

Impractical Magus



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Grace

Forced to join her family for the holidays, Haily settles down to a tropical cruise with too much alcohol and not enough company. While her sisters are trying to find their matches in the highest ranking magical families, Haily gets the buffet. Knocked into the ocean by chance, she finds herself surrounded by sharks and trapped in a war that revolves around her. Shocked into using her powers for the first time, she grows gills, rides sharks and masters a magic that she didn't know she had.

Loki is the shark shifter Alpha and he takes Haily under his fin, showing her that she has nothing to fear about using her talents underwater, and that this is where she was designed to be. In the water, at his side.

Enjoy this Yuletide tale with sexy sharks, deadly dolphins and a water magus who learns to be herself in the nicest way.

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Impractical Magus
A Nexus Chronicle

By

Viola Grace

Dedication

*To my family, who doesn't understand why I
write, but is happy for me anyway.*

Chapter One

The word fun was being thrown around like a four-letter word and Haily Holly Danvers was not in the mood.

"It will be so much *fun* to be on a cruise for the holidays!"

"We can have so much *fun* without having to worry about the neighbours seeing the spell casting."

"Won't it be *fun* to spend a cold holiday in a hot climate?"

Her sisters and mother went round and round with their f-word. The dressing for dinner would be *fun*, the dances and forced events would be *fun*. Even the matchmaking was causing hysterical giggles at complete random.

Haily brushed her hair and glared at her own reflection. Crappy magic and blue hair—it summed up her life. Too much of everything.

While her mother and sisters used domestic magic to pack, Haily was stuck doing it the mundane way, folding and stuffing. If she used

any of the spells that her family was famous for, her underwear would be found in the yard. Three houses away.

"Haily, are you ready?"

"Yes, Mom." She randomly grabbed dresses from the closet and rammed them into her suitcase. She could iron on the boat.

Muttering, she bounced up and down on the suitcase, stuffing the escapees back inside with a shoehorn. She hauled her luggage down the stairs, snarling silently as her sisters' luggage minced past her as it travelled through the air with a twisted sway.

April, May and June Danvers were waiting next to their self-packed luggage.

Haily stomped to the circle and gingerly laid her suitcase down. *Whew*. She didn't smudge the transport glyph on the floor.

"I can't see why we can't just take a regular portal." May was always a little slow on the uptake.

Their mother cleared her throat and looked over at Haily.

"Oh, right. The magnification. Sorry, Hail." Her sister gave her a weak smile.

"That's right. Everyone has to get blasted through a glyph because of me. Let's just get going, shall we?" She rarely had to explain it to her family, but sometimes May forgot.

Their father nodded and powered up the glyph. Somewhere, across the country, an identical glyph charged up and triggered a gateway for them to fall through.

It was the falling that her family resented.

Haily sighed inwardly as they plummeted through a tunnel of colour, landing softly in a mass of misty light. Her stomach rotated ninety degrees with the effect of the travel and noted that her family looked as grey as she felt.

A masculine throat cleared and they stepped off the glyph, making room for other additions as the magus prepared to cast the charm for another group.

"We designed that spell, why should we have to use the transport for the powerless?" April's whine grated on her nerves.

"We have to travel this way if Haily is coming along. You know that, April. Why are you being so difficult?" Morag Danvers hushed her youngest and shooed her brood out to the docks.

Haily simply ignored her family and wandered aboard the ship anchored off the edge of the floating platform in international waters. Magical family vacations were difficult at the best of times, but this year, some yahoo decided to host a matchmaking cruise to get the various magical families together for some crossbreeding. Haily was just along to show a complete family and not

one that was broken by the unfortunate problems of her genetic mutation.

The purser gave her a look of polite inquiry. "Your name, miss?"

"Haily Danvers. Daughter of Morag and Eduard Danvers."

He gave her a look of respect, so she felt compelled to add, "The one with the unusable magic."

The look of fear spilled into his eyes and he checked off her name. "Deck three, room nine. Your itinerary is on your bed in your room. Enjoy your cruise."

He handed her the key and eagerly greeted the rest of her family. She slumped in defeat and made her way to room nine, deck three. Let the *fun* begin.

Haily was lucky enough to have a single room. She stifled a snicker. None of her sisters enjoyed having her too close. It was like having a Van De Graaff generator in the room. Enough exposure to her and even *their* magic didn't work right anymore.

She pulled on a boring navy sheath. It was the *get to know the other passengers* dinner and yet another reason for *fun*. Damn, she really hated that word.

Her sky blue hair didn't look right against the

navy and she sighed. The white floppy dress it would have to be.

With her temperamental talents, wearing a white beaded dress was a thumb in the nose of fate, but with her hair colour, her wardrobe choices were limited.

The lovely tank dress had a cowl neck and a skirt that fell to her knees when she stood still and flipped up to mid-thigh when she walked. Considering that none of the men at dinner would be interested in her due to her talents, she still knew she looked fabulous and it was enough to boost her ego to the point where she could leave her room.

The dining area was full of the cream of the human-shaped magical families. Wizards, magicians and magi, all here for the holidays, to see and be seen and to possibly meet their match within their own kind.

It was a difficult matter to get the higher-ranking magic users all in one place for these kinds of events and this was a very impressive turnout.

Over two hundred people milled and mingled, introducing, shaking hands and greeting old friends. Haily walked over to her parents, nodded to the cohorts that were having drinks and enjoying a quiet moment while the younger set started flirting.

“A drink, miss?” One of the goblin servers came up to her with a tray and she took one of the delicately stemmed glasses.

The glass was designed for a display of power, so she held it as if cradling a cotton ball. The contents were a layered parfait of liqueurs, each sip completely different from the last. Haily smiled, it was a drink-me potion. Around the room, folks were making faces as they discovered flavours that were not quite palatable.

It was an old trick. Only the most powerful would influence the beverage to tasty flavours. Those who lacked magic would get the grimmest of tastes. The elders of each family were watching the younger ones to determine which members of compatible families would be suitable for matches.

Haily smiled and took another sip of sweet caramel. Quantity of power had never been her problem. A few of the elders eyed her speculatively, then noted her blue hair and quickly looked away.

She sighed and wandered over to the railing, watching the waves beat against the side of the ship as they churned their way to some unnamed, uncharted tropical island.

Dolphins chased the ship, frolicking in the waves. A few whales came up close, attracted by the magical vibrations the ship was giving to the water. She shook her head and let the wind play

with her hair, the blue strands lifting and mimicking the waves.

“Are you thinking of jumping in, Haily?” Her mother came up behind her, sipping at her own drink.

“Of course not, Mom. You know I wasn’t allowed swimming lessons.”

“There were reasons, Haily. Underwater shockwaves could have killed other swimmers nearby. You know how unpredictable your talent is.”

“Yes, Mom. I know.” Of course, she knew. It was the binding rule of Haily’s existence. She was one step away from being locked up by the ruling councils every single day. It was difficult to live with since she was never allowed to forget it.

Her mother’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Thank you for coming, Haily. April, May and June might meet the men for them on this cruise.”

“I know. And it’s why I am here. This is the time of the year to focus on family, isn’t it?”

Morag chuckled and gave her daughter a one-armed hug. “Thank you for understanding.”

“I understand, Mom. Better than anyone can guess. All for the family, that is my motto.”

Her mother faded back into the social scene and when the sun began to set, Haily returned to the party as dinner began to appear on the buffet.

She sat with her parents and their friends as her

sisters took up positions with men of similar ages and power levels. A few brave souls tried to engage her in conversation, but as soon as they asked her if she was seeing anyone, the chill in the air could have frozen them in place.

The party began to roar after dinner when more alcohol and a number of magical beverages came out. Morag winced at the noise when the music kicked off and leaned over, "Haily, can you watch them? Make sure that they get to bed alone?"

