

A romantic couple embracing at sunset over a beach. The man is shirtless and has his arms around the woman. The woman is wearing a light-colored, possibly wet, top. The background shows a sunset over the ocean with a rocky beach in the foreground.

Wet
GLAMOUR
IMMORTAL COUNCIL

COURTNEY BREAZILE

After running out on Rina, his declared mate, Lucas shows up years later with an invitation to The Council of Immortals. He needs her to represent the mermaid species on the council, for very personal reasons.

Rina never wants to see Lucas again. He chose his sister and his clan over her. She definitely has no interest in being on a council of any kind with him, and she is more than happy to shoot him down while showing off her love-free self, even if it has to be gained through magical persuasion.

When her sister is kidnapped by a psychotic wizard creating a deadly scavenger hunt, pitting all immortal species against one another, she knows her best chance of saving her is with the help of The Council of Immortals.

Can she keep her love hidden from Lucas long enough to save her sister? Or will the song of love that she has been hiding burst forth and ruin everything?

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Wet Glamour

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WET GLAMOUR
THE IMMORTAL COUNCIL BOOK THREE

BY

COURTNEY BREAZILE

DEDICATION

The man I would sing for, if I could sing

PROLOGUE

“I am bound, Rina...I have a duty to my people.” *A duty my sister refuses to let me forget.* Lucas growled to himself. Standing there as if he felt nothing about the matter tore his heart apart, but after Lillian’s outburst, he really didn’t have a choice.

Rina’s beautiful silver eyes, bright with anger and tears, bore into him, making him wish it didn’t have to be this way. He was destroying her, and it was destroying him. He had no other choice at the moment, his hands were tied, Lillian was a madwoman, threatening everything and everyone if he didn’t do his *duty* to the colony.

“I don’t understand, Lucas. What does your sister and your colony have to do with our love? We are mates, you said it yourself.”

The clear hurt in her voice made his heart bleed as his ears tingled with the indication of his mate’s voice. He couldn’t imagine living without it, he would rather die. “I can’t take you there, they won’t accept you as my mate because—”

“Because I am not good enough, I know I heard every word Lillian screamed at us. I don’t need a recap, thanks. Because I am just a simple mermaid, not a perfect balanced elf!”

Rina’s eyes flashed with anger so bright and deep Lucas wondered if she would ever be able to forgive him of this hurt. “Rina, it’s not exactly like that, I...I just don’t want anything to happen to you. I would do anything to keep you safe.”

“Well fuck you, Lucas, and your fucked up elfin beliefs. I don’t need you, or anyone else, to keep me safe. I will find someone else, someone who is more to my liking to mate with. More *my* equal.” Rina reached out and smacked him across the cheek.

Lucas stood there, not moving and not letting his screaming and broken insides show. It was better this way...wasn’t it? Better she hate him, it would hurt less...he hoped. “I’m sorry it has to be this way right now, Rina, but if I can convince Lillian to change her mind –”

“Forget it, Lucas, you don’t get a second chance. I don’t ever want to see you again if you have to ask your sister’s permission to fall in love and mate.” Rina turned and left.

Lucas watched from the doorway as she ran down the beach, stripping her clothes as she went, and dove into the ocean. She would be far away in no time, her mersisters would comfort her through

this. Thank the gods for them.

And he would have her again someday, he hoped...

CHAPTER ONE

Thirty years later...

Lucas sat outside the shop for an hour, trying to think of the perfect way to approach her. He didn't fool himself into thinking it would really matter in the end. There was no doubt in his mind as to how she would respond to his presence—flying objects directed at his head and scathing words directed at his masculinity. Getting her to even consider listening to him would probably take a miracle, the likes of which *he* wasn't even capable of producing.

He wouldn't leave until she listened to him, no matter how long it took to make her. Lucas settled against the hard bench and glared at the figures passing on the other side of the shop window.

The shop, *The Mermaid's Friend*, a little curio shop on the beach of Santa Cruz, specialized in seashell jewelry and sand in pretty little jars.

Obviously a tourist trap, but a very successful one judging by the number of people coming out with purchases wrapped neatly in environmentally friendly seaweed paper. The name made him smile. Wouldn't all those sunburned tourists just die to know that the beautiful women inside that store were actual mermaids? Fins and scales and all, in their other form anyway.

Lucas was an Animal Elf, one of three elfin races. All of which had the ability to use glamour, a type of magic that hid their true form from all but other supernatural beings. Humans could see only what the glamour presented. In Lucas's case, this was a thirty-something male with a buffed up beach body and long blond hair. In reality, he was tall with lean muscles and pale luminescent skin, swirling brown eyes and long white hair, not to mention the stereotypical large and very pointed ears.

A few of the fairy tale myths held true in the real world.

Lucas was thankful as always for his Animal Elf abilities, which allowed him to sense where and what type of animals were in the area. It allowed him to sense the presence of the mermaids he saw flitting by behind the window. From his bus-stop bench, he watched their lithe forms and tried to not feel like a stalker. She wasn't in there, her beautiful voice wasn't among the chattering

others. Mermaids didn't stop talking unless they were asleep, and his ears were not tingling with the sound of her voice. She couldn't be among them, but they would certainly know where to find her. And in this beach town, he didn't relish the idea of searching for her on his own.

He didn't relish the idea of facing those women either and felt like a spineless jellyfish at the thought. They had every reason to hate him. Hell, he'd been hating himself for a long while, too. The past was a shadow hanging over them and would likely result in them wanting to hurt him in any way possible. But he came here today under the guise of an official mission and that would keep his tender ego from getting too bruised in the exchange. He dared hope it wouldn't be a total disaster. It may be underhanded, but he had no intention of coming right out and declaring he had returned to claim her, not until he had some idea as to what she would say about it. When she had run out, she had made it clear there would be no second chances.

He could check out their beach house of course, it would be his next step if she didn't show up here soon. Something told him here was the best place to find her though, so he would wait until she showed up, or he gained enough courage to go in and ask about her. He knew he wasn't likely to get a straight answer from any of those

mermaids in there. A school of piranha would be more welcoming.

Beach-clad bodies of all sizes and shapes passed by, some looking at him curiously, some trying in vain to catch his eye, but none approached and he felt relieved. Sometimes, that could be an issue. It was an elf thing. Even though he used glamour to hide his true form, he inevitably attracted attention from humans, affirming the reason why other beings believed elves possessed self-important attitudes.

A family passed, trailing a teacup poodle in a yellow dress and matching bonnet. The dog looked at him with vicious intensity. She was going to chew the outfit to shreds just as soon as she was left alone with it. Lucas smiled at the dog in sympathy and gave her a good luck nod. The outfit really did make her look ridiculous. Why people insisted on dressing up their animals, Lucas would never understand, but he supposed they didn't know any better. Humans seemed to have a hard time dressing themselves most of the time.

Some passersby looked so ridiculous it almost made his stoic face twitch with amusement, almost. If he were here to people watch, he might have done just that. His intentions were more serious, however, and remained forefront in his mind. He had to get to Rina. This overshadowed

any possible amusement at the people around him. Not that he would have showed his amusement anyway, that just wasn't what an elf did.

Lucas focused his attention back to the shop window with an intense stare. He knew he was probably attracting more attention than was safe by sitting there so long, staring at the place. The last thing he needed were nosey humans asking questions or looking too closely at him. Humans were so quick to destroy what they didn't understand—it was one of the reasons he had bought into Paxton's idea of the council.

But he just couldn't make himself move, not yet anyway, no matter the danger of human attention. It was extremely frowned upon by all to interact with humans. If they found out what was living around them, it would be the end of everyone's happy existence.

"Oh excuse me." A woman, dressed in a denim miniskirt and tiny yellow bathing suit top, feigned accidentally bumping his leg as she settled her ample ass onto the bench beside him. She smiled brightly and turned toward him, knee brushing his in a casual way.

Lucas resisted the urge to move over farther in an obvious attempt to brush her off, but there was no reason to be rude he supposed.

"Are you a local? I'm just here on vacation and

looking for a good place to get a few drinks, maybe find some company to spend a few hours with." The woman spoke with a lilting southern accent and more than enough innuendo for anyone to guess her meaning.

"Sorry but I'm not from here either," Lucas spoke dismissively, but the woman didn't take the hint, too drawn in by being so close to him. Her mind and body were reacting to him, overriding any good sense she might have otherwise had.

She was attractive, with her large breasts overflowing her top and brown hair floating around her shoulders. Any man would have taken her up on her offer. But there in lay the problem—Lucas wasn't a man, he was an elf. That alone would make a relationship of any kind with her forbidden. More importantly, he was here on a mission, recruitment duty for the Council of Immortals, and a personal reunion with Rina. He didn't have time for a complication of the sort this woman offered. The woman pouted her lips and pressed her breasts onto Lucas's forearm, trying her best to be provocative. Her hand slid to his thigh.

"Perhaps we could go back to my hotel room and have a drink there? It's much more private than a bar, and it's quite close, too."

This was the problem with going out in public. Humans just couldn't help themselves, and it just

annoyed him most of the time. Like a puppy he couldn't get to stop humping his leg, he almost felt sorry for the confused lesser beings.

"I'm not usually into this sort of thing, I assure you. But I'm on vacation, and well, you just look so scrumptious." The woman giggled a squealing giggle and wiggled closer to him.

How did humans stand each other? The woman shivered beside him and he knew it was a loss. She would never leave on her own at this point. He was about to make a false promise to meet up with her later when a singsong voice from behind made every part of his body fill with dread.

"I see nothing much has changed here, still laying your hands on everything that comes your way, Lucas?"

Now? She shows up now! He screamed in his mind, keeping an outward calm, showing nothing.

The woman cooed beside him, sidling closer. "Lucas. What a beautiful name." She grabbed a lock of his hair and twirled it around her finger, oblivious to the implication in the other woman's words.

Lucas turned his head slowly, just to make sure he hadn't been mistaken. It had been a long time since that beautiful voice had so grated on his nerves. Nope, it was Brook alright. She hated him more than Rina did, if that were possible. She was the leader by default of the mermaids, having

inherited the position from her husband when he died and there were no other males to take his place.

The merfolk, like most other immortal races, had been run by the males. It was something that came with living so long, the ideals of times past didn't go away when it was the same people there hundreds of years later. The elves were surprisingly equal in their leadership. But that came from what many termed their *fanatical* belief in balance of all things, such as nature intended.

"It's so nice to see you, Brook. Maybe you could give me a hand with this." Lucas indicated the woman who continued to run her hands up and down his bare arm and looked like she was about five seconds away from tracing her tongue along there as well. Brook glared at him for a long moment and he thought she would refuse to help him.

She turned her attention to the woman and spoke quietly, "You can leave us now. He isn't worth your attention anyway."

The woman immediately straightened away from Lucas and gave him a disdainful look, as if he had been the one trying to get into her pants just now. She stood and took off at a fast clip down the sidewalk.

Brook's persuading voice had gotten rid of the woman—a great thing about mermaids, unless

they turned that singsong command on you. They could make you think you were doing what you wanted when in actuality you were doing exactly what they told you to do. Not that they could make you do something completely out of character, but within limits, they could control you.

Brook took the woman's vacated seat. She was a pretty woman, as all the mermaids were. Her age was unnoticeable in her flawless skin and shiny black hair that fell past her shoulders. She looked like a normal human, but of course she wasn't wet. She turned her gaze on him.

He was shocked to see bright blue staring back at him. All mermaids had silver eyes, not unnoticeable among humans, so it shouldn't surprise Lucas that she wore contacts. Of course it had been so long since he was last around them. They hadn't invented contacts yet, at least not colored ones that he had been aware of. "I guess that makes it a lot easier to go about in public," Lucas commented.

"What? Oh, the eyes, yes. Colored contacts were a thankful invention. Dark sunglasses and lowered lids could get to be a hassle." They sat in silence for a moment, both staring at the store in front of them. "She goes to college now. She is trying to make a life."

"A life without me you mean."

"She is better off without you, you know that."

"Yes I...damn it, Brook don't play those games with me."

Brook smiled, but didn't respond.

She would never admit she had been trying to persuade him, he knew from experience. It was the way of the mermaids, very tricky. Because they lacked the physical strength most immortals possessed, they used their wits all the more. Not that you would think they were very smart by looking at them or listening to them. They all dressed like college sorority girls and with their high-pitched singsong voices, they were a wet fantasy to any man with a ditzy cheerleader fetish. "I need to speak with her about a private matter, I am not here to try and win her back."

