memory. "Adam had best enjoy you." His voice was low, sounding like a threat.

She knocked his hand away. "I'm not a cookie to be enjoyed. And why would the enjoyment be his to take? I think I'm the one enjoying, thank you very much. He's a refreshing little raindrop."

She watched Markos's arrested face. He could go either way into anger or nonchalance. His fiery nature was so changeable. To her surprise, he burst out into laughter again, deep and so hard he folded over, slapping his knee. Despite herself, she smiled.

"Raindrop!" He roared. "Raindrop!"

Adam sat in the car, murmured to Tasha, who nodded and closed the door. He glanced at Markos, who pointed at him and boomed, "Refreshing little raindrop!"

Adam's face remained unmoved. His eyes slid to Xia.

She held her smile, but felt it crack a bit. "It came out wrong."

Sitting between the two large men on the leather seat, she was surprised when Adam reached over and pulled her into his lap. He arranged her facing Markos, and then he gathered her close. "Storm cloud, you can call me whatever you want, if you just let me hold you right now."

She let her weight settle on his thighs, her ass nestling into his groin. She slid one arm around his back and laid her head on his chest. Markos kept trying to stop, but the chuckles would burst from him, until he'd start to laugh and wheeze, where it would all start again. Adam leaned his head against the seat, his arms tight around her. The car slid through Vienna's streets, and Markos amused himself.

It wasn't long before they stopped. Tasha opened the door and they all climbed onto an ordinary sidewalk. It was a lovely gray stone townhouse, perhaps from the mid-1800s. She could tell they were still in the city proper. A cheerful window box exploding with colorful flowers decorated the single window, and the door was painted glossy white, which looked lovely beneath a red stained-glass fan window. There was a simple brass nameplate on the door above a mail slot that read *Chamber for Historical Studies*.

"Huh," Xia said, taking it all in. "Who knew."

"You won't. This will probably be taken from you," Adam warned. "Taken from Markos and Tasha as well."

Xia scowled. She hated having her memory fiddled with. It itched. Tasha took the car away, as there was nowhere to park, and Adam didn't bother with the bell, just put his hand on the brass plate. The door opened by itself.

Markos stepped in, his grunt warning Xia the door was spelled. She went in. It was like walking through thick cobwebs. The sticky, distasteful feeling made her skin crawl. If she didn't know it for what it

was, she'd have turned and left. As she stepped up next to Markos, the sensation grew worse, like actual spiders crawling over every bit of exposed skin. She couldn't stop from reaching up to brush her face.

Adam closed the door and the sensation stopped. Her breath burst from her in relief. Markos stomped his foot. The bull-like mannerism meant he was as bothered as she, although he didn't show it by wiping his hands down his arms like she did. They were in a lofty, formal foyer, with an intricate white and gray marble floor and lots of glossy white ornate molding.

"This way." Adam led them into one of the two side doors on either side of a staircase. The sitting room was small and tastefully decorated in mint green luxury that Jane Austen would have felt at home in. He looked absurd in his jeans, battered hiking boots and plum T-shirt, although Markos in his tailored black suit didn't look any more appropriate. Adam opened the servants' door hidden in the back wall's paneling, and the sound of voices murmuring in typical cocktail chatter could be heard.

"Ah, here they are," said a proper, deep English voice. The voices died away. "Welcome, Prince Adam of the Stone Shores. Thank you for bringing your charge to us so promptly. I know it is uncomfortable for you, but I delight in the opportunity to greet you again."

Xia stepped up to the door. *Prince?* The room was full of people. It was a long, large assembly room, filled by a massive, gleaming table decorated with a mosaic wood design.

"Hello, Robert." Adam went up to the older, hearty man, who could have stepped out of the pages of England's colonial period, in his khaki jodhpurs and pocketed khaki expedition vest. He had a bushy mustache that flowed into mutton chops, and a thick head of white hair.

"Safe journey? Would you like refreshment?" the other man boomed.

The people were drifting to chairs around the table that had to be easily three meters wide. The room was wood paneled with a nice dark oak, and the three chandeliers were crystal. It felt rich, but warm. Her gaze was drawn to the few pure-blooded magicals in the room, a winged gargoyle with adorable little horns, and a gnome, with his bald head and mouth bristling with terrifying spiked teeth. There were precious few of the pure-bloods. She could even be looking at the last of their race. Everyone had interbred with the humans or had evolved into having a humanoid form, like the elves, angels, most demons, and vampires.

"Completely uneventful, thank you. Yes, I'd love some of Vienna's famed pastries, and a cup of coffee would be brilliant."

Adam beckoned Xia. Markos took her elbow and walked over with her.

"This is my morphi, Xia, and her advocate, Markos."

"Excellent! Excellent! Markos, a pleasure. We are most eager to hear your report, young lady, but surely there is time to treat you as an honored guest. What may I arrange to bring for you both?"

She didn't want to be rude and looked at Markos for guidance. She couldn't go by Adam's bottomless stomach for what was appropriate.

Markos gave a small head bow to the older man. She noted Robert had not offered his hand to either of them for the lengthy shake he'd exchanged with Adam. "Coffee would be most welcome, thank you, sir."

"I'll have a cup of tea."

Robert turned and rapped on the wall twice sharply. He spoke into the wood. "A pot, a cuppa, and a pastry plate for our guests, Tim."

Robert clapped his hands together as he turned to them. "I'd love to toss back a shot or four later tonight. You didn't happen to bring any Glenfinnan, did you, boy?"

"No, you old dog. You know Mary told you to stop."

Robert pounded Adam on the back between the shoulders. Xia was impressed he held his feet, even though the man was shorter than Markos. "A man can dream! Ho, yes, now here it comes. Let's get you settled. Here, Markos, and you're here, Adam."

Xia stood rooted while Robert gestured the men to their chairs. Tim, the server wheeling a butler's cart down the length of the room, was an oni. A pure-blood. One of the most vicious creatures on the planet, he was barely bigger than the cart and muttered darkly over the squeaking wheels. He was green and bulbous, with long curling fangs and five horns and impossibly long, clawed hands. She didn't think they ever emerged from their subterranean caves in Asia. At least, no one saw an oni above ground and lived. She was consumed with curiosity about how one ended up serving snacks to the Chamber.

"Thank you, Tim! Well done, yes, excellent." While Tim was handing the gilt-edged plate of sweets to Adam, Robert picked up the teapot. "Cream? Sugar?"

"Uhhhhh...no, thank you. I'll take it plain."

He tutted, but passed it to her. The china was delicate. She stared hard at it to keep her eyes off Tim as he went muttering back to the kitchen, the scent of coffee lingering in his wake.

Robert stepped into her space, delicately herding her to one of the grand high-backed wooden chairs. "Here you are, Morphi. If you would, please."

Xia stepped forward, then stopped, belatedly realizing she was being placed at the head of the table. Glancing up, she saw at least forty faces fixed on her in two long rows. Her cup rattled once before she firmed her grip. She was proud of the way she tucked her butt into the chair Robert pushed in for her, and managed to put her cup on the table delicately. Swallowing, she looked at Adam on her left, but he was perusing the tortes. Prince or not, she was going to kill him. Markos sat next to him, and gave her a bracing nod, his hand in a fist on the table.

Robert stood in front of his chair off to her right. Even though the room was silent, he clapped his hands three times. Xia felt the air squeeze around her head, and her ears popped. A privacy spell.

“Chamber. Interested parties. Our long-standing ally Adam has reclaimed this lovely morphi, Xia, from Terra. This is the same woman who was able to give us the dreamtime information we had long been missing, enabling the hunt. She has come bearing Terra’s wisdom directly to us.”

Robert turned, looking down at her, his chest puffed out very hale-well-met. “Xia, I will share that we have already heard the reports of the other three morphi who successfully returned from Terra as well.”

Three? Only three? Xia’s heart stopped. At least one morphi had lost his or her mind or life to the assignment. She glanced at Adam, who was watching Robert. He sensed her gaze and looked back at her, steady, so contained.

Robert continued in his booming, capable voice. “In summation of the others’ reports, Terra, too, is waking, probably from all of Aqua’s agitation through its realm. Terra does not fear Aqua, but it does not like her. Terra also told two of the morphi that it could not stop Aqua at this point.

“Also, you will be happy to know our hunters have two of the six balance traitors in custody. Another has been killed, and two are quite close to being taken.”

The room erupted with hearty applause. Satisfaction thrilled through her. A morphi so rarely got to see such direct results from her dreaming. She, Xia, with Adam’s help, had dreamed big. Only one of the stupid-heads that started this was left to find. She had no doubt at all that it would happen. The Chamber’s hunters were that good. It was too late for it to really matter, though. They’d done their work and Aqua was on her way up. But to have the most powerful beings in the world applaud her good work was a moment that would hold her in the dark times.

She flashed a smile at the table, at Adam, who was actually smiling more than usual in return. His handsomeness struck her, the golden hair sparkling, angled face so dear. Markos lifted his clapping hands high when she glanced at him. His smile was so wide, his teeth a white slash in his swarthy face. The applause politely died down, but the swelling in her heart stayed.

“So now that you know the gist of what we’ve heard, please, add your findings to it.”

Robert sat. Xia glanced down the acre of gleaming wood and staring faces, and back at her teacup. Adam’s foot stretched under the table to hook around hers.

She took a deep breath. “There are not four elements. There is only one, and she is Aqua.” There. Her message, so hard won, was free.

An enormous gasp came from a few people, thunderous silence from most, and two men stood to shout.

“Lies! Blasphemy!”

“She’s mad!”

A swell of murmuring took the room and Robert sighed. Standing, he clapped his hands. They didn’t quiet.

He clapped and yelled a gruff, “Ho, there. Silence.”

Another person stood up, hands planted on the table and shouted, “She’s one of theirs, I tell you. That rampart is Aqua’s and the whole team is under her spell.”

The murmurs rose into a clamor with the high-pitched edge of hysteria. Xia sat shocked at their outbursts. This was not what was supposed to happen.

A woman rose and pointed at Xia dramatically. “Sweep them. Now!”

Robert knocked on the table. “Order, I say.”

The man who had shouted “blasphemy” shoved away from his chair and strode forward down the aisle. Xia went rigid, preparing for a physical attack. As the man came up toward Markos, Markos pushed back in his chair, a long slide from the table. He was holding his coffee cup, his legs outstretched and crossed. He took a sip, staring at the red-faced man.

“Go sit down, Kendall.” Markos’s voice was not as calm as his posture.

The only reason Xia could hear his bass rumble was because he was so close. The noise had swelled to a cacophony.

A woman on Robert’s other side leaned in and hissed with great malice, “Our world is on the brink and you play little dramatic games. You should be ashamed.”

Xia swallowed on a Saharan throat. Maybe she should have put some thought into how to say what she needed to say. She’d thought starting with the most basic principle and working to the solution would be appropriate. Obviously, she’d been wrong.

A man two seats down from hissy-face was on his feet now, yelling that Robert be removed for negligence and incompetence. Robert roared back that he was a little weasel and to put his personal machinations aside. Blasphemer got into Markos’s personal space, a mistake with a minotaur. Markos was on his feet, the coffee tossed in the man’s face. He stood shocked, sputtering. The person watching from next to Markos laughed. Red-face became puce-face.

Looking wild-eyed at Adam, Xia waited for him to take control of the room. He sat with his hands folded on the table, his brows lowered and jaw tight. A pang pierced her heart. He was mad. Disappointed, hurt. She’d carried news like this inside her and hadn’t shared it. It wasn’t that she’d tried to keep it secret from him, it was just that it had been too overwhelming to try to explain twice. She reached out to him, and he pulled his hands into his lap, at the same time he took his foot from around her ankle.

Xia felt the room dip and swirl under her. There was now a small crowd around Robert and his accuser, with lots of angry arm movements. People were screaming at each other across the table. Xia felt two inches tall and utterly incompetent. A dozen people down on the left, a white face staring at her caught her eye. He had an elbow on the table, his hand thoughtfully cupping his chin. He was so pale he was probably a vampire. His wink was the last the straw.

Xia drew in her power, formed the spell, and breathed out her command. “*Intentio*.”

For one moment everyone’s attention was forcefully drawn to her, their own voices suspended.

“Let me finish.” Drat. Her voice shook.

Immediately some person at the far end shouted, “Absolutely not!”

And it was all lost again. Feeling utterly sick to her stomach, Xia stood and turned to go back into the cool, crisp salon they’d entered through. She fought not to run, but it was a close thing, as all she could hold herself to was an inelegant scurry.

The door closed, leaving only silence and a bright, civilized room. The furniture was so proper and formal. The drapes appeared to be real lace. She couldn’t bear it. She left the room. Moving swiftly across the marble foyer, she reached for the ornate brass door handle when Adam’s deep voice froze her.

“Don’t you dare.”

Stiffly, she turned. He was in the center of the green room, hands in his pockets, glaring at her.

“Adam—”

“You little brat. Wait out here for order to be restored if you must, but you will sit and face the mess you created.”

Her throat squeezed in regret. The feeling of shrinking continued. “Adam—”

“No. I can’t listen to you. Sit. Wait. If you truly do have the secret to stopping Aqua, it will be a miracle if they listen to you now, but you must try.” He moved to the window. The harsh electric streetlights were softened by the sheer white curtains. He stared unseeing through them.

Xia stood in the entrance foyer’s dimmer light. She stood, her heart thrumming, lungs aching. Mess, he called it. The most profound truth of her life had been earned as her very soul hung in balance. She held the secret to a new paradigm of balancing the elements, an entirely different and probably more effective way than the long fight the magicals had always struggled with. Lord and Lady, none of them had been there. None of them knew. None of them could go there, and so none of them *could* know. Might not ever accept.

She stood on the cold, empty marble, a step from false freedom, and dreaded the rest of her life. She’d actually thought, naively, stupidly, that they’d believe her. They’d be surprised and nod thoughtfully and adjust their techniques. The Chamber’s mages would get to work creating the necessary ceremony from her information and the world would be saved. Her hand was on her throat trying to hold the bile down.

There were people in the world who revered not a god or the Lord and Lady or their ancestors, but the Four. A vision of pious religious zealots seeking to hunt her for the rest of her days flashed into her brain. They’d kill her. One man had apparently already had that urge. Markos had stopped that angry man intent on getting to her. Was he okay?

Her hand lifted up to cover her mouth. Her stomach churned. One moment before she’d blown the world apart with her idiotic statement, she’d known what it was to be respected. She’d basked, so proud. Imagined that the pinnacle of her success was yet to come. Her mind scurried around in circles, seeking a

way to undo this. What could she say to take it back? What excuse could she give that would play it for a lie? That woman had said she was playing a game.

The thought of being viewed as that vain, that awful, chilled through her. But it would be worth it, to give people back their world. To regain her life. She could still tell them the idea for the High Magic that would stop Aqua. As Adam said, why would they listen to her, especially if she recanted? Then everything she said for the rest of her life would be suspect. Her career was ruined. No, she wouldn't think about that. She'd think about how to share the secret to stopping Aqua. Which wouldn't make any sense if they didn't believe her first statement.

Abruptly, her knees gave out. She caught herself on her hands before she totally fell on her ass, but it was still graceless. Her skirt tumbled and her ankle twisted and the heel of her left hand ached. Gasping, head hanging, hair hot around her face, Xia crumpled in the foyer of the Chamber, and for one pure moment, truly wanted to go back to Terra. In Terra, she was safe. Eternal. Terra was peaceful, restful. Nothing like the frantic nature of Aer or the seething emotions of Ignis. Nothing like the vicious, voracious soul of Aqua. Aqua that was rising, waking, to destroy the world.

Adam was in the doorway. Like the foyer's marble parquet floor was some sort of barrier, he didn't come to her. His hands were back in his pockets. "Don't start crying. Pull yourself together. Think, for a change. Get off the floor and sit in here while you wait." He turned away. Stalked away. Might as well have shook his feet like a disgusted cat.

Adam. Losing his regard was a harpoon in the gut. She wanted to weep. To lay prostrate on the cold marble and disappear in a storm of horrified sorrow. For several long moments, she thought she wouldn't be able to keep from doing that. But the sounds of her gasping lungs steadied, and she rocked up onto her knees. Standing was hard. Walking on shaking legs back into the room with him was the bravest thing she'd ever done.

She knew this feeling of utter worthlessness. It was what she'd lived with for almost a year after ghosting into that bitch Aqua. Aqua had sucked the life out of her, and the reconnection with Ry had been so horrible she'd had to fight for every scrap of confidence again. This was just like that.

The room had three seating options. Deciding between the backless bench, the couch or the wing-back chair seemed crucial. The sofa meant someone could join her. The bench seemed too exposed. She tottered to the chair and collapsed. Adam remained at the window, staring out. His back was broad, his shoulders vast above his tight ass. His legs were thick and long, his hair covering the collar of his tee.

I'm sorry. I didn't know. I didn't think it would be this way. Don't be mad. She breathed through the pain. *Think, Xia.* She couldn't. She sat there until her ass went numb, but her brain was just locked on replaying the horror after her announcement. It was a long while later when the door to the Chamber's room opened to her left. Robert stood in the doorway, flushed and glowering, bushy white eyebrows tight together. The murmuring of voices behind him was reminiscent of the first time she'd gone in, but the

energy of the crowd was still high. With utter relief, Xia noted the emotions seemed to have been settled and rational behavior restored. Robert, Markos and a female elf came through the door and closed it. Markos put Xia's teacup on the table by her arm. He pulled the bench over near her and sat, glancing once disdainfully at Adam's back.

"All right, Xia?" he asked, his huge hand settling over hers, clasped tightly in her lap.

She just looked at him incredulously.

He squeezed his hand on hers and let go. The elf sat on the couch and stared at her thoughtfully. Xia couldn't hold her lovely green gaze. Robert paced agitatedly around the room. They all watched him for a few minutes, before he was able to stop and focus on Xia. She dragged her gaze up to meet his. His now shockingly orange pupils were star-shaped. This man was a dragon.

His question caught her unprepared. "How do we stop Aqua?"

Xia's throat swelled shut. Blinking to hold back the tears, she sat like a useless lump in her chair. Breathing through her panic, she managed to croak out, "Steam."

Robert began to pace around the room again. The elf relaxed back in the corner of the couch, now stroking her lips in an oddly seductive manner. Markos grew stiffer beside her.

The elf said something in Gaelic. Robert snarled back at her in the same language, no longer an adorable, harmless-seeming caricature. Adam turned and added his two cents. Markos stood, apparently agreeing with him. Xia felt like a three-year-old, with all the adults in the room spelling so she wouldn't understand.

They chattered on for a long while. Adam came and sat on the coffee table near the elf, and eventually Robert leaned on the sofa back, while Markos sat down. She stayed silent, lost in despair. Gaelic was a beautiful language, utterly strange and odd. She let the sounds roll around her.

Eventually Markos turned to her. "Aqua would still be awake, just changed."

"In the grip of Aer, it will not be able to hold to any purpose. Not until it returns to its true, liquid form, which will take awhile. This will buy time, to think of other ways to send it to sleep. Possibly you could even find ways to keep Aqua's sentience bound to Aer longer. Aer might be enlisted, if it is amused." The detailed answer made her utterly weary. She had nothing left.

The elf spoke in her low contralto. "Did Terra teach you this?"

"Terra showed me the way. This is my realization."

"How will we capture Aqua and force her into this altered state without also waking up Ignis? We'd be creating another problem on top of Aqua, while we have no idea what this new blending will do to Aer."

"Ignis doesn't have to participate. It just needs to be harnessed and used. Ignis feeds even asleep. Bring one to the other and let Ignis feed. As to how you will capture Aqua into a focused object in order to transform her, I am no High Mage. That's work for Chamber staff."

They spoke for a while in Gaelic. Xia drifted, a sense of relief that her message had been relayed seeping through the numb shock.

The dragon turned to her. "What did Terra specifically tell you about Aqua?"

Xia stared at him. His eyes were still orange. She wanted to disappear. She wanted to scream and rage in his face.

"Xia." Markos covered her hands again. He was warm. "Try to remember."

Her voice emerged as a whisper. "Water is."

Robert stared at her. She could feel it, even though she couldn't look at him to tell for sure.

"And from that you extrapolated your little philosophy."

Xia licked her lips. Her throat ached from holding down the vomit. Her mouth was so dry. "It didn't tell me everything. It showed me. It felt and remembered, in between moving and sleeping."

"Terra considers itself part of Aqua?"

"It is a...piece. A relation. Not a child or a subsidiary, but close."

"Will Terra respond to Aqua? Defend her?"

"No. I don't know. It is aware, as your other morphi told you, that she is not to be loved."

The elf repeated her slowly. "Not to be loved. Fascinating. How I wish I could speak to the very elements, as you have, Morphi."

Xia stared at the bitch with burning eyes. If she'd been more herself she would have laughed in her face.

Markos spoke. "That is naive, Nuwoe. You know the theory of subsumation better than that. She was not Xia when she learned these things. She was Terra."

The dragon in human skin began to pace again. "You are saying that Terra considers Aqua the master element. The source."

Xia considered that. "I guess. I don't know."

He turned on her. "You knew enough to explode the world with your thoughtless words."

She was shrinking. If only the process would finish, so that she could fade away.

"Focus. Get the information you need from her and avoid useless castigation." Adam spoke in a clipped voice, unafraid of the dragon's wrath.

Markos prompted, "What else did Terra say about Aqua?"

Xia closed her eyes and pulled at the terrifying memories. "Water is life. Water is all."

The elf murmured.

Markos prompted, "Anything else?"

"It is itself, and it is the other three."

He leaned his elbows on his knees, putting his face below hers to catch her gaze. "Terra said that it, Ignis and Aer are part of Aqua?"

“No. That they *are* water. It was in images. Layers of rock, swirling lava, wind. Wind wearing away soil, Ignis burning away soil, Ignis gobbling up Aer, Aer taunting Ignis...” Aware the images in her mind were not translating into words correctly, she blew out her breath. “They all act like water. They follow the same patterns she does.”

Markos sat up. “Ignis is the antithesis of Aqua.” It was a distillation of a much more intricate philosophy, but one that was held to be essentially correct.

“No. Ignis is a mirror of Aqua.”

“But Aqua does not have to be fed, like Ignis and Aer.”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know.” The tears were back, just at the top of her throat.

Adam spoke with his usual, short, matter-of-fact calm. “This philosophical discussion will need to wait for later. Xia can reflect on her experience, write it out and refine her understanding, which is so very new. At the moment, you need to work out if you are going to consider her idea.”

“Terra’s idea,” Xia dared to correct. She stared at Adam, a tiny seed of hope in her heart at his calm support.

“As you say.”

What did that mean? She searched his black eyes, seeking answers in his deep.

He held her gaze. “May we leave?”

Was he asking her? Then the answer was *Please, Lady, yes.*

“Anything else? Any other detail at all you can share, Xia?” the elf asked.

Ripping her eyes from Adam, Xia wracked her brain. “Just that Aqua cannot ever be really stopped. It is uncontainable. It is. All you can do is redirect her into another form.”

Robert the British colonial dragon growled.

Adam stood. “Contact her via email, cell or spell. I need to go home.”

The world narrowed to a tunnel. The panic attack was instant and full blown. Her breath wheezed loudly in the room. A high, thin keening wailed.

Adam was on his knees in front of her, his hands gentle on her neck, his thumbs stroking her cheeks. “Us, Xia, we’re both going home. I’m still here, Morphi.”

When she was able to focus on more than Adam and had breath enough to push back the black at the edges of her vision, she became aware that Markos was kneeling to her side, his arm around her shoulders, and the elf had come close.

Xia nodded her understanding of Adam’s steady reassurance, and everyone seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. How nice not to have to watch the morphi go crazy.

“What is this, Rampart?” Markos turned on Adam.

“We’re not sure. It’s barely been a day. Did you expect her to be untouched? I’ll send you a report.”

“This has happened before?” the elf asked.

"None of your business," Adam said matter-of-factly. He stood, pulling Xia upright, but her legs didn't work and he ended up catching her when she tumbled against him. He lifted her. Her legs screamed in pain as blood returned to them.

"Markos, let's go. Call Tasha." He strode from the room, no goodbyes.

Xia put her hands around his neck for balance, but it was wrong. She had no right.

"I'm not your servant, selkie. Don't order me."

"I'm not part of your team. Don't order me."

The elf laughed. "Men are ever simple, in any race. Adam, a watcher will be assigned. It will be hard to contain this information for long."

"I know. Adieu, Nuwoe."

"Slán, my friend."

Markos stomped from the room. He called Tasha in the foyer. "We're ready."

Were they? Xia wanted to cry.

"Let me try to stand now." Her legs were being eaten with pins and needles.

"No."

He wouldn't look at her. She was so tired.

Robert came to stand with the elf in the doorway. "I'll call you with the soonest available flight."

Adam didn't look at him as he replied, "Tonight, Robert. Fly us anywhere, but get us out of Vienna within the hour. We're going directly to the airport. Have someone send our bags."

"My passport. I didn't bring a purse."

"Ballocks. All right. We're going to the hotel, but then directly the airport. Still no cell reception from the meeting room?"

Robert nodded.

"We'll hopefully be gone by the time you finish hammering this out. Call me when you dismiss. That's when things could get tricky."

"Will do."

Markos's cell buzzed. He opened the door, and the black car was there. The air was surprisingly humid. The world had gone on despite Xia's little meltdown. He pulled open the sedan door and Adam set her on the seat.

"Scoot over."

She did, and he came in next to her. Markos climbed in and Tasha closed the door. The gray stone around the white door with the red peacock fan window above would always be seared into Xia's memory. It occurred to her that no one had tried to spell her into forgetting. Small favors.

Markos spoke to Tasha briefly and they were all silent on the ride to the hotel's car entrance. Eventually he addressed Adam, ignoring her. "She is tied to you now?"

“Fuck, Markos. Let it go.” Adam sounded as tired as she felt.

“What happens if you leave? How bad would it get?”

“It gets bad. I won’t leave her, so let it the fuck go.”

“Oh yeah? And what happens when you disappear into your fur?”

Adam ground his teeth.

“Xia, do you still have Smith’s number?” Markos leaned around Adam to see her.

Smith. Good ol’ Dr. Smith, the woman who had helped Xia when she tried to form herself back into a functioning morphi again after her last ghosting into Aqua. “Somewhere. She’s still practicing?” Smith had been human.

“For you, yes. Call her.”

“This isn’t a desperate situation, Advocate.” Adam’s haughty voice drew Markos’s brown gaze. “Or at least, the separation anxiety isn’t. It can wait.”