She turned to look at her sisters, one blonde and two brunettes. "I will watch them. But if I have to blast their butts into bed, I will."

Eduard shuddered and patted her shoulder. "If you must, you must. Have a nice night, Hail." He pressed a kiss on her forehead and patted her on the shoulder again.

He always called her Hail. It was his way of rubbing it in to her mother that he had been allowed to name their firstborn after the weather on the day she was born. He wanted to name April Sunny, but he had been vetoed and had to be satisfied that he got Hail in. She was the moment of her father's triumph and every time he said her name, she knew it.

She watched them wander off, arms around each other as they returned to their room for some...lord, she did not want to think about it. Parents having sex was creepy at any age.

The party was in full swing and like dozens of magical parties before, some of the morons started showing off with light displays and flashes of power.

Haily's sisters were slow dancing, making out with a young wizard and raiding the dessert bar respectively. They would be safe for a few minutes while she caught some fresh air.

The waves were dark and threatening, but under the dancing lights of the cruise ship, they looked miles away.

"How am I going to plan a life when I can't even be trusted among my own family?"

Her words were answered by a drunken magus inside screaming, "Watch this!"

She turned to look into the party to see what he was referring to and was struck in the chest by a rainbow-hued fireball and thrown into the silent waves.

Fucking *fun*.

Chapter Two

The water closed over her head and her chest burned from where the saltwater was hitting the wound from the flare. She wondered idly if anyone had seen her go overboard. Haily doubted it. They were all busy having *fun*. She fought to regain the surface and her sensible dress restricted her movements.

She sank down, down, down until all she could hear was the rushing of her own blood in her veins. Her air escaped in bubbles and floated toward the light of the retreating boat. She was going to die and she blamed *fun*.

Light sparked around her in the darkness, her hazy mind blamed lack of oxygen, but the light touched her skin and burned. She tried to cry out, but the pain wracked her from head to toe, centering on her neckline and the middle of her back. Her hands clawed at her skin but nothing stopped the burning until she opened her mouth to scream. Cold water rushed into her, but it

didn't come through her mouth. Her shaking hands found gills at her neck and based on the sucking of fabric, gills on her back as well.

Blue hair, gills. On the floor of the ocean, Haily sat and thought about the conversation that she was going to have with her mother.

She started walking on the floor of the ocean, stepping as lightly over and around coral as she could. The closer she was to the ship when they started looking, the better off she would be and the faster she would get her answers.

Haily didn't know how long she had been walking in the darkness, seeking the power vortex that the party boat was generating when shadows flitted between her and her goal.

Oh look, pretty dolphins. She had to be exhausted. As they got closer, the telltale marks of sharks were obvious.

The strange collection of sharks circled her until one of them nudged her hand and she had the horrible feeling he wanted her to grab his dorsal fin.

When another shark came up behind her and nudged her toward the one offering the fin, she began to suspect that rejecting the offer of...whatever they were offering.

The skin of the shark was hard, rough and soft all at the same time. When she locked her hands around the fin, he started moving slowly through

the water.

The back and forth motion of the beast made holding onto him loosely an impossibility. She ended up straddling the animal while holding the fin as closely to her face as she could.

Now that she was more secure, the strange pod of sharks picked up speed.

Haily's new gills loved the increased speed. They replaced her lost oxygen in only a few minutes, clearing her mind and leaving her in no doubt that she was meant to be underwater.

Her eyes were adjusting to the minimal light as they dove deeper than they should have been able to stand. She was certainly surprised that *she* could manage to withstand the deeper pressures of the ocean depths.

Her escort had no doubts that she was suited for this environment. They simply pulled her with them.

The darkness was now almost absolute for her eyes and she held on for dear life as their path took them through coral stands, rocky outcroppings and past other predators who glowed in the inky black.

Her transport ducked deep and surfaced near a bubble inside some sort of cavern. Light emanated from the magical glow balls mounted to the wall and Haily stumbled to the shoreline when her shark shallowed out.

As she took her first wobbling steps, coughing out the air in her gills, a shadow on the shore came forward to assist her. "Come this way, magus."

She took the hand gratefully, then looked around at the men who were now exiting the waters next to her. "Ohmygod." She blushed furiously and closed her eyes as a few wandered up and casually wrapped short skirts around their hips. Several didn't bother. It was like leaving the water with a naked football team.

The person holding her chuckled, "I apologize for our lack of modesty. We are mostly on our own down here."

"No, it's fine. I am sure." Haily looked up and almost fell back into the water.

"Are you all right?"

"Just a little...dizzy." Shocked would be a better term. He was a shifter. There was a certain stamp to a shifter's body language that always gave them away. His grin was painfully sharp and his eyes solid black, but his features were assembled in an arrangement more suitable for Grecian gods.

"Then let's get you inside and comfortable. It must be hard on the system to come through a rush of magical transformation after almost drowning." He was starting to move her out of the shallows and through the hall where the others had disappeared.

Light streamed through the huge cavern leaving her blinking in shock. Her companion's eyes blinked and then an inner lid blinked sideways. "I am guessing that you spend a lot of time in shark mode."

"I do. It is something I am hoping to change, magus." He escorted her to a table and sat down across from her.

He was more disturbing when she faced him head on. "How do you know what I am?"

"The ocean told us. Your magic came to us on the waves."

She cleared her throat and gathered her thoughts. "I don't know what the *ocean* told you, but I am not a good magus."

He raised his midnight eyebrows, "You are of an evil inclination?"

"No. I simply mean I am not a skilled magic user. My magic...it's wrong." Saying it out loud was freeing. She had fought for years not to admit it, even to herself, but now, underwater, it seemed right to say it.

He smiled and a young shifter brought them something hot and sweet. "You were too powerful. Too much energy, too fast with your spells. You can do your incantations in silence, no need for an audible trigger."

"You know an awful lot for a man I just met." She sipped at the drink.

"You are not the first water magus born, just the most recent."

"Water magus?"

He nodded and grinned that disturbingly sharp grin. "Yes. Air, earth and fire are easy to spot and have no problem with their talent above the seas. A water magus needs water to bring her into focus."

She drained her cup and her host refilled it. Haily sat in silence while she got herself under control. There was a possibility that he was correct. It would definitely explain why the gills she just grew were lying shut, but she could still feel them.

"This is fascinating, but why should I believe you?"

He was still smiling. "You shouldn't. You are here because I am going to prove it to you. Everything that I have just said can and will be proven in the next few days."

She swallowed, "Days? I can't stay here for days. My family will miss me and come looking."

"They won't find you until you have gotten your talent under control. We have been guarding and training the water magi for centuries. Now it's your turn." His face looked as if it was waiting for something. His midnight eyes blinked, the lack of whites in his eyes becoming less creepy by the second.

The interior of the large cave spun around her. The faces of the shark shifters grew fuzzy.

"Who are you?"

"Ekobai. Loki Ekobai. Alpha of the shark shifters." He rose from his seat and came around behind her.

Good thing he did, she fell right into his arms.

* * * *

April Danvers giggled in the arms of her dance partner. As he swung her around the floor, she glanced over to the spot where Haily had been camped. There was no Haily at the table. That wasn't like her.

She paused and broke away from her partner, a guy named Brock or Brent or something. "May? June? Have you seen Haily?"

June looked up from the tower of cream puffs she was feeding to a guy who was more jaw than man. "What? No. I haven't seen her since just after dinner. Why?"

"I have a funny feeling."

Her sisters gathered around her and their dates edged away. May looked closely at her, "Are you sure it isn't just the shooters?"

"No. This is a Haily feeling and not a hey-duck-Haily's-using-magic feeling. This is far more serious. We need to get the parents." April

smoothed her blue dress and looked to her sisters. "We can either look for her now, or we can face Mom and Dad in the morning."