"Of course you're not, that would be below you, to mate with a species other than your own high and mighty kind. We lowly fish folk aren't good enough, are we? Well I assure you, Marina wants nothing to do with you and you can just leave."

Lucas stood up, caught himself and sat back down with enough force to vibrate the bench. "Not until I speak with her, where is she?"

"Like I said, she goes to college at UC. You want to find her. Go there."

Lucas stood and walked away without another word.

* * * *

Rina watched from the safety of the office above the shop where she'd retreated to after her frantic miming of her problem to her sisters. They had no trouble guessing what had shut her up in mid-sentence, not much could. She was sent up to the office so her glowering face wouldn't scare their customers while Brook hurried over for damage control.

Rina watched as Lucas sat there, staring at the shop with an inscrutable expression. Elves didn't give anything away in their expressions they didn't intend to, always so cold, so controlled. It infuriated her beyond belief, so unfair to a woman who was so full of emotion she couldn't possibly keep it off her face.

When a human woman sat down beside Lucas, Rina felt jealousy rise up, strong and deep. She wanted to go down there and drown the bitch for touching her man. But he wasn't her man, not anymore, never had been really, and she needed to remember that. He didn't want her and so what reason did she have for jealousy? She didn't want a man who thought he was so much better than her. Luckily, Brook showed up in time as Rina couldn't watch much more of the woman's petting of Lucas. She would have given herself away and

been forced into a confrontation with him. Not what she was after at the moment. She was pretty sure she never wanted to face him.

Rina glowered at Lucas, her silver eyes flashing as he walked away. She tugged a hand through her short red curls and stomped her foot in frustration. Keeping her mouth shut for this long was hell, even worse when something was tearing through her, trying to get out.

She'd known the moment he appeared in the area, which is why she immediately stopped talking. If he still felt she was his mate, he would be able to pick up the vibrations of her voice from a distance. His ears would tingle, or so he once told her.

Or maybe those had just been words, something to tell the naive mermaid to get her pants off. It had certainly worked. It seemed so easy for him to leave her after three weeks together. Maybe his ears wouldn't, never had, tingled around her. Either way, she didn't want to risk it, so remained painfully silent. If only the song that recognized him didn't want out.

The song of love a mermaid can't help but sing when their mate was near told her Lucas was fated to her. Today, as soon as he arrived in the area, the song had risen in her chest again, tearing through her throat, begging to be let out. It tortured her to keep it in, but she couldn't, didn't

dare let it out. If she even opened her mouth to breathe at this point the song would burst forth and ruin everything. Not to mention mortify her in front of him, letting him know she still felt he was her mate would be beyond embarrassing. After the way he left, the things that were said, she couldn't ruin it all by singing their love song now.

She couldn't let Lucas know she had been unable to move on. There had been no breaking their bond, no forgetting their song. It was impossible to do. All the mermaids knew it, but she had told Lucas something different all those years ago. She had assured him she cared naught if he left, she would move on and live her life without him, find someone else, someone more suitable to spend her immortal life with. Someone to complete her, she had said, playing on his insane belief in balance of all things.

Unfortunate for her, once sung, it could never be taken back and no other love song would be sung by that mermaid except in the event of her mate's death. Even then, it was rare for a widowed mermaid to find another mate. None of the many she lived with ever had.

Rina watched Brook stand after Lucas had disappeared around a corner. She walked across the street, looking pensive, her body language said pissed. Lucas had that affect on others.

Rina hurried down to meet Brook in the shop.

She had to know why Lucas was here after so long. She would have expected it, had expected and hoped for it even, for the first year after he left. But not now, it just didn't make sense after so long for him to show up and it didn't bode well for her or her clan.

Whatever the reason, it doesn't matter. She forced slow steps downstairs. Curiosity and fear drove her now, nothing more. If she knew why he had shown up after all this time, she would be able to figure out how to get rid of him. She dismissed any anxious joy and buried it deep under years of tears and hurt, an easy enough thing to do.

As she descended into the shop, two of her sisters enclosed her in their loving embrace. They were not any real relation, all mermaids considered each other their sisters, with the exception of one's mother and Brook, their leader. They were a very close species, more so since there were so few left, and no males in that to help populate the species.

Rive and Nautia squeezed her tight and ignored the curious stares of the patrons in the shop. "Don't you worry, Rina. We won't let that elfin bastard anywhere near you," Rive said with an edge to her voice. The words seemed odd coming with the singsong voice of a mermaid, nothing they said ever sounded too harsh.

Rina stroked Rive's black pixie cut hair, unable

to speak just yet. With Lucas moving farther away, the pressure of their song lessened, but it hung on with vicious claws.

“Oh dear,” Nautia said softly. “I do hope Brook convinced him to stay gone.” Nautia tugged nervously on her long golden brown braid. “I just can’t help but remember the last time and how you, oh I’m sorry you don’t need me to bring it up I just...” A tear streaked down Nautia’s cheek, leaving behind a trail of green and blue swirled scales. She quickly wiped the moisture away and her skin returned to human.

“Rive, Nautia, get back to work and leave Marina alone.” Brook swept into the shop and motioned for Rina to follow her out the back. Leaving the shop would give them a little more privacy, something hard to come by around mermaids.

The two mermaids were in no rush to do Brook’s bidding as they hugged Rina tight one last time, then stepped away so she could follow Brook out the back door and onto the beach. They took a seat a safe distance from the water and far enough from the shop to be nearly out of earshot of the two mermaids still trying to listen in, none too subtly, from the back porch.

“Suddenly Nautia and Rive are obsessed with that dead flower pot out there,” Brook said with amusement. “I think we can wait out their

patience though.”

It didn't take long before Nautia and Rive were huffing and puffing to each other and went back inside. Likely they were still pressed against a window, trying to listen, but it would be harder.

Rina felt the song disperse back into her body to wait until it could once again try and force its way out. It had been awakened and it wanted to be sung. After so long of being buried, it had gotten a new spark of life with Lucas's nearness. It would be even harder to hold back next time, if there *was* a next time. Gods, she hoped there wasn't a next time. She wasn't sure she was strong enough to see him up close. How did one face one's mate who had callously tossed you aside for a duty that made no sense at all?

She took a deep breath and stared out at the water. Filled with happy swimmers, it beckoned to her, now even more than usual. It represented escape and safety, away from Lucas and all he could do to hurt her. It also represented a dangerous and lonely existence, one without the love and protection of her mersisters. She would never choose that, no matter how easy it would be to get away from Lucas out there. To lose herself in the clear blue ocean waves, never worrying about what her sisters needed her to do versus what she wanted to do.

Never having anyone else to talk to, that would

be the worst part, she did love to talk but eventually the thrill would run out of talking it up to a dolphin. And besides, she wasn't a coward. She wouldn't run from her problems just because it was easier that way, safer for her tender feelings.

"What did he want?" Rina finally asked, resigned to the fact she was going to have to stay and deal with him.

"He says he just wants to talk with you, he didn't come back to claim you for his mate."

Rina's heart stuttered and her stomach clenched in agony. He still didn't want her. *No, this is a good thing.* She was not interested in him like that, so it was better this way. *So why does it hurt so much?* She didn't want to answer that. "What could he possibly want to talk to me about?" Hadn't he made it crystal clear when he left that his kind didn't want anything to do with hers?

"Does it matter? You can't even be near him without your song bubbling up. How do you expect to meet with him and keep that to yourself? Or are you intending to answer his booty call, then deal with the crushing consequences when he leaves you again?"

Brook's words were harsh, but Rina knew they were true. The only possible reason Lucas would want to meet with her was he hoped to seduce her again, not that she would lead him much of a chase. An elf didn't believe in doing business of

any kind with another species, unless it involved enforcing their skewed ideas of laws. Lucas had gone against that law to be with her once. He might do it again, but for no more reason than before, simple lust. What else would bring him here, unless it was official business of the elvish sort. Rina's eyes widened and she stilled. "He couldn't possibly have any reason to arrest me could he? I have done nothing to any elf, haven't even seen one since he left."

"I don't think so. He wouldn't have been so hesitant if he were here on some kind of psychotic law enforcement mission. And likely his evil twin sister would be tagging along in that event. She would just love to see you suffer some more." Brook stroked Rina's hair gently. "Nothing will stop us from protecting you, Marina, you know that. Anything you need or decide to do, you will have our full support, no matter how crazy it is."

Brook got up and walked away, leaving Rina to think over the situation on her own. Brook was their leader, the one who guided them all, but she very seldom set laws down and demanded compliance. It just wasn't her way, which left Rina in the difficult position of making up her own mind.

Rina's mind reeled and her heart ached, thoughts just weren't forming correctly. She needed to swim, it would help clear her mind and

she could have a few hours of freedom and escape before her mersisters bombarded her with more well-meaning advice and questions. Worse yet would be facing her mother, Rio would intrude to no end in her daughter's life, out of love of course.

Rina stood and pulled her sundress over her head, she almost always wore a bathing suit under her clothing, for just such an opportunity. And like everyone else who lived and worked on the beach of Santa Cruz, a bathing suit was practically a uniform. Today she wore a white two-piece with bottoms that tied on the sides and the word sweet scrawled across the back in gold lettering, it was one of her favorites. The white really showed off her tanned skin and the small bits of fabric left few lines behind from the sun.

She dropped her dress on the sand and walked with slow steps toward the water. There were too many people around and she wouldn't attempt something like this on a normal day. It was dangerous, but she didn't want to find a more secluded spot. She wanted to be in the water, now.

No one was watching too close, they'd never notice that she went in and didn't come back out. Even if they did notice, she would be long gone before they thought to care.

Rina dove into the surf—her skin disappeared the instant it hit the water. Her entire body, now covered in swirling pink and white scales, sped

smoothly through the water. Her legs kicked twice, but she wanted to move faster as she could still see people swimming above her. She clamped her legs together and they morphed into a fin. She caught her bikini bottoms caught by their string before they disappeared forever to the bottom of the ocean and tucked them under the string at the back of her top for safekeeping. Then with one powerful push of her tail, she jetted away from even the most adventurous of human swimmers and out into the deep ocean.

Out where she was free.

She didn't have to fear being discovered and didn't have to hide her nature when in the deep ocean. Such an incredible thing to just be herself, just a mermaid. This feeling was unattainable anywhere else. The closest she could come was in her home with her mersisters, and once upon a time with Lucas, but neither of those were as good as this. This is where a mermaid belonged—swimming freely in the sea. The few who were left lived in a beach house in Santa Cruz, it was so unfair.

Of course the reason her and her mersisters had taken to land, the disappearance of all male merfolk, was not something to forget. It had driven the mermaids from the sea, seeking the protection of land against their enemies. They didn't know who those enemies truly were—they

had their theories, which were sure enough to keep them from their natural home.

Historically merfolk have always been a very passive species, not getting in the way of any other creature, immortal or mortal. But they have been hated for their beauty of both male and female species by the selkies. In the stories of human disaster wrought by mermaids, almost always a selkie was to blame for the incident. Evil sea creatures they are, and ugly, too. They have slippery gray skin and flat faces with protruding snouts. So seal-like in appearance, it was a wonder any drunken sailor could possibly want to follow them into the water. Ships seeing them from a fair distance would have a hard time distinguishing their rather unusual features. The stories of ships lured onto the rocks and certain doom were more believable, in Rina's opinion. But either way it happened, mermaids received the bad press. In the mortal world, they were mythical creatures luring unsuspecting men to their deaths, in the immortal world they were murderous sea sluts. Rina didn't care for either opinion.

A theory stood among the mermaids that the selkies got back at the mermaids for being so attractive to the selkie males by getting rid of all the mermen, very efficiently ensuring the end of their species. Rina supposed it was only the bad luck of the males that they were out hunting that

day and not the females, to have been captured and killed. She was certain the selkies would have preferred to end the species by killing off the females rather than the males. They were not allowed to find out though as Brook took charge when it had become obvious the men were not returning. She gathered up the females and ushered them ashore, to assumed safety.

Selkies were unlikely to go on land. They couldn't change form enough to look like a human. They could remove their seal-skin, like peeling off a layer, and reveal human skin. However, their distinct seal-like features would not go away. Among the humans, they would be treated as horrific freaks, something almost all immortal creatures were sensitive about, especially the unattractive ones. Stories sometimes surfaced in the mortal world about pig-men, and Rina often wondered if these were Selkies being seen by the humans—the description could definitely fit.