“I think that’s for Xia to decide.” Markos looked out the window, miffed.

When they got to the hotel, Xia went to the room with Adam. He hadn’t unpacked, and he stood by the door as she quickly gathered her toiletries. Leaving the bathroom, she stood before him, stomach churning. “Adam—”

“Not here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure.”

The cold answer was like a slap. She actually raised her hand to her face. Her cheeks burned with the force of his blow. She finished packing and took up her purse. As they rode the elevator down, she asked, “Will they come for me?”

“If we move fast enough, I hope to be on our own territory. We’ll talk later.”

She stood, the sinking of the elevator nothing to do with the sinking of her stomach.

He spoke again a few floors later. “You won’t be alone. When they come, they’ll face a Chamber watcher and me. You are protected, Xia. We’ll practice some offensive magic.”

She looked up at him, his face staring at the blinking numbers as they descended. He would defend her even now. Because she was his duty.

Tasha waited by the car, a still but deadly doll. She opened the door, and they climbed in. The airport ride felt even longer this time, with the roiling atmosphere in the car.

At the terminal, Xia hugged Markos. “You haven’t nagged me for a report.”

He stared at her, her joke falling flat. His thick finger traced her lips. “Stay alert. I’ll be in touch.”

Adam finished hugging Tasha. To Markos he said, “I have an idea. I’ll call you.”

Markos nodded.

The flight was to Madrid. A baby cried the whole way, scraping down Xia's last nerve. In Madrid, they were able to get a flight to Glasgow with only a small layover. She finally lost the battle with her exhaustion and slept. Moving through the airport like a zombie, she couldn't believe it when Adam packed her into the Rover with determination.

"Don't you need to sleep?" He'd had even less than she, over the course of many days.

"I need the ocean more." The whirl of roundabouts at dawn contributed to Xia's ongoing nausea. Soon they were parked at a hotel and Adam was out of the car. He strode across the parking lot, through a strip of grass and went straight down an embankment to the water.

Because her vision got spotty to see him so far from her, she followed. Right down to the water. The dawn light was pale yellow, the air cool. The water hung in the air, the sea once again thick in her throat. He stripped down to his underwear. Turning to her as she stood weaving on the shore, arms tight around herself, he said simply, "Watch."

He moved into the water. She heard him breathe harshly as it came up over his waist. Without his fur, she bet it was nippy. He dove into the water. Her heart stopped, but he emerged immediately. He swam along the shore, and she paced with him. He swam back to where he'd entered, and she trotted alongside. He floated on his back, and a huge, wide smile cut through his tan face. She treasured the private glimpse of that rare smile.

He stood and his hair darkened and slicked back. His arms raised to smooth the water from his face took her breath. Standing ankle deep, his underwear transparent, he motioned her forward. She inched to him.

He held out his hand and she took it. The tiny bead of hope rattling around inside her hollow self thumped once, gaining a heartbeat.

"I was angry." He didn't apologize. He simply acknowledged. And he used the past tense. Hope took another heartbeat.

"I'm sorry."

"You were foolish to challenge so boldly like that without a plan or a care."

"I see that now."

"You didn't use me or Markos. You had allies and you blindsided us."

"I didn't think it through."

"Why ever not, Xia? I know it's been a whirlwind since you woke, but you had time on the plane, if nothing else."

His hand was cold, his flesh firm beneath the wet. "I—I don't know. It was just a truth I knew. It was complicated, and I knew it would be hard to explain, but it never occurred to me that I shouldn't."

"This will remake our world. Your reckless courage takes my breath."

Dread, down to her very toes. "I'm sorry."

His thumb stroked over the back of her hand, as his black eyes ate into her soul. “Storm cloud, you have to stop being sorry, and afraid. You have to start being strong, and angry. They asked this of you. Now they have to face what they wrought. When you go poking questions at the very elements, then you might not necessarily like the answers.”

His new defense exploded the seed of hope into a trembling flower inside her. “Thank you, Adam.”

“Don’t keep things from me. I can’t keep you safe if you hide.”

The flower withered. Dedication. Obligation. Cursed duty. “I’ll try.”

“Any more bombs you decided to hold back? Something I should know?”

I love you. She blinked at the idea. It was just her psychic need of him, wasn’t it? Some sort of neurotic hero worship tied up in sex and a perverse interest in his wild nature? “Not that I can think of.”

“Here’s my idea. We need to set you up in the media, and we need university contacts. It needs to be big and clear that you are questioning what you learned, and reflecting, and not some new messiah of Aqua.” His brows drew together in a scowl. “Are you?”

“No!”

“All right. I’m thinking of a published series of essays, or letters, between leading philosophers and High Mages and training instructors. Maybe an elemental of each can weigh in.”

“Not you?”

He gave her a quelling look. “What do you think of the plan?”

“It reminds me of Einstein writing Gandhi and that ongoing discussion they had.”

The small smile curled his lip. “Einstein, huh?”

“So I’ll work it out and send it to them, and they’ll work it out and publish about it. Now it’s not coming from me. It will be like a new discovery or something.” He was brilliant.

“Yes. Some of them might want to come interview you in person, especially since we can’t lose any time on this. My people are guarding my house, but Robert called just before we landed to tell me the meeting was over. Word will be out.”

“Your people, Prince Adam?”

He rolled his eyes. “Aye.”

“I didn’t know selkies had royalty.”

“Like Charles, the Prince of Wales, I’m a figurehead.”

“Will you be king some day?”

“I’m fifth in line. I hope not.”

“You have four brothers and sisters?”

“Eleven, actually. I want you to meet them all.”

The thought was chilling. *Hello, Adam's family. Yes, I'm the woman who publicly decried the Four, endangering myself when Adam was in charge of me. Thank you so much for guarding our backs ever since.* "How sweet. I'm not sure you should meet Antonia. She's a strong personality."

He nodded. "Aye. She's likely a fire elemental trapped in a magicless shell."

Adam let go of her hand and stepped onto the mucky beach. He began to dress. "What do you know of Tony?" How had he gleaned a secret belief of hers without ever meeting her sister?

"Let's talk as we drive. Time to go home." The utter yearning in his voice stopped Xia.

As he stuffed his feet back in his boots, he casually mentioned, "You did well. You were able to come down to the water's edge. Your panic was mild."

"Panic sounds so pathetic."

"I'll have you swimming within the week." He moved up the hill to the car.

Xia stopped. "That's not funny, Adam."

He kept walking. "Aye."

Xia hurried after him, scowling. "Was that yes, it is funny, or yes, it's not funny?"

Chapter Twelve

Xia slept for the long drive through some of the most beautiful scenery on the planet. She roused enough to shuffle into Adam's house. For a moment, her grandparents were sitting at the long, sturdy table in the center of the room, playing cards. Adam steered her into the bed, connected to her astral self, and then she knew no more.

At one point, she knew she was wrapped in Adam. At another, her stuffy nose woke her up. She was crying in her sleep. Rolling to her back and sniffing was as much as she dealt with that, and soon she was asleep again. Her cell phone sang out with "Turkey in the Straw", and she opened one eye, but Adam rolled from the bed, ropes creaking, and took it from her purse. She was gone again, listening to the rise and fall of his quiet Scots accent.

When she woke, she felt battered and rested and hollow. In the cozy valley her body had made in the bed, among blankets smelling of the sea and Adam, she almost closed her eyes to drift away again, to hide. But coffee's rich aroma filled the room, and the scent of cinnamon. She sat up, which took serious effort in the deep feather mattress. The room swirled and settled.

Adam was by a small enamel stove in the corner. It had to be from the early forties. A matching, rounded fridge with a long latch handle was next to it. He looked up when her head emerged from the mountainous mattress. He was wearing a dark gray T-shirt with one arm ripped off. It was sexy.

She looked at him. Good morning seemed a ridiculous thing to say, so she didn't.

"All I have is porridge and coffee. Some supplies will come later today."

"I'll take some porridge and just a glass of water." She didn't mind the smell of coffee, but the taste of it, even sugared and creamed, was not something she enjoyed.

After she'd battled from the bed, she asked hopefully, "Bathroom?"

"Next to the carport."

She was still wearing her red dress. She found her nice shoes and ignored the relentless steady sound of the ocean, or how close the high tide had come, and crunched down the oyster path. Stopping halfway, she turned and went back to the house.

"You'll stay here?"

He nodded. "I won't leave."

Still, when she had to stop and look back before passing into his workshop, she forced herself to not to call out to him, to have him come to the door. The bathroom had been updated in the sixties. The olive

fixtures were clean and worked fine. She showered, shaved with his razor—she'd have to warn him—and used his toothbrush. 'Cause ruining his life wasn't enough.

Back through the oil scent of his machine shop, past the Rover, and again ignored the ocean's taunts as she entered into the little room. Gram was in the corner fluffing the mattress. Adam was setting the table. Xia went to take Gram's place and made the bed.

She sat across from Adam, uncomplaining of her simple glass of water and bowl of cinnamon porridge. They ate in calm silence, and she remembered the long-ago morning they'd sat side by side on her little couch much the same way. If only the ocean wasn't muttering beyond the walls.

"What did Markos have to say?"

"He stayed in Vienna, met again with Robert and a small group from the meeting. Robert has declared silence on the meeting and seems to think it will hold until our plan is in place.

"Today and tomorrow I need you to write, Xia. You need to write and think and lay out both the essential experience the best you can, and how you interpret it. Markos, Robert, Nuwoe and I are lining up more participants to be part of the unveiling and commentary. Three of the members at the meeting have already agreed to join in, representing Oxford, Nuremburg and Harvard, as well as professors at St. Petersburg, Riyadh, Delhi and Tokyo."

Xia forced the lump of oatmeal she'd swallowed to finish its path down her closed throat. "I'm not a very eloquent writer."

"You'll do your best."

"Will you... I'd appreciate it, if you could, read it over and help."

Now it was his turn to still his steadily working spoon. He looked at her, and she ached inside at how beautiful he was. "About time you asked." He spooned the rest of the porridge from the pot to his bowl and resumed eating.

She watched, eventually managing to swallow a few more bites.

"I performed an experiment when you were asleep."

"Oh?"

"I went and fetched our bags. You didn't wake."

"Oh!" Terrific. That meant there was no metaphysical reason she needed to be near him. She was just crazy and weak.

"So then I went for a quick swim in my fur. I have no problem guarding your sleep from a distance, but still your need for me didn't trigger, even when I took my other form."

What it must have felt like to him, to be home, with his selkie self so close, and not be able to instantly go and be who he really was.

"I'm sorry, Adam. I'm so sorry to—to be this *stone* around your neck."

His eyes crinkled a bit at the corners, and his lips curled at one edge in his smile. “What else could you be when you’ve come out of a ghosting with Terra?”

She blinked. He was making jokes about it? He chuckled and drank some of his coffee. Her water tasted stale, like it had been bottled for too long. But it wasn’t salty, which was all that mattered.

When he was finished, he ate what was left of hers and put all the dishes on a gorgeous Japanese lacquer tray. From under the bed, he pulled her laptop case. He put it on the table. “Your priority today, all your focus, needs to be writing. If we can get your ideas out to them and their responses to the media, all within two or three days, we can weather the initial storm of interest in you and let this move ahead on its own.”

Xia slowly unzipped her bag. “So my notes are only going to be read by the professors, not printed in the papers?”

“I wouldn’t plan on them staying secret. In a year or so, they’ll come out.” His voice lowered to a growl. “Anonymously.”

Xia powered up the laptop. Adam opened the thick plank door. “I’m leaving this open. I’m going to the washbasin at the garage. You can see me if you move a little to the left.”

He went out, and she tried to hold her seat, to believe he was right there. He was coming back, just like he had from the grocery store. She was safe, he was safe, Terra could not reclaim her. By the time her desktop image, a picture of Tony’s current volcano gleaming with lava in the evening, came up, she was panting softly, but determined to hold her place.

She opened up the word-processing program, and when that was set, she had to give in and lift her feet off the floor, propping them on the opposite bench. At the top of the page she typed *A Morphi’s Subsumation Into Terra*. She’d done this once before. It had been her first therapist’s suggestion when she’d come out of Ignis with Markos. She had typed it all out, and it *had* helped, settling something inside her. Not that she had ever read it again. It had come up with her trip into water, also. But putting that journey on paper would have made it too real, too permanent. She’d never had the courage.

Just the thought of how the ritual had begun, with her on the plaid bed and Adam holding her feet, her symbolic anchor, had her hyperventilating. She had to turn on the bench, put her feet on the floor and bend her head between her knees. Footsteps crunched on the walk. She shook from the will it took not to turn and watch for him. Her head pounded. The door kicked closed, and the small chink of dishes came.

He said, “Try not to puke inside.”

Abruptly, a laugh startled from her. In a moment she could sit up. Ease settled into her shoulders knowing he was here again. Coming around the table, he squatted on his haunches in front of her and took her hands. “This is not weakness, Xia. It’s not something that you can face down and toughen yourself up for. It’s a wound you must heal from. Stop picking at the scab, and let yourself heal.”

She wanted to fling herself onto his strong shoulders, be caught by his black depths. She wouldn't though. She had to stop being deadweight and start pulling her own.

His hand came up cradled her face. The touch of his calloused skin exploded through her, a softening in her belly. Her lips parted for him without her permission.

"Little warrior, not everything has to be a battle, and certainly not fought alone."

She gave him the truth. "I hate not being an equal partner. I don't want to be a burden you carry to finish an obligation." She licked her lips and his darkening gaze dropped to them, which made it easier to finish. "I want to be a woman you're proud to stand next to."

Holding her breath, she waited. It was such a blatant attempt at reassurance. Where did she stand with him? Was she anything more than duty at all?

His hand slid away from her cheek, which stung from the chill of his absence. His dark eyes captured hers again. "I want you to be that woman. Life is in our way. Duty is very much present, for now. Did you think it was a casual thing when I agreed to be your anchor? I am your anchor for more than the short span of the ceremony. I'm also still your rampart, responsible for your safety. When I failed and fell asleep last night, you had a nightmare."

She gasped. "You still haven't slept?"

His brow furrowed. "I am to watch over you in your sleep, Morphi."

"I've seen a lot of scary things in my life. I'm never not going to have nightmares, Adam. Markos won't order me into the dreamtime again. Or if he does, I'll refuse. I'm too unsteady right now. You should be officially released as my rampart."

"That order isn't yours to make."

"So...when you are no longer assigned to me, and when I've recovered from this neurosis I've picked up, you'd still be willing to see me?" Her heart banged off her ribs. She couldn't believe she was daring to ask Adam if he'd date her in some far future.

"You have to go back in the water."

"What?" She reared away from him.

He stood, staring down at her, and winked. "You heard me. Any woman I'm with has to at least tolerate the sea."

She was on her feet, head tipped back, chin jutting. "Are you giving me an ultimatum I have to pass to be your girlfriend?" Her mouth flapped with outrage. "That's—that's *so* arrogant."

"You love a challenge. Come now, you're up to it." He crossed his arms.

"I'll go in the water when I'm good and ready, not because some sexy boy wants me to."

"You'll go in the water to finish getting healthy, because it's long overdue."

"You're not my therapist." She crossed her arms in return.

"You know what? I'm not. I'm your lover. I should carry more weight."

“Adam!”

“Xia.”

Her blood was boiling and that smile curled on his lips. It was like some taunting smirk and the light flared white. She leaped on him, one arm tight across his shoulder, the other wrapping over his head. Her mouth hit his hard, lips jamming. She worked her jaw to get into his mouth as he grabbed her hips. Winning the cavern of his mouth thrilled her. She rolled her tongue through his, his taste warm and sweet and faintly of toothpaste. Massive palms gathered her ass and pressed her in tight to him, her dress sliding silkily in his grip. He swirled his hips in her belly. That pressure loosened her legs and he let her stand on her own. Cradling his head, now she forced him to turn at the angle she wanted, sealing their mouths. She drank him down.

One of his hands skated up her spine, electrifying her scalp, while the other grabbed her breast, fingers sinking into the flesh, owning it, claiming her. His other hand settled on her nape, while his touch burned up her breast to her throat. The dangerous sensation of her neck trapped between his two palms weakened her knees. Listing against him, she mewed into his mouth. His fingers pressed and stroked along the lines of her throat. So good.

The kiss went on. Air grew thin. Her brain spun, drunk with him. He left her throat and ripped at his pants on his hips. They stumbled together as he turned them in place. Frantic to be close to him, to feed the need exploding inside her, she clung to him, her hands under his tee, desperate for his skin. Falling backward onto the bench, he sat, taking the brief moment their mouths separated to pull his shirt over his head. Astonished at the view in front of her, the muscles and tight skin, she didn't resist when he tossed her skirt up to her waist and pulled her forward to straddle his knees.

His mouth found hers again, and the heat cascaded, so lovely, so free. Her fingers flew over his shoulders and chest. His grabbed her ass and lifted her. Squeaking she clutched his shoulders, but her knees soon found the bench and then she was over him. He pulled her underwear aside and his erection lodged between her legs. Two moans, low and tight, twined through the room. His palms burned into her ass as she trembled, her whole body balanced on the tip of him. He nipped, hard, at her lip, and the sting of salt rocked her head back. Her body softened, opened, and she slid down the thick pole of him.

Her kiss turned frantic as the pain and pleasure twined, in her lip, in her stretched center. He jerked her closer, sealing her down a final inch. A sound left her throat and he paused. She clenched around him with her inner muscles, then he went wild. His shoulders rolled and bunched as his palms lifted her beneath her bum. His fingers sank brutally into her skin as he pulled her down, grunting into her still-desperate mouth.

The two sensations above and below kept distracting her, as she split her attention between them. Each time her attention returned to her lips, they felt huge and sore and sensitive. When his rough movement drew her awareness to her vagina, the burn of him stretching her, lodged so deep, would spin her

mind away. It sped faster, harder, deeper, wilder, and then his arms banded around her, crushing her ribs, as he shook, holding her tight to him, hips straining against hers. He made no sound, but the fact that he was utterly taut and still finally lured her away from his mouth.

His face was so beautiful in orgasm. A ray of light came through the small window, dust motes hanging in the air like fairy magic. Her chest was flattened in his tight grip, and his jaw hung open. His cheekbones were stark below the slash of his brows, his lids squeezed tightly closed. The pleasure clamping deep inside her body tightened one degree and sharp sensation radiated from her clit. He opened his glowing purple eyes and she let her orgasm wash through her face as he held her close, held her safe.

She did not close her eyes, but let him see. It was all there for him to find, if he would. A high, thin cry wrenched from her throat when the pleasure strung out. Her short nails sunk into the meat of his chest. His eyes narrowed, and he jerked her down as he tilted his hips up, grinding her clit against his belly. The pleasure flattened the light, and her voice wailed as another orgasm bloomed behind the first.

He fell forward onto her neck, his teeth closing hard on the front of her throat, his tongue pressed tight to her pulse. He sucked, and she gasped. He lifted her a tiny bit, pulling her ass cheeks wide, and stuffed her down on him again, and the tiny bit of spread allowed him to go that much deeper, her clit against him that much harder. He sucked on her throat and it hurt and the pleasure spiked. Her back arched as the light took her. Her whole torso lunged backwards, her body whipped by too much feeling. His hands laced in the small of her spine caught her, and she hung from their joined hips, her arms outflung, as she shook and screamed and thrashed and died on the spike of him.

When it passed, he gathered her forward again, and she lay shuddering on his chest, slumped, dazed. He stroked her hips and ass. He kissed her temple, smoothed her crown with his jaw. A whimper came from her as little stings of pleasure cascaded from where they were enmeshed, echoes. He rocked her. Eventually both their hearts steadied, and their breath smoothed.

One big palm on the back of her neck, he tipped her head back and took her mouth, slow, deep, completely. When she blinked up into his royal gaze, she felt reborn.

“I adore sending a woman into the rapture.” He kissed one eye gently.

“The rapture? You use such sweet sayings. Calling it sharing and rapture.”

He grinned, wide and adorable. His hair tumbled over his forehead and she had to push it back. “Sharing is good sex with equal partners. The rapture is more. The rapture is when a woman goes out of herself and becomes pleasure bound in flesh. It’s been a very long time for me, Xia. Thank you. You were magnificent.”

“You were pretty splendid yourself.” Xia tugged the ends of hair. “You said it had been a long time since you’d taken a lover. I fear what you would be like with practice.” She cuddled into his neck, ignoring the ache in her splayed hips and the wetness coating her thighs.

“I haven’t driven a woman into rapture since my second wife, Haki. You are only the third woman to gift me with such trust.”

Xia frowned. “Meg?”

Adam sighed, his fingers thrilling over her tailbone. “Yes. Once, I shared that with her, but she was afraid of it. We never went there again.”

Xia considered what it was like to be in company with his dead wives. “Afraid? I can see how that would be possible. I’ve never experienced anything like that. I don’t think I’m up for it often, but I’m not saying never again. It’s like...you can’t have Godiva’s triple chocolate cheesecake every day, and it’s an effort one must gird oneself up for and get in the right state of mind, but you know you’re going to go back and do it again sometime. You won’t be able to withstand the allure.”

Adam stilled beneath her weight. “Are you comparing me to cheesecake?”

“Raindrop, it was just a metaphor. Do me again like that anytime soon, and I may end up gibbering and catatonic after all.”

“I don’t think you can be both gibbering and catatonic.” She heard the grin in his voice.

“Pffft. Details, details.” Heaving a sigh, she considered the fact that the bench was cutting into her knees in a very painful way. “I have to get up, sorry.”

He drew her up, and they both caught their breath when he fell from the clutch of her warmth. She got her knees under her, but he kept his grip on her ribs while she firmed her stance. Her rumpled dress fell down around her calves.

“Kay, got it.”

“Just a moment.” He pulled the scoop neckline down and pushed her nipple above the fabric. His lips closed over her, soft and hot, while his tongue laved her. The tremors this caused in her belly spread through her body.

“Adam, too much!”

He hummed, licking across her once more, before letting her breast settle back into her bra. He stood, and stretched. The blatant display worked for her and she fell on his tan nipple, teeth dragging across the bitty nub. His arms cradled around her, holding her loosely until she was done tasting the salt of him. With her forehead pressed to his collarbone, she got her breath back.

They both sighed at the same time. Smiling, she stepped away from him, and he let her. It was impossible, at first, not to touch him, as he pulled his pants up from ankles, picked up his tee and pulled it back on.

“Your bags are under the bed.”

“All right.” She nestled into him, and he held her. Surrounded by his shoulders, with his head bowed over hers, he stood solid, like he would let her stay there all day. There was no sense of waiting to

disengage, of wanting to get moving. He was around her, and he wanted to be there. Tears pricked her eyes. She stood on tiptoe to kiss his throat and stepped back.

“I’m going to change, clean up, then I’ll write.”

“Aye. I’ve got to sleep. Then I’ll bring an engine down from the shop and work here with you.”

It worked out. By the time the sun was high in the sky, Xia was typing with tense shoulders, comforted by Adam’s deep, steady breaths behind her. At first, she stopped and started, reread, and brought up thesaurus.com for more powerful, eloquent words. But she quickly realized it wasn’t working. So instead, she just started to dump it all out in a stream of consciousness. She’d type feelings, describe images, sensations, then remember something else and add in the new recollection as she went.

By the time Adam roused at sunset, her neck ached, her ass was numb, and her stomach growling. When she heard him stir and yawn, she turned on the bench to admire him. He’d taken his clothes off to rest, and it was easy to imagine she’d traveled back in time to see a solid, hard-working fisherman propped on one arm, tousled, in the corner of the dim croft.

“You slept soundly. I didn’t hear you have any nightmares.”

“Aye. ’Tis the gloaming?”

“Just beginning. No one’s called. I haven’t checked email.” She utterly refused to feel guilty for not sinking into the dreamtime. She deserved a break. Okay, maybe she didn’t actually *deserve* one, but she needed one.

He rolled from the bed, turned and resettled the heavy mattress. His ass was amazing. His flexing back a work of art. With a beautiful stretch that made her wish she had a camera for Antonia, he groaned. “Good to be home.”

As he dressed, he glanced at her where she still watched him. “Do you miss yours?”

“My home?”

“Aye.”

Xia considered. Her parents had relocated several times while she was growing up. One pair of grandparents in Pennsylvania had died when she was twelve, and the other divided their time between New York City and Maine. She’d spent her twenties in Seattle, and still had an apartment there. Having both mountains and sea had been her goal, but that was before. It had been a long time since she’d passed more than a week in the city. It was merely a storage facility as she skipped across continents. “I don’t know if I have a home. Yours reminds me of summers in Maine with my father’s parents. I think those memories are more important to me than I realized.”

Adam frowned at her while he pulled on the one-armed tee. “Everyone should have a home. You doona love Seattle?”

“I did, for a while. It’s been too long. It’s gotten big and rich and fast. Plus, it was too close to the ocean.”

“What of Charleston?”

Wow, he’d read her file and knew it well. The first eight years of her life had been in Charleston, before her parents had moved. “I don’t remember it at all, outside of the sound of horseshoes and wagons on cobblestones. I’ve never had reason to be back. Even though I’ve heard that there’s still a section that’s unchanged these hundred years or more.”

“Maybe someday you’ll have a home. ’Tis a peace. I’m going to get an engine to work on. Anne should be bringing some food on her way home from closing her shop.”

He left, with the door open, and Xia didn’t even try to keep herself from going to the doorway to watch him. The sky was overcast now, the air very still. Because of the clouds, the gray sky tinted plum with the lingering light. The ocean was only a murmur, absolutely peaceful. The odd thought startled Xia into glancing at it. Yes, it looked peaceful as well. Deceitful bitch. The sounds of metal crashing drew her eyes to the carport and the rooms there. Movement in the shop door. She breathed in the freshness. She rolled her shoulders. Her skirt and blouse felt thin in the cooling night.

Casually, she looked to the rise of gorse beyond the cottage. A man crouched on one knee in the tall brush. Her breath stopped. He had an object in his hand. It gleamed. An athame. A thousand thoughts spun through her brain at once. She was standing exposed in the open a day after her stupidity in Vienna. Adam was unaware. She could call and alert him, but he was unarmed. So was she. Her athame was in her luggage. The Chamber had set a watcher. Was he the watcher? An assassin? An unfriendly spy?

Adam came out of the carport with a deep woven basket bristling with greasy metal parts. His arms bulged with its weight. She opened her mouth, trying to summon a whispering spell, when he nodded and called out, “Hail, Hamm!”

“Adam. All clear.” The dark shape on the hill replied.

“Aye.”

Adam paused to look at Xia in the doorway.