May held her hand up. "Fine. First we look, then we interrupt Mom and Dad, deal?"

"Deal."

"Deal." June nodded and patted the giant jaw guy on the shoulder. "See you later, Luke."

"My name is Tony."

"Good for you. See you later, Tony."

With April's senses in the lead, she looked around for their missing elder. The trail went from the table, to the wall and then out onto the deck. There was a peculiar buzzing as if a magic burst was being overlaid on Haily's imprint.

The sensations led to the railing. "Oh lord. Quick, use every tracking spell you have. If she is on this boat, we have to find her. If we have no result in five minutes, we are waking the parents. I think she went overboard."

June went green and May started to cry. April used her tracking spells, but they kept leading to the railing.

May had the same result after she stammered her spells out and June just ran for their parents.

When Morag and Eduard arrived on deck, the faces on their drunken daughters must have made an impression. "What happened? June was... June."

"Mom, Dad, I think Haily was accidentally blasted over the railing, but I don't know how long ago." April straightened her shoulders and faced the disapproval.

To her astonishment, tears came to Morag's eyes and Eduard looked unsettled. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure. She isn't on the deck and we can't find her inside. Mine and May's tracking spells both stop at the railing."

Morag straightened, wiped the tears out of her eyes and looked to her husband. "Get the Morgans and turn this boat around. We are going to do a reconstruction and find where our daughter hit the deep."

April sighed in relief as her father left to follow their mother's orders. Their parents were in charge and they would find Haily. April just hoped that her sister had discovered an untapped affinity for swimming.

Chapter Three

The pillow under her face felt like the softest suede and the cover that draped over her was made of something leathery, yet butter soft. Haily opened her eyes to the bizarre sight of a canopy over her with four posts holding it up. She also wasn't alone in the bed.

"What the heck?"

She sat upright and clutched the blanket to her breasts. Unfortunately, that ended up exposing more of her bed companion than she was comfortable with. Planes of muscle and bulging arms moved as he turned toward her and stared with those jet black eyes.

"I see you are well rested. Time to begin your training." He stood and put one of those short skirts into place. It didn't conceal nearly enough for her peace of mind. Living through almost three decades without the hope of a man in her life made her very sensitive to things like attractive muscular nudity.

"Training? What about breakfast?" She got out of the bed when she noticed she was still in her white dress.

He looked over his shoulder and winked, "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to swim on a full stomach?"

She pattered after him, enjoying the feel of stone worn smooth down through the centuries under her feet. "My mother forbids me from swimming."

Loki waited for her to catch up. "Does she? I am guessing that the water magus gene is on her side of the family then. If they never went to the water, they would not know what they were. Interesting technique. Are you married?"

Her face flushed red. "Me? No. With my uncontrolled talent, I am not a good catch for anyone in my social circle."

"Control is in the eye of the beholder. I would bet that you were able to cast the perfect spell, you just had way too much power behind it." He was leading her down the hall that led to the water.

She could smell it. Clean, cold and so inviting. She shook her head and focussed again. Water had never seemed inviting before, but then again, as she touched her neck and felt her back, the gills were still there and still eager for water.

It was embarrassing, but she turned to Loki. "Can you unzip me?"

"What?"

"We are going into the water, right?"

"Yes." His face showed confusion.

"Then I need the back of my dress unzipped to the waist to free up my back gills. The fabric gets in the way."

"Oh. Certainly. How does this work?" His fingers touched the top of her neckline gently and she quickly explained.

"There is a small tab, pull it down slowly and steadily. It should not take much power to do it."

She felt the small tug on her neckline and then the caress of cool air as the zipper opened. Her skin felt hot in comparison to the damp atmosphere of the cave, but when Loki stopped pulling as he freed her gills, she took a gasping breath. "Thank you."

He came to her side and took one of her hands, "You are welcome. Now, come along, we are going into the sea."

She shivered and lagged behind as far as she could. "What will I be doing?"

"Illumination spells. You are going to try to light up the submerged cavern I take you to. I will have to alter my shape somewhat as my gills don't come out until I take on a half-form. Will that distress you?"

"Probably, but let's get this started. If it is all a dream, the water ought to bring me out of my

coma anyway.” She took a few steps until they were both in the water to the knees.

Her mind ran through all the illumination spells she could think of and the moment that her gills were splashed, her mind cleared and fear of the water faded. By the time her upper gills were submerged, she was eager to be guided to the cavern he had mentioned.

Loki’s face was only remotely human now. Thick grey skin with black striping took the place of his Polynesian tone. His black eyes remained the same, though he now had a dorsal fin and webbed hands, arms and feet. As he kept her hand to lead her forward, he also showed her a tail that could do quite a bit of damage.

Are you all right, magus? His voice in her thoughts was crystal clear.

She focussed and tried to send a message back, *Haily, my name is Haily.*

Are you all right, Haily? The grin on his face was now truly disturbing.

Fine. Shall we head to that cavern?

By all means. He swam behind her and wrapped his arms around her ribs, moving them swiftly through the water.

They were still in the darkest deep. *Is it daylight up there?*

Yes, but we prefer to be out of the light of the human world. It is far safer to be at the bottom of the sea than

the top of it.

It made a certain sense. Is there a way to get a message to my family?

You will be able to do that later today if you wish. We just need to get you used to channelling your talent through the water. Once you have grasped that, all spells you have ever learned will be at your disposal.

That sent a thrill of anticipation down her spine. She kept her mind shut as they swam along, her body completely lost, but part of her brain keeping close track of where she was. Haily supposed it was similar to April's tracking and instincts. No one in the family ever argued with April's instincts, not if they wanted to live.

She used the swim time to focus on spells she wanted to try. The feel of walls next to her started her heart pounding. She was going to be able to practice her magic and no one was trying to stop her. This was going to be so cool.

We are here. I will go to the entrance. You may commence whenever you are ready. He released her and she slowly waved her arms in the slightly moving current.

Her senses expanded and suddenly, she could see the walls around her in a gray scale. Haily turned to face the far end of the cavern and selected a spell from her whirling thoughts. If her mother was right, this spell would kill her. If the strange shark shifter was right, she was a water

magus.

She touched her gills absently and decided to believe Loki for the time being. With a deep breath, she silently chanted her spell and threw the power to the far end of the cavern. It struck the far wall and stuck. Another whispered word and the spell hopped in a series of splotches around the wall until they made a complete circle.

Showtime. She activated the magic with a word in her thoughts and the cavern exploded into daylight.

Holy starfish!

She looked behind her at Loki, to see him shielding his eyes from the bright light. *I did it!*

Yes, you did. Congratulations. This was obviously successful. Is there anything else you would like to try?

Haily looked down at her dress and whispered silent words. *There, that was one.*

One what? He looked around for proof of her skills.

She turned to show him her back. *It now goes low enough to free the gills without the zipper.*

The mental chuckle was indulgent.

How long will these lights burn?

Burn? They are permanent unless I turn them off. I used a transformation spell on the rock.

How do you have that spell?

My name is Haily Holly Danvers, of the Spell Crafters. We design spells. It's in our genes.

Those black eyes did that disturbing double blink again before he smiled. *You may leave the lights on if you wish, but it isn't necessary.*

Her stomach rumbled. *Can we have breakfast now?*

Can you find your way back?

Probably, but I don't want to try. Oh, can I make a call?

This is your experiment, do what you will.

With trepidation rolling through her, she reached out to contact her family, the communication spell forming a great white whirling vortex in front of her.

* * * *

Morag stood next to her husband as they prepared to cast the spell that would show exactly what happened to Haily. Together, they chanted and reached out, turning their memory of their daughter into a three-dimensional image.