Selkies were the main reason it was frowned upon, by Brook, for any of them to be out swimming alone. Rina's mother, Rio, would have a fit if she knew Rina was out here by herself. Not that any of them had been killed, or captured, since leaving their home so many years ago. It remained a fear every one of them held tight as survival of their limited species depended on them

being very careful. Immortal as they may be, they were not impossible to kill. Eventually they would all be gone, which was their biggest fear.

So the mermaids lived safely on land for the past hundred years, moving often enough to keep suspicions down about their ageless beauty. It was a life, but it wasn't the life they were meant to live and in all this time, there had been no mermaids born. A couple have died, withering away at the loss of their mates, and the only love song sung among them in all this time had been hers for Lucas. He had destroyed more than just Rina's hope for the future when he denounced her and left. Every living mermaid wanted to skin him alive for taking that hope away from them, but she hadn't let them even consider it. Any action against an elf was met with swift equal action, not something their dwindling species could afford.

Some hold out hope that at least some of the males are alive, being held captive and someday they will return to them. Rina wasn't one to hold out hope. Her father had died along with the others that day and she had seen the look of horror and pain on her mother's face when the song of their love died with him. It was cruel to hold out hope just to have it taken away so painfully again every day they didn't return.

Brook would say their precautions kept them safe all these years, but in Rina's opinion, there

was really no need for all the caution, there was no reunion coming for them. She followed the rules though, most of the time. Not today however, it had been way to stressful a day to not be out here.

Rina slid through the water, the feel of it rushing past her soothing. Soon her mind held nothing but the intoxicating enjoyment of the experience. No pressing matters or impossible decisions weighed upon her, just peace and exhilaration.

Eventually she had to come up for air. She shot up to the surface after a cursory look to make sure no boats were lurking nearby. She broke through with a splash and a gasp for air. She fell back, dissolved her tail into legs and floated as the sun caressed her body. Soon spots of skin appeared on her face and belly where the sun dried the water. This should be her greatest worry, her biggest decision of the day. How long to stay like this, floating in pure ecstasy.

But it wasn't, and soon thoughts of Lucas filled her mind. She angrily dunked back under the water. How dare he show up like that, how dare he interrupt the life she was trying to lead. Most of all, how dare he make her want everything he had denied her once already.

CHAPTER TWO

Lucas slammed his car door shut in a rare show of emotion and sank down into the hot leather seat. Damn if he hadn't been manipulated, and so easily, too. He knew what to expect from those sneaky mermaids, and still he had fallen for Brook's subtle manipulation, her helpful suggestion that he check out UC.

Lucas's black Touareg sat alone in the lot on the UC campus. It was late summer, too late for the summer semester and too early for the fall semester. Even if Rina attended school here, which he highly doubted at this point, she wasn't here now, no one was.

Except for him and his monkey.

At about seven inches tall, Jack was large for a pigmy marmoset and although his brown fur and ringed tail were classic pigmy marmoset colors, he was named after the black and white capuchin on *Pirate's of the Caribbean*. Rina was a big fan of

pirates and some of Lucas's best memories were of them role playing the pirate and the fair mermaid together. It had been a private tribute to her to name his monkey Jack. Something not even his clever sister could figure out.

He wondered if Rina would get it right away, or if he would have to explain the meaning behind his companion's seemingly ordinary name.

After leaving Rina, he couldn't connect with anyone, elf or animal, until he found Jack. Jack was Lucas's companion in Rina's stead. Better than a dog as his best friend, and smarter, much smarter. Jack comprehended on a level beyond that of a canine's unbiased devotion to its owner. And he didn't drool.

He wasn't a great replacement for Rina, but he sufficed. Might need to continue to suffice as there was no reason to think Rina would want anything to do with him, even if she did agree to join the council. It wouldn't mean she was joining *with* him and he wasn't even sure if he deserved to ask her to.

Jack jumped to Lucas's shoulder and patted his head in sympathy, sensing the frustration and fear in him.

"Don't worry, Jack, we will find her. Then we'll see what happens. My mission is still about the Council of Immortals, not my personal desires. We need a representative of the mermaid species, and

Rina is the destined candidate.” He crooned to his monkey, who responded with a hopeful nod of his head. *At least it’s supposed to be about the council.*

Lucas could communicate with animals, not in their words so much as their feelings. He could understand what they needed by reaching out with his mind and touching their feelings. Animals were simple and so their feelings told all about them—unlike complex creatures like humans and immortals who so often acted in contrast to how they felt. Sometimes Lucas preferred animals as companions. Never did they have ulterior motives. Never did they hold you to an ideal of what you were supposed to be. Animals were happy with you being you. That was easy.

Lucas headed back toward the beach. *Damn, rush hour traffic, it’s going to take me forever to get back to the beach!* If he knew it was safe, he would flash himself into their shop, but it was likely there were humans inside. That kind of mess up would get him killed. He didn’t even consider putting himself straight into their house. Humans weren’t likely to see him, but that would be like dropping himself into a nest of hungry sharks with a bleeding wound. No reason to tempt them.

Lucas was a lot of things, but suicidal he was not. So he drove, slowly, along the freeway, and took the time to try and come up with a viable

plan of action. His phone sang beside him, the readout proclaiming Lillian. Lucas groaned, his twin sister was a bitch, no way around it. She was also his partner in leading the Oregon Animal Elf colony. He didn't want to talk to her, but if it was official business, he had no choice but to answer. When he had agreed to become a part of the Council of Immortals, he had promised Lillian that he would still be available as leader of their colony, would not abandon her or their people. It was the only way she would agree to what she considered *depraved insanity*.

"Yes, Lillian," Lucas said unenthusiastically. So far she had called him every day, sometimes twice a day, since he left on this mission. Mostly she was just trying to bother him with her mundane questions, trying to prove he was such an integral part of the running of things there that he should be ashamed of himself for even considering taking on anything else.

"Lucas, I require your assistance at home."

"You know I am in the middle of something, Lillian, what is it now?"

"There are two werewolves outside the colony walls, demanding to see me."

"So, what do you need me for? Either you want to see them or you don't."

"I don't know why they are here. It can't be safe for me to let them in, not without you here as

well.”

“Lillian, you are about as far from helpless as an immortal can get. You no more need me there than I need you here. They are asking for you, you deal with it. Make them love you, then find out their intentions.”

Lucas felt no remorse for leaving his sister to handle things on her own. She was beyond capable of taking care of herself. Elves could mess with the feelings of those around them, inspiring lust or hate, however, it didn't work on other elves, they were immune to the magic of their own kind. It was a pretty good trick when facing down a potentially hostile enemy. It was also how they were able to control animals of all kinds, allowing them to keep mortal enemies together in blissful peace. She could also flash to safety faster than even a bullet could reach her, not that a bullet could kill her, but it would hurt. Elves, like most immortals, were hard to kill, short of decapitation. That didn't mean it didn't hurt like hell when they were injured, they just healed too quickly for it to kill them, most of the time.

“It's just not right, Lucas, without you here, we are off balance.”

“I am sorry for that, Lillian, but not enough to return. My presence is not necessary for my laws to stand, and if there was an emergency, I would be there, you know that. I am doing what I must,

to balance my soul." Lucas hung up before she could say any more. Before she could try and guilt him with a sense of duty and a reminder that as an elf he was supposed to be committed to balance in all things. That balance should be his first thought and righting any unbalance should be his top priority.

He had believed it with his entire being, at one time. Just like his parents had raised him to. Balance was good, and nothing was better than a perfect balanced elf. Just because elves believed there should be balance, they did not believe that all beings were created equal. There was a definite hierarchy in the elf mind, with elves at the top for living life in complete balance with nature and each other.

Then he had met Rina and beyond all comprehension, his ears had buzzed with her every word, even though she was a different species, a mermaid of all things. He had been taught they were nothing more than sea sluts who killed humans for sport. A terrible thing in an elf's opinion, death should not be dealt without cause. A punishment should always be equal to the crime.

He was not of her kind, but she had sung a song of love for them and they spent three weeks together. Blissfully consummating their relationship without a worry or care in the world.

Those had been the happiest weeks of his long life, the memories a poor substitute when he lay alone in his colony.

If only Lillian hadn't tracked him down, reminding him of his duty to the colony and the elf creed of balance. Being with a member of a different species was against everything he was supposed to believe in, everything he had held his fellow colony members to for so long. He had handed down death sentences for lesser offences than this without a twinge of remorse.

He was an enforcer of balance, and he had committed one of the biggest offenses against that in choosing a mermaid as his mate, even for a short time. If Lillian had wanted, she would have been well within her rights to sentence him to death for his actions, just as he would have at one time if it had been her to offend.

Rina changed him irrevocably and he suddenly saw his laws for what they were, but he wasn't able to just go in and change them. He ruled as an equal partner with his sister, if she didn't agree, the law could not be changed. So he had left Rina, with her assurance that she would find someone more worthy of her love. Not what he wanted, but all he could hope for at the time. His mission to keep her safe and happy had kept him away for the past thirty years. In all that time, he had never stopped searching for a way to be with her.

He could find nothing to help them, but never gave up. His biggest fear had not been that he would never find a way to be with her, but that when he did, she would have already found someone else, someone who wouldn't let a little thing like a difference in species stand in the way of love. As much as he wanted her to be happy, he was selfish enough to hope she didn't find love, not without him.

His sister had unwittingly given him what he needed when she brought in a werewolf and a vampire to be charged with going against the balanced laws of nature with their marriage. Without it, he wouldn't be here now, he would have no basis for his desire to mate with Rina. Now he had a legal precedent his sister could not deny. She had been forced to admit that two different species could mate, because these two particular mates had produced a perfect child, a balance of were and vamp that an elf could certainly appreciate.

He drove on without an ounce of guilt over his actions toward his sister, and a whole lot of hope this would go his way.

It took Lucas an hour to get back to the shop, an hour in which he thought of all the reasons he should not go through with this, and all the reasons he should. The deciding factor was the chance to hold her in his arms and press his lips to

hers. Once again, to float in the complete ecstasy only her body could provide him. The miniscule chance he would once again be able to look deeply into her silver eyes and see love there.

There would be no chance unless he spoke with her, no chance unless he got her to forgive him. Unfortunately, the likelihood she would refuse to see him seemed greater than it had earlier in the day.

He knew he had no right to expect anything else. He'd been a jerk, no two ways about it. *It had been for her own good.*

Added to that, if he failed in this, his first mission as a member of the Council of Immortals, he would run the risk of Paxton kicking him out and replacing him with an Animal Elf with less baggage hanging around his neck. If any other member had been sent out to gain a representative of the mermaid species, they would have approached Brook and gotten whoever she wanted to appoint. He didn't want just any mermaid sitting on the council, he wanted Rina. He wanted to be as close to her as possible so he could win her back.

Determination hummed through his calm countenance as he parked near the shop.

This time he didn't hesitate. He knew she wasn't in there, but he was going in anyway and demanding answers from whoever *was* in there.

No doubt they were smug and laughing at him for falling for Brook's trick earlier. He would show them his brainpower far exceeded their powers of persuasion.

He wished for a moment his powers of emotion suggestion would work on mermaids. He could have them begging at his feet so fast. But it didn't work on them. Lucas wasn't positive why, but he thought it had something to do with the fact that their powers were based in their minds as well, protecting them from his magic. It was also what protected him from falling too easily for their powers of suggestion. Although if he wasn't paying attention and they hit too close to his own thoughts, he could be persuaded to think as they suggested, like he had earlier.

He walked into the little shop with purpose, defiant energy radiated inside, on the outside he was cool and calm and giving nothing away. A tinkling bell above his head announced his arrival. Five pairs of carefully concealed silver eyes glared at him. He knew his face was blank in spite of his anger at being made to look a fool and nervousness in facing these women who hated him. They would not be able to guess his emotional state, one point in his favor.

There were a few tourists in the shop looking at pretty shells and glass figurines of the human ideal of mermaids. They glanced at him briefly,

but went back to their shopping after quick appreciative perusal.

Brook and Rio made quick suggestions to the tourists that they would like to leave now, but return tomorrow to make purchases. The tourists quickly left, faces smiling and minds delighted with what they felt was their own ingenious idea.

Lucas was now alone with them.

Brook, their leader with long black hair, stood next to her daughter, Rive who had pixie cut black hair. Rina's mother Rio, she had long hair the same bright red as Rina's short curls. Nautia was there with her daughter, Acquanetta, they both had golden brown hair, Nautia's long, Acquanetta's short, falling just below her chin. All were beautiful with their flawless skin and delicate features, all looked to be no more than thirty.