“You could have told me,” she stormed. “I was terrified.”

“This is heavy.”

“Aaargh!” She whirled inside.

He followed her, putting the basket on the opposite end of the other bench. Closing the door, he lit three oil lamps and the room glowed brightly. “That’s my little brother, Hammish. The Chamber’s watcher is wandering the outer reaches of my land. She’s a wendigo named Ay-zhe-gah-bow. They’re not messing around with us. She’s absolutely deadly. Four other selkies are stationed in an arc around the house, and there are also five in the sea guarding the cove.” He straddled the bench and began to set out his messy things. Without looking at her, he said, “Tell me you’ve saved recently.”

She looked at the screen, thoroughly sick of thinking about the ritual. “Of course. I’m getting toward the end of the journey, but in order to move on it, I just dumped it all out. It’s a mess.”

“Perfect. The psychologists will love that.”

The urge to stick out her tongue at him was terrible.

He slid her an amused glance. “Keep going, storm cloud.”

“I’m hungry. I’ve only had water all day.”

“Anne will come by soon.”

“If the wendigo doesn’t carry her off.”

“She’ll be fine.”

“What is it with you and Anne?”

He picked a screwdriver out of the basket and set to work on some gizmo. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Adam!”

“Keep working, Xia.”

Grinding her teeth, she reread her last paragraph. Impossible that she’d found him beautiful a few moments before and had concern for his well-being. Typing with more force than was necessary, she worked for another hour. They both looked up when the sound of a car on the lane came over the shush of surf.

“I’ll go.”

This time, she breathed with deep, controlled, counted breaths through the unease and discomfort of his absence. She kept working, irritated that she was now recollecting how she’d known he’d be waiting for her, an utterly dependable, dedicated anchor. By the time he was putting the savory-smelling meal on the table, she was in a frenzy of typing.

“I’m so close to finishing. Go ahead and eat, I want to wrap this up.” The memory of rising, the desire to sink, the feeling of being torn between the peace of Terra and the lure of her loved ones pumped through her blood. Adam had followed her, sought her out and lured her, in so many ways as he tried to urge her from the ground.

Pausing at one point, she looked up to find him watching her. “You should write it too. What it was like to trace me. How you did that. For other anchors, to show that it’s not brute force.”

His gaze brooded over her face. He didn’t respond, and she was too caught up. With a disgusted sigh, she went back to writing. Two hours later, she slumped over, done, and very nearly as exhausted as she’d been when she’d come back.

“Anne is the daughter of my sister’s human lover.”

Closing the laptop, Xia put it by her on the bench and pulled the basket of rolls close. “Huh?”

Adam stood to get her hot stew from the stove. “She is dear to my sister, who loves him still.”

Her brain caught up. “Wow.” Falling in love with humans was bad news for magicals. Even the most average of races, like witches, lived two hundred years or more. The more powerful, like dragons and angels, could live for millennia.

“What race was Haki? How do you know Robert? He must be very old for his human form to look like that. Why haven’t you checked your email, we need to know what’s going on.” Emerging from the navel-gazing that was her journaling, her brain began to fire again, interested in the outside world.

“I’ll finish putting this back together, and then I’ll read over what you’ve done today. When it’s ready to go, I’ll delve into the mad world beyond my home. I admit to hermiting a bit, after the excitement of Vienna.”

“You’ve been there before.”

“A few times. Dire times.”

“Well?” She unwrapped the tinfoil from the french fries and dug in.

“Those problems are long past. We’re still here, so we won.”

“No, my other questions.”

“Robert knew Jesus. That’s the only clue I’ve gleaned about his age.”

Xia paused. “I see.”

When she was done with the french fries, he asked, “More stew?”

“No, thanks. Did she send tea?”

“Aye. I had the water boiled, but it’s cooled now.” He stood and turned the burner on.

“Why don’t you want to talk about her?”

Of course Adam didn’t pretend not to know who she meant. And he quit avoiding her curiosity. “Haki was a selkie, from New Zealand. She was Maori, my age. I married her only a dozen years after I lost Meg, whom I married when I was barely an adult and lost after a mere thirty years. She demanded we live near her family. I agreed, thinking it would be easy to do. That I could use a break from Scotland and all the fighting with the English stinking up the glens with sheep.”

Xia’s heart sank. From that simple beginning alone, she knew this wasn’t going to be a good story to hear. He piled the dishes onto the Japanese tray again, setting it on the table to take it to wash. “I’d been there two years before I knew it wasn’t going to work. I was desperate for home. It was worse, I think, for all the ways the land there reminded me of Scotland, yet very much wasn’t. It took me three years to convince her to go home with me for a visit. Our fights were colossal. She was certain if I went I wouldn’t return. She was jealous of Meg and insisted her spirit was calling me back. She wanted a babe and I wanted to wait.”

He settled on the bench and began to put parts together, less greasy now, little screws going round as he stared with blind eyes. “Finally, we were going to make the journey home. After our marriage in France, we’d gone to her home in our human skin, on a ship, traveling through the Middle East on camels. So this

time, she wanted to go in our fur. She mapped out a long route, full of sightseeing. She was happy in Madagascar, tried to stay longer. We fought.

“I’d never journeyed so far. We traveled with three others. As we were rounding the tip of Africa, already tired because I pushed us so hard, there was a storm. There was ice and waves and lightning. It was so cold. Too cold. And in that awful night, there was an orca. We all worked to stay together, to run from the orca. I failed. Just as I failed to be on the loch for Meg when the storm came up. I failed, again, to protect my female, and she was lost. In terror, alone. Lost.”

Adam picked up another bitty screw and began to twist it in. Xia stared at him, heart pounding. He looked at her, eyes black pools, closed and deep. Selkies were a moderately aged race. Their nature in the capricious ocean meant their lifespans could range wildly, from two hundred to four hundred. To know that he had lived almost two hundred years with those bitter regrets for his lost loves hurt her.

“I’m sorry, Adam.” There was nothing else she could say, even though it was stupid.

“My people know nothing of divorce. That human concept has no place in us once we promise to be a mate. If I’d lived with Haki for another two hundred years, it would have been bad. Very bad. Very lonely. I tell myself this, when the anniversary of her death comes round every May. I let myself be grateful that our relationship was short, for it wasn’t wise. I tell myself to remember our passion, of how she helped me see again after Meg’s death.”

“Yeah. That’s good.”

“No, it isn’t.” His voice was very final. Xia watched him finish his project, and then he stood. “Come help with the dishes.”

“Hello? Request and not orders, please.”

He grunted in reply.

Adam carried his basket and she carried the tray. The deep industrial double washbasin was not ideal for dishes. She muttered the whole time she cleaned, distracting herself from Adam being out of her sight. Adam came out from washing his hands in the bathroom, and dried.

“Do you have to go back to your fur tonight?”

“I’d like to.”

The sound of the ocean was close. Xia focused on washing.

“Will you come down to the sea with me?”

“What, to trot along the shore like a deranged dog again?”

“Sit on the dunes.”

“Within reach of her?”

“She’s not a monster waiting to snatch you up like some Scylla.”

Xia put her soapy hands on her hips and glared at him.

“She isn’t. She is terrifying, and beautiful, and more than her anger.”

“Ignis is anger. Aqua is more like hate.” Licking her lip, Xia asked the rude question that had bothered her since she’d first seen him on the ferry. “How do you stand it? Being one of her people, knowing she’s such a bitch and is so deeply a part of you.”

“She’s a harsh mistress. But you look at her with society’s eyes. She is not humanoid. She is alien, and deserves respect.”

At first a mental image of a green bobble-headed, five-eyed dwarf with antennae popped into her head. Then, the word *alien* resonated beyond the caricature. Yes. That’s exactly what it was like. Other, and so beyond her brain’s ability to understand.

Adam laid his dried dish on the tray to carry back to the house. “Other elements do not experience the blending of creatures that she does. Terra and Aer have creatures move through their realms, but Aqua’s creatures belong to her. To be in water is to function at survival mode, every minute. It is a beautiful immediacy. There is only *now*.”

“It seems like her sole goal in life is to destroy.”

“No. That is not her goal. Her goal is to simply be. She understands only herself, and the desire to spread and grow is a biological one all creatures have. I am fully in agreement my mistress needs to be kept asleep. Never mind about coming down to sit with me. You don’t have to.”

Immediately, she wanted to. “I want to touch you. If I come down there. I want to pet you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I’m no lapdog, either.”

“You’re a beautiful, powerful selkie, and you’re very touchable in any form.”

His shoulders eased. Ah, to soothe the male ego. “I’ll think about it.”

They both waved to Hammish on the way back down the path from the carport with the clean dishes.

In the croft, he read her mental explosion. She was surprised at how shy she felt. The room was quiet as he learned of her most grueling and intimate thoughts. She opened up her email via her cell phone, since there wasn’t anything else she could do to avoid it. Her sister had written a long, emotional email about their parents, and the last time she’d gotten crazy after Xia’s ghosting with Aqua, and how she was tired of being powerless, and felt judged as a slacker by Xia in her zealous military career. Xia’s head was throbbing by the time she finished it. If only her sister knew just what a fuck-up Xia was. She dreamed of never having to share the humiliation of Vienna with her sister. Knew it was impossible Tony wouldn’t hear about the new world order Xia had announced. Dreaded that discussion with an intensity that pinched her ribs.

Skiping a reply to that one, she read Markos’s email summarizing in more detail the plan he and Adam had put together. It was very calming to see it laid out so logically, with action steps, due dates, and lists of responsibility. This might happen. She might get out of this with her life mostly intact. Her career was still up in the air.

To her surprise, Robert wrote her, to tell her to please work quickly and to use Adam's Chamber protocol to send her email when she was ready.

An old friend wrote her. She hadn't spoken to Peter in years. It was surreal to write him with a bouncy, blithe summation of her recent jobs and current placement.

Scotland is beautiful. My rampart is hot. Trying to stay above water. ;)

After her email, she surfed for a while, aimlessly shopping and researching the horn of Africa and New Zealand, which she'd never been to. Australia was nice, though. At one point, looking at luxury resorts in Fiji, she found herself humming Johnny Cash. "I went down, down, down and the flames went higher..." Frowning, she went back to researching lamia. How Ignis would capture Aqua in Aer wasn't her problem.

Chapter Thirteen

Finally, late in the night, Adam finished. He had several comments for her, and they talked through clarifying some passages. She hadn't reread it and it was amazing to her how poetic certain parts were.

After that chore was over, he checked his email and sent her little memoir off with supersecret Chamber encoding. The only thing of import was that Robert was coming to see them tomorrow. Xia swallowed her dread.

When they finally walked down to the ocean, hand in hand, it was on the morning side of night. The ocean's horizon was still black, but plum filled the sky behind them over the land. Adam stripped his clothes and shoes on the cold stones, and she waited by them while he summoned his skin. When it rose to his primal call, gooseflesh erupted down her arms. Magic was so beautiful. She needed to have more patience for Tony.

Adam turned and called to her. "Xia."

Picking up her sneakered foot, Xia stepped forward. She went to him, heart thudding as the waves sloshed so near. If she tripped... But Adam's fascination was stronger than her fear tonight.

Finally, she stood an arm's length from him, breathing hard. "Hi."

He lifted the soaked skin in his arms, presenting it to her. "Touch me."

Her spine crawled. She'd wanted to pet him when he was a seal, all adorable round head and long whiskers. This was like looking at a carcass. It was wrong, empty, but waiting, watching. Everything about it said, *Touch me not*.

He was honoring her and challenging her. It took concentration to lift her arm. She ran her fingertips down a fold of skin. Lightly, quickly. It was warm and soft despite being drenched, vaguely oily. Adam gasped, shuddering.

"Does it hurt?" Her heart twisted.

"No. Not quite. It's strong."

"Oh." She felt like stepping back, but didn't want to insult him. "Thank you, for the opportunity."

"Thank you for taking it."

She glanced down at the constantly pushing water around them. "I'll wait on the beach."

"I won't be long."

"No." She spoke sharper than she meant to and he looked at her quickly. "I mean, I'm a bit better. Be a little longer."

“Don’t pick at your scab, Xia. We’ll start to push you when you’ve had more time.”

She sighed gustily. Turning, she walked carefully up to one of the softer dunes. Halfway, she heard a wet, fleshy sound, and turned. The fur was around his shoulders, erasing his pale skin against the darkness. “Adam.”

He turned his head to look at her, his eyes dark holes.

“I’m so sorry about Vienna. It hurt, to disappoint you.”

“It hurt that you didn’t trust me, warn me. I can’t stand at your side if you don’t let me.”

“I want to. I want to have you by my side. I was foolish.”

“Aye.” He turned away. His voice was muffled as he drew the gaping fur up over his skull. She caught a glimpse of empty eyeholes and shuddered. “’Tis past now.” He continued to draw the face of the fur over the crown of his head, pulling it down over his face. As he did, it rippled, tightened, with a shifting of muscles.

He dropped into the water, enormous and sleek. This time, he didn’t surface to look back at her. She walked stiffly, terrified, to the whispering grasses. She sat on the lumpy earth and stared at how the foam came ever closer over the cobbles toward her feet. She stood her ground, and waited for Adam to return. Concentrating on keeping her breathing steady and deep, she couldn’t control her wildly thumping heart. He came up out of the sea nearly silently. But she’d been watching with burning eyes, and the spatter of water dripping off him as he waded forward didn’t surprise her. It had only been minutes, but she didn’t want to repeat them. His bare body prowled smoothly, easily, almost lazily. He was sated.

He stuffed his feet in his shoes, wrapped an old towel with a picture of Nessie on it around his waist, and carried his clothes up to the bathroom in the carport. She brushed her teeth while he showered off the salt water. When he emerged, pulling a blue tee on above his jeans, she managed to not even jump on him. As they walked the short path to the croft, with the dunes on the inland shore hissing with softly blowing grasses, she glanced to see if Hammish was at his post. He wasn’t, but the sky was a buttery yellow and peach that stopped her feet with its beauty.

“I’ve seen more of the dreamtime’s beauty in the last few days than I have in a long, long time. I’m rarely aware during this time to enjoy it.”

“Aye. It’s almost time. Look there.” Adam pointed above the horizon to a spot about thirty degrees up in the sky. “Wait to see if it will come.”

She set her eyes on the spot, a drifting part of the sky between two shades.

He stepped up against her back, pulling her in against him. “You’re warm,” he purred.

She stared into the sky, waiting as they stood in the very beginning of dawn, and after several minutes of peace, there was the most extraordinary flash of vivid green. Lime green, soft green, streaking across the sky in an arc, and gone.

Xia gasped. “I saw it!” He hadn’t told her what they were waiting for, but she recognized it instantly.

"Me too. 'Tis good. We were listening and were blessed."

"Blessed. Yes, that's how I feel."

"The green ray of dawn is the moment God talks to earth. Only those who are listening with an open heart can see it."

Xia's heart trembled. "Adam, that is absolutely beautiful. Is that a selkie belief?"

"Gaelic."

His breath burned across her neck a moment before his lips closed on her ear. He nibbled there, and then his tongue went into the hollow below her lobe and toyed with her pulse.

"Hey." She protested with a half-hearted murmur. "There are watchers all around."

"Are there?" He spoke against her skin, his lips soft and agile. His kisses were molten touches down to her collarbone, each press searing a matching burn in her chest.

The colors of the brightening sky blurred as her head lolled against him. "Yeah. Let's go inside."

He sucked on the tendon that flowed out of her neck and she moaned, shivering.

Then he jerked, hard, falling onto her heavily, toppling to the side with a grunt. Xia gasped, tried to grab him. She still couldn't process the fleshy *thunk* sound.

He caught himself on one arm and shoved her reaching hands away. "Run!"

She fell to her knees, screaming at the huge arrow sticking out of his back. Drawing breath, she frantically looked up, back toward the still-darkened sky over the ocean. A creature hung in the air over the beach, her bow raising again with a second arrow. She was flame, talons, beak, flesh, feathers and bone. The ground dipped beneath Xia as her stomach heaved in terror.

"Hammish! To me!" she shrieked.

Adam crumpled forward onto his side. The wendigo, the Chamber's watcher turned assassin, drifted higher, her bow drawing back as she angled to strike at Adam again. Adam? She was aiming at Adam!

The bow vibrated at the arrow's release and Xia screamed, throwing herself over Adam. "*Confuto!*"

Algonquin magic clashed with witch magic and mostly won. The arrow barely glanced off Xia's air shield and chunked into the ground three centimeters from her splayed hand. Oyster shells exploded back from it, one stinging against her cheek.

There was a moment of total self-disgust. She'd had a bad scare earlier and hadn't corrected her mistake. Her athame was *still* in her luggage.

"Get up! Come on!" She pulled on Adam's shoulder, ignoring the huge bloodstain that spread across his shirt. Lord and Lady, that arrow was as long as her arm and almost as big around.

A rifle sounded, and wind blew hard, and Adam groaned as he got his knees under him. Xia hauled with all her might and he was sort-of up, bent over with his staggering weight across her shoulders. She stumbled down the shell path as wind whipped at her from every direction. Her hair was in her face, and Adam's legs gave out within reach of the cottage door. She crashed to her knees. Cursing her decision to

wear a skirt, ignoring her stinging knees, she lunged for the door and pushed it open. Gunshots rang in the dawn as Xia struggled to pull Adam's inert, giant mass across the threshold.

"*Aeris!*" Xia was a dreamer witch. Her specialty was spying in the dreamtime, floating, sinking through the other reality of the elements. She was a lousy enchantment witch. Summoning Aer was one thing when she was on the astral plane, a very similar construct to the dreamtime, but in real life, she was useless. The Aer she commanded to come to her did nothing but blow a gust of dust and sand into her face. Adam remained unmoving. She screamed as she pulled on his arm with all her weight, managing to move him exactly one centimeter.

Dropping his arm, she dashed into the cottage and flung herself at her luggage. Grabbing her athame, she sliced her palm and dashed back out to stand, straddling Adam's hips. People swarmed the beach, all with guns, one with a wand and gun. The wendigo danced and dipped. White waves crashed high on the shore in the gale winds.

Gripping her athame in her bloody fist, she raised it and pointed at the wendigo, a creature of both Aer and Ignis.

"*Gelu.*"

Hail filled the sky. The wendigo turned toward her, beak clacking, flames for eyes. Her long black hair flowed behind her, and her feathered arms stretched apart as she drew her bow back with another arrow.

Blam!

A rifle shot exploded, and blood bloomed between her breasts. The arrow released and Xia watched it sail over the cottage's roof. When she glanced back, the wendigo was flying away. The idiots cheered. Xia ended the hail spell.

"Help me. He's hit. We need a healer." Her brain scrambled for the few healing spells she knew. If there was one thing she sucked at worse than offensive spells, it was healing.

"Slow." She touched the elegantly simple knife to Adam's neck, praying that slowing his heart wouldn't kill him.

His wrist shot out faster than she could see. His hand clamped hard on her forearm, pulling her down to him. Through gritted teeth, he growled, "Markos."

He collapsed. In slow motion, horror freezing her blood, she watched his fingers slide from her skin, lax. Looking blankly up toward the running footsteps, she was blinded by the rising sun cresting the horizon. Tears ran down her face.

But this was not Xia's first crisis. "You." She pointed to the one with the wand. "Are you a healer?"

"I can be, but our clan has better."

“Get over here. I’ve slowed his heart. You and you and you, get him inside and onto the table.” She scrambled out of the way. “You’re to get the healer.” The slight young girl just stood watching the bigger men bend over Adam. “*Now*. Go!”

Responding to the commanding whip of Xia’s voice, she turned and ran with selkie speed straight to the ocean. Turning to the blond man who was holding the door open for the men talking through Adam’s move, she said, “Are you Hammish?”

“Aye.”

His familiar, simple answer stabbed at her heart. Adam was not dead. She knew that. Magically, she could feel his life. But her brain replayed that heavy fall of his arm. “Get help to hold the croft. She’ll be back in moments.”

“I shot her!” one of the selkies yelled triumphantly from inside.

“You’re a moron. That was a wendigo. She’ll be back. Get outside, get fortified and prepare.”

“Can you help us?” One of the men asked as he edged past her in the doorway.

“I’ll protect the cottage from her fire, but I’m a morphi.”

Another man, an enormous redhead, groaned.

She shot him a dirty look. “If it gets bad, retreat here. I won’t leave him.”

He nodded, and the men blended into the long shadows of the rising dawn.

“His lung is collapsed, and at least two ribs shattered.” This from the helpful selkie-witch who had ripped Adam’s T-shirt off. She’d been fond of that one. “He’d be okay from those wounds, but this arrow is spelled.”

Of course it was. Because the Lord needed to spice things up for her. The Lady too, apparently, because the phone began to ring. But it wasn’t hers. The selkie-witch touched his wand to the shaft of the arrow and was blown across the room into Adam’s shelves. His belongings rained down on the unconscious man.

“*Fuck*.” Xia screamed. She stormed over to the dresser and flung T-shirts until she found the phone, which hadn’t gone to voicemail. “*What*.” She shouted into it as she put her fingers on the throat of the fallen selkie mage.

“Xia?”

“Crisis, here!” The man was alive. That was good. She needed him awake to help. That was bad.

“Bugger it. The Chamber’s watcher we assigned you was found dead in Glasgow.” Ah, it was Robert.

“Murder capital of the world,” Xia quipped. “We’ve got a wendigo that put a spelled arrow through Adam’s back. He’s down. We’ve driven her away once. The selkies are scrambling for her return.”

There was a beat of silence. “Adam?” he asked tensely.

“Alive. Can I go now?” she snarked, as she took some of his T-shirts, and carefully tried to wad them up around the base of the arrow, pushing against the still-seeping blood welling there. It was hard to do

with an athame in your hand and a cell phone on your shoulder. And she'd poo-poo'd those little ear devices.

"I'm coming now." He disconnected.

With a snort, Xia muttered, "Lovely. What wonderful help."

She tossed the phone in the direction of the bed and swiped at the tears still pouring down her face. The door blew open, and she squeaked in surprise like a little girl. Wind roared through the house. The wendigo was back. Xia rushed to the door. She set her shoulder to holding it closed and slapped her athame up against the wood. A spell to defend, a spell to stop fire, and a spell to not burn encased the house. She dropped the stout oak bar across the door, sorry that it would slow the retreat of the selkies if they needed to get in.

Rushing back over to the selkie-witch, she touched his forehead with her athame and commanded, "Awake."

He bowed off the floor, screaming. Blood gushed from his nose.

"Sleep! Sleep!" Xia yelled, frantic.

He fell limp to the ground. Gasping, crying, cursing, Xia went to her phone and dialed Markos.

"Xia," he answered.

"We're under attack. Adam's down with a wendigo's arrow and said to call you."

"Are you defensible?"

"Sort of. We're in a two-hundred-year-old cottage by the sea with a thatch roof."

"Hold the line. Let me call Robert."

"He just called. He's going to jaunt over."

"He is? Well, then you'll be okay." The relief in Markos's voice was deep. "Hold tight."

"Hold tight! For what, six hours?"

The ground rattled with the force of a roar unlike anything Xia had ever felt. It was similar to the supersonic boom of a fighter jet. Her ribs shook, the walls shook, dust sifted down from the ceiling.

When she could hear again, there was pounding on the door.

"Witch! It's the healer!"

Xia tossed Markos onto the bed, ran to the door, hauled up the bar. The door blew open, knocking her on her ass. The healer ran in with three other people, and Xia sat with a gaping jaw as she watched a dragon battle a wendigo in Adam's cove.

He was teal, with darker stripes and dappled shading, his lizard form flowing as if the air was something to swim in. He had a ruff of deep orange fur around his neck and at the back of each foot, like Asian dragons did. There were two curving bone spikes that came forward from the crown of his head, like some sort of demonic tusks, and a long thin whip tail that carried the bony ridge of upright plates from his back to its very tip like a dinosaur. The wendigo had dropped her bow and was tearing at the dragon with

her clawed hands and feet, leaving shimmering waves of flame where she struck, as if it was napalm instead of simple fire. The dragon snapped and clawed. He landed a hit once, and she tumbled through the air, feathers swirling loose.

“Close the damn door!”

Xia became aware that wind was racing through the cottage, her hair streaming from her face. She got on her knees and forced the door shut. The young woman she’d sent away before helped her latch it.

Collapsing against the base of the door, she gasped, “The arrow is spelled.”

“Was. Isn’t anymore. I need to know what kind of tip this arrow had.”

“I’ll go tell you.” Xia pulled herself to her feet, and threw up the crossbar they’d just fought to close. Learning, this time she spun away from the door bursting open so she stayed on her feet. She dashed down the white path. Grabbing a piece of driftwood, she swung it at the arrow embedded in the ground, again and again until it knocked loose and fell over. Ignoring the feeling of large things pulsing in the air over her head, she dropped to her knees and studied the arrow, her tangling hair clutched in one fist.

She ran back to the cottage, where the small woman was waiting to slam the door behind her. “Flat, shiny black, flared at the base of the shaft, tapering down about the length of my hand.”

The healer nodded to her and sent his knife deep into Adam’s back. Vomit exploded in Xia’s mouth. She made it to the stove where she puked in a saucepan. She stayed there, facing the corner, listening to the two selkies’ urgent voices as they directed each other’s movements. Sliding down the front of the stove, she closed her eyes and prayed. In the middle of her prayer, she remembered Markos. Crawling on her hands and knees, she went around the perimeter of the room, over the unconscious mage, to the bed.

“Markos?” she croaked into the phone.

“I’m here. I’ll stay on the line until my flight boards. Status.”

“Uhh, I guess the same, except the wendigo is distracted by a dragon.”

Markos sighed. “What I wouldn’t give to see that.”

“I’ll send it to you.”

He chuckled. “And I’ll take that memory. Listen, Xia, I made some calls. One of the Chamber members was mind-ridden, probably by the crew who are waking Aqua. He’s the one that sent the wendigo to assassinate Adam, but only after you’d finished your transcription. Which makes no sense. Because if they want Aqua to continue to wake, then they should stop your information.”

Xia swallowed the bile in her mouth, understanding instantly. “If Aqua wakes, it might be politically useful to have a madwoman’s ravings, direct from Terra, saying it is the supreme element.” Her fingers clutched at the down mattress to keep from turning at the tumult of frantic voices working over Adam. He was still alive. She could feel it. “They expect us to fail. Aqua’s already too far past sleep.”

“Ah. Yes, that I can see.”

“And of course, we were conveniently standing in the open right at dawn, presenting. He thought she was our watcher. Robert said our real watcher is dead.”