The party started up around them, anyone near Haily turning into an image. Morag's heart ached as she realized that no one was coming near her daughter. Not even a pity dance.

She and Eduard sped up the image, the loneliness on the face of their eldest heartbreaking as they watched her sigh and go to the wall, then stand in the doorway, turning suddenly as

something caught her attention. A bright flare came from one of the partygoers and struck Haily squarely in the chest. Surprise and pain froze her face as the power exploded on contact. She was lifted off her feet and thrown over the railing. The party never skipped a beat.

Morag rushed to the railing to watch her daughter disappear into the blackness of the waves. Eduard placed his arm around her shoulders and pulled her back.

"Elli, can you track her?"

Elli Morgan was one of the most advanced tracking mages in existence. Her son Tony was a good age for one of Morag's daughters, but he was all chin, few brains. He favoured his father.

Elli took a deep breath and whispered her spell over the water. "She's alive. Something has her, something old and powerful."

Dolphins came to the surface and frolicked in the waves around the almost immobile ship.

Eduard was looking at the animals with a considering eye. "Do you think they know where she is?"

Morag scowled, "Why would they? They are just dumb animals."

"No, my dear, I believe they are shifters." He leaned out and gestured for one to come aboard.

The dolphin took a running leap and shifted into the form of a naked man as he skidded across

the deck. He cleared his throat and grabbed a towel from one of the lounge chairs.

It took him three tries before he was able to speak. "Greetings, thank you for the welcome. May I ask why you have asked me to come aboard?"

Morag nodded to Eduard, her throat too clogged to speak.

Her husband stepped forward and spoke. "Our eldest daughter has gone missing and we fear for her safety. Is there anything that you can tell us about her whereabouts?"

"Your eldest daughter? You have others?" He made a gesture with his hands and a few more dolphins leapt onto the deck, transforming mid-air.

"We do. But we are concerned with the one who is missing."

The dolphin shifter cocked his head. The others on board came forward as they dressed in towels. "I see. Well, I could tell you where the water magus is, but I would rather meet your other daughters. Where are they?"

Morag got a sudden chill and put a shield between the magic users and the shifters. The first dolphin gave her a look of contempt and strode forward. "You might have to pay for that. Let's see how agreeable your offspring are."

He gripped her by the arm and the other

shifters took possession of the magi on the decks.

Morag swallowed. "Why didn't it work?"

"Because we are on the ocean and your magic has no anchor here. We tried to get to the water magus first, but the sharks beat us to her, as usual. If she has sisters, one of them may have the same abilities. Let's just go and see, shall we?"

He was hauling her back into the main dining hall when a burst of light erupted in front of them.

Light streamed everywhere and in the center, Haily's face and body took form. Her hair was waving in a current and slowly flexing as she moved. Morag stifled a cry of joy. Haily smiled and tried to speak, but frowned.

A booming voice in Morag's mind almost dropped her and the rest of those in the vicinity to their knees. *Hello, Mom. Hiya, Dad, I am fine. A few things have been explained and I can use my talents if I practice really hard. I just wanted you to know I am okay.*

Morag's eldest looked carefully at the scene in front of her. *What is going on?*

"The dolphins have an interest in meeting your sisters. We were just going to make an introduction." She hoped that her serious and intuitive daughter caught on.

Haily smiled brightly, a facial expression she never engaged in, so Morag held her breath. *Glad to hear it. Those girls just don't get out much. I always*

said they were too shy. I will be with you as soon as I get a grip on my talent. I will check in tomorrow, see you soon, Mummy.

Morag waved farewell as the light faded. Haily was on her way and would help however she could. Never in her twenty-eight years had she ever called Morag, mummy.

* * * *

April gathered her sisters when the first dolphin came aboard. "We need to hide somewhere."

"Why? That guy is cute." May was of a lecherous mind as soon as she saw any naked guy.

"Because I have a very bad feeling about this and the bad feeling is centered around *us*."

June gave her a solemn look, "Then let's get the hell out of here."

Together, they rushed out of the concealment of the ballroom, down the stairs and in a sudden bit of inspiration, into Haily's room.

June did her thing and sent a cleansing fire to remove all traces of scent and magic. She used it when she wanted to escape her sisters and it worked for all magic users except Haily.

April smiled as they huddled in silence, breaking into Haily's stash of candy and sundry snacks. Haily could kick their butts when she made it back to the ship. April hoped that she

would make it back soon. Whatever was happening was tangled up with Haily and only she could set it right.

Chapter Four

*As the blaze of light faded, she turned to Loki.
You have to get me to that ship.*

*He scowled. I saw. Rathor and his dolphins
are on the cruise ship. That isn't good.*

Then you understand I need to go back there. Now.

Yes. Come on, I will go as fast as I can.

*Good, I am going to make sure you go even faster
than that.*

*He gripped her under her arms and lashed his
tail.*

*She dimmed the lights as they left the cavern
and concentrated on making them rocket through
the water to the outpost she could see in her mind.*

You know where we are going, don't you?

*She chuckled mentally. I do. I can see the life
forces of the shifters thick in the water and the bubble of
energy that is our outpost.*

*The grin in his voice was audible in her mind.
Our?*

Unless you want me to leave. I feel more at home

here in less than a day than I have in twenty-eight years on the surface.

Ours it is. He changed his grip and she was now held far more securely against him than she had been before. She also had proof that the shark shifters were not coldblooded.

Their speed increased until they reached the shallows. She stopped the spell and stumbled onto the smooth sandy shore. Beside her, Loki de-sharked and to her surprise, his eyes and teeth had taken on a far more human-looking aspect.

Loki sent out a mental call that she could feel though not hear. It seemed that out of the water she was just as dippy as she ever was.

He turned to her. "We will leave after you have had something to eat and a change of clothing. That dress is lovely but not suitable for constant dipping in the water."

She looked down and for the first time noticed that her dress was transparent except for the beading. "Why didn't you mention something earlier?"

He chuckled as he hustled her up the walk to the main hall. "What and spoil the view?"

She punched him in the shoulder.

He winced and got her seated while a selection of lightly cooked fish and rice were put in front of her. "I am guessing that it's a good thing I like sushi."

She was referring to the rice, but he frowned. "I didn't think of that. You probably have a very different diet."

"Usually. May I try another experiment?"

"Of course. What do you need?"

"A pitcher of fresh water and a bowl."

He squinted and within two minutes, a youngling brought the requested materials.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting breakfast. Shh." She poured the water into the bowl and then turned the bowl into a fixed portal. She scanned her favourite buffet joint and used the water to suck out a Belgian waffle with syrup that someone had just placed on their plate.

As she brought it free of the water, she squealed in triumph, dropping the waffle to the plate she had been given when she sat down. Her magic had wrapped the waffle through the water and now it was all warm, golden and sticky on her plate. She grinned at Loki. "Did you want one?"

He shook his head in astonishment. "That is amazing."

"Thank you. Hold on, I am going back for sausages." She focussed and disappeared some sausages from another plate.

"Score!" Chortling, she ate her land-style breakfast while the men around her ate their predominantly raw fish. Once she finished the

waffle and sausage, she took a few bites of the fish. They had cooked it and based on what she was seeing cooking was not an activity they engaged in when it came to fish.

"There. That was lovely. What was that?"

"A large eel. Most of the time we just eat as we swim."

Ah, the shark form. Right. She could only imagine the devastation the entire mass of sharks could engage in while swimming together.

"Fifteen minutes and we are on our way. Is there anything you want to know?"

"Yes, what the hell is up with the dolphins? I was under the impression that they were cute and flippy. They were swimming next to the boat all day yesterday."