Each one gave him a look that would send any mortal man running for the hills. It was a good thing he was more than a mortal man. Obviously, there was no forgiveness here, he hadn't expected any. Hoped perhaps, but never had he really been able to convince himself forgiveness awaited him with any of the mermaids. Jack hunkered down on his shoulder, reacting to the tension in the air.

"I see your trip to UC was unsuccessful. I guess I forgot to mention the semester was out," Brook said with amusement.

"We don't allow animals in here, they poop and they break stuff," Rive added with malice.

"I assure you Jack is housebroke, and must I remind you I am an Animal Elf, he would do nothing I did not approve of."

"I wasn't speaking of the monkey," Rive said.

Lucas ignored her.

"How many times do you think we should allow you to ruin Marina's life?" Rio asked accusingly. "My baby didn't deserve to be treated so cruel the first time and here you are asking for a chance to do it again?"

His heart clenched, Lucas knew the truth in her words, he didn't deserve another chance. But his face remained a mask of calm. Never show emotion, it was the elfin way. "I don't believe it is your choice whether or not Rina speaks with me. Does she even know I am here? Or have you made the decision for her?"

"She is aware of your presence. She is thinking on how she would like to respond to it. Leave a contact number. She will call you," Brook said with an expertise that almost made Lucas miss the subtle but powerful persuasion.

Lucas allowed himself to show the smallest hint of emotion, narrowing his eyes just enough to surprise them. "I will not stand for your tricks, Brook. Where is she? I demand to speak with her."

"Where are you staying? I will give her a

message and you can wait there,” Acquanetta said with a voice so hauntingly quiet and rhythmic Lucas was powerless to deny her persuasion.

“Tell her I must see her immediately. I am staying at the Beachfront Hotel, room 206. I won’t leave until I speak with her.” Lucas turned and left, oddly satisfied with the way it went.

* * * *

Acquanetta did her best not to cringe away from Nautia’s proud arm when it was flung around her shoulder. Acquanetta knew no one could put a suggestion in another’s head quite like her. She was, by far, the most powerful of their mermaid clan. But she hated to use her power, for more than just the moral reasons.

Luckily only Rive noticed how pained Acquanetta’s face looked, how her hands trembled as she clasped them behind her. She had a power beyond the others, but it cost her dearly every time she used it. It was her dirty little secret only Rive was privy to. It kept her from controlling others too easy, but it also made her a liability among the mermaids, something she wasn’t keen on them knowing.

* * * *

Rina waited until full darkness had fallen before she dared emerge from the water. Emerging at the public beachfront where her home sat could be dangerous. They could afford to live on the beach, but they certainly weren't rich.

She poked her head above the water and scanned the length of beach in front of her. A couple walked hand in hand along the water's edge, but they were headed in the opposite direction. She was safe, from humans at least.

She stepped out of the water cautiously, expecting to be bombarded by her concerned mersisters or her angry mother or leader. But only one sat on the beach waiting for her, Acquanetta. By far the least threatening or intrusive of the clan, Rina was thankful to be facing her first.

Rina slipped her bikini bottoms back on before coming out of the water, not that it did much to hide her scales. They practically glowed with reflected moonlight. Everywhere the light touched, pink and white swirls glistened and her silver eyes flashed. If a human saw her now, there would be no rational explanation, which is why they had to be so careful all the time.

Acquanetta didn't say anything, just handed her a towel and waited. Rina dried her body as best she could, then wrapped the towel around her middle and sat down. Her human skin slowly returned as her scales dried, trails of shining color

streaked down her back where her short wet curls continued to drip.

"I grabbed your dress off the beach."

"Oh. Thanks, Netta. I would have hated to lose that one. It's one of my favorites." Rina relaxed. She loved being with Acquanetta, she was the quietest of all her mersisters and at a time like this, it was so easy to be with her. Acquanetta would wait until she was ready to talk, no pressure. "So am I in trouble for taking off?" Rina asked, not able to stand the silence surrounding them any longer.

"No, Brook expected as much when she left you on the beach. Of course if you had stayed out much longer we would have gone out looking for you. Then you would have had everyone mad at you. Especially since tonight is Raine's big date with that wizard she met at the con."

"Oh right, Walker Weston. I can't wait to meet the man, or whatever it is," Rina said with sarcasm. "It is always interesting when she brings one of them home."

"Yeah and Raine has always had great luck at those conventions. Of course maybe that's not true since none of them have induced a love song in her, but she has gotten some pretty hot dates out of the deal and only once has she accidentally brought home a human."

Rina laughed at the memory. "Hell even I had

to look twice to make sure he wasn't a were, he sure was big and hairy enough."

Melodious laughter filled the night as Acquanetta joined Rina in her amusement. Rina relaxed and leaned against her mersister while she tried to gain the courage to ask the question burning in her mind—more important than the one she had already asked. "So did he come back?"

"Yeah, he did," Acquanetta said with a resigned sigh.

"And?" Rina prompted.

"And...I convinced him to wait at his hotel while I gave you a message." Acquanetta paused, looking thoughtful. "He won't leave without seeing you, Rina. I don't think even *I* can make him."

Rina's stomach clenched at the thought and it was no doubt reflected in her face because Acquanetta immediately relented.

"Of course if you want I can try, but I really think he will just come back when the persuasion wears off. I had to use quite a bit of force in my persuasion to get him to leave the shop, and it was along with a promise of giving you the message that he would be waiting. Brook wasn't even able to persuade him this time, she tried first."

Rina thought about the hopelessness of it all. She couldn't keep avoiding him. If he kept coming

back, it would only cause problems for her sisters, problems that were hers alone to deal with. But what other option was there?

"I can't be near him, Netta. Do you have any idea how mortifying it will be when he hears me sing our love song? He will know I haven't been able to let him go. He'll think I'm just as hot to trot as ever, and worst of all, I'm not sure I could tell him no. Even knowing he will just leave me again. The feelings are too strong to deny." Rina dropped her head to her knees and felt like crying. "Even now what I want to do is run to his hotel room and take whatever it is he's willing to give me, for however long he is willing to give it. That is so sick, isn't it?"

"It's natural. It's what your instincts are meant to tell you to do. The fact that you are sitting here instead shows just how strong you are."

"But for how long? And what will I do if I come face to face with him? I don't think I can do it."

"Then don't go. There is nothing he could possibly say that is important enough for you to face him and risk your wellbeing. I will go talk with him, try and get him to tell me what he wants."

No matter how tempting, Rina knew she couldn't ask Acquafetta, or anyone else, to provoke him by using their persuasion on him again. Lucas was an elf, and elves don't take well

to being tricked as they had an unequalled drive to keep things even. The fact that Lucas hadn't yet done something negative to the mermaid clan to get even for his earlier embarrassment didn't mean he wouldn't if pushed again. It went against his nature not to.

Rina refused to bring harm upon her clan. "Like you said, he will only come back when the persuasion wears off, and who knows what his plan will be then. It's no use. I will have to face him to get rid of him for good." Rina didn't add that the thought of him leaving and never coming back made her heart ache with unequalled sorrow and her song want to tear her apart from the inside out with vengeance. She would be alone, forever, or at least until he died, which wasn't likely to happen any time soon. She was destined to lead a loveless life without him, and for a passionate creature such as herself, it was the epitome of torture. Why had she been cursed with a mate who couldn't accept her? It just wasn't fair. Rina wanted to scream and curse and shake her fist at the sea with fury, but she didn't. Instead, she settled for a pouted lip and a glare. Not nearly as satisfying, but at least Acquanetta wouldn't think she had totally lost it.

"You don't have to do it alone, Rina." Acquanetta's face was urgent and she looked as if she was struggling with something painful. "I can

persuade you to repress the song, but I don't know how long it will last and you have to really want to repress it for it to have any chance of working." She hurried to explain.

Rina's face lit up with excitement and relief, hope at last. "Oh, Netta, I do, I do so want to repress, to forget, even if just for a short time. Oh thank you so much." Rina threw her arms around her dearest mersister and held her close. She had just given her a glimpse of light at the end of this dark tunnel she was living in. If this worked, she could rid herself of Lucas and not harm herself in the process.

Rina refused to think about how one way or another, Lucas would be gone. Maybe forever this time, it was for the best. She deserved someone who was proud to call her mate, someone who wouldn't feel like they were mating below themselves with her.

"I thought I heard you two down here," Rive said, coming up behind them. "Rina, your mother has been freaking out inside, you really should go in and let her know you're alive. At one point, she was talking about killer whale accidents and electric eel encounters. If she had started talking about selkies, we would have had to knock her out to keep her inside."

Rina grimaced. Her mother did like to worry. "Alright, I'll go put her out of her misery." Rina

hugged Acquanetta one last time, so thankful to have someone willing to help, then hurried to the house. Her heart was full with the possibility of making this newest problem disappear, and shoving her love-free self in Lucas's face would give her so much satisfaction. Just the possibility of it was making her face light up in a grin as she raced across the beach.

Their house was a ten-bedroom, twelve-bathroom beach house. Old fishing nets surrounded their veranda. Seashell wind chimes and glass buoys decorated the netting, which also served as a buffer between the outside world and the walls of glass windows in the main rooms of the house. It blocked their view of the ocean, but it was safer.

Rina hurried up the steps and through the doorway, which was propped open with a rusty anchor. Adorning the front door like a wreath was a life ring with *RMS Titanic* scrawled across it.

The smell of fish and seaweed stew wafted out of the kitchen along with the happy melody of Misty's singing. Conversations buzzed all throughout the house—it was such a comforting mix of sounds and smells. As nice as the quiet ocean was at times, this was what home sounded like, busy and hectic and wonderful.

"I don't care, I am taking her skirt. It's not as if she has a hot date to wear it on," Raine yelled as

she ran from a back bedroom and up the stairs to her own, the borrowed skirt clutched to her chest, her bobbed blonde curls bouncing with each step she took.

Cascadia was right behind her, waist length blonde hair flying out behind her as she chased after her daughter. "You can't just take it. Acquanetta is too nice to get angry with you, that doesn't make it right."

"Give it a rest, Mother, I'll ask her later." A door slammed upstairs. Undeterred, Cascadia continued to lecture her daughter about her behavior through the closed door.

Rina followed the mouthwatering scent of dinner into the kitchen. Misty was there, it was her night to cook and she made the best stew. Her shoulder length dark brown hair was tied back and she donned a frilly pink apron over her miniskirt and halter top. Her mother, Aquaria, was helping by making a shrimp salad. With her long dark brown hair pulled back in a similar ponytail as Misty, it was hard to tell them apart, especially since they looked the same age and dressed the same, right down to their sparkly pink sandals and purple toenails.

Rina and all her younger mersisters kept their hair fairly short so they weren't mistaken for their mothers. The differences between each mother and daughter were quite hard to see when

completely scaled.

"Hey, Rina, you made it back just in time, dinner is almost ready," Misty said, pausing from her singing.

"Great. I just want to let my mother know she can stop worrying about me. I didn't encounter anything more dangerous than a baby sea lion. Do you know where she is?"

"Last I saw, her and Brook were upstairs. Ooh needs more salt," Misty said as she tasted her concoction.

"Never too much salt," her mother agreed beside her with a cheerful nod.

Rina hurried back out of the kitchen and up the stairs, past a still lecturing Cascadia and up another flight of stairs to Brook's attic room. She paused outside the door for a moment, a bit nervous about her decision.

What if they disagreed with her? She wasn't supposed to act in direct contrast to her leader's wishes, but she couldn't stand back and let Lucas attack her mersisters. No matter what her leader told her to do, or not to do.

Maybe it's best they don't know, at least for now. What her and Acquanetta were going to attempt was more than frowned upon. A mermaid was never supposed to use persuasion on another mermaid, not under any circumstances. It was rule number one, and they were going to willingly

break it.

She opened the door, ready to immediately jump into an apology about taking off and hope to keep both Brook and Rio distracted until she was able to get away with Acquanetta, unnoticed.

The sight that met her made her pause.

Her mother and Brook were lounging in a huge antique bathtub. Both in full mermaid form, tails flopped over opposite ends. Her mother was covered in delicate pink and white scales like her own and Brook was covered in dark, but no less beautiful, black and red scales. Both were shinning in the moonlight that flooded the room.

Their silver eyes locked onto her when she entered and her cheeks reddened with embarrassment for interrupting them. Obviously they were trying to relax after a particularly stressful day, caused by her.