Markos sent a low whistle of amazement through the phone. “Big, big chaos.” A loudspeaker blared in the background. “I’m boarding. I’ll be to your location soon.”

“You’re coming here?” Xia boggled.

“I’ve been ordered there, dream dancer. See you soon. Adam is tough. Don’t worry.”

Xia closed the phone, and knelt at the side of the bed. She bowed her head and went back to prayer—

“Witch! We need cloth!”

Or not. Stumbling to the still-open dresser drawer, Xia ripped T-shirts. And after that, she brought water to them. Voices roared up to the door and the young woman opened it. This time, there was no wild wind. The selkies dragged Robert’s smoking, sagging body in and laid him on the ground. Pushing the two table benches together, they lifted him onto the makeshift table. Like they’d done this before.

Gaelic filled the room. She understood urgency in any language. Another selkie was brought in and laid on the floor, with a very broken leg and a bloody torso. Then another, who was soaking wet but other than being unconscious, seemed fine. More selkies came in, gathering around the table. They shouted at each other and gestured. Bloody cloth was bundled out, as was her pot of puke, and a bottle of whisky was passed. Xia took a swig and rejoiced at the inner fire.

A cheer went up. The healers washed their hands with harsh modern gel that smelled of chemicals. Many of the men and women clapped for the healers. Xia looked at Adam’s beautiful back streaked with blood and padded with shredded T-shirts. She sat on the edge of the bed when her knees gave out. The older healer, with silver hair, came to Robert, while the woman went to the bloody selkie. Xia went to Adam. A man crouched near his head, whispering furiously into his ear.

“Is he awake?” Xia asked, shocked.

The man shook his head and kept talking in Gaelic. Xia got a pillow and put it under his head. Peeking under the T-shirts, she saw the bloody hole in his back was stitched closed. It looked awful. For a bad moment, she relived the knife sliding into him along the arrow, but she wrenched her mind from the vision. Someone jostled her as he came around to pick up the selkie-witch and lay him out properly. There must be two dozen people in the tiny cottage.

Everyone stopped when an orange glow began to shine. From Robert. The hush held as the light shone pure and vivid, like a cheerful fire on a winter’s night. Robert sat up, still glowing, and went to Adam. He put his hand on Adam’s back, and the glow shimmered over his skin like rain. Turning, Robert went to the panting man with the broken leg, and knelt by him, and the glow became deeper, from amber to pumpkin. Finally, he went to the selkie-witch and touched his forehead, but the glow did not pour over him, like it had with the others.

Robert stood. Xia looked into his eyes, his dancing, flickering eyes, and couldn't move for terror. A dragon with the power of gods stood before her. He reached out a hand and held it palm-up in front of her face. An offering, as the glow began to fade and flicker. She lifted her hand but hesitated, unable to take the final step and touch him. He smiled and stretched his arm out straight, and touched his finger to her chin, a teasing flick, like her grandfather might do. She didn't feel any different. But itching erupted on her knees and her cheek, her hand and shoulders and stomach.

Robert blinked. He stood before her, a very fit, very nude older man with a sprinkling of white hair on his torso. "I say, anyone have a pair of spare breeches?"

"Nay, but we've whisky, so who needs trews?"

Laughter erupted from the rough retort. Xia went to the dresser and gave Robert a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He glanced at them with a pained look, but nodded his thanks. She turned as he dressed, noticing several of the men were nude. And were just as fit, if a bit younger. She passed jeans out and all but one accepted.

A gathering formed around the selkie-witch, as they all stared down at him with deep frowns. Xia gathered the dragon's healing magic hadn't been able to touch the wendigo's spell. She assumed the creature wasn't fit to be questioned. A few drifted away out the cottage door, and a man and woman began to cook in Adam's small kitchen. Xia sat next to Adam and held his hand, watching it all.

Over the next hour, the selkie-witch was carried to a car that pulled up, those left were served breakfast, and Robert checked his email on her laptop. Three of the men were Adam's brothers, and one of the women was a cousin. They all seemed to know who she was. Whenever she tried to introduce herself, they'd say, "Aye, you're Xia, his new witch." It occurred to her to ask if he had an old witch, as well.

Robert bade her check her email, and he was right. Thirty-eight responses and questions had already come in from eager philosophers who had read her experience.

"I thought my journal was only going to a few, highly placed people?" she asked Robert.

He shrugged.

Xia tried to answer their questions, ignoring the commentary both gushing, patronizing and snide. Many times all she could say was, "I don't know."

When she'd done with that, Markos had landed and was renting a car. Thinking of the dead watcher in Glasgow, she made sure Tasha was still with him.

"That was your bull?" Robert asked.

Xia blinked at him until she figured out he meant Markos. It was so rudely dismissive to reduce Markos to his animal attribute. Perhaps she should call Robert a lizard and see how he liked it. Maybe not. "My advocate is a minotaur, yes."

He grunted. "Righto." Raising his voice, he called out to the room. "If you'll excuse us, I need a private word with this couple."

The selkies left with a simple goodbye. Xia tried to thank them, but they waved her off. She noted that none thanked Robert. Magicals still held discomfort over accepting debt.

When they closed the door, Robert said, "You can put your knife down now."

Xia looked at Adam, unconscious on the table. She thought of the Chamber's own watcher dead in Glasgow and Markos's stories of political intrigue. "No. Thanks."

Robert leaned forward and touched Adam's bare shoulder. He coughed, moaned, coughed. Leaping to her feet, Xia held her breath. He rolled onto his side, with his back to her.

His voice was rough and low, but so thrilling all the same. "Your wendigo went rogue."

Robert sighed. "The tragedy is that she didn't. She had an encoded assignment from the Chamber. It was our own member that was rogue."

"I don't believe you sky-hopped here just for us." Adam's voice was hard and suspicious. "Why did you come?"

Xia put her hands on his shoulder. Or rather, one hand and one fist-still-clutching-her-athame.

"But I did, my boy. I did come just for you. Your water-bound self, with your dreaming witch who's dragged strange truths from the heart of Terra, and her fire-bound bull. It's times like these where I'm quite sure I'm a Christian, for who couldn't believe in the meddling Yahweh who brings such moments together so neatly?"

He turned and poured a shot of whisky into a coffee mug. He slid it onto the table, and Adam took it, tossed it back. Carefully, he rolled over and sat up, so that his legs hung over the table's edge to the side of Xia. She looked at him, his eyes clear to her. His gaze drifted down her body, and she became aware she was filthy and bloody and tear-stained and exhausted. It seemed she was always exhausted now. Maybe Terra's love of sleep would never fade.

"Hello, Rampart," Xia whispered.

"Hello, Morphi."

He opened his arms and she stepped up and hugged him tight. He sighed, his nose in her ear, and she bit her lip against new tears.

"Damn, I love dragon magic," he murmured.

"I need your attention, Prince." Robert sounded impatient.

She was in the arms of a topless prince. Xia giggled. Adam looked at her strangely and she folded her lips in, clamping them in her teeth.

Adam stood and got his first glimpse of his cottage. His face darkened. Xia felt bad for the mess of his home, but knew that it was generally a matter of hard work to put it right, so considered the battle mostly a success.

Glancing at Xia, he bit out, "Did you need dragon healing as well?"

"No. Well, I mean, I did have it, but it was just little things."

Adam looked at Robert, who nodded.

“Did you just check with him to see if I lied?” She was outraged.

Adam ignored her. They sat at the ash-and-blood-covered benches and spoke over shots of whisky.

“Aqua has woken. She’s not fully awake, but she’s passed from the grip of sleep. Our High Mages have been consulted. They have constructed two rituals to bind Aqua into Aer. Once she is there, Aer’s chaotic and busy nature will see that she’s held for a good long while. Long enough for us to plan for sending her to sleep when they separate.”

Xia smoothed her fingers over the thick shot glass. Her daring, dangerous idea was going forward. Aer was the only element that wasn’t a still sleeper. It was like a sleepwalker or a befuddled elderly family member. Like Aunt Natty. Aer could be worked, but wasn’t reliable because really you were working with a sleep-walking shell.

“The good news is that both are simple rituals that can begin with little preparation, almost immediately. If the first one fails, there is a backup.” Robert smacked his lips over the whisky.

“And the bad news?” Adam asked.

The old dragon rubbed a hand over his face, clearly worried. “The backup is death magic.”

Xia gasped. Whatever happened to the British code of death before dishonor? “We have lived and died by the law against all death sacrifice. It is a primary mandate of Chamber operations.”

Robert stared at her with his orange-star eyes. “The Chamber has already signed the ritual’s grant.”

Putting his mug gently on the table, Adam wiped absently at some drying blood. “You should have no reason to be telling us this. Somehow you’ve made a decision to tie us in. That’s why you used High Magic to come here and help us.”

“You have a new assignment, my old friend.” Robert’s gaze slid to his hands.

Adam’s face was very calm, very flat. “Are you sitting across from me to tell me you’ve saved my life because you want me to give it for the good of the earth?”

“*What?*” Xia screeched. Slapping her hand on the table, she surged to her feet. Pointing her athame at the dragon she shouted, “No! Never!”

“Don’t point your weapon at me, young miss.” He sounded indignant.

Scowling, she lowered it.

Stroking his finger down his mustache, he nodded at Adam. “Good. I’m glad you feel that way. It will make the alternative seem much less a trial.”

“Xia.” Adam put his hand on the bench.

She sat. Dread and panic still swam together in her blood.

Adam asked, “Do you want to put down your athame?”

“He just insinuated he wants you dead!” Oh Lady, she sounded like a sulky teen.

“Oh, I don’t wish Adam harm. I’m quite fond of the lad.”

“Xia, he could kill me with a touch or eat me in one bite. I know it’s been rough, but set it down now.”

She pouted. “No.”

Adam turned to Robert. “Tell us of the other ritual.”

“The answer, as your intuitive and insightful morphi told us, is steam. We’ll simply use Surrendered Psyche Assignment.”

Xia rolled her eyes. If it was so easy, it would be done. He was hiding something, something he wanted from them.

“And that is?” Adam asked.

“Adam, it’s shamanism 101,” she said.

He looked at her, and it was still a thrill, to see him with open eyes, aware, alive. “And that is?”

Xia frowned at him. “Haven’t you ever meditated on the nature of a seal? And become the seal? Experienced the seal through your eyes, while you were still you? It’s advanced visualization.”

“Our children pretend to be seals.”

Xia glared at him. “You are an elite psychic warrior. Stop playing dumb.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Xia looked at Robert. He looked calmly back.

She gave stupid-talk her best shot. “He’s going to ask someone to become Aqua, like a very deep role-play, and someone to become Ignis, and Ignis will symbolically, magically, press someone representing Aqua into Aer.”

Adam’s head whipped toward Robert. “She just came out of Terra. She’s not going to be subsumed again so soon.”

Robert tutted. “It’s actually the opposite of a subsuming ritual. In that case, the person goes into the element. This calls for a person to draw the element into himself and control it. And it won’t be her. It will be you, Elemental.”

Adam looked at Xia, his jaw clenched. Dear Lord. Robert wanted Adam to invite Aqua inside, to become her.

Quashing the fear and pity that formed, she explained. “This is something all witches do to test elemental affinity. Open yourself up, invite an element in, and see if they’re interested in your brain. One of the reasons I’m such a good morphi is that I have no elemental affinity. I’m like a universal donor. You, with your magic sourced in water, have a bond with her. The ritual will have you invite her in. She’ll become you, if she has reason enough to be interested. If you can stay in control, she’ll be trapped into the ritual via you.”

Xia tossed back her whisky. “The trick will be somehow forcing yourself into discomfort from Ignis. The ritual will require you to mirror the agitation of boiling, so that Aqua will be changed to steam, and

given over to Aer.” Xia breathed hard through the burn down her windpipe. Images of Adam being tortured with flickering flames filled her mind. She shook her head once, hard. “Your emotions will affect the pure consciousness of Aqua, dragging her reality into the one we want to create.” Setting the cup carefully on the table, Xia looked at Robert. “I assume there is a spell.”

“Indeed.” Robert inclined his head.

“But, if I’m Aqua or Aqua is in me, how am I going to turn into steam?”

“You won’t have any choice. Ignis will enter the picture, and you won’t leave, so Aqua will become dispersed,” Robert answered.

Xia slammed her athame on the table. “For Lord’s sake, quit dicking with us. Tell us what you’re going to torment him with.”

“Xia,” Adam rebuked.

Robert just chuckled. His indulgence was deep into patronizing now. “It is a reminder that the recently sleepy, earthen witch has also danced with Ignis in the past.”

“And Aqua too. I can do bitch real good.” She stared hard at the Chamber dragon, but he wouldn’t look at her.

“Xia,” Adam growled.

She realized she was breathing too hard. Something unpleasant was coming. He’d wanted to set up death as an option, first. Robert, the coward, kept his eyes on the table. Adam, of course, simply sat, waiting patiently. She clamped her jaw shut and counted, refusing to start screaming like a lunatic at an ancient dragon.

Finally, he decided to tell them. “The spell will use sex magic. The ritual space is enclosed. Aqua’s essence will enter you, Adam. You are in control, but your thoughts and reactions will be influenced by Aqua. Markos will become Ignis. Fire will overtake Aqua, because you will let it. Aqua’s new, altered state will be captured by Aer, which can be controlled by Xia. She will then perform the draining spell, holding Aqua with her hard-earned understanding until the ritual is finished. We will have a new elemental reality, at least for a generation or so.”

Xia stared at Robert with her jaw hanging open.

Adam stared at Robert too. Slowly, he rose, his fists on the table. “You. Are telling me. That to save the world. I must let myself be raped?”

Robert looked just as aghast as she felt. “No! Not at all. It is Xia who can be taken.”

Adam leaned over his fists, jaw jutting forward. “My female must be raped?” His voice was low and vicious.

“No, no. Nothing of the sort. Sit down, boy.”

Adam did, as slowly as he had risen, like if he let himself move too quickly he would attack. Robert bustled over to the stove. He put a pot on it and filled it with a ladle of water. Then he lit the gas flame and kept it high, the blue tendrils licking up the edge of the metal.

“Here is water.” Robert gestured to the pot’s interior. “And here is fire.” He flicked at the flames. “Water prefers its liquid state, but in this location, will not have a choice. If fire is fed and kept steady, water will be boiled away. What is the key piece that binds these two elements in this reaction?” He gestured in a circle with his hands at the whole setup.

“The pot,” Adam said cautiously, suspiciously.

“Precisely.” Robert beamed at him, so proud. “Xia is your pot. In your case, as an ambulatory, thinking entity, there is no way you would stay in a situation that was making you uncomfortably”—he fanned the steam wafting from the water—“hot. Your entrapment, your reason for staying, is her.”

“And Ignis will be making me uncomfortable how?”

“Why, fire is just as trapped as you are. Fire is applied in one spot, fed by the gas jet. It must stay and do as it is bid. Fire is focused on the pot, as are you. You both don’t really care about each other. You just dwell on the pot.”

Hands behind his back, he rocked on his heels, delighted. “Sex, my boy. A nice, rousing bout of elemental sex will be the source of this little game. Between fire’s intensity and your emotions for Xia, you will let Ignis take the advantage. Then the pot will spring the trap and drag Aqua into Aer’s keeping.” Robert smoothed his mustache, orange eyes veritably twinkling. “Its very distracted, very dispersed, very busy keeping.”

Xia felt her face burn with a blush. The leader of the Chamber had just ordered her into a ménage. “Surely you must have other, more powerful choices for this ritual.”

“Certainly. But when I realized in our brainstorming session that the pieces were all present in the very team that gave us the idea, I insisted you be given the task. It’s too succinct not to be meaningful. There’s no reason at all the three of you can’t do this. You’re all qualified.”

Oh. How reassuring to know she was qualified to have wild sex with two wild elementals. Silence almost filled the disheveled cottage. But the sound of the waves was constant.

Adam ran his hands through his hair. “Robert.”

“Yes, Prince?”

“Are you wearing my clothes?”

He huffed. “You’re quite welcome for the arrival, battle, and healing that saved your life.”

Adam didn’t even blink at his sarcasm. Blandly, he replied, “That was your mess to clean up, so thank you for doing the right thing. I need some sleep. Badly. Will you be staying?”

“I think as long as I’m here, I may as well stick around to help guard the ritual. Markos will be here in a few hours.”

Adam sighed, deeply and loudly. “Will he.”

“I’ll be on the shore. I have to make sure I didn’t lose any scales.” Robert stepped out.

Adam stood from the bench and drew Xia into a hug again. When she tightened her arms, he whispered, “Gently.”

“I’m sorry.” She pulled back to look in his face. “You seemed so fine before.”

“I would never insinuate Robert did less than a perfect job of healing. Damn, I’m sore.” He limped over to the bed, sat, and eased himself back into it. “I would give anything to sleep with you now.”

Xia stood mournfully by the bed. She chewed her lip. “I wish I could sleep now too. If I lie down with you, I’ll be out.” And it still wasn’t safe for her to sleep without her rampart to guard her. Not when too many people knew of her revelation.

“Any other status I should know about after I blacked out?”

“Your selkies were amazing. Several were hurt, two badly, but I don’t think any were your relatives.”

“They’re all my relatives here. I’ll look into that soon.” He plumped a pillow, and she pulled the covers up over him.

“Well, they’re all alive. Robert in his dragon form is stunning beyond words. It was a sight I’ll never forget. I’m not sure if the wendigo is eaten, dead or captured. I answered my email. There was a lot, and I don’t think I’m going to be very anonymous.”

With his tousled blond hair and his eyes closed, his face relaxing, he looked so young. Not a day over ninety. “It will hit the papers tomorrow. When it does, we’ll ride the wave, and the crest will pass.”

Which reminded her. “What did you think of Robert’s proposal?”

“I think if anyone had to be a sexpot, it would be my sweet-faced, auburn-haired, curvy-bodied Xia.” He closed his eyes.

What a horrible pun. Xia stood slack-jawed for a few moments, until a deep, heavy breath eased from Adam. He was asleep, with a smile on his face. It was contagious. She went to the door to overlook the sunny cobble beach, beaming.

Chapter Fourteen

When Xia walked into her little rental cottage early in the evening, the realization that her life was different hit her hard. First of all, it was surrounded by selkie guards. With Tasha on the doorstep. Second of all, the scent of coffee and bacon lingering from their last breakfast only a short while ago made her realize Adam was beginning to smell like home.

She took her suitcase into the bedroom. There the scent of herbs made her shake her head. If anyone had told her last week that the last thing on her mind a few days after subsuming into Terra would be that experience, she would have laughed. The massive, life-changing ritual was only remembered when she displayed distressingly dependent separation anxiety, like when Adam had taken a shower.

Markos was sitting on her bed with his laptop, a notebook, a soda and a bag of Doritos, his cell phone at his ear. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his shoes were off, revealing his round, shining black hooves. He looked like he'd been there for days instead of fifteen minutes. He also looked good. His thick black hair and dark brown eyes were familiar, dear. His throat was strong and his forearms muscled. His thick fingers on wide hands moved delicately on the keyboard.

"She won't do any interviews. No. No cameras, not even stills. I'm telling you, this is everything you're going to get from her. You can sue all you want, I'll see you in court." He hung up and tossed the phone down. He scowled at his laptop, typing for a few more moments. She wasn't insulted. When Markos had his concentration on, the world ceased. He looked up at her. The anger cleared from his eyes. "Xia."

"Are you my agent now too?"

"Might not be a bad idea."

"Can they sue to force me to talk?"

He snorted. "She thinks I'm covering up truth the people have a right to know. Little does she know, the article she's dying to write as an expose is going to hit the papers tomorrow. All of them."

"So someone's been talking."

"Bound to." His cell buzzed on the bed, dancing in a circle on the plaid like an angry black bee. Markos looked at the number. "Another one."

"This has been happening a lot?"

"Since about midnight last night."

"I'm sorry, Markos. Thank you so much for running interference for me. I caused the problem, yet I'm the one being protected from the consequences."

“He’s your advocate. It’s his job to control your contact with the outside world.” Adam came up behind her, and his hand on the back of her neck might as well have shouted “Mine!”

To Markos he said, “Advocate.”

Markos’s brows lowered darkly. He got up off the bed and stepped up to Xia, chin up. Pulling her into a hug, he wrapped her up tight. She wondered what kind of staring was going on behind her. Adam didn’t move his hand from her nape, and she had a sudden mental image of Markos biting it. She wiggled to be free of the tension between them.

“Let’s talk out in the living room.” The significance of Markos setting up camp in her bedroom wasn’t lost on her.

Walking into the small living area, she paused. If she sat on the couch, it would become a power play to see who would sit next to her. She pulled a counter stool out and set it across from the couch.

“Have a seat.” She waved her hand at the selections and sat on the floor.

Adam took the couch. Markos moved the stool back to the counter and sat next to her on the floor, but at a good distance. Xia kept her sigh a mental exercise. With Adam’s legs sprawled out and Markos’s stretched and crossed at the ankle, Xia had a ridiculous urge to see her men play Twister.

Xia had talked to Markos via cell when he’d landed, as she’d helped Adam put his home to rights after his long nap. Between his rest, Robert’s dragon magic and a visit from the elderly selkie healer, he now had nothing but a tender fresh scar on his back.

Adam hung one arm on the back of the couch. “Have you talked to Robert?”

Markos sat with both arms braced behind him. It created a lovely presentation of his chest in the tailored white dress shirt. “He was here a bit ago. I find that I’m less than honored to be gifted with the execution of a world-saving ritual.”

Xia shuddered. “Let’s not use the word ‘execution’. It was clear that the use of death magic will be laid at our door if we fail.”

“We’ve missed moonrise. Moonfall is just after sunset tonight,” Adam mused. “Placing it directly in the gloaming. I don’t want to do this when Aqua is at her strongest.”

He was talking about auspicious ritual times to begin. Xia shrugged. “Witch’s midnight, then.” The darkest moment, the halfway point between sunrise and sunset.

Markos clacked his hooves together softly as he shifted his feet. “I already calculated when that would be. You won’t believe this. It’s one twenty-three.”

She chewed her lip hard against the desire to dismiss the number as a superstitious coincidence. In magic, such things had power.

Adam remarked, “How interesting. The only night of the year that witch’s midnight falls at that time, and all of our choices have led us here.” Clearly, Adam wasn’t a believer in fate. His words settled her.

“I think we should perform it outside.” Markos’s deep bass filled the room.

“We’ve recently had some bad luck with outdoor excursions,” Adam countered dryly. His cream T-shirt had an ad for motor oil on it. Xia enjoyed how it was too small for him, outlining every rippling muscle as he shifted on the couch. He looked at her, and her stomach flipped happily. “You decide, Xia.”

Oh. Crap. She glanced at Markos, who watched her intently with a warm, patient gaze. There were deep, bruised gashes under his eyes. Xia regretted that it was no doubt her fault he hadn’t been sleeping. She had a thought. Last year, Markos had shared that he’d taken Elspeth for a lover. Mostly, Xia didn’t follow his long list of sexual activity. Was this ritual going to interfere in their relationship?

“Focus, dancer. I see your brain being distracted through those gorgeous silver eyes of yours.”

Adam shifted on the couch at Markos’s low words.

Her first reaction was the same as Adam’s—rejection of the outdoors. But she reconsidered. This was not an etheric ritual, like when she’d tested Adam with her games or shared the memory of her dreaming with Markos in a private report. This would happen in the real world, with the elements coming to them. She’d be responsible for working Aer, which didn’t enjoy enclosures.

“If Robert is here as our guard, with Tasha and the selkies to help, and the Chamber has cleaned up their dirt, then I think we’ll be safe enough from magicals. Being outside will aid our element work.”

The men were quiet. Xia couldn’t believe she had to wait a half-dozen hours, sharing the house with them, contemplating sex magic.

Her voice came out disgustingly high. “Are we clear on the ritual’s procedure?” The High Mages at the Chamber had emailed them details. She’d read her email separate from Adam, too embarrassed to call him over to read about *the peak of climax, domination options and timed orgasms*.

Silence. No waves, no wind, no voices.

Then Adam said, “Xia hasn’t had any sleep. You should clear out of the bedroom and let her rest.”

“Markos is tired too.” She could have slapped herself upside the head. Her comment had just slipped out, but clearly sounded like an invitation. Adam’s face became a mask.

Markos smiled at her. “I’m way beyond tired, but I’m all right. There’s a lot of work to do for tomorrow’s release of your revelation. I wouldn’t say no to some food, though.”

She nodded. Being both an elemental and a minotaur meant Markos had much more stamina than she. He could stay up for days, although she feared he already had. The oatmeal she’d had for lunch seemed long ago. “All right. Dinner first, and then I’ll rest.”

She stood, Adam rising with her. Markos gathered his hooves under him and rose to a few inches below Adam’s lean height.

“Can I speak to you outside a moment?” Adam said mildly to Markos.

Oh, no. Oh, Hel, no.

“Sure,” Markos replied just as mildly. “You’re okay with starting dinner on your own?” he asked Xia.

“No problem.” She moved into the kitchen at a sedate pace. They were so not going to have a male powwow about her. Absolutely not.

She opened the refrigerator and took out several things, blindly. The front door opened and closed. Slamming the fridge, she dashed toward the bedroom. The front door opened again. She froze, eyes big and innocent as Adam stuck his head in. “Xia, I’ll be right in the drive. Just a few minutes.”

She smiled brilliantly at his thoughtful reassurance. “Thanks. I’ll try not to come to the window if I can help it.”

He nodded to her, his hair golden on his brow with the late sun hitting it, and closed the door. She sprinted for the bedroom. Hauling the window up, she grabbed the latches for the screen and shoved it aside. Throwing one leg over the sill, she gritted her teeth when a tall, lean selkie came over from the fence.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in alarm.

“Nothing. Quiet. I’m spying.”

He put his hands in his back pockets and rocked on his heels, grinning. “All right, then.”

She peeked around the side of the house and saw that it was safe. She scurried up to the corner of the carport, with her lovely Schwinn gleaming there. A line of parked cars stretched down her driveway. Running bent over, Xia scuttled up behind the first and caught a wisp of Markos’s rumble.

“—needs someone who will stay around for her. Between Terra, Aqua, and this public revelation to magicals, she’ll need a full-time friend. But not a rampart. Keeping her with me is the most efficient and familiar route for her.”

What? Were they dickering over who got to take care of her? They were still two cars away, standing where the edge of her mowed front-lawn area turned to field. Staying hunched over, she crept forward as quietly as she could.

Adam’s response was measured, but his voice was tight. “I disagree. My cottage is remote, easily guarded. It’s better for avoiding the rush of celebrity and the backlash of fear that will come at her. Taking her with you on your assignments to major cities isn’t wise.”