His eyes flicked to shark-black and then back to brown. "They could feel you but had no idea who you were. An un-activated water magus is like a warm current in the water. You can feel it, but the point of origin will almost always be impossible to trace."

"Why were they sensing me? What do they want?"

"They want a water magus of their own to use against us in territorial wars. We have lived in these waters for thousands of years. The dolphins followed the mages and are now trying to take our hunting grounds from us."

"So, a water magus..."

"Would be a weapon in their war against us and one with your power could be capable of incalculable damage."

She swallowed. "What do you want from me?"

"We want you to train to your best ability and to live in the ocean as a free-honoured citizen."

She frowned. "Do I have to live *in* the ocean?"

"I would recommend it. That or nearby. There are some tiny islands in the vicinity if you prefer."

"Uncharted?"

He looked surprised. "Of course."

She laughed. "Let me think about it."

"Of course. All choices are yours. We will never restrict your choices or location. The sharks here are dedicated to the freedom of the area and the opportunities those living here should be able to have."

She smiled. "The opportunity to eat or be eaten?"

"Yes. And on that note, if you are not swimming with one of us, please use a protective shield. The natural sharks in the area enjoy the abundant sea life."

The threat was implicit. While the shifters wouldn't eat her, something else might want to.

"Why is my mother worried?"

"They are going to test your sisters to see if any of them are water magi."

"Test...but how? I only transformed when I drowned. Oh my God." She felt nauseated. "They are going to drown my sisters?"

"Yes. Don't worry, we are ready to swim."

"Fuck swimming, I am making a portal." She rose with him and walked to the launch pool. While he and the others became sharks, she swam out beyond the mouth of the cavern, through the tunnel and into open water. With unlimited ocean at her disposal, she flung her arms wide and created a transport portal that led right under the cruise ship.

We will swim right under the cruise ship. Is that acceptable?

A shark that had the feel of Loki swam up next to her. *It is, are you ready? The dolphins will have the ship surrounded. It may be hard to get to the surface.*

It isn't the surface I am worried about. How am I going to explain a hundred sharks to my mother?

A chuckle rang in the minds of the sharks around her and she grabbed onto Loki as he lashed his tail to bolt through the huge portal. The rest of the sharks followed in seconds and the moment they were all through, she collapsed the portal down to a pinprick. *If any of you need to get back home, just come back to the portal site. It will only open for you.*

Loki asked, *How can you manage that kind of precision?*

I have no flipping idea. Now, into the sunlight. Mush!

The noise he made would have been a growl in another creature, but she had never heard that sharks verbalized at all.

They swam upward, the dark of the oceans depths lightening to navy, then denim, azure and finally sky blue. Dolphins were surrounding a large shape. Haily took a deep breath. The sharks increased speed as they grew closer to the surface, silence and intensity was in every muscle.

Attached to Loki, she slipped through the dolphin guards. The swarm of sharks distracted and partially destroyed the dolphins in a vicious attack. Haily didn't have time to weep for the treacherously cute dolphin shifters as Loki leapt out of the water, aiming for the decking above.

A dolphin struck them in mid-flight, separating them and sending them tumbling back into the ocean.

Loki!

I have to take care of this, Haily. Get to your family!

He was alive. She breathed a little more deeply and cast a spell to raise her out of the water in a waterspout. The tornado lifted her up and she was soon on the decking. The dolphins were inside the ship, she could feel them.

Now that she had touched the vastness of the ocean, she understood what she was sensing.

Warm blooded, the dolphins were also predatory. They ate fish just like the sharks did, but now they were out for power. Her power.

She looked down and cursed, her dress was still transparent, "Damn it." Nearly naked or no, she had a family to rescue.

The magical families were in the dining area. Four shifters watched them. With her blue hair wet and not concealing a darned thing, she lounged in the doorway. She whistled and beckoned the shifters to come to her. "You hoo. Come here, flipper boys."

The magi looked shocked at her appearance and her come-hither pose. "Magic doesn't work on them, Haily."

She chuckled. "Not your magic."

The dolphins looked at each other and then took a few steps before they realized that they were approaching a water magus. It was too late. She created a water tendril and wrenched them from the dining hall, bounced them on the deck and then dumped them back in the ocean.

She faced the magi and asked them, "Where is my family?"

Sixteen shaking hands pointed down the hall that led to the cabins. The others simply stared at her in astonishment.

She ran down the hall, using her senses to read the location of the dolphins. Her still-damp body

let her encase two of them in stone and one in a cage. She was drying out far too quickly.

Haily could sense a very powerful dolphin down below, but he wasn't near her sisters' energy and that was comforting. Wait, her sisters were in *her* room. They were probably into her snack stash.

She knocked on the door and when there was no answer, she sighed and used the super-secret shave-and-a-haircut knock.

The door opened and a hand reached out to drag her in. Voices squealed, "Haily!" She was hugged until she lost her breath.

"I am so glad that you three are safe."

"Where were you?" April was asking her at exceptionally close range.

"Under the sea. I met a crab and he sang and there was a whole musical number that I am a little fuzzy on." Her answer was answer enough. Her sisters shut up. "Where are Mom and Dad?"

"We don't know. We hid in here and burned our trail. Is it safe?"

"Safe enough to hide you with the rest in the dining hall. If any shark shifters come on board, they are the good guys. They will be naked, so play nice, May." Haily ruffled her sister's hair and then darted back to the door, using her fading senses to find her parents.

They were down below but approaching the

stairwell. She posed in the stairwell, her arms crossed on her chest, leaning back casually. Her body was almost completely dry and though she could feel the ocean on the other side of the hull, she couldn't use it to focus.

When her parents and the dolphin alpha appeared on the stairs, she winked. "Rathor, I hear you have been eager to meet me."

The dolphin shifter pushed past her parents and ran up the stairs to grip her by the shoulders. "You are the water magus."

"I am. Care to come outside where we can discuss this?" She looked up into his brilliant blue eyes and saw the cold soul inside.

He suddenly got a calculating look in his eyes. He released her and backed up to catch her parents with each hand. "As long as I keep some leverage."

She walked up the stairs and stood in the dining hall. He kept his gaze on her the entire time.

"Oh, balls." Her heart sank as she saw who was waiting for her. "Loki, they got you."

He was bruised and battered. His black eyes shining with something that wasn't defeat. A dolphin shifter on either side guarded him.

"Lord Rathor, the rest of the sharks abandoned him. We captured him after he was wounded boarding the ship."

Rathor strode forward and punched Loki in the abdomen. "Not so strong without your sharks to guard you, are you?"

Loki looked at him and didn't say a word, merely straightened slowly.

"Well, I have the water magus, I have the alpha shark. I merely need the lady's cooperation and we can let these good folks resume their holiday cruise."

Haily looked at him suspiciously. "What do you mean *my* cooperation?"

"I wish to have an undersea army that no one can defeat. That means having you at my side."

She cocked her head and gave him a contemptuous look. "You have to be nuts."

He reared back in anger and lifted his hand. She simply stood and glared at him. He got himself under control with some difficulty. "You will swear to serve me, or this will be the last time your parents breathe air."

That was direct enough. "What would keep me from breaking my word?"

"A blood oath. Even your kind is bound by it."

Gasps echoed through the room as the magic users acted to the horror of his declaration.

She shuddered. He was truly a twisted son of a bitch. Swearing a blood oath would bind her blood to his...until death. She would be his puppet and would never be able to lie to him.

"I don't think so."

"You are dry, magus. There is no way you can gather enough power to drive me off."

His words made her smile. She raised her hand and formed a ball of magic. Her parents threw themselves to the floor on either side of the dolphin. "Power was never my problem." The blast smashed him through the wall and over the railing.

Haily turned to the two remaining dolphins and they took a grip on Loki as she took a step toward them. She didn't have enough control to strike them individually, but they didn't know that. She raised her hand and summoned another ball of power.