Her mother lifted an almost empty glass of yellow liquid. Another glass, half-filled, and an empty pitcher sat on a table next to the tub. They were getting drunk on banana smoothies. The potassium leached salt out of the system. To a mermaid this created an affect much like alcohol in a human.

“I just wanted to let you know I was back, and Misty said dinner is almost done.”

“Wonderful, I’m starving,” Rio said with a slight slur as she transformed her fin to legs and

hopped out of the tub. She strode across the room, pecking Rina on the cheek as she passed. "Don't worry me like that again, Marina," she said softly, then danced to her room without modesty for her undressed state.

In the ocean, they had never bothered covering up at all—clothing was a human invention they were forced to adhere to, which is probably why they chose to wear as skimpy clothing as possible, it just felt more natural.

Brook shifted in the tub, leaning forward with her elbows on the edge. Her silver eyes assessed Rina from head to toe. "I wasn't too worried, so I kept her occupied the best way I could." She shifted back, more relaxed. "I hope you figured things out while you were gone. I don't know how long it will be before he resurfaces. Maybe here next time."

"I know, I thought about that." Rina couldn't meet her leader's eyes, knowing she was deceiving her. Instead, she stared out the window, seeming intent on the stars.

"You don't have to do anything on your own, Rina. You only need to tell us what you want so we can act accordingly. Don't think you are alone with this. Any problem of yours is a problem of all of ours. We can't survive any other way."

"I know I'm not alone, and I won't let anything happen to my mersisters." Rina clenched her

hands behind her. *I'm not lying to my leader, misleading maybe, but not lying.*

Brook smiled brightly. "Wonderful! Now to deal with Raine's new boyfriend." She stepped out of the tub.

Rina hurried from the room under the guise of giving her privacy.

Rina skulked down the stairs, feeling guilty, but not repentant. She would do what was necessary to deal with Lucas and she wouldn't put her mersisters at risk in the process. Thoughts of Lucas confronting them all with anger and retribution on his face filled her mind. Her scared, innocent and so helpless mersisters trying to stand up for themselves, against him, made a knot of nerves grip her stomach in a painful grasp. They wouldn't stand a chance.

A knock at the now closed front door made Rina freeze halfway down the stairs, her horrible thoughts still filling her mind and body. Fear tightened her chest, sure death stood outside. The only person she could fit into that vision of death bringer was Lucas. *It's too late, he's here, and my mersisters are going to suffer for my horrible luck.* Rina was frozen with fear and indecision.

Raine danced past her in Acquanetta's borrowed skirt and threw open the door without a care in the world.

A shortish man of about thirty stood there, a

bouquet of irises in one hand and a box of sushi in the other. He had long black hair pulled back into a ponytail, his lips were thin and pursed and his eyes were narrowed and dark, assessing.

Rina shivered with apprehension as Raine embraced him and took the proffered gifts.

“Raine Oceanaria, my dear mermaid.” He leaned forward and pecked her cheek. “Do I get to meet your leader? Is Brook, mermaid leader, here?” The man’s gaze darted around the entryway and landed on Rina with interest.

Rina forced herself to take a deep breath and continue descending the stairs. She was just freaked about Lucas. This man was harmless no doubt, even if he did seem a bit weird. Then again, when did the men Raine met at the cons not seem a bit weird? Any immortal willing to go outside its own species to find a date was going to be a bit on the unusual side as it was frowned upon by most species. Of course all of them had plenty of males and females to go around. The mermaids were not so lucky.

“Rina, this is Walker.”

“Walker Weston, wizard extraordinaire.” Walker held out a dry hand.

Rina shook it as brief as possible. What could Raine see in this man? She was a beautiful girl and usually brought home attractive men, she didn’t discriminate between species, but they were

always the attractive ones. This just didn't seem like her normal date, and something about it, and him, really bothered her. She didn't have time to worry about it now though. She had her own problems to deal with.

"Brook is getting ready for dinner, she will be right down. I am on my way out with Acquanetta. It was great meeting you, Walker," Rina spoke politely, but without any real kindness.

"Walker Weston," he reminded her with a tight grin. "I am sure we will be seeing each other again, Rina Oceanaria."

His use of the mermaid's last name was creepy. Rina didn't understand it, but shrugged it off and hurried out to find Acquanetta before she could change her mind about her own problem. Raine could deal with her weirdo wizard. After all, she brought him home.

Rina hurried back down the beach and found Acquanetta, still in the spot she left her, and now in close conversation with Rive. "Umm, Netta, are you ready to go...to the store?" Rina asked, not quite quick enough to fool anyone.

"Don't worry about it, she already knows," Acquanetta said.

"I don't agree with this," Rive said with an angry look at Acquanetta. "But I can't talk her out of it. So I am going along for extra protection."

Rina didn't like the idea, didn't want any more

people involved in this than necessary, but Rive wasn't giving her much choice in the matter. "Fine, let's do this. I won't be able to get near his hotel without the song burning up my throat, so let's get it repressed here, before we head over. Hopefully we will be in and out and back in time for dessert, and never have to see Lucas again." Rina spoke with a confidence she didn't really feel and sadness she could barely conceal. For all the resentment and fury she held for Lucas, she still loved him and wanted more than anything to be with him. It would never happen. She knew and accepted it.

This was the only choice. Never seeing him again would make it easier to go about her life like everything was all right, no matter that nothing was all right. She would be alone instead of held in his strong arms, there could be no rightness anywhere but with him. She felt it with certainty, all the way down to her fin, and ached for what she wouldn't have. No mate, no life with a baby and husband, no continuation of any sort of mermaid species. She just wanted to forget. Forget him, their time together and their love song.

"Okay then," Acquanetta said with a big breath. She held Rina's shoulders with a light grip and looked deep into her eyes. "Lucas is not your mate, you do not love him, you do not want him and you will not sing a love song for him."

Acquanetta's hands fell away and Rina staggered back as her mind buzzed with the input of persuasion. Her head burned, then slowly cooled, and she swore she heard a cry of frustration from somewhere deep inside her, as if some part of her was struggling to not be suppressed. When she was again able to open her eyes and focus, she saw Rive had an arm around Acquanetta who, although pale, smiled when Rina looked at her.

"How do you feel?" Acquanetta asked, quite concerned.

"Fine now, but wow that was intense. I hope we don't have to do it again. How long do you think it will last?"

"I don't know."

"Long enough I hope," Rive said harshly.

CHAPTER THREE

They made quite the procession, hurrying down the street. Three beautiful women, one with flaming red hair one with pitch black hair and one with golden brown hair, all dressed in tiny sun dresses and all with glimmering reflective silver eyes – an oversight caused by the quick departure. Normally they would have put on contacts to cover their color, especially at night. They reflected the light and it was eerie to look at, if you were human.

A few catcalls and bold come-ons were quickly deflected with their otherworldly and withering glares.

They seemed innocent and harmless, defenseless even with their sweet faces and high singsong voices. But something about their silver shinning eyes glaring at a man made him rethink this seemingly easy conquest. They were in no mood to be flirtatious. They were women on a

mission and anyone who even thought about getting in their way was quickly discouraged.

Rina's determination faded the closer they came to Lucas's hotel. As they crossed to the street where Lucas's hotel stood, nerves knotted in her belly. *Why am I so nervous? This is ridiculous. I am in complete control here.* She knew she *should* feel love for him, knew there was a love song she had sung for him, but couldn't quite remember it. It was as if she were trying to remember the hazy details of a dream. The memory of it was there, but none of the emotion to make it real. It was a strangely empty memory, missing the most vital piece, the feeling behind it.

I feel free, and even a little interested in the cute Rastafarian playing music on the corner. Rina batted her eyes at him and gave him a finger wave. He stepped up the tempo of his music a bit as she swayed her hips by and blew a kiss over her shoulder. "If he wasn't human, I would be coming back for him later. Yum," she said with a giggle.

Both girls turned and looked at her with shocked expressions.

"What?" she asked innocently.

"Nothing, it's just that, well..."

"You haven't been with anyone in years, not since Mr. Wonderful left you," Rive finished for Acquanetta who was trying to be delicate.

“Yeah, I guess I kind of realize...” Rina let her mind wander to the possibilities of this persuasion. Being able to be with Lucas without attachment, satisfy her body with his like she had so many times in their short affair. She had to shake that thought away, it would never work, she knew. “I suppose that’s why I’m so horny.”

Their tinkling laughter floated down the street as they continued on, all a bit lighter of spirit. When they arrived at the hotel, they strode in, confident and smiling. The boy behind the desk didn’t stand a chance against their charm.

Rina took the lead. She placed her hands on the boy’s side of the desk and leaned forward. “Could you pass us through to room 206 please?” She didn’t even have to use persuasion on the bumbling boy, he was all too eager to please.

His gaze was locked onto her revealed skin as he waved them through with a stuttered, “Yes, ma’am.”

“That was almost too easy to be fun,” Rina complained as they stepped into the elevator.

“Hold that,” a voice called as the doors started to slide closed.

Acquanetta reached out and hit the button to open the doors. A couple in their seventies came to a halt in front of the elevator.

The husband eyed the three women with an appreciative glance and started to step in. The

wife pulled her husband's arm back and stood stiff. "It looks a bit crowded. We'll wait for the next one."

"It looks fine to me, dear," the man said as his gaze blatantly roamed over the three.

He was rewarded with a whack on the arm as the elevator doors slid shut once again. With the doors shut, all distraction was gone and Rina's gut tightened. She was about to face Lucas, and although she didn't feel anything for him right now, what would happen when they came face to face? *Can I look at his pale sparkling face and into his beautiful swirling brown eyes and not feel all the same love and desire I had before? Is Acquanetta's persuasion strong enough for that?* "What if it starts to wear off while we are there?"

"I don't know, I guess we try and be in and out as quick as possible and if you start to feel any changes, you just leave, no matter what is going on at the time. Rive and I will cover for you if that happens."

"If I can," Rina grumbled, not so sure of her strength. She did have more than enough resolve, but was not willing to make a fool of herself over that elf.

Two comforting arms went around her. One thing she could always count on was the support of her mersisters, even when she was doing something stupid and dangerous and totally

against the laws of the clan. Such a different attitude than the elves had—to them it was unforgivable to go against the colony. Which is why Lucas turned away from her—he couldn’t disappoint them, they would never forgive him and she wasn’t a good enough reason to lose them. Rina tried not to be bitter, but even Acquanetta’s persuasion couldn’t change that.

The doors opened and they hurried out and down the hall to 206.

Rina stood staring at the door, assessing her feelings. Lucas was on the other side of that door, she could feel it, but did she want to sing? *No, I don’t.* The thought fortified her and she lifted her hand to knock, but the door swung open before her hand descended. Lucas stood there, a glamour shimmering around him very similar to the one he had been using when she had seen him outside the shop—a buffed up beach boy with tanned skin and bulging muscles. In reality, he was tall and lean with shimmering pale skin. He wore a pair of low-slung jeans and no shirt, revealing a delicious amount of hairless skin and two enticing brown nipples. His long white hair was braided down his back, leaving his pointed ears to stand out considerably.

An unbidden memory of nipping and licking those lovely points popped into her mind. She quickly tamped down on the titillating memory

and moved her gaze to his mouth. His lips showed the slightest hint of uplifting at the corners, a major show of emotion for any elf. The annoyance of that thought gave her the strength to look into his eyes, big mistake. She almost lost herself in the swirling brown pools. Thankfully Rive chose then to gently kick her foot. Rina moved her gaze down to his slightly pointed chin, much safer.

"I'm here. Are you going to make me stand in the hall or what?" Rina was proud of her strong confident voice in spite of her whirring emotions. She could feel them trying to assimilate, but they kept getting scrambled, blocked both by Acquanetta's persuasion and her own determination.

"Of course, won't you come in?" Lucas stepped back so all three could enter his room, "I had hoped to speak with you in private."

"Right, like that was going to happen," Rive said as she passed into the room.

"I don't keep things from my mersisters," Rina said. Then just because it felt good to point out, she added, "My mersisters care only about what makes me happy, and who. So I don't need to keep secrets."

"Really, so I guess that means Brook knows you are here and approves?"

Rina bristled at the comment and she saw his

blank face change slightly with satisfaction. "I'm here, what did you need to say to me that was so important it couldn't be relayed through one of my mersisters?" Rina watched his face carefully, searching for the slightest change in his expression to indicate his thoughts and feelings. Nothing. His was a frustrating race and time had changed nothing. How was she supposed to enjoy showing him she didn't love him anymore if he didn't express his misery over the fact, or at least surprise?