“After this ritual, she may not be comfortable with you. You know that you’re going to have to submit.”

Crouching, she squatted beside the back tire of an old-model Volvo. It was still warm, even with the sun in creeping distance of the horizon. She was so fiercely glad she didn’t have to ride the dreamtime tonight.

Adam’s voice came a little faster, a little less measured. “Xia should be given a choice of who to stay with. You know nothing of how we relate sexually. Are you insinuating she’ll be disgusted with me after the ritual?”

“I know quite a bit about how she and I relate sexually. Xia is drawn to strength. If she doesn’t have confidence in you, she won’t feel safe.” Markos sounded hard.

“You’re saying this ritual is going to make me look so weak she’ll no longer want me.”

There was the distant crunch of feet on gravel, and she cursed. Someone was coming up the drive, and the men began to move toward the house to avoid the person, passing her on the other side of the car.

“It’s not going to make you *look* weak, Adam. In this ritual, you are going to have cede sexual control of Xia to me. Ignis needs to emerge the victor here, forcing Aqua’s transformation.”

Xia slowly rotated on the balls of her feet, so that she pointed back toward the house. Her palms itched with the need to smack Markos. Should she stand up and end this ridiculous posturing?

“Interesting. That’s not how I see it at all. I’ll be the one who reaches for Aer, blending myself with it. Ignis has that option too, but won’t take it. Ignis will be stubborn and left behind while the two of us join.” Now Adam sounded amused. “And I think it will merely be the fact you take Xia last, that forces Aqua’s change. Far from being weak, I think Xia will see me as a refuge from your unrelenting aggression, well after she’s been satisfied and wants to stop.”

She straightened her knees, her fingers tingling with the desire to punch Adam in the nose. But she remained bent and hidden, chewing on her lip indecisively.

“It’s not called aggression, it’s called passion. Something she and I have shared many times. We’re very comfortable together, and she’ll trust me.” Now Markos’s voice was the tight one. “Both during and after the ritual.”

As they traveled closer to the house, she glanced over her shoulder. She scuttled back to the first car, letting them stay well ahead of her. She’d have to move fast once they entered the house again. What excuse could she give for being in the bedroom all this time?

“Hullo, Adam,” called the new voice that had come up the drive.

“Hullo, Samuel. This is Tasha. She’s coordinating the guards. Thanks for coming.”

Tasha? Tasha was overhearing this pissing contest? Xia’s thighs were beginning to burn from her posture.

“I show you where to stand and watch,” Tasha’s soft but authoritative Russian voice said.

“Sure. G’night, Adam.”

Footsteps moved away, thankfully, in the other direction. Xia dared a glance around the front fender of the car. Both men stood with their arms folded, watching Tasha and a slender young man walk away.

Markos spoke. “Listen to me, you arrogant asshole. She’s scared, she’s exhausted, she’s overwhelmed. By assigning us to this mess, Robert assured it would be personal. Make this about her pleasure, and do your duty. Give way to my heat and just finish the fucking ritual. Afterwards, we’ll discover her emotions, and we’ll deal with it.”

Adam turned his head toward Markos, and she ducked back behind the car. “She hasn’t been yours for a long time. And you were fine with that. I hear you’ve been keeping your bed plenty busy. Now that it’s time for her to move on, you rear your head up. She’s not part of your herd.”

“Sure. Go for the cow jokes. Our bonds are solid, sealed in hardship and time. She is very much part of my team, and I’ll always fight for her well-being. As her advocate—”

“Don’t give me that shite.”

“Listen—”

“You’re far more than her advocate.”

Silence, but for a cricket.

“And how is that news?” Markos’s reply made Xia smile. She recognized her influence in the snark of it.

Adam’s tones became more controlled again. “This is going to be personal for all of us. Get your head clear on where you stand in her life, and where she’s going, and where you want to be when she goes there. The dynamics of the ritual are set as we manipulate a certain outcome, but the emotions behind the actions can give them several different meanings.”

His voice lowered and Xia leaned forward, angling her head to hear him.

“Let me be clear. She’s the center of my life right now. She’s going to become part of history with her announcement and will need constant, undistracted support. I plan on being close by her side throughout. So close I become part of her body each night. And after this ritual, sharing her is not going to be in the stars.”

She couldn’t stand it anymore. She took another peek. Adam and Markos were nose to nose, Adam leaning down from his greater height. Markos’s hands were in fists. One hoof scuffed the dirt in a slow warning swipe.

Adam continued, ignoring the fact that Tasha cleared the corner of the house and moved toward the men with such controlled grace she appeared to be floating. Xia whipped her head back around the side of the car, her heart pounding at Adam’s impassioned words. They just kept coming, a steady rain drenching her in fascination.

“I don’t think she’s the center of *your* life, Markos. And I don’t think that either of you want her to be. So your prior claim is moot, and your pride needs to be set aside. You gave her to me, knowing I’d be her rampart, anchor and lover. Now you’re fussing like that’s all going to be wiped away in some powerful sex magic. It isn’t.”

Markos dove right in as soon as Adam took a breath. “Neither are the bonds *you* claim as powerful as you say. You’ve focused on her less than a *week*. I’ve also been her rampart, anchor and lover, plus her friend, mentor and confidant. Just because you’re fresh meat doesn’t mean you’re the most filling meal.”

Adam snorted. “Leave it to a minotaur to make a food analogy.”

Tasha’s voice interjected in Russian. Dammit.

Adam replied, his voice softer, less angry.

Markos chuckled. She heard the door open.

“Honey, we’re home. What’s for dinner?” Markos called out.

The door closed. Xia peeked. Tasha met her gaze and made impatient shooing motions with her hands. After a second’s hesitation where she understood that Tasha hadn’t given her away, she stood and pelted to the bedroom. The selkie was waiting. He cupped his hands. “Hurry! They’re back!” he hissed.

“Shut up!” she hissed back, lifting her foot into his grip.

He tossed her with selkie strength and she landed in a sprawl on the bed. He lowered the screen. She winced at the rasping metallic sound. Markos filled the doorway. Curse the tiny floor plan.

“Xia?”

“I was a little dizzy. Wanted a moment to rest.” She winced at how breathless she sounded. Casually, she propped her head in her hand, trying to make it seem as if she’d fallen onto the bed in this position.

He frowned, stepping up and laying his hand on her forehead. “You do feel warm.”

She sat up. Adam came to the doorway, his face controlled.

“I’ll be fine. Let’s just get dinner made.”

Markos put one of his huge hands on her shoulder. “No, you stay here. I’ll take care of dinner. Adam can do the dishes.” He pressed her to lie back.

She saw Adam looking at the window and quickly babbled. “So did you have a good manly conversation about little ol’ me? What did you decide?”

Both men looked at her sharply. She winced mentally. Adam moved to the window and looked out. He reached up and lowered the blinds.

“I mean, don’t pretend you didn’t go out there to discuss cars.”

Markos just chuckled and went to the door. “Curious witch.”

When he’d passed out of sight and she heard cupboards opening, she looked up at Adam. He was pulling on his lower lip thoughtfully, watching her face. She quickly ran her hands over her cheeks, wondering if revealing dust or grease somehow marked her guilty.

“What?” she asked grumpily.

“You really want to know what we talked about?”

She felt her eyes pop wide. “I assume you’d have stayed in the house if it was meant to be shared.”

The sound of running water came from the kitchen sink.

“You could assume that us leaving the house meant we wanted privacy, yes.”

She swallowed. He knew.

“Some of it was posturing. Two strong males not used to sharing a woman have to work out some details.”

Oh. Xia was suddenly dizzy for real.

“Have you ever shared yourself with two males at once before?”

His question took her from dizzy to faint. “Ummm. No.” Why, had he?

“Have you been in a ménage of any kind?”

Not unless he included a pile of giggling, turned-on-but-mortified young witches watching a burlesque together in university. “No,” she breathed.

Adam nodded slowly. “All right.”

He moved around the end of the bed, took off her shoes, slightly dusty she noticed, and left. Left?

She lay staring at the ceiling with huge eyes. Listened to the sounds of Markos in the kitchen, his hooves making soft tapping sounds on the linoleum. Eventually, he came into the darkened room.

“Sun’s gone down,” he said quietly.

“Yeah.” She always knew the sun’s position.

“We’re having breakfast for dinner. Is that all right?” He sat on the edge of the bed, smoothed her hair at her forehead.

It struck her as a very proprietary gesture, but it was so full of tenderness she didn’t say anything. “Of course.”

“So you want to know what we talked about?”

She stayed silent.

He leaned down over her and put his lips to her earlobe. The shadow of his emerging beard against her cheek shocked her with sensation. The heat of his breath in her ear filled her hearing. “We worked out who would get your ass, pretty dancer. And you’re not going to get a say.”

Xia’s breath stopped. It was a long-running issue between them. Markos liked ass play, but with his size, rarely indulged in it when he had human-built partners. Xia had never taken him there, because every time he’d tried, he’d judged her not stretched enough. Even though she’d begged.

Chuckling against her neck, he kissed the hollow beneath her ear, then touched his lips to hers. He was familiar, gentle, comforting. And shockingly different from Adam. She remembered kissing Adam for the first time only a few days ago, in the kitchen. His passion and energy had stunned her. She’d never come from just a kiss before.

Markos spoke as he nibbled along her jaw. “Xia. Don’t overthink tonight. You and I have to work together to break Adam down. There will be pleasure, for everyone. We all know how it needs to end, and we’ll get there. We just have to try to enjoy the journey.”

Wise Markos. Sexy Markos. “AreyoustillseeingElspeth?” she asked in one breath.

Markos sat up. His thumb rubbed the tendon in her neck. “No, we broke it off almost after it started when we discovered we weren’t as compatible in bed as we’d hoped.”

Her mind boggled at not being compatible with Markos in bed. He was a passionate, amazingly thorough lover. “So, this isn’t going to hurt someone on your side.”

He put his hand in his lap. His head tipped and his gaze left hers. “There is someone...and she will be hurt when I tell her of it. But we’re not lovers, yet. And this is much more than a sexual liaison. I hope she’ll understand.”

A pang struck Xia’s chest. Her hand shot out to cover his. “I’m sorry.”

“I refuse to be.” He gripped her fingers, engulfing them. “You can always come to me, Xia. After this night, after tomorrow’s revelation, after the tumult of either our success or failure.” He squeezed her tightly. “Always.”

She squeezed him back, bringing her other hand up to join them. “I know.”

His surprising words of love from the phone came back to her. They’d loved each other a long time, and always would. He’d always be her man, but Adam had made her see he was never really The Man. Markos wasn’t the love of her life, just one good, shining love *in* her life.

“Remember, if someone tries to force you to be something you’re not, you will always have a place with me, no matter who I’m with.”

Well, he was usually a good guy. But he had some really annoying moments. “Can we eat now?”

“What? Why did you get snippy?”

“Markos.” She struggled up off the bed and sat next to him. “Let’s just go eat, ’kay?” She smiled at him, trying to limit the teeth.

Adam filled the doorway, leaned in it. “Come eat, so you can really get some rest.”

She frowned at him. “You didn’t come in to guard my sleep.”

“You weren’t sleepy.” He turned and left.

Xia clenched her jaw.

“What did I say, before, to make you angry?” Markos persisted with his usual tenaciousness.

She stood up, stretched, her toes curling in the rather unfriendly Berber carpet. Folding her arms, she looked at his lowering brow and knew he wouldn’t let this go. “First, you tell me what was in your letter.”

“The letter you couldn’t be bothered to read on the eve of a harrowing ritual?”

“Yeah.” She’d already apologized. She wasn’t going to get wound up again by him.

“I told you I would come if I could, but they’d ordered me not to.” He rose, and her head tipped back as she held his stare. “I told you that ghosting into Terra was it for us, our turning point. At that moment, I had to choose you, or my career. I knew that if I didn’t go to you, to anchor you, that I’d lose you. Lose all rights to you.” He stepped up to her and touched her cheek. “I chose my career, because it’s not just a job for me. It’s a need, to keep the world in balance. But I asked you to call me. One call, and I’d be there, and I’d find my own way to contribute to maintaining the Great Sleep. And you didn’t call.”

Xia’s stomach flipped over. In her pique at the assignment, one Markos had had no power over, she’d tried to hide from the reality of seeing it in writing. But she’d also hidden from any support, advice and

reassurance he'd taken the time to give her. She should have realized when he sent her a real letter and not an email. She should have trusted him more, been less childish.

Adam had known. He'd known that Markos was on the verge of coming for her, and he'd kept that chance from her. Xia turned from Markos, a flash of heat rolling up her neck to light up her brain. Fists clenched, she felt as if she could breathe fire... But in the next breath, the fire sputtered, and by the third, all that was left of the heat was her beating heart.

No, this wasn't Adam's fault. She'd already discarded her care of Markos before Adam destroyed the letter. But he was a ruthless shit for doing it. Xia turned back to Markos and stepped into him for a hug. He gave the best hugs. He was so wide and steady and warm.

She whispered into his chest. "If I'd read your letter, Markos, I wouldn't have called. But I'd have written. I'm always going to be right on that edge with you."

"I know," he replied.

He squeezed her, and she sighed, loving it. Burying her face in his neck, rubbing her cold nose into the stubble there, she added, "You deserve better. Someone at your side, not balanced on edge."

"I know," he said again, and her heart ached, and settled.

He'd always been there for her. In the end, she'd decided she didn't want him there. It was hard to admit. Hard to see her rejection of something so important to her. Maybe it seemed unconscious, but it wasn't. If she'd wanted Markos, she'd have reached for him. But she'd moved on, and so had he. How ironic that they'd verbally confirmed their love for each other after it was too late.

Adam's voice came from behind her. "The food is getting cold. Or should I close the door and give you privacy?" There was absolutely no inflection in his voice. It was utterly polite and bland.

Markos pulled back and kissed her on the temple. "Let's eat." His voice was low and quiet.

Xia turned and moved forward, away from his heat, away from their sadness. Adam didn't move. She stopped inside breathing distance. He was backlit, his face in heavy shadow.

"Xia..." He paused, his breath still, but never finished the sentence. He turned and went into the kitchen. She saw he'd served himself and stood to eat at the counter. She wondered how much he'd overheard.

Markos served her pancakes, eggs and bacon. "Now you tell me what I said before to make you upset."

Xia rolled her eyes. "I don't even remember that conversation."

Markos reached to put honey in her tea, but she said, "No honey, thanks. Although I will put some on my pancakes."

He nodded, as if it was normal that she no longer took her tea the way she had for decades.

Adam said, "She got irritated because you implied you'd already have another woman, when you were reassuring her she could always come to you."

“Adam!” Xia exclaimed. What rude little selkie ears he had.

“Oh,” Markos said mildly. He looked at Xia curiously as he piled up his own plate. “You’ve never minded my bed partners before.”

“When I’m not there. But if you’re saying I can come to you, and you’re saying you’ll already have company, then you’re saying I can come in addition to the company.”

Markos tilted his head, confusion on his face. He really was so handsome in his rough, primitive way. “It would be rude to ask a new lover to get out just because an old lover needed support.”

Xia put the bacon that was about to go in her mouth back on her plate. She put her hands flat on the counter on either side of her plate, and counted. When she reached twenty, she picked her bacon back up and chewed it viciously. “This is ridiculous. Future situations that may never occur have no place here tonight. We need to stay in the moment.”

“Do you know a good spot for the ritual?” As a fire elemental, Markos was very good at that. He could let everything but a full angry steam go. If he made it up into the height of anger, that could feed on itself for days. Xia shivered as she remembered some of the angry sex they’d shared. Ripped clothes, love bruises, interesting locations...

“Focus, Xia,” Adam bit out darkly.

She blinked, ripping her eyes from Markos’s flexing forearm, bared by his rolled-up shirtsleeves. “Well, it needs to be private and not near the ocean, but somewhere near water. It needs to be away from any structures, and if the area burns, it can’t damage anything important and should stay contained. It should also be defensible, although I think attack is unlikely, don’t you?”

“One of the magicals you saw in the dreamtime is still eluding capture. I doubt very much he’d have the manpower to find us and take us, but the guards aren’t going anywhere. Guards that will include Robert, I should mention.” Markos put an obscene amount of Tabasco on his eggs.

“I know a place. My island in the loch. There’s very little development there because the government has a facility on the far end. The selkies can take the water, Robert can take the air, we’ll still have privacy, and any fire will be contained.”

“Sounds perfect.” Markos and Xia both spoke at the exact same time. They looked at each other and grinned.

Adam took his plate to the sink. “I’m going to go tell Tasha. We need to get people over there to scout it out.”

Xia’s smile faded as she watched him stride stiffly to the door. He spoke in Russian for a few moments. Once, Markos spoke up, adding something. The door closed. Markos shared, “She doesn’t want to leave us. She’s sending most of the selkies and Robert.”

Xia nodded her thanks at the summary.

“If you’re done, it’s time you got some sleep.” Adam stood next to the couch, out of reach of her perch at the counter.

“Adam...” It was her turn to let her sentence trail away. She swallowed, refused to be intimidated by him. “Do we need to talk about tonight?”

He stared at her.

She stared back.

“Just remember, this is a ritual. It’s not me, Xia. Aqua will be with me. What I do isn’t...what I will always want.”

Xia set her fork down, the last bite of pancake wedged in her throat and cemented there with honey.

“It better be what you want, Adam. There’s no pretending tonight. Sex magic doesn’t work if you fake it.” Markos growled at Adam, his breath coming heavy. “Things will get kinky, and things will get wild, and you just have to give yourself over to it. No holding back, or it will fail.”

Xia put her hands in her lap. Gripped her fingers tightly. Squeezed her thighs together to still the deep throbbing there. With effort, she spoke around her closed throat. “Adam, I know this isn’t”—she swallowed to use his sweet word with Markos here—“sharing, between us. This is outside of that.”

“I hate it when you fear me. Just remember, Xia, I earned your trust before. Give me a chance after this, to earn it back.”

She stood, alarmed. “Adam!”

“Don’t. Don’t say you trust me. It won’t be me, tonight. It will be us, Aqua and I together.”

She suddenly understood his fear. He thought she was going to see Aqua in him, and resist. “When I join you tonight, I’ll only be able to face Aqua’s sexuality by believing in you. I know it won’t be entirely you there with me, but I know you’re not her. We’ll deal with it, Adam. I won’t do that to you.”

“You really think you’ll be able to find honest pleasure with Aqua?”

She bit her lip. “I like sex. You’ll be there, even if you’re not in control.”

He strode forward, his hands hard on her arms. “Promise me. Promise you’ll give me a chance to be your lover again, tomorrow, no matter what my body does tonight.”

She laid her hand over his heart. It jumped and tumbled against her palm. “I promise.” A series of platitudes tumbled to her lips. *I’m a professional, I know how to separate reality from ritual. You’re sexy enough to take on any persona and still excite me—it couldn’t ever be bad between us. Don’t doubt my ability to forgive.* She kept them all back.

Markos’s bass rumbled in a false coo at Adam. “I promise too. To give you a snuggle in the morning. Don’t worry, sweet cheeks, we’re not afraid of getting wet.” Markos winked when Xia gave him a dirty look. “I’ve got one word for you, dream dancer.” He smugly popped a piece of bacon in his mouth. “Asssss.” He drew it out with relish.

Xia rolled her eyes, laughing. Adam's shoulders were more relaxed. Markos's irreverence didn't seem to anger him. Nor did he respond to his last word. Her thighs clenched in reaction again. Was he serious? Had they really discussed that before she'd made it out the window? She must have missed at least a whole minute of conversation.

"Bedtime, Morphi. Let me in." Adam's touch low on her spine, in the dip above her tailbone, lit up every bone in her body, liked he'd plugged her into a power source.

"Oh," she breathed. She felt his psychic push and opened her door. His strength and otherness washed through her, and suddenly sound was muffled, like she had water in her ears. The thought made her shiver.

"I've got to get back online." Markos collected her dishes with his and put them in the sink. He pulled his laptop over, and she was already gone, lost to his ferocious focus.

Adam's hand flattened against her back, steering her off her stool and toward the dark bedroom. She stopped to snap Cookie Monster on.

"I'll wake you just before it's time to go," he said quietly.

"No, about a half hour before. I want to check the supplies and take a shower."

He nodded, pulling down the tartan covers. She slipped between them, and he tucked her in. His internal presence guarding her was the best comforter she could have.

"You'll remember I'm there. Beneath her, I'll be with you, even if she takes control." His order was so full of self-doubt it made her ache.

"I will. And it will anchor me as surely as a dance with Terra." She licked honey off her lips. "When I touch you like this, you'll know I'm thinking of you." She fluttered her fingertips in a gentle flurry on the back of his hand. "You'll know, even if she's in control, that I'm glad you're there."

He turned his hand and held her fingers firmly. She wished she could read the currents of his eyes.

"Are you scared?" she whispered.

He stood above her, a dark shape bathed in faint blue light. "No. I'm excited."

By the time she had her breath back, he was gently closing the bedroom door. A rumbled exchange between the men, and then the water ran with the clink of dishes. Xia closed her eyes and tried not to imagine being trapped between Ignis and Aqua.

Chapter Fifteen

When a girl is invited to have sex with two of the most sensual elementals on the planet in order to save the world, will she rise to the occasion or pass out? That was the question Xia was stuck on as she listened to Adam intone his portion of the ritual.

“...I am Aqua’s and invite her to see me, as I offer the taste of my desire and ask for strength...”

He was nude, sitting on the corner of the bed, his legs on one side and his torso twisted to face her, resting against the headboard. The ritual items were in the center of the wide mattress. He didn’t know about a few secret items she and Markos had arranged that were hidden under one edge, and she wondered if the men had likewise colluded to surprise her. Probably.

Adam extended his arm and tapped the ceramic dish of water. Swallowing, she followed her gaze up from his thick, work-roughened hands, over his strongly corded forearms and sleek biceps, to the stretch of his golden neck. *Oh, my.* That body pleased her. The selkie inside made her ache, with his capable skills, his steady eyes, his unyielding nature.

Xia had called in Aer first, and since the first piece of the element to answer her was a frisky, lightly bouncing shred, she’d had to send out a deeper call for a more steady breeze. It ruffled her hair, the ends teasing her nipples. The forest was still, the scent of pine and fresh grass strong. But here in the clearing where she held Aer, branches whispered and swayed. The hand-carved wooden bed was old, and strangely seemed perfectly suited to the small glade on the island. The selkies had set it up, and someone had taken enough care to put excellent cream linens on the dense cotton mattress. She knew they were well guarded by Adam’s friends and an ancient dragon.

Markos’s Greek accent, deeper, less lyrical than Adam’s brogue, came forward. Flame burst into being on the red candle. Showy. Violent. Beautiful.

“...Ignis come forward and take my energy, burn me, burn us, use this desire...”

Markos knelt on the bed, his body immense, thick. A fine pelt of dark hair dusted his chest and belly, covered his forearms and thighs. Xia became very aware she was sitting tailor-style, her core open behind her crossed ankles. A core Markos had very ably filled many times before. Peaceful times, but mostly tempestuous times, their touch fast and hard, hot and wild. Deep inside, her belly softened, preparing.

Her gaze skittered back to Adam, who watched, not his offering of water, not the speaker of the ritual, but her. And in his eyes, she saw waves, tossing, spraying. Aer tumbled around her, and she almost choked when it pulled at the breath she was trying to draw in. Finally letting her inhale, the whisper of it dusted her

body, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. Her chest worked quickly, already frantic at the reality of being on the bed with these two men. *The ritual. Remember the ritual.*

Markos finished his incantation. He held his massive hand out over the flame, unflinching as the light hit his palm. Just because he was an elemental didn't mean he wasn't a creature of flesh. Xia hurriedly threw her hand out over the feather she'd offered, aware of the shift of her breast. Adam's stare continued to bore into her as he held his hand out over water.

Together they breathed in and spoke. "We offer our desire to power the elements of Aqua, Aer and Ignis. In return, they are our witness."

Adam turned his palm over, and water coiled up in a small waterspout before splashing down between his fingers. Xia turned her wrist, and the feather whirled from the bed to spin in the center of her hand before gently wafting up and off to the side, cradling down. Markos turned his hand over, and the flame disappeared from the candlewick to flicker and shiver in the middle of his hand. He held it there for a second, then clenched his hand into a fist. Smoke wafted with the smell of pain and flesh. When he opened his hand, a white blister was surrounded by angry red skin and a black charring.

Adam took what drops of water were left in the small bowl and poured them over Markos's hand. The ritual was over. He did it merely as a healing gesture. Xia took Markos's wrist and rolled up onto her knees to blow gently over the poor burned skin. She lowered her face over it, mourning the hard road of fire elementals.

Adam swept his arm across the bed, sending everything tumbling to the needed clearing. Hot wax spilled, and her athame clattered off a close tree trunk. Dancing, agitated flames from the four torches around the bed flickered over his golden skin.

She scowled at him, opening her mouth to blast such rudeness. But when he lifted his head up from the mess, her words died in her throat. *The waterspout was in his eyes.* She tried to jerk her hand back, to protect herself somehow, but Markos had turned his hand in her grip and held her without any sign that his burned hand pained him.

Adam's hand caught her nape. Her position on her knees in the middle of the soft bed was unstable. With one solid push she was face down, each of her arms held out to the side and pinned by her men. Her legs flailed unattractively. She kicked her feet, and Markos spanked her, one hard, stinging smack with the flat of his hand sending her rigid with shock.

A bizarre sound, something between a grunt and a shriek, escaped before she found her breath. "Adam! Markos!"

She pulled on her arms, turning her face toward Adam, confused about their actions. What was happening?

Markos jerked on her arm at the same time Adam licked the skin in the hollow of her elbow. Paper thin and so sensitive, she gasped at the cool moisture left in the wake of his firm stroke.

His face breathed up her arm, over her shoulder, and then his lips buried in her hair, rubbing her ear as he whispered. “Did you think this would be a battle? Did you think we would try to compete? Were you worried, storm cloud, that your men would argue over who got your pretty pussy versus your biting ass? Oh no, dream dancer. Oh. No.”

The words echoed in her womb. Her belly gave a wrenching twist from hearing Markos’s pet name for her come in Adam’s growling voice. She jerked reflexively in their hold when Adam’s tongue stabbed into her hair, twining along the rim of her ear, toying with the lobe in a lazy way.

“I’ve been aching to taste your bold flesh, soft, so warm.” Something in the hissing timber of Adam’s tone held her still. She rolled her eyes up at him, panting through a curtain of hair, still as prey. *Aqua was here.* But then the moment passed and Adam’s breath was scalding into her ear and down her spine.