"Let him go or be dolphin tartar."

One of them clued in, "You can't hit both of us."

Loki did something she would never let him forget. With his lips pursed, he blew a stream of seawater on the front of her dress, powering her up and making her naked in the same move. She grinned and used the water to split the ball of power into two. The dolphins collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

She walked up to the shark shifter and glared up at him. "Did you just spit on me?" He wasn't given time to answer, she leaned up on tiptoes and pulled his head down for a breath-stealing kiss.

He tasted of the sea, a tiny bit of coppery blood and all Loki. It was her father clearing his throat that finally broke up their first kiss. When she drew back, his eyes were brown and his teeth were normal. It shook her a little that his sharky aspects had not mattered.

“Mom, Dad, this is Loki Ekobai, Alpha of the shark shifters. Loki, this is Morag and Eduard Danvers, Spell Crafters.”

Her beaux stepped forward, butt naked. She used a good portion of what focus was left to wrap a cloth around his hips to cover the essentials. Loki shook her father’s hand and kissed her mother’s.

Morag smiled weakly. “Shark?”

“Yes, ma’am. Nineteenth generation. We have been training and guarding water magi wherever they appear.”

Eduard scowled. “As long as it is just guarding.”

Haily’s grin froze when Loki added, “Well, we have slept together, but it was just the once. I don’t think it counts.”

Chapter Five

Of course, her sisters would take that moment to walk in. The shrieks of laughter and astonishment almost drowned out Eduard's roar of disbelief and Loki's gasp as Haily punched him in his already-bruised ribs.

"We slept in the same bed. Nothing happened, Dad."

As they stood and she tried to plead her innocence, Rathor came back up over the railing, "You will be mine, magus. Come here."

He was definitely worse for wear, his blonde hair partially torched and sticking up, his skin blackened in places and eyes glazed.

Loki shrugged. He had no more water.

"Fine."

She spit in her hand and before her sisters could finish yelling, "Oh gross!" she blasted her power through the saliva and knocked him unconscious.

Loki shook his head in amazement. "A true spit ball. Interesting."

Morag shook her head, "That is amazing, Haily. A water magus. Who would have thought it?"

Haily looked to her mom, "You know what I am?"

"I have read of them, everyone has. But no one has seen one in centuries." She shook her head again.

Haily went to her mother and held her by the shoulders. "Why did you forbid me from learning to swim?"

Morag blushed and looked over at Loki. "I don't think this is the place for this discussion."

"This is the perfect place. Now, why wasn't I allowed in the water when my sisters all had lessons?"

"We thought there was mer-blood in our bloodline. There was a reference to blue hair, water and power as well as gills in one of our family histories. Your father and I just assumed that..."

Haily sighed and took one of her mother's hands, placing it over her gills. "Water magus. How do you think that I can be in the ocean if I can't breathe in it?"

"Oh." Morag looked at her and then dawning understanding finally struck. "Oh, oh gods, Haily. I had no idea."

She leaned forward and hugged her mom. "Not a problem, Mom. But that is what the power

problem was. I am designed to function underwater. The water slows everything down."

Eduard suddenly came in on the hug and smaller impacts indicated that April, May and June were in on it. A full Danvers hug. One of only five in history.

When they finished their hug and parted, Haily moved to stand beside Loki. "Mom, Dad, I want to finish getting the hang of this. I will be staying out here for a while."

Eduard grew suspicious. "How long is a while?"

"She will be safe with me, Magus Danvers." Loki wrapped his arm around her and pulled her to his side. "She will be given property put aside by the councils for just such a being and she will have full access to all implements and libraries that she requires. We are prepared to forward her learning. Ah, here they are."

A surge of shark shifters came over the railing. One came over and nodded to Loki. "The area is clear of dolphin shifters. Your cruise is free to continue. We will take Rathor with us. He will face the shifter council."

April, May and June were staring at the naked males as they wandered around and attended those who had been injured by the dolphins.

Morag shook her head, "I can't believe it. Dolphin shifters are evil, sharks are helpful."

Loki cleared his throat. "I will correct your misapprehension. We are not helpful. We are doing what is necessary to allow our feeding grounds to remain unmolested. The dolphins are more power hungry. We simply enjoy our status quo. It is a difference of mindset which guides action."

"Ah. I understand." Morag didn't understand, but she was making an effort.

"Thanks, Mom. The sharks just want to do what sharks do. This dolphin sect wants to destroy and take over."

Her mother smiled in relief. "That makes more sense. Thank you. So, Haily, you will go with them?"

"I will. I can't describe the feeling to you. When I am under the water, there is this tremendous soul all around me and it holds me, supporting me. When I use my magic, it helps me direct and control it."

Tears formed in Morag's eyes. "That I can understand, too. But now that I know you can contact us at any time, I can let you go with an easy heart." Something hit her, "Will you come back to the boat for Yule?"

Haily looked over at Loki.

He nodded.

"Yes. We will come back for Yule."

"We?"

"We."

Loki came up and put his arm around her waist. "We need to be going. Can you bring the portal to the surface?"

"Sure. Once I am immersed. I am not doing the spit thing again. That was way too showy." She chuckled.

Haily looked around and found all of the magic users on their feet, some talking to the sharks and her sisters had cornered a few of the men and were backing them up against a wall. "Oh, geez. I am beginning to wonder which the more dangerous species is. Loki, go help them."

"Are you insane? I am not getting in there." He chuckled and crossed his arms.

Sighing, Haily stomped over to the sharks and gave them an order. "It's time to go. Get in the water."

They didn't run, but they walked determinedly past the three sisters and dove over the edge without hesitation.

Haily hugged her sisters and grinned, "I will try and get a few of them back here for Yule."

April, May and June all hugged her in a rush, wishing her well and telling her to change her wardrobe.

The sharks had taken the dolphins over the edge, under guard, and were making sure that they breathed before being hauled down below.

Haily smiled at the advantage gills gave her.

She sat on the railing and dangled her legs over the water. Sharks stirred beneath her and a frisson of nerves ran through her. She waved goodbye and was going to keep talking when Loki popped her off the railing with a shove to her back.

Chapter Six

Her shriek rent the air as she fell, stopping in a splash the moment she struck the water. As soon as she was in the water, she remembered why she didn't need to fear it. A quick personal shielding kicked in just in case not all of the sharks were shifters.

Loki broke the water next to her and she used her back gills to inhale and sink herself. His form shifted before her eyes—legs fusing, dorsal fin sprouting and teeth elongating to deadly points. She straddled his back, rucking her skirt up.

With her control back to full force, she pulled the portal up to them. *Where do you want the portal to lead?*

You can change the destination?

I can.

Then let's go here. I will tell the others. An image of a watery city in the dark depths of the ocean formed in his mind and transferred to hers.

She changed the destination of the portal and as

it came up to them, they swam down to meet it. One minute their backs were to the sun, the next they were deep in the Bermuda Triangle.

The city glowed welcome for them. The sharks guarding the dolphins went first and when one tried to break free, Haily grabbed him with a glove of magic and shoved him through the access port.

Loki swam up into the port where an attendant handed him a hip wrap. The rest of their group was waiting. Haily's dress was still wet and see-through, but she wasn't being given a clothing option, so she simply walked along in her wet dress with men ogling her as she passed.

The city was amazing. There were entry and exit ports within easy reach. Even a few static portals for those coming from land. She didn't know half of the shifters she was seeing, but a few rare species caught her attention. All manner of ocean life was represented here, from sea horses to blue whales.

Their path took them to a large hall in the centre of the city and there they waited until a whale shark came to escort them to the inner chamber.

"The court will see you now."