Lucas had dropped his glamour once the door was shut, no use hiding in here. So now there was nothing to get in the way of her appreciative, hungry perusal of his body. *Damn, I have to keep my thoughts straight.* But it was harder than she thought it would be. She wasn't feeling love for him, but still felt attracted to him. She just hoped she didn't have *easy lay* written across her expressive face. If the situation weren't so complicated, she would be dragging him to that bed right now, tearing his clothes off with her teeth and licking every inch of his delicious body.

Rina bit her lip to keep the groan of desire from escaping. She could do nothing for the wetness she felt between her thighs. Lucas's eyes widened and she knew he was smelling her arousal. *Damn his immortal senses.* One thing she could count on, she hoped, was he had always been a

gentleman. He would never embarrass her by bringing up her obvious desire for him.

"Please join me on the balcony, at least. I would prefer to express myself in private."

Rina nearly scoffed at his use of the word *express*—when did Lucas ever express himself? Lucas motioned to the balcony door where a small monkey was pressing his face against the glass, staring in at them with annoyance.

"Is that a rat?" Rive asked, spotting the tiny hairy thing.

"It's a monkey, a pigmy marmoset," Lucas responded, ignoring the hostility in Rive's tone.

"Oh, he's adorable," Rina said, kneeling on the other side of the glass, thankful for the distraction. She tapped on the glass by its tiny hand. "Hey there, little guy, do you want to come in?"

"His name is Jack," Lucas whispered behind her.

A shiver ran through her body as his breath fanned her cheek. *Nothing more than I would feel for any attractive male.* Increased, no doubt, by the knowledge of how their bodies mated in perfect unison and reached heights of pleasure she hadn't before or since experienced.

Rina gave herself a mental shake and a shuddering breath escaped. Her body heated while her nerves vibrated with repressed need. "Jack. Like from *Pirates of the Caribbean*? I love that

movie," she whispered breathlessly.

"I knew you would."

His hot breath produced just enough moisture to make the skin on her cheek go slightly scaly for the briefest moment, so light and disappeared so quickly it would have gone unnoticed by a human.

Lucas was not human, and he noticed. He groaned low and deep, as if he couldn't control it. The sight of her scales no doubt bringing up memories of their passionate times together.

Rina swung her head around and searched his face, but it was blank and he stood, hiding any further reaction. She had no doubt he was ashamed to have shown emotion. Nothing had changed and she had to remember that. This was still the man who so coldly and callously walked out on her. She wouldn't give him the chance to do that again.

"To the balcony then? I let your sisters into the room. You owe me a bit of privacy at the very least."

Owed him. Rina scoffed mentally and she knew her face showed what she thought of his statement. Lucas was all about what other's owed him and even more so what he owed others—loyalty to his colony. He had owed them that above all else and she had been left behind because of it. She would never understand his

kind and didn't even care to try anymore. She would give him what she *owed him*, a couple minutes of her time and a cold shoulder, nothing more. "Whatever. Just make it quick, I have a date." Rina shoved open the door and a furry brown ball flew at her, claws extended, a vicious howl of anger emanating from its tiny body.

"Jack, no!" Lucas yelled and flashed himself in front of Rina, just in time to catch the little hell monkey. "Go sit in the bathroom," Lucas said to the monkey, who was mewling at him in apology.

When Lucas gave a firm nod in the direction of the bathroom door, Jack hopped out of his arms and, with a last murderous look at Rina, scrambled off to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

"No harm done," Lucas said simply, no doubt dismissing the entire incident from his mind.

No harm done! Rina fumed as she remembered that about him. If there was no harm done in his mind, then it was okay. It didn't matter that his little hell monkey had tried to rip her face off, what mattered to him was that it hadn't succeeded. Elves were infuriating, didn't understand the emotion of things, it didn't compute in their eye-for-an-eye view of the world. Feelings simply didn't matter to them, and so when they hurt them in others, they saw it as *no harm done*. Just because she didn't bleed on the

outside, didn't mean there wasn't any bleeding on the inside.

Rina stepped out onto the balcony, thankful for the cooler air on her heated body. She looked out over the bustling nightlife below, not wanting to face him. "I hope you don't feel my clan has treated you unfairly today, anything they did was to protect me."

"I know, and I am not looking for retribution for their actions toward me. I feel they were justified in using persuasion against me and sending me on a wild goose chase."

His comment surprised her. Rina turned to face him and gave him a look she hoped said, *get on with it I'm bored*, but probably fell more around *I hate you and I want to leave before I forget it again*. His impassive face went tight, a sign of nervousness she knew from past experience.

"I am here on official business, of sorts." He sounded as if he were choosing his words with care.

"I am not interested in anything having to do with your sister, or your colony." Rina moved to pass him and reenter the room, done with this conversation, and this visit. He grabbed her arm to stop her, his firm but delicate touch igniting memories of his wonderful hands all over her body, bringing her exquisite orgasms she had so missed. Rina pulled out of his grasp and stepped

back as far as she could. Her breath was coming in quick gasps and pain seared behind her eyes as her mind tried to assimilate the memories of their time together into the persuasion Acquanetta had given her.

“This isn’t about my colony,” Lucas said, his dark eyes assessing her reaction to his touch and obvious discomfort.

“What then?” Rina asked as she tried to rub the pain out of her head and took a deep steadying breath.

“Are you not well?” he asked with a hint of concern.

“Fine, but I would like to go, so please just tell me what you must.” Her voice caught at the end, squeaking out unnaturally. She cleared her throat, which suddenly felt as if it were being forced to do tricks it had never done before.

“You don’t look well, Rina, perhaps you should sit down.”

“No! Tell me now or I am leaving.”

Lucas allowed an angry emotion to pass over his features, no doubt just to let her know he didn’t appreciate her demanding him to do anything, but did continue without argument. “I have joined with representatives from other immortal species. We are forming a council to regulate and strengthen the immortals of the world. Unify them in a way that will be beneficial

to all, and eventually deal with the humans when and if we are ever forced out of hiding.”

“Wonderful, congratulations,” Rina said, more breathless than sarcastic as she had meant it.

“I have come here, Rina, to ask you to join us, to represent your species within the Council of Immortals.”

“Umm...I will have to think about that, okay. I will come back and let you know, or send a note or a carrier pigeon or something. I gotta go. Now!” Rina rushed past him and through the room, not caring if Rive and Acquanetta were following or not. She passed the elevator. It would take too long and she knew she didn’t have much. She ran for the stairs as her body began to tremble, barely under control. The song was coming alive, fighting through the persuasion. Her head was pounding and lightning shocks of agony were racing through her vocal cords. She ran as fast as she could, ignoring the curious looks of the people she passed. She didn’t stop when she hit the stairs. Her feet carried her swiftly down them and through the lobby. When she hit the street, she headed straight for the water, even though she was three blocks away from the beach. She never slowed down or looked back, just ran.

The scent of the ocean calmed her more than the distance she was gaining from Lucas and when she flung herself into the crashing waves,

relief rolled through her as quick as the scales covered her body. She stayed under until she couldn't hold her breath any longer, then she burst through the surface and gasped for air.

One note of her love song escaped into the night, searching for its intended receptor. Rina cringed and hoped it didn't make it. Then her mind went blank.

* * * *

Lucas clutched the balcony rail as he watched Rina sprint across the street below. Why she was running from him, he had no idea. Why he wanted to chase after her and force her back, he knew the answer very well. She was his and nothing in this world could possibly change it. Every word she'd spoken had given him endless chills. His ears had buzzed and tickled with each syllable uttered. For an elf, that was the sign of a destined mate.

But nothing out of her mouth had been what he had hoped, no song of love declaring her heart still open to him. She had done as he'd told her to do and feared she would do, she had moved on. There was no feeling left in her for him, except hate—he had seen it in her face. She hated him for what he had done, which had probably given her the strength she needed to move on. He had only

himself to blame for this hopeless situation.

Lucas straightened away from the rail as he watched Rive and Acquanetta sprint across the street after Rina. Acquanetta paused on the other side of the street and looked back at him, her silver eyes reflecting the lights and shining up at him with an eerie intensity. There was accusation in those eyes. He turned away, unable to stand his own thoughts reflected there, and with barely a thought, sent himself far away. He materialized in a dark room with bulky furniture and rich textures, very overdone by his standards, and very familiar.

“Lucas, how wonderful of you to drop in, luckily I was just finishing up here.” Paxton was seated on an overstuffed chaise, a young woman draped across his lap.

At first Lucas thought Paxton was in the middle of receiving a blow-job, but the woman’s limp arm and hand resting on the ground revealed the truth. Paxton was getting satisfaction of a very different kind. Lucas was almost positive the other kind of satisfaction had come first however. He could smell sex in the air.

“I am sorry to interrupt your, uhh, meal? But I wanted to report.” *And sulk.* The one good thing about being here was he knew he wouldn’t have a loving happy couple shoved in his face. Right now, he wanted a fellow miserable bachelor to

drink with, not that he would ever admit to as much.

“Yes well, like I said, I am done anyway. So I will just escort her outside, then we can talk.”

Lucas waited uncomfortably while Paxton carried the slight human outside. She was dressed like she had been clubbing at one of the many Goth themed clubs in Portland. A black tank top, black miniskirt with purple and black striped nylons underneath, and boots that laced up to her knees, she had gone out thinking she was the scariest thing in the night and found Paxton, poor girl. Her feet began to twitch as awareness started to seep back into her dazed body. Paxton was not the type of vampire to kill his food, most of the time.

A few minutes later, Paxton returned from his errand, a bottle of brandy in one hand and two glasses in the other. He filled them both and handed one to Lucas.

“I didn’t know you could ingest things other than blood,” Lucas said as he took the proffered glass. He needed a drink after meeting with Rina.

“Yes well, most of the time we don’t. But on occasion a good glass of brandy is well worth the slight discomfort afterward, as long as I don’t drink too much. I have accustomed my body to handle it in moderation. It has taken years of determination however. So how did the meeting

with Marina go?"

"I brought up the offer and she is thinking on it."

"Hmm...that's okay I suppose. It's to be expected, she would need time to consider the offer. So now we just hope she agrees."

"Hope? You said she was there, you saw her in your vision." Lucas spoke with a hint of anger in his voice. His hand tightened around his glass and he gulped down the remainder of the amber liquid, practically a tantrum for an elf.

Paxton raised an eyebrow at Lucas's show of emotion, but seemed unperturbed by the outburst. "I hope you didn't scare her off with your intensity," Paxton said with just enough force to let Lucas know he wasn't joking.

Lucas knew Paxton was determined to make his vision come true, as exact as possible to the way he had seen it. Although he hadn't shared its complete picture with Lucas, he had told Lucas what his part was. Lucas was there, sitting next to the mermaid representative, Marina. "You saw it, right? So there should be no question. Your blood vision foretold it, that's the way it works, isn't it?"

"It should," Paxton mumbled as he took a sip of brandy.

"What?" Lucas growled, his empty glass shattering in his hand as he took a threatening step forward. "It's a vision, you said she was

there. What do you mean *it should*?"

"*It should* work that way." Paxton stood tall, not giving an inch in the face of Lucas's anger. They were a fair matched pair in a fight, neither of them really wanted to test it though. "But it hasn't, not *exactly*. I was wrong about the representative of the werewolves. It was Ian in my vision, sitting next to Alexia, representative of the werewolves, but it is Terrance who is representing the werewolves. If I was wrong once, I don't know I can't be again."

"How is that possible? You vampires are supposed to rely on those visions to find your mates, how can it possibly not be accurate?"

"I have no doubt my mate is who I saw, that does not mean everything else will be exactly as I saw it. I don't think any vampire has ever tried to use their blood vision for any other kind of future telling. It's only proven to be accurate in identifying the mate."

"Then why the hell have you been trying to recreate it so exactly? Can't you just go out and find her now?" Lucas's voice was full of exasperation, his mind full of doubt and fear. "You know what? I don't even care. All that matters is this means she might say no. I have to go back there and talk to her, now. I can't let her decide not to join, it's too risky."

Lucas flashed himself out of Paxton's house

before hearing anything else Paxton might have to say. He landed in his hotel room momentarily, then pictured the beach where he assumed Rina had run to. Not caring if he might pop up in front of humans, he sent himself there.

The first thing he noticed was the moonlight glittering off two fully scaled mermaid women, one black and red, the other blue and green. Rive and Acquanetta were walking out of the water with a bundle in their arms that Lucas's mind refused to make sense of at first. He blinked twice, trying to make it go away, unable to accept what his mind was presenting to him. A pink and white scaled, fully formed, mermaid lay limp in their arms. Lucas's heart slammed into his chest and a fearful sweat broke out across his body as sudden chills rolled up his spine. Rina was harmed and he hadn't been near to save her.