“By the end of this, you won’t be either of those women. You’ll be remade with pleasure. Belong to both of us.” His teeth closed around the furiously beating pulse at the side of her neck. His lips nibbled along the line of muscle until they found her earlobe and sucked on it despite her thick brown hair.

On a soft breath, he sighed, “Dream storm.”

Heat poured over the side of her ass Markos was petting. She clenched her bum against the feeling. It may have started like the flick of flint with his spank, but he was the one now burning. This was just the start. Soon, Markos would become inhumanly hot, and his every touch would sear her. Disappearing into passion was the best way to blend the pain when Markos channeled Ignis. One of his thick fingers traced the crease of her cheeks, toyed in the fold between ass and thigh.

Adam’s smell was in her throat, sharp brine. His lips jumped to her jaw. Against the corner of her mouth, he inhaled. “You journey far. You seek. My creature wants you, woman. I’ve known you somehow...before. Where have I known your flesh?”

A small cry of terror ripped from Xia. She cowered back, pulling on Adam’s hold on her arm. Markos popped her ass again. First came a blast of sound, then the sting of warning. The flush spread down her thighs and she bucked.

“I hear Aqua too, Xia. Feel. Just feel, for now.” Markos’s deep voice calm, soothing. “Just feel.” His hand abruptly crushed into her ass, fingers biting hard. Letting go, he smoothed over her skin, dragging his nails over her muscle and stirring her peach fuzz.

Xia licked her lips. Before, her instincts had warned her, but this time the presence was so very clear. When Aqua spoke through Adam, his voice carried none of his thick Scottish burr. His words were strung together, almost sounding Latin.

When he spoke again, it was with the rough tones she knew. “I’m here, Xia. But there are dark currents tonight. Remember your promise.”

Lady, sweet Lady. Her hair fluttered over her back, slithering softly over her shoulders when Aer followed her agitation. He was warning her. This could get rough. Visions of how violently Aqua liked to

play with flesh tumbled through her. Very much, this needed to stay grounded in sex. She whimpered, even though his hand on her nape simply began to massage her deeply. No matter how hard she held to the fact she had to commit to this ritual for duty and honor, there was no getting around that she was here with two men she'd trusted her soul to, and this was personal.

Markos pulled her thigh wider, swinging it out. Without so much as a pause, his hand was between her legs, scalding, thick fingers dabbling through her folds. "Do you remember that time we played with wax?"

His touch burned, but she was so wet it didn't hurt, just thrilled. He moved delicately over her, so masculine, so other.

"You made these little sounds. I love your little pain sounds, Xia. I want those again." Before she could even blink, her ass was stinging, and his fingers were back dancing around her inner soft skin again.

"Markos!" He better not keep spanking her!

He hit her again, harder, and her whole body twisted as the little stings of before seemed to accumulate into a spike of sensation.

"No, not Markos. We're not your men, lovely Morphi. Not tonight. You know who's here with you right now. And I'm hungry. I can never get enough." Ignis chuckled out of Markos's throat, so pleased.

Adam swept her hair away from her face, pulling it free of her shoulder. He feathered it between his fingers, staring like he'd never seen it before.

"Who am I, Xia?" Markos's voice came mildly as his palm petted her throbbing cheek.

Aer skated around her curling toes. She held it spooled around her body, but for her, the exercise was simple. The men had called their base elements into them, while she owed no allegiance to, nor affinity for, Aer.

"Ignis, I would remind you I am not an elemental. Tonight, when you burn, please remember that." Xia's request came in bursts as she tried to breathe through Adam gathering her hair around his fist, through Markos's fingers delving under her to search out her clit.

He knew exactly how to touch her, how to rub, press, grip that tiny mass. Light flashed behind her closed eyelids. Her hips bounced and jerked at the intensity. Adam's hand anchored her head, pulling at her scalp, lifting her neck back.

"You're fragile," Adam growled. "Delicate, soft. You burn, you drown. Why do you feel so fucking amazing?" Leaning over her, his lips moved along her brow, nibbled at her eyelashes.

She whimpered, hips spasming uncontrollably at Markos's demanding touch. It was too much too soon. It was just the beginning of where they'd drive her to. It was going to be awful. For the sake of the world, she had to maintain focus. She was a soldier. This wasn't the time to be ruled by her body. But oh, how beautiful "awful" could be.

“Leave your arms out. If you move them, you’ll be punished.” Markos pressed her wrist to the bed. Then smacked her ass again with his suddenly free hand. The sting coincided with a twist of her clit. Her eyes flew open, breath seizing in orgasm. Adam was three inches from her, his eyes like storm-tossed seas. He smiled, and it wasn’t him.

Markos inhaled. “Delicious. There’s the taste I need.” He continued to roll the little bundle of flesh at the top of her folds, making her hips lift. “Your pleasure feeds me.”

Her lips parted and Adam slid forward, his fingers trailing up her arm with threatening grace. When she tried to close her mouth before his forefinger touched her lips, he twitched his hand in her hair. She opened. He slid it in, pressing it into her tongue. Instantly she curled around him, lips closing on his knuckle, teeth testing the bone. She sucked.

He turned to watch Markos’s hand circling on her hot ass, with the other pumping between her legs. “I want to fuck her.”

“We agreed. To start, you get above the waist, I get below.” Markos moved between Xia’s legs, and without fanfare sank two large, hot fingers into her core.

“Hunh!” Xia groaned around Adam’s finger. Her breasts chafed, swollen and needy as she writhed against the bed. Markos stretched her, heating a gaping chasm in her body she needed filled.

“I want to feel this sucking wet from her cunt, like you do.” Adam sounded downright petulant. His finger pumped in her lips. His hand finally let her head rest down on the bed. She sucked him gratefully, swinging her hips on Markos’s fingers.

“Xia. Take a breath.” Markos’s whisper was full of eagerness that alarmed her.

She did, quickly, holding it deep and squeezing her eyes closed again.

Markos shoved his hand hard into her body, and then his free hand began to slap at her other cheek, small, quick, hard pats. From the top of her ass near her back and down around by her hip, back and forth crossing her clenched curve and down near her inner juncture. She squeezed on his fingers, torn between the outer shock and inner delight.

Adam ripped his hand from her hair to grip her jaw, forcing it open. Three fingers dove into her mouth. She closed around them, shocked eyes staring at him. She began to jerk under the accumulating sting of Markos’s torture, so Adam flattened one spread hand between her shoulder blades, pressing her into the mattress. Gripping fistfuls of the soft cotton with her rigid, outstretched arms, she sucked in quick pulls, timed them to Markos’s rhythm. With both her mouth and pussy stuffed, her body pinned and her cheeks swelling with fire, Adam’s black gaze pulled her in and she fell into the spiral toward release.

She lifted her hips, but there was nowhere to go. Her clit pulsed in time with his hard taps, aching and angry despite the tight, increasing heat he’d stuffed up her channel.

“Burn, Xia,” Markos ordered gruffly.

She moaned, tightened, legs weaving wildly on the bed.

He twisted his fingers inside her, rotating his wrist. His hand finally left her scalding bum to push one knee high and wide, spreading her open. He withdrew from her soaked folds. Laying his hips against her, she shook with the shock of his cooler skin against her sensitized ass.

He fit his tip to her, and she swallowed around Adam's fingers. Markos pushed, laying his hips hard against her glowing curves, crushing her aching clit. Her cry came high as she tumbled into climax. Adam pulled his fingers away, and she groaned.

"Yes. Yes." She wasn't sure who Adam urged.

"Delicious. A feast," Markos gritted from behind her.

Finally, with the burning sensation of a pole breaking her open, she felt Markos gain entrance to her body. It had been awhile. Both of his hands burrowed under her. He scooped her breasts into his palms, his massive heat and size against her back making breath impossible.

Then, gathering her against him and maneuvering his thighs, he lifted her. She quickly pulled her arms under her, bracing up on all fours. Adam appeared in front of her, clasping both sides of her head. The earth beneath her swayed, her limbs shaking with weakness from the two fast releases. Markos's cock lodged inside her and it was nearly all she could process. When Adam pressed on her jaw, she opened her mouth and he swung his fat tip to meet her lips. She licked over Adam's slit, loving the slick taste of him.

Markos chose that moment to twist her nipples. His hands worked her sizzling breasts deeply, kneading them, pulling them as he pushed at her tight channel. "Always. Burn. Me." He forged deeper, splitting her vagina wide like someone ruthlessly opening a peach.

Adam growled. One hand went to her hair at the back of her head, the other under her jaw to support her head, insisting she hold the position to favor his entry.

Xia's eyes rolled at the taste of him as he pushed his fat cock's head past her teeth, and Markos began to grunt in deep, short bursts. She knew what that meant. Soon, her minotaur would begin to fuck. The pressure of him inside, the way he crushed her flushed ass, the feel of Adam in her mouth, of being held between the two powerful men and lost to their lust, was already leading her down a shadowed path. She wanted more. It felt too good. She sucked hard on Adam and smashed her hips back to meet one of Markos's hard jabs.

Distantly, she heard Markos whisper, "Don't let him come, Xia."

Lord give her strength to remember she was in a ritual and not the most dangerous erotic fantasy of her life. She was trembling so hard her arms could barely support her. With one last flick of her nipples, Markos's big, burning hands coasted down her ribs, caressed her belly, then clamped on her hips. He reared away from covering her back and cool air instantly soothed her.

But then he withdrew. Sensation rolled through her tummy, tingling her spine, shivering her thighs. She felt her vagina close in the wake of his fat penis pulling from the gripping, dripping clutch of her body.

Adam pushed to the back of her throat. She swallowed. He jerked at her hair, which tightened her hanging nipples.

Markos punched his hips in with short digs. He managed to win another inch deeper. Withdrew, out, out. Again, jabbing, pushing farther in. All she needed was one flick of her clit and she'd go again. Frustrated, she swung her hips.

Adam tried to set up a rhythm, but every time he pushed into Xia's mouth, she changed the stroke of her tongue. Curl, flutter, press.

His hand tightened on her throat in warning. "Woman."

Markos dragged his thick cock back to her entrance. This time he shoved in to where her body stopped. They were used to this. Witches were not made for minotaur cocks. One of his hands brushed against her sore ass as he wrapped a fist around himself, marking his limit. He widened toward his base, and her skin was stretched tight, stuffed.

Withdrawing only a few inches, he began to fuck her. It was hard, shoving the round head of himself into the smallest, deepest place in her body. He knocked into sensitive parts of her with every thrust, and it was like his spanking all over again, only inside.

Adam's breath was loud between Markos's deep grunts. Finally Markos began to drive in her, fast, bobbing motions that kept Adam from any deliberate stroking of her mouth.

"Suck me!" Adam ordered.

Xia closed her teeth around him to keep him from jostling in her mouth. Her tongue lay passive, refusing his order. The smell of him was in her throat, his taste sharp. She gave her body up to Markos, who was now rigid against her ass, his fat, heavy balls slapping at her thighs. Her clit ached and swelled, but she needed to support herself with her hands. He filled her belly, heat and winding, tightening need expanding like the sun inside.

Markos's deep roar began to build. Desperate, Xia moaned around Adam, dragging his scent deep into her lungs, tightening her inner core with every heartbeat. Finally, Markos sent the hand he'd held himself with to her clit. One literally searing touch of his fire-flushed finger on her clit had her body writhing in a frenzy. She melted, lava pumping through her body. Then he came. And his come burned.

Xia tried to pull away from Adam, struggling to breathe, to scream. He finally withdrew from her mouth only to cover her stinging lips with his own. His mouth eating at hers, Markos's jerking, swelling cock pulling at her cunt, the semen burning down her thighs, lighting up her belly, torching her spine...

The pain cascaded into pleasure again and held as Markos continued to thrust against her cervix, his finger chasing her clit through her sopping cave. Adam's plunging tongue and teeth kept shifting her focus, and then the heat in her cunt would explode anew.

By the time Markos pushed his finger in her ass, she only groaned softly as the pleasure settled into a steady throbbing pulse. When he quickly pumped the one into two, stretching her between swollen cheeks,

she was a twitching, shuddering puddle. As he dragged his length out of her rippling cunt, he forced three into her. The sting barely registered when her labia and thighs were washed by the cascade of warm come flowing from her.

“Now me. Now.” Adam’s voice was hard and vicious.

Markos muttered, and pumped his fingers in her ass.

And then she was lifted, shifted, nudged and draped. Before she understood what was happening, she rested belly to belly on the hard length of Adam’s body. Her thighs were on either side of his, and his cock was drifting into her with a steady, long slide. Markos’s fingers never left her ass, his presence shuffling up behind her like a wall of heat.

Her hands clawed at Adam’s shoulders. Once he was wrapped in her warmth, he gripped her upper arms and held himself still, shaking. Her ass ached, her cheeks stung, her clit throbbed, and her packed pussy hummed, but the most unbearably beautiful thing was so much of Adam’s bare skin. She was plastered down his hard, silky taut skin, so much, so strong.

“Remember yourself, Xia,” Markos hissed in her ear. Then he promptly undid the sudden clarity of his reminder by dragging his teeth down her neck to the delicious spot between shoulder and spine. He knew to kiss her there softened her.

He worked his three large fingers in her ass, pulling and pressing them with only a bit of their come to assist, and she sighed into Adam’s mouth.

“I ache. It’s sssso good, and I need more.” Ignis hissed as his strong hands shifted her on Adam, his firm strokes controlling the way she rocked on Adam’s erection.

Between licking kisses, she gasped, “No, Markos. I can’t.” She wouldn’t be able to take him in the ass. She wouldn’t be able to control Adam, keep him on edge.

“You will. You have to. I won’t stop asking for more. I can’t. Ignis is hungry.” Markos’s free hand smoothed over her tender ass cheeks, a threatening caress.

She wouldn’t be able to satisfy Ignis if she didn’t keep coming. It was all tangled, the experience more than she’d imagined, more than she’d feared. Markos pumped his fingers again, the quick spread and release of her anus a hard nip of pain-pleasure.

Adam ripped his lips from hers. “Aye, dream storm. Forget your little plots and give your flesh to the elements. You don’t have our substance, and we’ve already tattered and torn your will.” With a sudden arching thrust, he shoved deep with a lift of his hips. “Now I’ve staked myself inside you, and I won’t be leaving. You will lose yourself in us.”

She focused on him, saw his eyes shine purple, before the waves came up and dragged the amethyst down deep.

His hand in her hair forced her head back, and his mouth moved onto her throat, teeth scouring her, tongue lashing her pulse.

Markos smacked her ass again, sucking hard at that beautiful spot on her neck. She swore she felt his fingers rub Adam's thickness through the barrier of her body. Adam's mouth was so close to his, a mere inch away as both men pulled on the skin of her neck.

The thought excited her. She whispered, "Kiss."

Adam bit at her jaw. Markos sucked harder, edging his kiss into pain. His fingers left her ass, and then a cold, smooth object was there. She keened as he forced it into her, shook with joy as he set his teeth back around the bruise he worked on. Adam licked in a long, hard stroke up her throat. When the huge thing stilled in her, the pain passed into awe. Adam was immense inside her.

"What have you done?" Her voice was low and throaty, rough with the effort it took to hold her orgasm back. She sent a gust spinning around the bed, cooling her, reminding her.

Adam groaned against her throat. And then his hand finally untangled from her hair, and both his and Markos's hands lifted her torso upright so that she settled into the thick pelt of Markos's chest. She sank astride Adam's thighs, but tilted against Markos, her back in an arch that shifted her stuffed lower body in a way that made her pant.

"Ahhhh," Adam sighed, as his gaze settled on her chest. "Yesssss."

Markos's lips found her ear and nibbled on it with delicate skill. But one hand went to her clit, and the other went to her ass, where he circled one finger over the stretched skin around the plug. The heat he poured over her clit made her twitch. Adam's pecs jumped in response, his abs jumping into stark relief.

"Stay still." Markos's voice was wrecked from his earlier roaring. It was a scratchy rumble, barely distinguishable. "Don't stimulate him, Xia."

Adam was captivated by her breasts. His hands were hard on them, rough and heavy. It wasn't his touch at all. He scored one nail along the crease below her left breast, shoved her right one high, gripped in his fist. It was strange and carnal to be handled so.

She reminded herself he was in there, her rampart. She'd wait for him, the same way he'd done for her. She pattered her fingertips across his chest, a delicate code to her lover of her respect. His lashes lowered, teeth revealed in a grimace, but his touch softened. Large thumbs flicked her nipples. His hips jerked up against her pelvis, tightening her already locked muscles, and her lungs fluttered. She almost broke, but Markos slid his finger from her clit.

Pulling her palms from Adam's amazing, stark nipples, Markos folded her hands behind her back, shoving his thick, wet cock against them. She scrabbled to feel his girth, his solid, tight skin. He wouldn't soften until he'd come several more times. His head was so velvety smooth. The heat of him nestling into her palms made her arms ache, but then Adam twisted her breasts, and she couldn't help the tightening of her channel around his firm length.

He chuckled, satisfied. "Yes. I'll taste the human release now." His fingers gentled on her, tracing trails of shock over her upper chest. His gaze on her nipples was enough to keep them aching.

His hips began to pump, lifting her weight effortlessly, tossing her in an erotic surge. She trembled.

Then Markos put something cold and round into her hand, heavy and smooth. Their secret weapon to keep Aqua occupied. "Time to burn, Lady Aer. My flames are fading."

With a twist, the plug dragged out of her ass. Moisture poured over her from a bottle of lube, and his finger pushed it in her. Adam huffed, squeezing her throbbing nipples. Xia pressed the catch on the metal circle, her hands still behind her back, her head supported by Markos's strong shoulder. It sprang open into two hinged arcs, a miniature manacle.

Something cold and impossibly large touched between her lubed cheeks. "You should see your ass. It's so puffy and swollen, shiny and pink." Markos spread one cheek to the side. "Now."

Xia moved her hands with difficulty, her arms weighted with drugged pleasure. A puff of air in Adam's face brought his black eyes to hers, distracting him from her reaching hands. His golden hair, darkening with sweat at the temples, fluttered. Her hands snaked over her thighs and shoved between them. She snapped the cock cuff around the base of his penis and balls, glad he had no fluffy hairs to catch in the latch. She met his eyes, nearly choking with terror and lust.

Markos heard the click and chuckled.

Adam's mouth was a slash on his face, his lips drawn into a grimace of pleasure. "What is that?" His fingers closed threateningly on her nipples.

Xia ratcheted the cock ring tight and his head jerked hard, the cords on his neck stark. His crushing grip on her nipples tore a cry from her lips, but it made her hips tremble with eagerness.

"Stings, doesn't it?" Markos rumbled. "Tighter, Xia."

She did as Ignis wanted and cinched the ring deeper into Adam's flesh. He snarled, and she cried out as the heat from her abused nipples streaked to her belly. That's when Markos pushed the dildo into her tiny, slightly stretched hole. The plug had been uncomfortable, but exciting. The dildo driving in should have hurt, except Adam was inside her, pulling her breasts taut, and Markos's mouth settled on the other side of her neck to suck.

She shattered, closing her eyes on the fierce pleasure. Adam roared, rising forward. His torso rippled with masculine control as he folded to sit up.

"What have you done?" Aqua cried out, and two large hands settled like claws on her shoulders. Ignis laughed, free with delight, as if the two beings it fed off weren't in the grip of beautiful agony.

Her body jerked and twisted, trying to escape the sting in her ass. Her core seized again and again on Adam, the pleasure dimming her view of his furious face. Markos's soft cock head thrust again and again in the groove of her lower spine and erupted in scalding wetness.

He leaned in and wrapped his large hands around Aqua's wrists. His chest flexed against her back as he pried at Adam's hands, dragging them from her shoulders. Xia was aware of a tug, a twisting, and then the men's hands grappled before her. She was between two immensely strong men arm wrestling for the

right to touch her. Markos's arms stretched over her shoulders as he pushed Adam's palms back toward his shoulders. Their fingers laced together, palm to palm, hands held tight. They strained for dominance so fiercely she could see the sinews shifting in their forearms.

"Are you ready to burn, Aqua?" Ignis taunted. "But you can't, can you?"

Adam jerked again and again in Xia. She sympathized, knowing he suffered his own pleasure-pain, trapped in the cock ring. Then he destroyed her sympathy with murderous words.

"I will douse you and scatter your coals to the freezing depths." Adam spoke through clenched teeth.

The scouring look in his eyes combined with her rasping throat. Her breath struggled. She coughed, lost as she came again at the thought they were dominating Aqua, however roughly. Pleasure burst from her clit where it chafed against Adam, with Markos pressing her forward.

Markos suddenly reversed course, wrenching his hands free of Adam's and struggling from the bed. "Why do you threaten? Because I dare to flow faster than you? Because I give her pleasure and take power in it?"

His distance from her brought such sweet cooling relief. Pine-night air danced over her and she writhed in Adam's loose grip on her ribs, her packed pelvis shorting out her ability to understand.

"I knew you were a selfish bitch, Aqua." Markos stood to the side of the bed, the torch flames and the forest shadows on his pelted barrel-chest making him look like a primitive warrior. "We're here to share her desire. But so far, all you've done is torment. Are you going to taste what your seal wanted you to? Or are you going to drive her away?"

"Get this trap off of us. Our come is stretching our balls."

Her hands rested on his rigid biceps. Her fingertips spasmed in her desire to free Adam from his discomfort. No. Tonight wasn't about her and Adam. She was a woman in love, but the terrifying words he spat gave her the courage to be the soldier. She could dominate this man, torment and drive him to the brink. Her fingertips tapped a reassurance up his straining muscles. The fight was on, and Adam was on her side. He'd given himself up to this, and she would use his generosity well.

Markos folded his arms, the biceps as thick as Xia's thighs. "You're not listening. You get to spill your come when she does. I've taken her to release many times, while you've done shit. Earn your freedom, Aqua. Dream storm will make it better, but you still don't deserve her."

"I am Aqua!" The liquid smoothness of not-Adam's voice trebled, echoing with a thunderous reverberation.

Somehow, the reality that she was fucking Aqua finally crystallized. Xia moaned, twisting on the twin stakes binding her body in place. All it would take was one hard grind against her clit, and she'd come so hard she feared for her control. Her toes curled, and she saw that her fingernails were leaving deep crescents in Adam's arms.

Markos sneered, leaning toward Aqua. “Pleasure *stolen* from humans is shallow. Think of all the times they’ve defied us for truths of their own. Don’t you want to experience this bond that calls them to their doom? You were curious enough to come see what could keep your selkie from your embrace.”

“You say that like you know these bonds you seek to draw me into, Ignis. We’re above such fleeting ties.” Adam gripped her ass and pinned her writhing body down against his hips, driving him to his deepest point yet. The cock ring gouged into her folds and it only felt good. He hissed. “The pleasure is fine for a moment, but I will not have this slight wisp thinking to take the power from me. Get this thing off.”

Her ass and her clit battled for the higher need. She strangled on the wail in her throat.

Markos smiled. “Power is over-rated. Not all of us have to destroy. Some of us like to dance once in awhile. Please her, and she’ll return the taste. It’s so sweet.”

After a dozen moments of silence, Xia was able to think beyond the throbbing in her uterus. She focused on Adam, seeing the spinning fury of Aqua in his eyes as he stared at Markos. Markos towered next to them, one wide hand pumping his shining cock, the other rolling his large balls. He grinned, lifting one sardonic brow. His brown eyes danced with flames. She didn’t believe it was merely reflection from the torches. Ignis, full of emotion and greed, wore him well.

Adam swung his head in a graceful sweep to look at her.

She stopped breathing.

“I want to fuck you. If I give you delight, you’ll let our come free.” He stared hard at her, his hands biting into her hips.

She nodded once, teeth clenched.

“Or I’ll break your neck.”

Every hair on Xia’s body lifted in horror at the calm singsong claim said with Adam’s deep voice.

For a moment, purple gleamed. “Xia, remember,” he rasped.

She reached to his lips and softly tapped her fingertips across his lower lip. His lashes came down, lifted, and then the black was back. His fingers curled into her ass, gripping her cheeks. Her lips ripped open on a guttural sob as the sensitized skin around the dildo pulled. His hands moved in and she couldn’t stop the wail this time as he gripped the base and twisted it in her.

She grunted long and hard as he tugged half of it from her.

“Put your hands on your tits.”

It took such concentration to ignore the heat at her core, the weight pulling at her ass, to maneuver her awkward arms. Her palms on her swollen breasts shocked her, made her sigh. He ripped the dildo out of her. Xia lost control of her spine and slumped against him, burying her face in his neck. He smelled of Adam, of sea and fur and strength. She sobbed when his hands cupped her ass hard, tucking her tight against him.

“Yessss.”

He rolled, pinning her down onto the firm mattress. He was warm, but it was the heat of passion, not fire. With his hands trapped low behind her aching ass, he began to thrust in short, hard lunges. His weight on her, his skin stretched out again along her, Markos's taut, grimacing face staring down at them, it all crushed the air from her lungs.

She came at once, but he didn't stop. Staying deep and striking her clit hard each time, he worked his hips between her splayed thighs in a frenzy. Her belly was tight and lifted against the rolling orgasm that held her shaking and helpless.

A scalding hand cupped her jaw, and then she was slurping and gasping across the tip of Markos. He was too fat to get in her mouth while she rocked with the force of Adam's hard fuck, but she licked him in delight anyway, her lips tingling with his heat.

Rolling her eyes up, she watched Adam's narrowed eyes stare at her. He was so very close to Markos's veined cock. Adam's breath fell harsh across her face with his efforts. Markos had to feel it. Again, the stunning sensations Adam worked on her body combined with the forbidden fantasy in her mind's eye.

On Adam's next crushing drive into her body, she breathed, "Lick him. Taste him."

He growled, retreating and banging down on her with rough precision.

She tempted him. "He tastes like my come." A tiny but brilliant release lodged in her clit, bloomed up her spine and sighed out her throat. And still she was rigid, waiting for the real climax.

A wash of thick cream poured from Markos, branding her cheek. Just as she turned her head more fully, opening her mouth to catch his come and drink it, Adam yanked his torso across hers, moving her just an inch away, robbing her of the taste.

Between one hard stroke and the next, his face swooped down on her. With a shove and jerk of his head, he muscled Markos's wet erection away from her mouth and claimed her lips. The kiss stilled her body that tiny bit more for his next deep thrust, his tongue stabbing past her teeth to stroke hers. He swished his hips against hers, a side-to-side movement that seemed to settle him deeper between her lower lips, and she felt the brush of metal around his cock press hard against her softness.