Haily watched the proceedings with interest and only had to stand once when she was identified as the object in dispute. She had been expecting something like this. If she had been on

land and a shifter had been the subject of just such an event, it would have been the object under dispute as well.

Rathor and his men were found guilty of territory infringement and sentenced to maintenance duty within the city, all territory they had acquired being handed over to the sharks.

Loki was satisfied with the ruling from the council and after signing a few papers, he nodded his readiness to leave. "That does it. We are done here for today, sweet. Come along and we will get you a better outfit. That one is wearing on my self-control."

She didn't look down, but her body reacted to his admiration without her willing it to. "There is an island involved in my water magus-ness?"

"Yes. Our clan has kept it in trust. It has nothing on it right now. The storms do a wonderful job of scrubbing it clean after the previous water magi leave."

They were on their way back to the pool where they had entered the city. "Leave or die?"

"Sometimes one, sometimes the other."

The beading on her skirt kept it around her thighs when she jumped into the pool, but when she swam down to wait for her escorts, it moved in a jellyfish manner back toward her knees.

Loki's shark body slid into the water with the ease of a sword cutting water. *Portal home, Haily?*

The rest of the shark shifters circled around them as she prepared the portal. She mounted Loki again and he swam them home through the swirling vortex of power.

Stumbling out of the water, she cleared her gills and rang out her hair. The salt water didn't seem to affect her in the same manner she had heard friends describe. Her body seemed simply to transform it into plain old freshwater when it sat on her skin.

Loki reformed next to her with his dark brown eyes dancing with amusement. "Would you care to see your rooms?"

"My rooms? There is more than just your bed here?" A tiny touch of disappointment ran through her now that she would not be sharing his accommodations.

He chuckled. "I needed to make sure you would not make a run for it."

"That is certainly one way to arrange it. Now, new rooms, new clothes?" She raised her eyebrows.

He grumbled and sent another one of those sonic signals that she could feel but not hear.

They walked through the halls and she nodded to a few faces that she recognized. Names would come later. It was enough that she was looking the shifters in the eye and recognizing them.

They went deeper into the outpost. "Wow, this

is really far."

"It is to keep you safe from attack. There are two hundred of my folk between any attackers and you."

"Good to know."

One of the younger shifters came forward and delivered a pile of folded leathers and a key. Loki took both items from the youngster. "Thanks, Gorlin."

"You are very welcome, Alpha." The younger man bowed and strutted away proudly.

"Why are there only men here?"

Loki looked at her, "You are not a man, but you are here."

"I am a magus and you know what I mean. I haven't seen one female shark shifter."

"They are in the family outposts. This one is for bachelors only. When we have our semi-annual gatherings, many meet and find their match. New young men are inducted into the bachelor outposts and sporting events focussing on self-control are played."

"It sounds like a fun family gathering."

"It can be. It can also be a pain in the ass when I have to fight younger males for control of the schools." He shook his head and led the way up a set of stairs. At the top of the gentle slope, he handed her the key. "Your chambers."

She took the key and turned it in the lock. The

door swung open on well-oiled hinges and she gasped in shock as she took in the crystal-lined room that greeted her. "A workshop." Her words were whispered and then echoed back to her.

A spring bubbled in the centre of the room, the walls were lined with workbenches. Crystals designed to reflect and disperse extra magic coated the walls and hung from the thirty-foot ceiling.

"There is also a library, a private study, a bedchamber, lavatory and a small kitchen if you are inclined to prepare your own food." Loki's voice propelled her deeper into the wonderland of her new quarters.

She felt something soft being pressed into her hands. "Oh, right, the clothes."

He chuckled. "Yes, the clothes. We work primarily in ocean-based leathers, so enjoy. Gorlin's father is a tailor. He has an eye for sizes and measured you when you arrived."

"That young thing measured me while I slept?"

"I supervised, I assure you. Besides, he needed someone to turn you." His grin was unrepentant.

She looked down at the leather and smiled. It was soft, white and had a light patterning of scales on it. "What kind of hide is it?"

"Albino manta. We primarily select them when they have been wounded and are fading. Most of the leathers that we wear have been taken from

animals at the end of their life cycles.”

“So, you don’t farm them?”

“No, but we do guard their hunting grounds. The albino leather is a prized commodity. Gorlin’s gift of it to you is truly a wonderful thing.”

She was eager to try it on. “Wait. He gave it to me?”

“Yes, he wishes to be selected as your assistant. This is his method of courting your favour.”

She took the clothes and shook her head. “We will see. Now, where is my bedroom?”

Loki gestured to one of five exits and she scurried away to try on her new outfits.

Chapter Seven

The white top was almost backless. The back laced at the top and bottom but left her gill slits free. She twisted and shifted in it, loving the snug feel of the leather against her skin.

When she unfurled the skirt, a small bit of fabric fell out and she blushed a little as she noticed the panties that matched the outfit. With the men around her in shark form, she hadn't really given any thought to her underwear. Apparently, it was an issue.

She shimmied into the white leather underwear and then laced the floor-length skirt into place. There were no shoes, but then she realized that they didn't need them. The floor had a warmth to it and the pressures that they were under would probably have crushed normal folk. It was only as she stood looking at the reflection of herself in the polished metal mirror that she began to realize exactly where she was.

The light on the walls was part magic, part

fungus. The pressure probably was near to bone-crushing depth and yet, she didn't feel a thing. She also could make the rise from the depths to the surface in seconds and suffer no ill effects. That was not normal.

Her blue hair rippled and waved down over the white leather in a very fetching way. With this being manta skin, there would be little to no chance of it turning transparent on her. She was just turning to go back down the hall to Loki when he appeared in her bedroom doorway.

His admiration was written in his eyes and she stood still as he walked toward her carefully so as not to startle her. "You look..."

She grinned and her smile disappeared the moment his lips touched hers. She pressed up against him and his hands lifted her so that their mouths could meet without strain on either of their parts.

As tricky as her clothes were to get into, Loki made quick work of the laces. His skill at caressing her skin was only matched by his fascination with tasting her from top to toe.

She was engaging in exploration of her own, enjoying each new texture of his skin as her fingers slipped, slid and circled at random. When he moved over her for the first time, she winced at the discomfort, then widened her eyes as the scent of her maiden blood brought out the shark in a

fascinating way.

Minutes, hours, forever, nothing seemed enough as he moved inside her until finally they rocked together in a complete harmony followed by silent bliss.

She sighed and faced Loki in the very comfortable water magus bed. Their eyes met and held for so long Haily forgot where she ended and he began.

"Loki?"

He lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them.

"Yes, dear magus?"

"Let's not tell my father about this."

He laughed and brought her to him in a tight hug, rolling them through the expanse of the covers until they were hopelessly tangled. Untangling took almost an hour and a lot of soft touches, but he was determined and she was willing.

Gorlin was pleased with his assignment as her assistant and he immediately set out to show her the island that had been set aside for her use.

She held onto Loki as he swam to the chunk of land that was to be hers for her lifetime.

Are you sure that this is mine?

The councils have set it aside for centuries. It is for the water magus. Loki's voice was calm and his movements in the water were slow and deliberate.

The light streaming through the water was bright and cheerful and it filled her with an excitement that she couldn't stop, so she didn't try.

The sand was gleaming white when they finally hit the shallows. She dismounted from her companion and walked until the water was knee deep. She used her new senses to assess the island and smiled at what she found.

There were tiny springs all over the island. No water magus would be vulnerable in this place.

"Do you mind if I do some work on the place?"

Loki was standing to her left, Gorlin to her right. Loki shrugged. "It is your home, please, make it your own."

Surprising them, she sat down so that only her arms and head were extending from the water. A swirl of sand, rock and trees started on the shore coalescing into a house with a deck, a surround and five bedrooms.