Lucas couldn't tear his eyes away from the surreal picture they made as they seemed to float out of the water and up onto the sand—one any immortal would stop and stare at. A human would be frightened as well as spellbound by their dreamlike beauty.

Lucas forced his fear-frozen body into action. He raced forward and threw a glamour around them all to distract any dangerous human eyes. His stomach clenched with terror as his gaze scanned Rina's limp form.

“What the hell happened?” Lucas’s control slipped as the possibilities floated through his mind. It was so hard to tell, just by looking at her, what could possibly be wrong or how serious of an injury she could have. Covered in scales as she was, Lucas had no basis to judge her coloring. Perhaps she was deathly pale and he couldn’t even tell, or red and overheated. It didn’t matter, he was at a loss here and it was torture.

His entire being ached with fear as he watched her mersisters place his mate upon the sand. Their gentle hands smoothed over her, assessing her well-being in a calm and efficient manner that was quite at odds with their frightened expressions.

“Please, tell me what’s wrong, is she alright?” Lucas’s voice was pleading, his pain laid bare for them to see. Never in his life had he ever been so vulnerable. He felt his powers swirl around him, trying in vain to protect him from exposure like this, but he was too far gone. He refused to put energy into anything more than saving Rina. But how could he? Acquanetta looked up at him, her face registering surprise. They hadn’t noticed him before, too intense on Rina.

“We aren’t sure what happened, she blacked out is our best guess. She was in the water, we just saw her pop up and we could tell something was wrong. We hurried out to get her and she was unconscious.” Acquanetta looked back down, but

not before Lucas saw a flash of guilt in her eyes.

There was something more. Lucas was about to press her for the whole truth when Rina twitched, then moaned. All three held their breath and watched her, hoping and praying for another sign of life. She lay motionless and Lucas wanted to scream, to yell and curse—mostly at himself. This was all his fault. He never should have left her and now she might be gone forever. He was going to miss out on any kind of life with her.

“We need to get her back to the house, Brook should know what to do,” Rive said and started to gather Rina into her arms.

Lucas yanked Rina into his own arms and felt his power surge around them. His mind unclouded and calm assurance took over his grief. He could fix this, he was an Animal Elf and he could find what was wrong. But he had to control his emotions, he had to be steady and he had to direct his powers carefully. Rina was only part animal, which would make this difficult.

“I am taking her back to my room to heal her, if you would like you can meet me there, I won’t wait for you. There isn’t time to waste.” Lucas wasn’t sure why he offered instead of just flashing himself and Rina away, except he knew she would be happy he included her family. He supposed that was reason enough to act so out of character and be considerate of their feelings in this moment

of such personal horror. He wasn't acting with complete selflessness however, with them in attendance it would be easier for him to push away all emotion and focus on healing Rina.

Without caring to hear their response, he flashed himself and Rina to his hotel room. He would heal her and hoped it would be enough to gain her trust, and a bit of forgiveness. As he laid her on his bed, he thought of last night and how he had lain there wishing she were with him, wanting him the way he still wanted her. Now she was there, he just had to make sure she woke up so she could have the chance to want him back.

Lucas leaned over her body and took a deep steadying breath. He cleared his mind of all the emotions she was making him feel and pulled his powers forward, then concentrated the power in his hands. Beginning at her head, he slowly moved his hands over her body, not touching her, just close enough to feel the energy of her body. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the feel of it, the pulse of her life – it was strong. He paused a moment to thank all that was holy for the small gift. He shook off the feelings of relief, blanked himself out and concentrated once again. He identified the part of her that was not human, the part making her immortal. It was so enmeshed with the part of her that was animal, he just might have a chance of healing it.

Relief started to flood him at the strong healthy pulse of her animal part and his powers started to flicker out. He pushed the relief away – an Animal Elf could only really control his power if he blocked all emotion as emotion got in the way. He would be unable to help her if he didn't push them away. He continued on, searching for the slightest inconsistency in her energy. When his hands hovered over her throat, he felt a knot, a blockage, there. He wasn't sure what it was, had never found anything like it before and wasn't sure how to fix it. He prodded at it with his powers, gently tugging on pieces as if he were untying a knot. One strand at a time it came loose, and as the last piece broke free, he felt another's power, power that had been gluing it together, flow free. The power dissipated into the night before he had a chance to grasp it and investigate it. Not daring to assume it had been the only problem, he continued his search down the rest of her body, which was almost completely human looking once again. Her tail had split and her skin was only scaled under her wet clothing, which clung deliciously to her body. She was practically naked, a fact Lucas only managed to ignore by keeping his eyes closed.

The rest of her body's energy gave no indication of harm and after a second full scan, he gave up. Her immortal animal half was healed

and so her human self would heal as well. The relief he felt was so consuming, so overwhelming, he was unable to hold it all back. His hands were shaking as he started to peel her wet clothes off. As more of her body was revealed, his cock twitched and swelled, wanting her with the desperation of their long separation.

Light running steps sounded in the hall outside his room. Rive and Acquanetta rushed in and glared near identical looks of fury at him. They were wrapped in, no doubt stolen, sarongs and looking completely human, aside from the wet scales rimming their hairlines. The scales were subtle and would be dismissed by a human, but their flashing, fury-filled silver eyes, those would not be dismissed so easily.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Rive shouted quietly and rushed toward the bed.

“Is she going to be all right?” Acquanetta asked, more calm than her mersister as she, too, rushed to Rina’s side.

Lucas stepped back, with reluctance, to let them finish undressing her. He walked toward the balcony and stared out at the night, but could still see Rina’s flesh as it was exposed. The reflection held his rapt attention and he felt himself harden further with ferocious need. He took a deep breath and reined himself in.

“I think she will be fine, I could only heal her

animal part however, so she may still take some time to heal completely and wake up. I found a major blockage over her throat." The backs of both women stiffened and their hands momentarily stilled on Rina's body. "I felt someone else's magic there, someone did something to her." Lucas eyed their busy movements reflected in the glass with deep suspicion.

They undressed Rina and covered her in a blanket. "Well, she certainly looks better. I do believe she is merely sleeping now, recuperating her energy," Rive offered by way of thanks.

Lucas turned around to face them. On the outside he was his usual impassive self, on the inside he was raging, because these two women were keeping something from him, something that was harming his mate. He would find out what, but wouldn't waste his time asking them. He would wait until Rina was up and would gain her trust, then find out from her what was going on, if she even knew.

The three of them settled into an uncomfortable silence, all eyes on Rina, watching for the slightest sign of consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

A dream, at least Rina was pretty sure it was a dream. It had to be a dream, a wonderful dream she never wanted to wake up from. She was with Lucas and she was serenading him with their love song.

Rina cuddled closer to his warm body behind her as she sang the final notes and started again from the beginning. She had wanted to sing this song for so long she didn't want to stop now that she had started. She felt his finger caress her cheek and push the hair from her forehead – so gentle, so caring. This was her Lucas, not the cold distant elf he had become after his sister had found out about them. “I love you, Lucas,” she said as the song once again ended.

“Rina, are you awake?” Acquanetta's voice invaded her perfect dream and Lucas disappeared from behind her, turning into a soft bed. His familiar hands on her face and head became the

familiar hands of her mersister.

Rina squeezed her eyes tight, fighting to go back into her dream. She wanted Lucas to be with her, to be the gentle lover he had been when they met. He was her mate and they had been perfectly matched before he was reminded she wasn't good enough for him. Rina fought the bad memory, the reality. She preferred the dream and the good memories.

"She looks like she's in pain. Do you think she's in pain?"

Rive's voice came easily through Rina's forced dreaming.

"I don't sense any physical ailment."

Lucas's voice hit her and she stopped trying to stay asleep. She popped her eyes wide and looked up into three faces, two full of obvious concern and one impassive, almost bored. Anger surged in her and she tried to sit up—all three pushed her back down.

"You need to rest, Rina, you blacked out in the water," Rive explained.

"How do you feel?" Acquanetta asked quietly, her eyes filled with guilt.

Rina thought about what they were saying, then remembered what she was doing before she had apparently blacked out. The meeting with Lucas, under Acquanetta's persuasion to forget their love song, then running to the safety of the

sea as the song clawed upward, trying to get out. As she remembered, she felt the familiar song tickle her throat—her whole body tuned into Lucas’s presence, every cell straining of its own accord to be near him, to feel his touch and acceptance. Only her mind and broken heart rebelled. She bit her lip as the pressure increased and looked at Acquanetta, trying to relay her problem without words.

“What’s wrong, Rina, talk to us. There was a problem in your throat I fixed. Someone’s magic was there. Do you know who would want to harm you or your voice?” he asked quieter, a hint of anger seeping through. “I need you to speak so I know there was no permanent damage done to your vocal cords. I would hate to find out your beautiful voice was damaged in any way.” Lucas looked at her expectantly as he spoke with the detachment of a doctor to an anonymous patient.

Rina wished she could say something hurtful to him, anything to make him know she didn’t think any more of him than he obviously did of her, but couldn’t. Rina didn’t dare to even open her mouth at this point. The song was too strong, too intense as it tried to escape. She would like nothing more than to tell Lucas off, let him know what she thought of his infuriating calm and undoubtedly fake concern. However, it was impossible at the moment, unless she wanted to first let him know

she was still in love with him, on the very basest of levels anyway. So she avoided his eyes and looked from one sister to the other, pleading for help silently.

Rive jumped in after a moment's confusion. "Lucas, why don't you run out and pick up some sushi and saltwater for Rina, I am sure she needs to replenish after her ordeal." Rive crowded Lucas with her body and forced him to back all the way to the door.

His gaze never left Rina and she tried to give him a reassuring nod, but her insides were so twisted it was difficult to do anything for fear of letting it all go.

"And pick up something sugary as well. You know how she enjoys sweets," Rive added.

Lucas's eyes narrowed on Rive, just slightly. It would have been easily missed by someone not as attuned to his facial expressions as Rina was. "If you try to take her anywhere before I return, there will be retribution." Lucas's words hung heavy in the room long after he flashed himself out.

Rive rushed back to Rina's side, unconcerned by Lucas's threat. "We have got to get you out of here, away from that man and all the harm he is putting you through. Nothing is worth all of this."

The need to sing disappeared instantly along with Lucas. Rina was trying to enjoy the relief, but all she felt now was nervous concern and

indecision. "I can't leave. I can't let him come after me at home and bring his wrath down upon every one of my clan sisters. I feel bad enough you two are involved." Rina wanted to groan in agony, trying to think of a way to keep her family safe. "But you two don't have to be. Acquannetta persuade me again, then you two can leave and I will take care of Lucas once and for all." Rina turned determined eyes on her mersisters, looking from one to the other.

"Absolutely not, it is out of the question to persuade you again. It is not permitted and now we know why. You blacked out and who knows what would have happened if Lucas hadn't undone whatever he undid in your throat. Brook is in charge, Rina, don't forget that, and she would skin us all if she knew we did it even once," Rive argued.

"If I get away from him sooner, I will be fine. I think I only blacked out because the pressure was so great, the song trying to assimilate with him being near and the persuasion telling me to forget it. But if I am quick, I don't think it will happen again."

"I don't want to hurt you, Rina, but I will help you if it's really what you want," Acquannetta said quietly.

"This is crazy." Rive threw her hands up in the air dramatically and walked toward the balcony.

"Thank you, Netta. Now, do it quick, before he returns."

"How can you ask her to do this?" Rive said, angry now and turning back toward them. "Do you have any idea what—"

"Rive! That is enough," Acquanetta shouted. Both Rina and Rive stared at her, mouths agape, Acquanetta never raised her voice, to anyone. She was the gentlest of all the clan sisters.

"Fine, but don't expect me to take any blame for this. And what if he senses your magic in the room? He might be able to, you know, he will recognize it as the same he felt in Rina's throat." Rive stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest.

"We will deal with it if we have to. He shouldn't be able to though, not unless he gets close to me or Rina, searching through our bodies," Acquanetta answered calmly. "My persuasion is so concentrated in one specific area, I won't be leaving traces of it about the room like an elf does when he flashes."

Rive huffed, but didn't say anything.

Rina sat up comfortably in the bed, leaning back against the pillows. A cool breeze from the open balcony doors alerted Rina to her state of undress. "Rive, could you find me something to wear, I don't really want to face Lucas without any clothes on."