The next time he pressed into her clit, the winding pressure gripping her belly exploded, sending her legs flailing around his. Her arms wrenched from her aching breasts to grab at his waist, pressing his tailbone to seal him tighter against her, to hold the pleasure. Light took her breath and her sight, and her world spun. Tearing his mouth from hers, Adam howled in agony above her, a raw cry of need. But no, then he was below her. They'd rolled, and now it was her hands trapped beneath Adam.

It was Markos. Adam hadn't rolled them. Markos had. Xia dropped her head onto Adam's shoulder, trying to come to grips with the strength-stealing, breath-stealing, mind-stealing pleasure still jolting beneath her skin. She felt Adam swallow beneath where her forehead rested on his throat. And then liquid

lubricant was dripping down the crack of her ass, sparking overtaxed nerves. Adam twitched, and she knew he could feel it where it seeped down to their juncture. He was still huge and hard inside her.

He groaned. "Fuck. I gave it to you, and damn Ignis, but it *was* good. Now me. Give it to me."

Markos was between their legs, kneeling above her. His balls brushed her thighs, and heat scorched her anus.

"Push out." He didn't wait for her. He was in and she twisted, her high cry breaking, but Adam's arms wrapped around her shoulders and held her to him.

"No! No more!" She gasped. Lord, help her. It burned, from pain and fire's kiss.

"Yessss," Adam hissed. "I want this."

Markos moaned long and low, and he pressed his length into her ass. With the weight of him behind her, the pressure of Adam below and inside her seemed to double. Xia shrieked at the stunning, ripping beauty of it, but then he stilled. His touch settled on her waist, and the burn of his dual handprints there combined with the aching heat of their penetration.

In the time it took to register Markos's weight behind her, that she was between the men, penetrated as she'd never been before, there was one moment of utter silence where they all held their breath. The echo of her last cry drifted on the still air, and then the torches fluttered wildly.

She came, screaming and thrashing. They held her. Melting. Everything was melting. Animal sounds filled the clearing, from her.

"Get it off now or I'll end you all!" Adam snarled.

Distantly, she felt Markos twist behind her. His hands brushed beneath his balls, wiggled between them, scalded the skin of her cunt stretched around Adam. There was a click, and the scrape of metal through her soft lips as he pulled Adam's cock ring away.

And then Adam was roaring, cursing, bucking beneath them both. She almost wrenched her neck pulling her arms from beneath him, but she managed to get them free. Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she rode his bucking body, kissing his jaw, his throat, his collarbone. His elemental strength threatened to crush her between the force of his heaving thrusts and Markos's weight above her.

"Adam, Adam," she keened. What would it do to him, when they stripped Aqua away now?

Markos's bull roar ripped free through the night, holding her against Adam as he shook, pressed hard against her ass. The heat that seared her tailbone was his come filling her forbidden hole, and she knew Adam felt it too when he hissed.

A giant hand scooped her face to the side, and Markos kissed her, the angle of their lips awkward, but soft. "You sate me. Fucking you is exquisite. So strong, but so different."

His thick chest hair against her back protected her from the worst of his heat, but his lips sizzled against hers.

"No," Adam whispered. "It's fading. So good. No, No."

Markos stroked out, a pinching sting she couldn't help but clamp down on, and Xia gave a guttural, broken cry as she came again, consumed. It was too much, too gentle and too harsh at the same moment. Her nerves were flayed.

His hand stroked her hip in praise. He was somewhere behind her, kneeling between her legs.

"You should see the picture you make. Your legs stretched and splashed with come, your skin shining and Aqua's balls still twitching. I've danced with Aer, and ridden her well. All her openings explored, she's opened to me, and I've mastered her. But Aqua is on the bottom, among the dregs, again." His voice was raspy, with a gloating taunt.

Adam's chest vibrated hers with his steady growl.

"She was mine first, and I know her best. She watched her friend Tibor fuck a man once. It's one of her most erotic memories." Markos continued to stroke her thighs as he provoked Aqua.

And still her toes hadn't uncurled.

"But you didn't know that, did you, selkie prince. You don't know who she's killed, and who she's killed for. We've fucked you over with the richest rapture, but all you did was struggle to join in. You don't know what she—"

A snarl burst from Adam. He bucked beneath her, his powerful thighs lifting and thrusting between hers as he brought his legs together then thrust them out. Markos grunted with the force of his dual kick, the mattress bouncing. There was a thud and a rustle. Xia tried to sit, to lift and twist to see where Adam had kicked him to, but she had no strength.

Adam's hands settled high on her ribs, just beneath her breasts. With one decisive push, she was sitting up on him, straddling his hips. His presence in her was thicker, shorter. Her ass stung and sang as she clenched it, missing something to grip.

"So, dream storm. You like to pit two men against each other." Adam's singsong voice was lower than she'd ever heard it. But it wasn't him. "You like to toy with pain, the giving and receiving. You plot against my selkie, fearing what you desire."

Lady, Lady, Lady. She didn't want to do this. She didn't want to be the one. Her heart beat so hard her breasts rippled, her breaths coming in jagged gasps. Barely, she remembered to hold tight to Aer, but it shared her agitation, and the flames of the torches whipped wildly, casting violent shadows across his face.

"You want me sleeping, don't you dreamer witch with the fire-touched hair and sleepy-earth eyes. Your heart beats hard to remember our visit." Adam smiled, and it wasn't his smile. It wasn't his sweet, slight, tipped-to-one-side shy smile. Instead, a wide, cocky grin revealed his white teeth. "But I have such clear memories of *you*."

He twisted one nipple with a lightning quick snap of his fingers. "Last time I saw these breasts, we were drowning you, my creatures feasting on your marrow. You've dabbled long in my dreams, both shallow and into my fathoms. You think you're so clever."

He yanked her down onto his hardening cock, and now his flesh filling her hurt, but her traitorous clit throbbed with need. “I’m still the one fucking you. I always seem to be the one who gets to fuck you over, Morphi.”

Rage bloomed and triggered courage. She pressed her hips down on him, the pleasure seizing her thighs but more importantly catching his breath, interrupting his gloating. “You only fuck my body because of Adam. I’ve allowed you here.” He was so hard inside her. It was impossible that he’d grown in girth. It must be her over-used pussy swelling.

“It’s been a long time since one of my creatures invited me to a fuck. I thought I’d had enough of tasting life’s soft flesh.” His hands worked with his bucking hips. In a flash of stunning strength, he raised her, stroked hard from below, and slammed her down on the thick stalk of him again.

She moaned as her stressed body spasmed at the strike of prickling pleasure.

“Do you want to know why I bothered to accept the selkie’s invitation this time?”

She was slightly more prepared. He did it again. Lift, pump, jab. The pleasure wrapped her, spun tight bands around her throat. Where was Markos? Aqua was deeply agitated. They were on the cusp. She wanted the bitch finished, and Adam freed of her presence.

“It’s not every century I find a witch who’s ghosted through three of my masks, worming secrets from each. If you weren’t so mortal, I could love the strength of your soul.” His chest bulged as he sat in a rush of muscle, hands spread across her back. She squeaked at the speed his face appeared in front of hers. He lifted her on him, but this time she resisted with all the trembling will left in her muscles. The slow stretch of his greater strength dragging her up his cock set bursts of light off behind her eyes. *Focus*.

“You’re gifted. You’re stubborn. You’re unpredictably dangerous. I could love you, but I have to kill you.”

Her eyes flashed open in shock. Nothing about the face in front of her reminded her of Adam anymore. This being inside her body was her enemy. She shook her head, her tangled hair tossing on her spine.

“I won’t be stopped this time. I’m awake, and I’m not going back. Whatever little ploy you’ve set up in this tableau won’t work.”

It grinned. “Did you think to trick me with some fucking flesh? Oh no, little witch. Ignis’s invitation and cock trap and taunts to my pride were all quite pathetically revealing. You weakened me but you weakened yourself too. Didn’t human science teach you that flesh is mostly water? I tasted you, and I’m tired of you. I’ll be holding my selkie, and you can die.”

It reared forward and set its teeth to her neck, closing hard around the vein there. Holding her still with iron hands anchored over her shoulders, it began to hump from beneath, its slight movements effective as it crushed her clit against rock-hard abs. Its thick cock stretched her singing cunt, the sucking pleasure-

pain at her neck and the strength of the heaving body beneath hers swamping her. Her heart stuttered, her body so trained to pleasure it was impossible not to tighten in need, even with her enemy.

Teeth set harder into her neck, and she knew she was going to come. They'd pushed Aqua to the brink, and if any kind of transfer was going to happen, it had to be now, because she wasn't going to be able to hold Aer much longer, not when her bones were threatening to disintegrate.

Ignis rose up behind Aqua on the bed. His thick black hair stood in a corona around his dark, delighted face, eyes wild and blind. One wide hand slapped down on the middle of Aqua's back. White teeth gleamed as Ignis grinned, flames dancing in brown eyes. Aqua growled, and the teeth bit harder. Hands tugged her down and hips rolled beneath her. It was about to come and she wasn't ready.

She came. *Light*. Terror and menace and a heart pumping. It almost unraveled then. Almost, she was erased in the culmination of flesh's spell. But her hands curled around the strong, corded neck of the body she was pinned against. Adam. Stalwart, simple, wild, *hers*. This wasn't supposed to be personal. It was supposed to be deadly business, and it had come down to that. But now it was more than personal too. It was essential. The bitch would not have him. She pulled Aer in with a wrenching spiral.

Aqua's tongue stroked once across her jumping pulse. She felt it smile against her skin. Magic crackled and Ignis was thrown away with a low cry. Pain bore into Xia's skin. Her body had been so drowned in pleasure all night, it no longer reacted with self-preservation, even when the pain spiked.

At that moment, she snapped the bubble of air to her, the same sort of bubble she'd summoned for so many weeks of the gloaming's long dreamtime. It had been a globe of safety then, to keep water out. Not tonight. The sphere popped around her, encasing her dangerous lover as well.

"What!" Aqua whipped his head back, eyes narrowed.

"Aer, fan Ignis's embers." Xia forced the hoarse whisper out through terror-stiffened lips. She tightened her vagina hard and writhed in Aqua's grip. Maintaining the luxury of desire now was her selfish choice, a contest of who could last longer.

"You *bitch*." Hearing the words spat from Adam's body was hard.

Markos had heated her body all night, had branded her with Ignis's come. He'd placed his mark on both of them, and the handprints on her hips flared bright, as she knew the one on Aqua's back would. Inside the bubble of air, humidity was suddenly thick enough to choke on. Sweat poured down her spine and ran between her breasts.

"Yeah. I am." Her self-disgust at the pleasure she'd found in this dangerous ritual, at what they'd driven Adam to host, gave her strength to taunt her bitter rival. "That's right. Hasn't millennia of human faith taught you that spirit is stronger than the elements? Now *come*, by Lady's Light. Come, and feed Ignis, and boil."

It must have been instinct that drove her to return the mark of passion and dominance Aqua had given her. Xia lunged forward and bit deep into the thick muscle at the side of Aqua's throat. She closed her eyes,

struggled to breathe, and worked her body on the hardness below her. Adam. She needed Adam close. She needed him—

“Xia!” The praise tore from Adam’s throat and brought answering pleasure rolling through her. It washed away her fear and she fused to him, sobbing, clutching at him. His body was like silk over stone beneath her, rigid with release. His arms cupped around her, cradling along her spine and supporting her head with tender protection as his hips thrust.

Markos stood at the side of the bed again, his deeply muscled body gleaming with sweat, his curls limp around his snarling face. “Feel my mark on your spine. Feel how swollen her folds are from my control. Dance. Again.”

Adam’s hands wrapped around her waist, and he pinned her to him as he came again, body shuddering and groaning. “Xia. Xia.” He shook, rocking.

Her poor patch of Aer lunged and boiled, her sphere seething with misshapen bumps. The wrench against her psychic grip had spots sliding across her vision. “It’s fighting me. Did we do it? Is it done?”

“Let me check.” Adam’s palm trembled as it stroked down over her head. “Oh, Lord. I think—” He pulled back, cradling her shoulders, but broke off, his jaw going slack as he looked at her neck. “*Fuck!*”

His free hand slapped hard against her throat, and Xia swallowed with effort, shivering as the memory of Aqua’s cruelty combined with the last shadow of orgasm. Satisfaction had melted her bones and settled into her muscles. So heavy, so sweet.

“Bring it down, Xia. Let me in!” It was Markos, sounding as if he were half a mile away.

“Do it, woman.” Adam sounded as shaky as she felt.

But Aer was wild inside her bubble. Humidity still drenched her skin. The pressure was incredible, like she wrestled with a shred of hurricane instead of the steady breeze she’d known. “Too soon, Adam. I don’t have control of it. Is Aqua fully blended?” Her head lolled on his shoulder, her arms slumping to the soaked sheets.

“Yes, now, oh sweet. Your throat—I’m sorry. So sorry. Xia, drop the spell.”

“Not yet...” She couldn’t find out later that Aqua still stalked the waters, awake and all-powerful.

“Drop the spell!” Markos bellowed. Palms out, he blasted her bubble with twin fireballs, a truly impressive sight.

The force of the heat shuddered the air inside the sphere, sent it spinning around her limp body. The air turned opaque as every bit of liquid vaporized, and her bubble expanded against her will.

She leaned her weight into Adam’s grip on her throat. It throbbed, an echo to her core. Aftershocks of sizzling sensation twitched in her thighs. Her breath caught as her nipples dragged over Adam’s hard chest, and another small orgasm trembled through her belly, an aftershock.

“Adam?” Her throat rasped, and her lashes scoured over her eyeballs. There was no moisture in her body, it was all in the air.

“Xia, please.” His voice was agonized. “I’m begging you. Let it go.”

Her breath came in small pants. “Don’t be sorry, Adam. Wasn’t you.” She closed her eyes. “So tired. So scared. Too much.”

Gentle kisses rained over her brow and cheeks. “Listen to me, Morphi. You’re bleeding. I’ve nearly torn out the front of your throat. Your duty is done, your battle won. I am your rampart, if you can find your way to trust me again.” His lips feathered across her jaw, touched the corner of her mouth.

Breathing in the thick, soupy air was hard. She turned her head and kissed his lips softly. “Adam, that was the best sex I’ve ever had. But I never want to have it again, okay?”

He spoke against her mouth. “Never. Never fucking you like that again.”

“Good. It was a beautiful kind of awful, but sharing with you is so much better.” She found the strength to tap her fingertips along his hips.

“Xia.” He shook her. “Focus. Finish. Let go of Aer.”

“I’m afraid. I can’t do that again. We have to get it right.” She considered her slipping hold on Aer. It churned in a strangely thick new way.

“You did it. You both did.” His voice cracked.

She focused on him. Awed, she struggled to lift one hand up to touch his face. “We did it. Your eyes are purple. You’re free. Do you feel all right?”

“I’m fine. We’ll talk later. Enough, Xia.” His hand stroking her spine with desperate strength made her soften, sigh. He issued a hard command. “Let me in.”

The familiar rampart order floated past her exhausted brain, and before she knew it, her mental doors opened. Her brain was full of Adam’s shadow. She ached. From head to toe. Literally.

“Close your eyes. Sleep. Let go.” His words came softly.

Finally, she could fight no more. She had her Adam back. Aer, drenched with water, slipped from her hold. Her minotaur’s swarthy warm hands cradled her collapsing body when darkness took her.

Chapter Sixteen

Her hair hurt. Her ass, neck and thighs especially stung. She felt stiff and battered. Assessing her pain, she took deep, steady breaths, trying to determine why she felt so lax despite being utterly wrecked.

Cracking her eyes open, she stared up into thatched eaves, assorted baskets hanging from the thick wooden beams. Waves shushed in an urgent rhythm nearby, echoed by the surging hiss of hard rain on the thatch above. A storm then, but the inner cottage was peaceful. The air smelled good. Like cinnamon and wild. With exquisite control, she turned her head.

Markos sat at an ancient plank table, tapping at a razor-thin silver laptop. His dark curls were wild, standing every-which-way. Adam was in the corner at the tiny stove, spooning something into bowls. He added spoons to each and moved them to the table. His silky golden hair was also disheveled into chunky waves.

“She’s awake,” he said, his eyes on his bowl as he sat and began to eat.

It took a few seconds for his quiet words to filter through to Markos’s brain. She watched the process fondly. Finally, his head whipped to the side, the muscles in his thick neck lovely.

He stood and hurried to sit on the edge of the bed. “Xia.”

She smiled, even though that made her neck hurt. “We did it, didn’t we?”

He nodded, smoothing her hair behind one ear. “You did.”

Her smile faded. “Absolutely it was all of us. Don’t lay it all on my doorstep.”

Markos glanced at her throat, wearing his diplomatic face. “You’ve only had one healing session. Your energy was so low, we wanted to wait until you were stronger for another. Are you in pain?”

“Well, I’m not up for much dancing, that’s for sure.” Her weak chuckle died away as his warm gaze caught hers, weary and sad. The implication of her words hit her. She’d always been Markos’s dancer. “Markos...”

“Shhhh. We’ll make you comfortable very soon. Can you drink? Eat?”

Her glance took in Adam, steadily eating, curled over his bowl. She considered her stomach. “Yes, I’d like something small. Can you bring it here, though?”

“Adam will. I’m going to get the healer.” Markos laid one of his thick hands across her upper chest, fingers spread. A wonderful wash of heat trickled through the blanket, deep into her bones. She relaxed a bit as sore muscles eased.

He went to turn and stand, but her hand shot up and grabbed him, right through the blankets. “Wait.”

He did, laying his hand over hers despite the thin quilt between them. “Yes?”

“Are you all right?”

He tilted his head, his lips twisting wryly. “Ah, Xia.”

“What?”

He squeezed her hand. “The ritual was amazing. Terrifying and horrible. I feel rested as I only do after I’ve gone into Ignis like that, and I’m really sad.”

Xia fought with the blanket. She freed her hand and gripped Markos’s tight. “I see that. What is it?”

He looked down at their clasped fingers. His thumb rubbed over her wrist. “It’s always sad to leave a lover.”

His words stopped her breath as pain speared her heart. Her fingers clenched hard on his. Her own words tumbled through her head. *I love you. We’ll always be friends. We weren’t meant to be.* “What a way to go.”

Startled, his brown eyes danced with laughter as he snorted. “Imp.”

She squeezed him one last time before softening her fingers. A signal she was ready to let go. He was the one to do it, his fingers sliding slowly from hers. “I’ll be right back.” He stood, tossed a glance to Adam, now scraping his bowl. “In a minute,” he amended.

Striding heavily from the cottage, weak light slashed through the opening then was gone with the *thunk* of the door. Adam licked his spoon. Standing, he put his dish in a bucket. Then picked one up off the table and turned toward her.

“Adam?”

He just stood there, golden hair shining, shoulders tight beneath a tan T-shirt.

She closed her eyes. “Did Aqua win then? Did she ruin us?”

Her heart stopped beating waiting for his response. The moment spun out, and it hurt. When he moved toward her, it started again, but thumped heavy and wild, uncertain inside her.

“I don’t know. Did she? Do you remember your promise?”

Her eyes flashed open. Silver clashed with purple. “You want to make love to me?” Her belly clenched. “Now?”

His gaze drifted down her body, seeming to sear right through the quilt. “Yes. But of course I won’t. You’re hurt.” He turned his head, closed his eyes. “I hurt you.” He turned back and his gaze grabbed hers. “I liked it.”

Her breath strangled for a second before she managed to keep on. “Yeah. I liked it too.” She saw her admission shock him, the flare of his gold lashes flickering, his body’s quickly checked motion toward her.

“I almost killed you. At the end.”

She blinked. What? Idiot. “Aqua fucked me, and it was painful at times, but I was already lost in the pleasure you’d both layered over me. I’ll recover from this.”

With a graceful twirl and glide, he turned, put the bowl on the table and sat in the exact spot Markos had. His hand hovered over hers. "I kept trying to get out. I couldn't. I was there, Xia, and I couldn't stop her. Your private touches kept me sane."

She lifted her hand into contact and he clutched at her. "How awful for you."

"For me?" The backs of his fingers coasted across a cheek. They shook. "I failed you. Aqua tortured you. And at the end, you forgave me. How can you forgive me? How can you stand to honor your promise and touch me again?"

"You're the bravest person I know. You're my man. I'm proud of you."

His hand turned, fingertips brushing her lips delicately. "Say that again."

"I think you were an amazing warrior to face down the element that owns you, to hold her for capture, sacrificing yourself."

"No. The part about you being my woman." His jewel eyes glowed.

"I didn't say that."

His jaw clenched.

"That's a claim only you can make. I said you're my man."

His hand pulled down, and both of his hands surrounded hers. "I still belong to Aqua. I always will. She's altered, not gone. She can't be destroyed."

"It's part of what makes your soul, selkie-mine. Aqua's state is a conundrum for our children, unfortunately. But not us. We've fought our campaign. We won this battle." Xia grinned with fierce glee to say the words. Joy ripped up inside her. "We're alive. We've picked up some new scars"—not all of them physical—"but we're still standing." Her smile twisted. "Well, lying down, maybe."

He smiled, a slight upward shift at the edge of his lips. "Morphi, you are my woman."

"That sounds good, Adam." She knew now he honored her when he labeled her by title.

From a distance came the voices of people stepping on the rocky shore. Markos was bringing a healer. Abruptly, fatigue sapped her, the bed spinning beneath her. She sighed.

Adam's face closed up. "The minotaur will not be your advocate for much longer. He won't share your bed again."

Such proclamations. If he wasn't so fragile she'd snap at him, but she didn't want to break his belief in her forgiveness. "I know. But he is a good friend. Even more than a friend."

Adam searched her face. "I understand."

The cottage door opened and Markos tromped in with the older healer Xia had met before. "I hate walking on cobbles," he grumped.

A smile stretched across her face, despite her exhaustion. Admiring the way his shoulders moved as he wiped the moisture from his thick hair felt right. He looked over at them. Adam sat on the bed next to

her, and she remembered Markos's dark gaze on them during the ceremony. If he wasn't the guy for her, why didn't her attraction to him fade?

Later, as Xia was healed, she learned she'd slept a whole day round. Two days later, she and Markos had worked out a systematic way to respond to the deluge of interest in her Terra-ghosting journals. Adam took the hate email "for research". Three days later, their system held true against a renewed barrage of reporters and academics seeking her comment and reaction to the Chamber's news that Aqua had woken, but been bound to Aer. She'd been grateful for Adam's selkie clan. They were excellent guards against determined magical paparazzi.

Four days later, a summons came from Vienna, asking for all three of them to submit separate reports in person.

Adam's response was simply, "No."

Because Xia gratefully attached herself to his objection, she now stood in front of Markos's open limo door. The constant rain had faded out to a drizzle. Tasha stood a few feet away, but Xia didn't mind. None of them bothered with umbrellas.

The sound of the surf and the calls of the seabirds no longer made Xia's stomach knot. The air smelled good, like pine and heather and power. She inhaled deeply, focusing on Markos's manly warmth, and not on the fact Adam was out of her sight, gone swimming in his fur. Nothing about the ritual had changed her embarrassing need for him. The two men had simply shook hands.

"I don't want to shake your hand," Xia announced suddenly.

"All right." Markos grinned.

She couldn't grin back. Despite choosing Adam, she felt like something precious was slipping away. "We're never going to be together again."

"Never is a long time. Not while you have Adam, certainly." That distant look came into his deep brown eyes.

"Who is she?"

"Hmmm?"

"The woman you told me would be hurt, when she learned of the ritual."

Markos draped one thick forearm over the open car door. "You sure you want to know?"

Xia nodded. "I didn't want a face in my head, when we were together. But now I think I'd like to picture you with someone."

Markos scrubbed his hand through his dampening curls. His blue business shirt's sleeves were rolled to the elbow, and the shift of muscles that had held her so well during passion made her breath catch. It had been like this over the past days. Little moments of memory, of loss, of appreciation she had no business feeling anymore. "I'm not with her yet. If she can get past the ritual, can accept that it's done, then I'll let you know."

Surprise burst through her. “It’s someone I know.” Xia didn’t pose it as a question. She was suddenly certain.

Markos nodded, his eyes sliding away. A faint twist took his lips. That was a new look. Part amused, part bitter.

“She’ll be pissed, on top of hurt. You might hear about it, even if it doesn’t go well.”

Faces of friends they had in common flashed through her mind, churning her curiosity.

Markos reached out one wide, warm hand and settled it on her nape, his thumb centered on her pulse. “If I give you a letter, will you read it this time?”

Her numb hand clasped his wrist. “Markos.” She nodded. “Of course.”

One eyebrow lifted, but he didn’t answer. He’d been utterly placid for days, totally unlike him. He’d said she’d burned him out. “Xia, take care. Let the selkies watch over you. Try not to let Adam rush you into marriage.”

“Marriage!”

But then he was pulling her close, and that special smell made tears jump to her eyes. She melted against his wide shoulders, his deep, hard chest a solid support.

Markos’s lips seared across her damp forehead. “Call me, anytime, always. Adieu, Xia.”

He stepped back to fold into the limo, and her hands slid from his body reluctantly, fingertips delighting in the swells of muscle beneath the crisp fabric. She’d see him again, maybe even fairly soon. They’d be in daily touch as they managed the press. He’d never not be her friend. But when he lifted his legs and set his shoe-covered hooves in the car, reaching for the door handle, Xia grabbed onto it.

He looked up at her. A memory flashed of his face between her legs. She bore his fading burn scars on her hips. Her heart was breaking. Licking her lips, she was at an utter loss to stop this moment, to freeze it, undo it. *I love you*. Why was it so hard for them to say it to each other?

He held out an envelope with his other hand, his eyes never leaving hers. “Bye.”

Swallowing, she let go of his skin, took the envelope. Stepped back. “Talk to you soon.”

He nodded and closed the limo door. Tasha was at the driver’s door and got in. The motor rumbled on, and Xia took a sudden, sharp breath. The envelope was thick, unmarked but for a flame burned into one corner. The oyster shells crunched as the car rolled off through the pines toward the road.

Suddenly, she couldn’t bear not knowing. He was still within sight. Ripping the envelope, she opened the creamy paper.

Dear Morphi Xia,

In light of your recent role in Chamber affairs, we are pleased to grant your request for dissolution of your oath of service. You are awarded an honorary discharge, along with a certificate of private

operations. We wish you well in your new independent endeavors and look forward to working with you again. Please be sure to seek assistance from veteran's support and benefits...