Loki let out a strangled sound. "Haily, how much power do you have?"

She smiled. "I am guessing that I have an even percentage of the power of water magi. Because I am currently the only one, I have the entire allotment. That is just a guess. I will need to check some of the books in that amazing library to make sure."

"What is that huge house for?"

"Retreats, family visits. They can't very well visit me in the chambers below. They would be crushed by the pressure."

He gave her a surprised look, "You noticed that?"

"I did. I also noticed that neither I nor your people seem to have any reaction to differences in pressure."

That gave him pause. "I haven't thought about it. It is simply the way we are."

"I know, but I am close to my family, so I want to make sure they have a place to visit if they want to. What should I get them for Yule gifts?"

He came up behind her and wrapped her in an embrace that Gorlin pretended he didn't notice. "I think I have a few ideas, but Gorlin will have to help."

Her new assistant looked up in surprise. "Me?"

"You can craft books for Haily's family. Each book can be crafted with a different treasure from the sea."

The gleam of the challenge started in Gorlin's eyes. "May I start now, mistress?"

Surprised, she nodded. "By all means. Use the workshop if you want to."

He grinned and the grin turned feral and toothy as he shifted back into a shark, wriggling into deeper water.

Loki whispered in her ear, "I thought he would

never leave.”

Laughing, they walked along the beach to her new house. It was still humming as the magic finished completing the image in her mind. He exclaimed at the kitchen, admired the living room and waggled his eyebrows when he saw the enormous bed in the master bedroom.

“I am guessing that you had something in mind when you crafted this.” He patted the edge of the bed and asked her to join him with a gleam in his eyes.

“I am still sore from the first time. I had to use a body shield to keep the rest of your kinsmen from tearing me to pieces and not in a good way.”

“Then just let me hold you in the sunshine. It will be a new experience for us both.” He was naked and aroused, but he wasn’t in a hurry.

She grumbled for her own dignity, but then launched herself into the air and passed him as she landed on the bedding with a bounce. It was the most restful and relaxing of afternoon cuddles that she could have ever imagined. Mind you, cuddling with a shark had never been in her imagination.

Chapter Eight

Haily straightened her clothing and checked the pearls that Loki had given her to thread through her hair. They gleamed against the blue.

Loki, Gorlin and five random sharks were with them, all attired in their standard wraps. They were travelling via portal, so clothing was required. It was time to go to her family party.

As Haily opened the portal from within her workshop, she heard a few gasps as the fountain spring turned into a gateway that led to the ship.

The guards went through first and she, her assistant and Loki followed. She closed the portal to a pinprick again, so that they could return if they needed to.

Gorlin placed her family's presents on their table and they took their seats after the rampant hugging had run its course.

A few of the young men from other good families were casting glances toward her, but as soon as Loki caught them looking, they found

other candidates to focus on.

As dinner proceeded and the sun set, Morag started in on the shark shifter. "So, Loki. It seems that my daughter is quite the bundle of power and talent. Why should you be the one to get close to her?"

The sharks all looked at her. They all knew about the progress in their relationship, sharks were exceptionally sensitive to scent.

"Because he is the one that *I* want, Mom. No other man has looked at me for what I could be. Even the guys here who have become attracted to me via power are only seeing part of me. Loki sees the whole me. He has the entire time."

Loki's blush was becoming, the ruddy tone moving beneath his skin in a slow wave. The shark guards all looked very impressed and pleased by the regard given to their leader.

"Mother, this is my new assistant, Gorlin. He is on his way to being a master leather crafter and has created a wardrobe for me that would make May drool." The distraction worked.

Gorlin was inundated with questions about fashion and June was looking him up and down as if mentally trying him on for size.

"Loki?" Her whisper was as quiet as she could make it.

"Yes, Haily?"

"How old is Gorlin?"

"Fifty-two. He will be able to vote in eight years." Loki was enjoying his jelly dessert. He loved the wobble and had made her watch it three times.

"So that would make you..."

"Two hundred twenty. We age slower. It has something to do with the cold water." He raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to it.

Her mind reeled at that. She kept her comments to herself until they were dancing. "Do all shark shifters live that long?"

"I don't know. I haven't met all of them." He was moving smoothly through the crowd of dancers. She moved with him, their grace shared by the few guards who dared to accept the invitations to dance from her sisters.

She scowled at him for his uninformative answer and was about to pursue it when the gong sounded for the Yule exchange to begin.

Haily nodded to Gorlin and he produced her gift for Loki. She reached down her shirt and handed a leather-wrapped bundle to Gorlin. "Mistress, you shouldn't have."

She smiled as he unwrapped the illumination crystals that she had permanently charged. "They work with only a single drop of water. You will always be able to see where you are going. The second one opens into a dagger that cuts magic. Treat that one carefully."

Gorlin almost passed out as he took in the tiny dagger that gleamed with invitation. "Thank you, mistress."

She took the gift for Loki and extended it to him with both hands. "This is from me."

Bemused, he took the present and opened it.

Around the room, her sisters and parents whistled in astonishment at the pristine spell books that they had been given, each with a water manipulation spell on the first page.

Gorlin had worked shells, pearls, sand dollars and starfish into the covers, which were made of a variety of sea leathers.

Loki looked confused as he lifted the necklace with large jet disks out of the wrapping.

Haily quickly explained, "The necklace will shift with you," she blushed, "and the colour reminds me of your eyes."

He seemed at a loss. He put the necklace on and it rested at the base of his throat, drawing her gaze to the face that she loved.

"I didn't think to get you anything." His embarrassment was palpable.

"Yes, you did. You gave me myself." She gave him a sweet kiss and then another. "I was an outcast and you rescued me. I was a powerless loser and you showed me that I had the power the whole time. I am finally, for the first time, exactly what I am supposed to be and that is the greatest

gift that I could have ever gotten."

One of the guards came to them and cleared his throat. He sent a signal to Loki that she couldn't hear and the gleaming eyes went from emotional to amused. "Apparently, the outpost has given you a gift...from me."

The package was pressed into her hands, the crackling of the parchment that covered it ringing in her ears. A box was in her hands and as she opened it, she saw a ring made of a thousand tiny pearls.

Loki went down on one knee and looked up at her. The room went quiet and Haily's heart started to pound.

"Haily Holly Danvers, water magus of the spell crafter clan, will you be my wife, my mate, my honour and my heart?"

It took her three tries, "Loki Ekobai, Alpha of the shark shifters, head of the bachelor outpost, only if you be my husband, my strength, my love and my trust."

"I will."

"I will."

She leaned down to kiss him and he surged to his feet, bending her back as he rose.

The room exploded in applause and bursts of magic rioted on the dance floor.

When one of the young men yelled, "Watch this!" Haily held up her hand and returned the

ball of colour to sender.

The kiss continued and she smiled inside as her using her own body's natural water to focus was successful. It was a good thing, too, she didn't think her shark was ever going to stop kissing her and she didn't mind that one bit.

Merry Yule everyone, embrace the *fun*.

Author's Note

Here we are in *Impractical Magus*, because genes are funny things. While it takes place in the Nexus universe, Abby is nowhere to be seen. We are in the land of the pure breeds and this is the kind of dorky matchmaking cruise that the Magus clans would engage in.

Shark shifters have been part of many island cultures just as dolphins have. They just have pointy teeth, which makes them less cute and cuddly for the tales and tourists.

I will not suggest that you run out and hug a shark this season, but do take a bit of time to enjoy your friends and family. No matter what form your holidays take, they are the ones you will miss when they are gone.

Even horrible holiday stories become amusing with the passing of time...and remember...don't invite sharks for Xmas dinner...or dolphins. Stay away from the whole aquarium. You never know who remembered to pack their trunks...and who didn't.

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About the Author

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

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

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

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

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