She quickly folded it as raindrops plopped across the words. Blinking through her tears, Xia stared blindly at the black car disappearing around the last bend. She hadn't requested a leave. Hadn't even thought what her next assignment would be. Or when. The thought of having to sink into the dreamtime to spy on any of the elements sent a spike of anger through her. Another ghosting would probably kill her.

Thunder rumbled, the same groaning discontent it had been sharing for days. Aer and Aqua were still working out their new bond. It wasn't going well. Massive hurricanes and typhoons had rocked the world, so early in the normal storm season. Magicals and Chamber soldiers were doing what they could. But Xia hadn't even thought to approach Markos for information on that front. She'd holed up in Adam's cottage and slept, and let the awe of crazy-scary sex wash over her. He'd done this for her. Markos had known that her days of obeying orders were fading fast. She still wanted to help, but she might need to work on her own timeframe from now on. And the thought of having her own rampart was very reassuring.

Moving stiffly back to the cottage, Xia tucked the letter away. She sipped some lukewarm tea and gave in to the wild ache inside. She waited at the window, watching with a frantic heart. Not long after, Adam popped up in the waves. A spray of water fanned in a sweep as he tossed his head. With strong, surging strides, he waded out of the sea, his shoulders shifting in sleek counterpoint to his thighs. He waved to someone on the dunes above the garage and moved that way.

Gripping the windowsill, Xia concentrated on keeping her breath even. Rain poured harder now, the sky a flat, low gray. He was only in the shower. Just rinsing off. He'd be here any minute. She was an ex-soldier, and she did not need a man in her sight at all times. But he wasn't any man. He was Adam. Simple, wild, clear-eyed Adam. Her Adam.

Whirling, she hurried out the door and up the white path to the carport. This whole business of a detached bathroom was going to be revisited. Xia hustled into the bathroom, her breath easing at his trim shadow behind the frosted white glass door. She pulled off her top, bra, skirt and panties. Sliding the door open, she sighed in appreciation. The large handprint burned into the exact middle of Adam's upper back was sexy. It was shiny, and in certain light seemed to glow.

"Xia?" He turned, his hair darkened and slicked against his head.

She smiled shyly to see his shock as his eyes rolled down her body with heated intent. "You were expecting someone else?" And the scar from the wendigo's arrow in his shoulder sent her heart pitter-pat as well. She felt sorry for him. With such a blood-thirsty lover, he wouldn't get a lot of sympathy for his wounds.

"I wasn't expecting anyone. But I'm adaptable." He reached out and hauled her against him, spinning her under the warm spray. "Did you have a panic attack?"

“No,” she fibbed. She hadn’t had one, but if she’d forced herself to stay in the cottage, it wouldn’t have gone well. “I just finished an interesting read I wanted to tell you about.” Xia tipped her head back to wet her hair. The bite scar on her throat didn’t hurt at all.

“Let me guess.” Large, soapy hands settled on her shoulders, fingers sweeping into her muscles, soothing her. “You can get free Viagra mailed to your home without a prescription.”

Water sprayed as Xia sputtered with a burst of laughter. “No, you oaf. That was yesterday’s interesting read. Today’s was the one where my private consultant license was posted, releasing me from the Chamber’s service.”

Grabbing Adam’s hands, she dragged them down to her breasts. He froze, his hands cupping her gently. Whenever a touch between them turned passionate, he hesitated, softened. He was afraid.

“You know what that means?” She smiled at him.

“Markos is no longer your advocate.” His thumbs drifted too softly over her stiff, stabbing nipples.

“You are no longer my rampart.” Her breath caught as his fingers jerked on her, but then his touch was gone. He stood with his hands hanging at his sides, just out of the spray. She blinked quickly, wiping the sheeting water away from her face. Lifting one hand, she traced a rivulet of water down over the dips and rises of his muscled, tan torso. Her finger ran over the delight of his body, hollow throat with jumping pulse, swell of pec with thumping heart, steel-ridged abs.

His hand caught hers as she followed the droplet to the indentation of his hip. “This pleases you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, staring at his thickening, arched cock beginning to lift.

He squeezed her wrist. “My status, not my body. You wish to be free of my protection?”

“I *wish* to be your lover. Finally, we’re free. You don’t have to guard me anymore.”

“I’ll always guard you, Xia.” Drawing her hand up, he nibbled on her fingers. “Always.”

For some reason, the way he said it reminded her of Markos. She pushed into his grip, and he let her. His mouth was warm as it closed around her fingertip. One bed and three people with sexual histories had made for awkward sleeping arrangements. Adam had set up a cot, and they had made the one-room living space work. Without ever talking about the ritual at all after that first morning. She pulled her hand from his mouth, toyed with the lovely nub of a tiny nipple.

“But the last traitor has been captured. The mission is truly over.”

“Markos left.”

He didn’t say it as a question, but Xia nodded.

Adam’s hand settled over her hip, his fingers dusting over the changes in her skin texture. Markos’s palm prints. “We’re both marked by him.”

“We’re the ones who had to alter. He was the catalyst.”

Adam’s eyes flashed purple. He mimicked her circular press over her own nipples. “Sexpot.”

Rolling her eyes, Xia shook her head. “That’s not a nickname I want sticking around, Adam.”

“What about dream storm?”

Adam’s face staring down at her as he pressed his cock between her lips... “I—I don’t know.” It was a good representation of how she’d been completely worked over by both men, but it was a joint name, a reminder.

Thunder rang hard over the water’s spray, a sharp ripping crack of it. She jumped. He pressed her against him, and her newly touched nipples ached when they flattened into him.

“Soon, I want my chance. I want your promise, to let me prove myself to you. I’m not her.”

Sending her hands coasting up his back to anchor on his shoulders, she shook her head. “No, Adam.” She kissed under his collarbone, flicking the water away with her tongue.

He stilled.

She smiled as she licked a long, hard stroke across the sweep of bone. “Not soon. Now.”

“Here? In the shower?” He was amazingly careful not to use the word water.

“Here. I want to share, here.” She shifted her hips forward to brush against his erection.

His spiked lashes swept down. “I will show you—”

“No. You’ll share. There’s no trial, no test. Just us.”

“A man and a woman.”

His simple words had a sexual elegance that made her tighten inside. The long days and constant memory of the ritual had kept her on edge. She was suddenly on a desperate, downward slide toward orgasm, and he’d barely touched her. As usual.

“Adam. You’ve always been there for me. This time, let me take care of you.” Her trimmed curls brushed across his strong thighs as she pressed her groin to him, her fingers feathering lightly up his erection.

He touched her belly. “No biting.”

She looked at him from under lashes. “Not today.” Lifting her chin, she dragged her tongue along the edge of her teeth.

“Witch.”

“Your witch.”

“Yes.”

Xia knelt in the tub, with the steady spray warming her and thunder rumbling her thighs. She smiled up at her cold-eyed seal-man and he leaned against the tiled wall, hands caressing the swells of his etched abdomen with blatant sensuality.

She put her hands on his thighs. “I always heard selkies made the best lovers.” That sweet, crooked smile lit up his face. And then she leaned forward.

About the Author

To learn more about Mima, please visit www.mimawithin.com. Send an email to runemima@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Mima! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/runemima>.

Look for these titles by Mima

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Tending the Spirit has never been so sexy.

Future Found

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A Claimed Story

As a tree singer, it is Shay-non's duty—and pleasure—to tend the chi of the few remaining trees left after the Cataclysm. Even if it means enduring the life-sucking presence of the greedy cybernetic elites who own them.

But the moment she steps into Elite Sandor's compound, he throws her world into disarray. Instantly, she finds herself tricked into twenty-four hours as his sexual "guest", an infuriating prospect. Then he lets her see, but not touch, the magnificent oak in his possession. An oak that shouldn't exist. For one moment with the tree, she'll do anything—even submit to Sandor's attentions.

Sand has waited years for Shay's unmet sexual needs to weaken her defenses enough to make his move. The time is ripe to begin a spiritual revolution, plus convince the lovely singer he has always loved her from afar—all in one day's time. A daunting task, especially since her earthy sexuality has him making all sorts of deviations from his plan.

Now that he has her captive, he can only pray. That she'll agree to help him defy the Council and raise an illegal forest temple.

And that she'll see past his sensual blackmail into his heart.

Warning: This book includes brief references to m/m and ménage relationships. Some readers may be disturbed by references to a death during sex. There's also sex involving a tree that will forever make you smile when you hear the term "tree-hugger".

Enjoy the following excerpt for Future Found:

He stopped while the droid laid out the eating cloth and set the food precisely in the middle. Then it left. And he was still staring. She was on the altar, unveiled. The opalescence of her skin was more glorious than the silver veil. Kneeling with her legs splayed, he could clearly make out her sex below her spread ass. Her cheeks rested on her heels, her back arched, her hands reaching gracefully up into the cone of light. The crown of her ruby hair faced him since her head was thrown back in apparent ecstasy. It was worth the cost of the sunshine bulb he'd installed.

He walked around her, within touching distance. Her belly was adorable. Her nipples were hard, bitty berries. The position she held flattened her breasts to merest swells. At mouth level.

Slowly, her hands drifted down and rested on those splayed thighs. She rolled her head forward to look down at him. He'd meant to initiate the contract after a meal and some conversation to reassure her. But the plan could tolerate this new deviation.

“Shay-non, you are unveiled before me.” His voice sounded husky but he didn’t care. Let her see that his attraction was more than the plan needed.

“Sand, I initiate this contract.”

He did not think about the plan, his goals, his faith or his tree. He thought about the impact of those eyes without a veil between them. That skin, blushing in the strong light. That musk scent rising from her spread thighs. Those blood-red, lickable nipples. *Wait. Wait for her. It must be her.* His eyes flitted from one part of her to another, dazzled by her reality. Curves, everywhere. His cock fattened.

An eternity later, her hand rose toward him. His gaze flew to hers, but she was staring at his hair. She reached out like a slowed, half-time vid. Her touch landed on his hair near his left ear. He watched her eyes dilate, the brown fading from chocolate to black. He saw the tremor of her long lashes, her lips break open revealing a row of tiny white teeth. He was lifting in his pants, the cotton catching him.

Her fingers threaded into his hair and touched his scalp. He could feel each of the three fingertips. She pulled her hand down through his layers, behind his ear, heat scalding the rim. A hectic red appeared on her cheekbones that had been too pale. She hesitated at the bottom, then her thumb gently trapped his earlobe and rubbed it with her forefinger. He was so aware of how it was fleshy, and hot, in her firm grip. His head spun as his cock abruptly hardened.

Her gaze moved along the line of his jaw, and he felt her focus on his mouth like a physical touch. His own lips parted, fascinated, as the blush on her face spread down her neck. His earlobe was abandoned when she delved in a sweep along the curve of his ear. His breath began to come heavier. The head of him was rubbing against the soft waistband.

Her fingers moved where her gaze had, all of them trailing along, petting his lips, the outer edge, the inner skin. Rotating her hand, she sent her palm gliding on the sensitive skin under his chin while her thumb tested the edge of his teeth, boldly daring his lips. He froze absolutely still when she held her breath. She pushed her thumb into his mouth and he closed his lips over the joint while his tongue curled and sucked. The blush cascaded onto her chest, and his gaze followed it.

Her other hand lifted to touch herself, hesitated, middle finger a breath from her nipple. He sucked gently, scraped his tongue over her nail. Her nails scored restlessly against the line of his throat. She took her thumb from his mouth and laid her hand on his shoulder, her damp touch painting the hollow above his collarbone.

Then she closed her eyes as she delicately played over her nipple. He watched her face, now flushed. Her eyes tossed behind her lids. He studied her fingers, how she dragged the edge of a nail over the tip, how she barely touched herself, sometimes tracing the lower swell where her breast met her torso. His dick bounced.

Her grip tightened on his shoulder, nails biting suddenly, as she trailed those fingers down her sternum, over her belly, and hovered over her split lips. *Open your eyes. See me.* He didn’t say it. But she

answered his plea. She gave the faintest gasp at catching his gaze. She wasn't focusing as well as he. Her lashes fluttered like the rarest butterflies. Her lips were so plump and ripe. His mouth burst with saliva.

Her hand lightened its grip on his shoulder, soothed the shirt over the muscle there with a swirl of sensation. Then she dragged her palm flat down onto his pec and ground her heel into his nipple. His balls churned and boiled. Her eyes looked dazed as she watched her hand massage him, gripping the fabric and his muscle, fingertips pattering over the whole sweep of his chest. Finally, she stilled with her thumb pressing hard against his nipple. He was still watching her face, the want on it making him fiercely glad, when she looked up and met his eyes again. His breath hitched. Hers looked blank now, wild.

He steeled himself as her weight increased, pressing against him. She rose up higher onto her knees. She paused, gathering her balance, taking a deep breath, then looked down at her lower hand hovering over herself. He had no choice but to follow the slender line of her arm down past her breasts.

He has the one thing she never thought she deserved. A place to belong...

Revelation

© 2010 Lauren Dane

De La Vega Cats, Book 2

At long last, Kendra Kellogg has found her sister—but she's no closer to filling the gaps in her past. The magick that brought them together makes them targets for dark mages intent on finishing what started with their mother's murder.

As if her life wasn't chaotic enough, in barrels the one thing she doesn't expect, Max de La Vega. He's six-and-a-half-feet of cocoa-brown alpha male. He's strong, intelligent, sexy and intense. Everything she'd wanted in a man. And he scares the hell out of her. Still healing from a disastrous past relationship, she wonders if she'll ever have that kind of forever.

The next in line to run his jaguar jamboree, Max is unused to hearing "no". Once he knows what he wants, he assumes he'll get it. And he wants Kendra. She deserves happiness and it's his mission to give it to her.

When dark mages attempt to steal her magickal energy, Max's cat agrees with the man—Kendra is his to protect and he will stop at nothing to keep her safe. She can push him away as hard as she likes, he's not going anywhere.

Warning: Prickly, grumpy witch, bossy alpha male, scorching hot sexual attraction, toss in some bad words, a little bit of violence and a whole lot of action.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Revelation:

She was right, there was no threat outside. Still, Max shadowed her as she moved, giving her the space to work, but keeping close enough to protect her if it was necessary. He didn't hide his smile. He messed with *her* concentration? Every breath Kendra Kellogg took messed with *his* concentration. Even now as she did her magick mojo thing, moving around the yard efficiently, spilling that vibrant red-golden, warm magick in her wake, she took up every bit of his imagination and attention.

She was spirited, a huge turn-on for him. He loved women with an attitude, smart, strong women who didn't take any shit. He liked her sense of humor and the way she stood up to him.

His cat loved her strength. She was fierce, the kind of woman a man could trust.

It probably wouldn't have been as bad if he hadn't scented her. Twice. That was more intimate than the brief kiss of a few nights ago. Now her scent lived in him. God in heaven she smelled like sex. Like sex and comfort; like strong, sexy witch, and his cat practically kneaded his insides to get to her.

No one had affected him the way she did and he didn't quite know what to do with it. What he did know was the idea of her being in danger had set his cat so close to the surface he paced, on guard, just to

keep his human skin. He supposed it was simply another piece of proof that she was indeed meant to be his.

“What do you sense?” he asked when she got near enough to hear.

“Nothing. Not even a smear of the dark energy. Maybe I was wrong.” She frowned, shivering. He stepped closer, giving her some of his body heat, satisfied when she stopped shivering.

He doubted very much that she’d been wrong about the attack, though. He’d watched her from day one. She seemed to have a good grasp of her abilities. “Do you really think so?”

She thought for long moments before shaking her head no. “I don’t think I was wrong at all.”

“Me either. I think you felt it and I think your father has something to do with it.”

Her eyes lost their warmth at the mention of her father, not that Max blamed her. He’d be right in line behind Jack and Galen when they finally got hold of Andrew Parcell, or whatever the fuck the man was really named.

“Now that we know he had some involvement in my mother’s death, I have every reason to believe he’s connected to these other attacks. I don’t like that. At all. I don’t know what they have of Renee’s. That bitch most likely kept her hair or other physical links. I think I found a way to nullify that. When I find them they’re going have to deal with me. I *will* find them. And they’ll pay. For what they did to our mother, and for what they did to my sister.”

Christ, when she got bloodthirsty it only made him want her more. He cocked his head and spoke before he meant to. “You enchant me.”

That startled her. “I do? Is that a good thing?”

He laughed. “Yes. No. Hell I don’t know, but I like it. I plan to explore that. With you. Just so you know.”

She pursed her lips. “Oh.” She licked her lips, as if she tasted the words before saying them. “All right.”

He shook his head at her when she grinned his way.

She’d hit him like a bus, knocked into his consciousness when he had least expected it. Kendra Kellogg left him dazed and wanting more. Earlier that afternoon when she’d come out of Renee’s office he’d just watched her. Fascinated that she looked like Renee, and yet totally different. Her chic curtain of super straight hair, short enough to leave her neck exposed, those eyes, far more green than brown, thickly lashed and God, the dimples at each corner of that fucking delicious mouth—she was the loveliest thing he’d ever seen.

He’d been deep in a naughty fantasy about a hunt to see if she had any more freckles than the ones he’d seen on her forearms, when her entire demeanor had changed, became serious.

His cat had gone on instant alert, dragging all the cats in the room into hypervigilance with him. Jack had as well, the wolves cued to his moods in much the same way. Max had stood, looking to her. Taking his cues from her.

It had been the way she braced her feet apart and took on an onslaught of dark magics that had really pushed him into acting at long last. The kiss had been impulsive, but now he was decisive. He wanted her and she needed to know it. Her ferocity had pushed every last one of his defenses away.

That and the look of fear and panic when Galen had touched her and he'd blocked the door, the recoil she was able to get control of fairly quickly. Someone had done that to her, hurt her so that despite her strength, her first instinct was to try to make herself smaller and get out of arm's reach. Like prey.

Every male on the landing and in the hallway had felt it, seen it, and went into overdrive, wanting to protect her. Max did what he always did, he acted decisively and in doing so, found himself totally off balance and unsure for the first time since he was a teenage boy.

"Whatever it was or whoever sent it, it's gone." She looked around the yard, pretending he hadn't just told her he'd set his cap for her. "It's fine out here," she said quietly.

"Are they safe?" He jerked a thumb toward the house.

"None of us are safe until this is dealt with. But this house and yard will hold safely. I'll go out to Cambridge tomorrow and talk with Mary."

"Mary?"

"She's a powerful practitioner, a friend of my aunt's. Mary's been away for a month, but left a note that she'd be back this week and told me to stop in." Kendra reached for the gate, and in her full view, slowly but firmly, Max put his hand over hers.

"You look shaken. I'm taking you to dinner."

She opened her mouth, most likely to argue, these sisters were quite alike on that front.

"You can tell me about Mary and your plans. Fill me in on just how safe you are at your apartment too. Gibson will only ask me about it tomorrow anyway."

"You're bossy."

"So everyone tells me. It's my job to be bossy. But you're no doormat, I know it and so do you." He reached out and ran a fingertip over the tips of her hair. "No matter who tries to make you feel otherwise."

"Why do you want to take me to dinner? Really?"

Oh she had *no* idea. He smiled at her, slow and assessing. Her eyes widened and then slid a quarter down, sexy and slumberous and all sorts of buttons and levers got pushed at the sight.

"I want to take care of you. You look pale. Got a heavy scare. And I like you."

"Even if I'm feeling like steak and lobster?" She smirked, teasing. He liked it. Only his family teased him. It was intimate and showed she trusted him.

"Mmm, sounds very good." He held out an arm and she sighed before taking it. "What? You thought I'd be scared off by an expensive dinner? I know just the place and you can have the biggest lobster in the tank if you want."

"And cake?"

“Two slices, if that’s what you desire.”

Soft shoulders and dangerous curves...

Whirlpool

© 2010 Vivian Arend

Forces of Nature, Book 2

Braden can't deny he's always wanted Chelsea, but getting involved wouldn't be fair. She has college and big dreams ahead of her—he has no desire to leave Jaffrey's Cove. Plus, there's the fact merfolk women often take more than one lover. Share her? Not in this lifetime.

When Chelsea's plans for the future fall apart, the only bright spot remaining is Sheriff Braden Marley. She's been angling for a shot at the gentle giant's heart—and the rest of him—for a long time. Except he not only holds her at a maddening arm's length, he somehow manages to keep other men away, too.

Enter Jamie Powell, a human marine archeologist who's in town for a cataloging Warning: Seductive shimmering lights, a sexy interlude on the strip club floor, mysterious Spanish lovers, and a trio caught in an eddy of intense sexual attraction. Swim at your own risk.project. His instant chemistry with Chelsea inspires her to try a sexy new tactic: make Braden jealous enough to stop dragging his feet and start leaving his shoes under her bed.

The ensuing storm generates a boatload of complications none of them saw coming. A forbidden attraction no amount of merfolk magic can erase. And the danger that their secrets could be exposed to the outside world...

Warning: Seductive shimmering lights, a sexy interlude on the strip club floor, mysterious Spanish lovers, and a trio caught in an eddy of intense sexual attraction. Swim at your own risk.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Whirlpool:

Chelsea licked her lips and let her head fall to the side. Braden kissed his way down her neck, nuzzling behind her ear. Her nipples tightened, one breast held cupped in Braden's hand, framed like an exotic work of art.

Desire threaded through Jamie, then one seam at a time yanked apart his inhibitions.

"Hmm, yes. Feels so good, Braden. Touch me, love me. I need it, need Jamie too." Her husky voice beckoned him, the sound swirling through the room, and Jamie grew lightheaded. The desire to join them, to touch and caress every part of the beautiful woman before him grew irresistible.

He wanted her. It was the plain and simple truth. Jamie lifted his gaze to take in Braden's towering frame, watching the two of them move in a beautiful symmetry together. Smooth, sensual.

So be it. In spite of not completely understanding all the whys, he was willing to accept it for now and figure the details out later.

They met in the middle of the bed and all his saved-up passion broke free. Jamie kissed Chelsea like his life depended on it. Her sweet tongue tangled with his, their naked torsos touching, the tight tips of her nipples hard against his chest. She caressed his shoulders, dragged her fingers through his hair, tugging harder as the intensity of the kiss increased.

Braden joined them. He'd stripped off his shirt and the bare skin of his arm brushed Jamie's side as they trapped Chelsea between them.

She moaned with delight. "Oh yes, this is what I needed."

The breathless confession did something to Jamie's heart. He'd desired her before all the chaos of the day, and for whatever reason he was receiving this gift, he was going to treasure it.

He glanced over her shoulder to see Braden smiling at him. "It really is what we want. She needs us both right now."

Jamie nodded, staring with fascination at the centers of Braden's eyes. Blue flecks of light reflected back at him. *I know what you are, man of mythology.* The temptation to reach over and kiss Braden no longer frightened him. Passion erased his habit of analyzing.

Chelsea wiggled impatiently between them, and Jamie willingly turned back. He sat on the bed to worship her breasts, laving her nipples, nibbling along the soft under curve. Braden slipped a hand over her belly and between her legs, parting the pale curls of her mound to play with her clitoris. He slid his fingers in and out of her passage. Jamie watched everything as he worked his way down her body, needing to taste her as the scent in the room increased.

"Braden, give me room."

Two men making love to one woman—he'd never done this before. There were points of juggling limbs he'd never realized. Braden switched his hold, bringing his hand between Chelsea's legs from behind. As Braden eased his fingers back into her sheath, Jamie covered her with his mouth, teasing her clit with his tongue. Her flavor filled him, made his head spin. He reached down and circled his cock with a fist, holding off to make sure Chelsea was satisfied before he grew too tempted.

They worked in tandem, Jamie matching the pace of Braden's thrusts. Slow now, then quicker, until she cried out, her body quivering between them. Heated liquid rushed his tongue as he lapped, dragging his tongue against her folds. Braden pressed in, again and again, prolonging her climax. Jamie's tongue brushed Braden's fingers as the other man slowly circled her clitoris, teasing the still-quivering flesh under his fingers. Chelsea sighed heavily as she leaned back, supported by Braden's torso, her skin flushed.

Jamie held on to his control by a thread, his aching cock reminding him he wanted much, much more.

"You're amazing, Chelsea, so beautiful." Braden kissed her neck.

"Please..."

The tormented need in her voice made Jamie put aside his caution. No longer waiting to see what Braden would do, he rolled her to the mattress and covered her with his body. Skin to skin, her warmth felt

so right under him. He closed his eyes for just a second to appreciate it fully.

He kissed her again, this time a slow and thorough exploration. Tongues and lips and open mouths. He breathed her in and the darkness and fears he'd experienced all faded away. She was right. It was a celebration—of life and love and a passion that had been far too long unanswered.

The stroke of a hand down his back reminded him Braden was still with them, and yet...he couldn't stop. All his focus was on Chelsea, on the pleasure he found in her, the pleasure he wanted to bring her.

"You should see what I see." Braden's deep voice rustled through the air. He touched them both, his hands skimming Jamie's side. Hovering where Jamie cupped Chelsea's breast. The contrast of their fair skin and Braden's darker coloring—his rougher, beefier hands—showed clearly. "You two look like erotic Greek statues, porcelain fine and breathtakingly beautiful."

Chelsea laughed softly as she snaked out an arm to catch Braden around the neck. "And you're Poseidon, rising from the sea to love us both?"

"Hmm, it's not difficult to love you, baby." He kissed her, lowering himself to lie skin to skin against Jamie's side. Jamie watched in fascination until Chelsea squirmed under him, pressing her breast up into his hand, and he shifted to be able to reach her easier. He nibbled and licked, listening to the soft noises of pleasure she made, hearing Braden's whispered words of love.

Then a hand cupped his own neck, threading through his hair. Braden took control of him and turned their faces toward each other.

"I want to taste you." Braden paused, and Jamie's heart leapt to his throat. Slowly, inch by inch, Braden approached. He gave ample time to retreat, but Jamie wanted this. Wanted it as much as he wanted the woman lying under him.

With a satisfied hum, Braden brought their mouths in contact. Rougher, more forceful than touching Chelsea, but just as right. Jamie ignored everything else and simply felt—the caress of Chelsea's hands as she explored his back, the harsher touch of Braden callused hand trailing over Jamie's lower back and buttocks. The softness of her body under him as she opened her legs and he nestled tighter between her thighs. The curls on her mound were wet from his mouth and her juices, and they coated his cock as he rocked his hips slowly. He was enveloped by both of them. Surrounded and satisfied.

He'd never had such a rich and full experience before in his life and he reveled in it.

"I want you. Want you now." Chelsea pressed upward, her rigid nipples hard against his chest.



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