Rive rummaged angrily around the room, looking for something Rina could wear.

"You're sure about this, Rina? We can always just try and persuade him when he gets back," Acquanetta offered quietly.

"You know that will be no more than a temporary fix, Netta. He has to hear it from me or he won't ever leave us alone. Trust me it's worth it." Rina ignored the internal voice crying out to show Lucas she loved him still, to not suppress their song and just see what happens. *Yeah right.* He would just hurt her again, she would stare up into his blank face while she laid herself bare and he would say something like, *you know we are different species and therefore cannot mate.* She would not go through that, not again.

"Why? What does he want from you anyway?" Rive asked as she opened drawers and slammed them shut.

"It's complicated, but trust me, I am not interested and really it is something for Brook to be made aware of. I don't honestly know why he came to me instead."

"I think I could guess," Rive said as she walked over with a blue tunic, traditional elf garment made from a soft flowing material. "This is all I found in here, he obviously packs light." Rive handed Rina the shirt with a shrug.

Rina pulled the shirt on. It would cover to her

knees when she stood, more than most her dresses. Rina settled herself back and nodded. "Okay, let's do this. I want to be alone with him, I want you two to leave when he returns. I think it's important I have my say in private." Both sisters looked worried and shook their heads no. Rina narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. "I can take care of myself and I am an adult."

"Fine," Rive grumbled and Acquanetta sighed her agreement.

"Thank you both, now I am ready."

Acquanetta took a deep breath and grasped Rina's shoulders, looking deep into her eyes. "There is no love song for Lucas. You don't want to sing to him."

Pain seared through Rina's mind, a lightning strike with those simple words. Her vision went black and her throat constricted painfully. It took longer this time, the pain faded slower and when she was recovered enough to look around, she saw Acquanetta cradled in Rive's arms at the foot of the bed. Acquanetta was pale and her silver eyes were full of concern for Rina. Rive's face was full of fury and her silver eyes flashed with accusation at Rina.

Rina didn't understand what was going on, but before she could question them, a knock sounded at the door. All three turned to look at the intrusive noise. They waited, and just when they

thought whoever it was had gone away, the knock sounded again.

“Rina, answer it and send them away,” Rive ordered, still holding an only slightly less pale Acquanetta.

Rina hopped off of the bed and hurried to the door. Getting rid of unwanted guests was a simple task when you could pretty much make them do whatever you wanted. She opened the door and smiled brightly at the balding man who stood there. He wore a bathrobe and his chubby face was red with anger.

“What the hell is all that racket in there? It sounds like you have a wild animal in your bathroom and I can’t sleep.”

Rina glanced at the closed bathroom door, remembering the evil little monkey within. “Oh, sorry, go back to your room and get a good night’s sleep.” Rina started to close the door on the stranger’s face, her mind already dismissing the man.

His hand shot out and stopped the door from closing. His face was turning even redder and his eyes bugged out, incredulous. “What the hell is your problem, woman? I said take care of the noise. Don’t try to dismiss me or I will call down to the front desk and have you kicked out on your ass.”

Rina’s mouth hung open in disbelief. Why

hadn't it worked? How could a mere human withstand her persuasion? It was impossible.

"We will take care of the noise, so sorry to disturb you. Go back to your room and don't worry about it one bit." Rive's calm voice came from behind Rina and the man turned and left, a calm expression taking over his face. "What the hell is wrong with you?" Rive accused.

Rina slunk back to the bed, still confused. She replayed the whole thing in her mind, but couldn't think of where she had went wrong, why it hadn't worked.

"What the hell, Rina, why didn't you persuade him?" Rive accused.

"I did!" Rina snapped back, then quieter. "Or I tried to at least. I don't know why it didn't work." Rina looked at her sister with concern.

"I think I know why," Acquanetta said quietly. Both sisters turned to look at her with surprise. "It has to be because you are under my persuasion. You can't persuade anyone while you are under someone else's persuasion."

"Well I guess that's good, at least we know it will come back," Rina said, only a little relieved.

"Yeah just great, as long as you don't need to use it between now and then," Rive said with more than a little sarcasm.

Rina shot her a look clearly saying *shut up*. Acquanetta didn't need any more guilt over what

she had done, twice now.

Before any more could be said about it, Lucas appeared, bags in hand. His eyes flashed relief for just a second when he saw Rina sitting up in the bed, then his usual cool countenance returned, showing nothing.

"I apologize it took me so long. But I do believe I found all of your favorites, Rina. I had to travel quite far however, because of the late hour."

Rina hesitated to answer, searching through her body for the urge to sing. She didn't feel anything when she looked at him, other than a simple attraction to a beautiful male. Like the time before, she could feel the memory of the song and the confusion of it being gone, but didn't feel the urge to sing it. "Thanks, I'm starving."

"I am glad to hear your voice. It seems no damage was done. How are you feeling?" Lucas let Rive take the bags from his hands and rummaged through them for what Rina needed.

"Great actually, I haven't felt this good since...well in a long time I guess." Rina knew exactly when she had felt this good, earlier this evening when she had been under Acquanetta's persuasion the first time. It was sweet, such sweet relief.

"Here eat this, Rina." Rive shoved a container of sushi at her.

She dug in with gusto, she was starving.

Rive handed the saltwater to Acquanetta who gulped it down with shaky hands.

"What's wrong with her?" Lucas asked Rive, indicating Acquanetta.

"She's just low on sodium, nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure? I could check her out. Make sure there isn't anything wrong with her animal half at least." Lucas stepped forward, but Rive blocked his path. Brown eyes clashed with silver in a battle for dominance.

"We are already indebted to you far enough. I won't have my clan owing you any more than necessary. In fact, I think Acquanetta and I will be leaving." Rive stood and helped Acquanetta to her feet. "Rina, we will see you back home soon." Rive shot a look in Rina's direction that stated *If you aren't there soon we will be coming back for you.*

"Sounds good," Rina said with a nod. She didn't plan to stay long. She just wanted to be alone with him, really alone with him, one more time before she said goodbye. Once they were gone, Rina wasn't sure what to do. She was waiting, she knew, for him to make some kind of declaration.

"I hope you give my offer some serious thought, Rina. It's an important position, I think you would do it the honor it deserves."

He's all business. Even when she sat here on his

bed, covered only in one of his tunics, his mind was all on business. She hated that and didn't know why, she just did. She wanted him to want her, even if it was only her body he was after. She wanted his lust because she couldn't have his love.

Right now, under Acquanetta's persuasion she could give him exactly that back, all lust no love. She wanted to, wanted him, her body heated at the thought. Her nipples hardened, rubbing against the soft fabric. She watched him, his gaze drifted down and she smiled, knowing he was seeing her nipples poke through his shirt. A familiar darkening of his eyes told her everything she needed to know, he still desired her.

Wetness seeped between her thighs and she knew she was going to have him, refused to leave without. Raising a knee, she allowed the shirt to lift, revealing her bare thighs. She slid a hand along her exposed skin, drawing his gaze there.

"Rina."

Her name was a groan and it made her shiver with anticipation. Pinpricks of pain from the repressed song didn't detract from the pleasure. "Lucas?" she asked with a raised eyebrow, trying her best to play the nonchalant seductress.

Lucas didn't hesitate any longer. He fell on her with a passionate groan. His mouth was hot and hungry as it moved across hers, his tongue forcing its way past her parted lips. Rina moaned as his

tongue slid across hers, sending shockwaves of pleasure through her body. The shirt she wore rubbed against her straining nipples and she arched her back, wanting to feel his skin there. Hot and alive, she wanted to feel him all over her body.

Rina moved her hands between them, pulling at his clothing. His lips left hers and he shed his clothing. He was beautiful, tall, lean, pale and perfect, his hard cock jutting from his body. His long hair was loose around him and her skin tingled, anticipating the feel of it brushing against her bare skin. She didn't want to wait, this wasn't about making love, this was about satisfying lust.

Rina pulled the tunic off and grabbed Lucas's hand, pulling him down onto the bed. "I want to ride you, Lucas." His eyes narrowed and darkened, a rumble from his chest was his only reply before she pushed him back and straddled his body. She ran her hands along his chest and up into his hair. She leaned down, kissing him deep and allowing their bodies to touch everywhere they possibly could. His skin was so soft, his body so hard, just as she remembered.

Lucas's hands slid along her back, cupping her ass and pushing her down against his cock, rubbing her clit against its hard length. "Oh fuck," she groaned as her body spasmed. It had been too long since she had felt this, too long since she had

even given herself sexual release. He was moving under her and holding her tight, going slow, his tongue languorous as it moved against hers. He was savoring, she didn't want that.

Taking control again, she moved a hand down to grasp his cock, positioning herself above it she broke their kiss and slid down, taking him in deep. Her hands gripped his shoulders, steadying herself as she closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of being filled.

As she dared a moment of savoring, she felt the song tickle her, wanting out, knowing it was being held back. Rina didn't know how much time she had and she didn't want to waste any of it. She began to move, thrusting her hips in a slow hard rhythm. She opened her eyes and met his gaze. His brown eyes were so dark now and there was something in his face, anger maybe. His hands were gripping her hips hard and his hips moved to match her thrusts. Soon the rhythm became faster, harder, both of them slamming against each other, punishing thrusts that made Rina's entire body tighten as it neared orgasm.

"Oh, Rina," Lucas groaned.

She knew he was close to orgasm as well. Rina closed her eyes and let herself go, wetness spilling around his cock as her orgasm overtook her. She knew she was moaning, but it was incoherent and she didn't care, it felt too good to care. Lucas's

grip tightened on her hips and he thrust high off the bed as he came, too, spurting inside of her, completing her orgasm.

"Fuck...." He moaned.

Rina collapsed on him, catching her breath and her sanity. *What the hell did I just do?* She jumped off the bed and pulled his tunic back on, avoiding his eyes as she combed her fingers through her hair and slipped her bikini bottoms on. "I should be going."

"If you must."

Rina turned to face him. He had pulled on his pants and was sitting on the bed, looking calm and composed as if nothing had just occurred between them, nothing of importance. It made her body heat with a much less pleasant emotion than it had felt moments before.

"I will escort you home, of course."

"That's not necessary." She did not want to spend more time with him than necessary.

"We still have my offer to discuss," he reminded her.

A cold hatred settled in her stomach. It was all he cared about really, his newest stupid mission. "Of course, I will definitely be considering it. I would of course like to speak with Brook about it before I make a decision." Brook would no doubt assign someone to the position. It just wouldn't be her. "I can speak with Brook tonight, or first thing

in the morning perhaps, and I will let you know of my decision as soon as it's made." Rina stood, daring him to deny her.

Lucas gave no indication he didn't agree.

That irked her a little bit. She couldn't help it, she wanted a reaction out of him, she wanted him to hurt and feel disappointment, and damn it she wanted to be the reason for it.

"I have a vehicle downstairs."

"That isn't necessary."

Lucas narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "I won't have you come to harm because I kept you here so late at night. It's four AM. Nobody is out and about except criminals and vampires."

"Fine, but let's go," Rina said, not wishing to argue. It would be nice to get home faster than walking, especially with her lacking persuasion.

As they passed the bathroom door, a screech and yelp made them pause and stare.

"Jack has been locked up for far too long. He will accompany us." Lucas opened the door and a very distraught little monkey leaped to his shoulder, glaring at her.

He looked so small and helpless, Rina almost forgot the little thing had tried to scratch her eyes out. Rina ignored the stab of jealousy she felt as she watched the monkey touch Lucas with tender familiarity. She pushed the feeling away, trying to take on a more stoic, more Lucas like, facial

expression. She squared her shoulders, pushed her wild curls behind her ears and stepped out into the hall, full of stiff purpose. She would not let him get to her, in any way. Her entire being was closed to him and it was for the best, even if she wanted nothing more than to open herself up and let him in, craved it like nothing else. Despite the persuasion to forget the song of love, Rina was helpless to ignore and forget the fact that they had once been lovers and mates. He had once, for a short time, represented a life beyond her clan and a continuation of her species. Now he was just a reminder of the impossibility of all of it. She shouldn't have given in to her lust for now her body was even more eager to have him, as much as it could get.

"If we stay close, I can keep a glamour around us both, no one will see anything out of the ordinary."

Rina wanted to object, but was only half-dressed and it *was* four AM. The last thing she needed was to be arrested for prostitution. Then again, maybe Lucas could be arrested for pimping her, which might not be too bad. Rina smiled, picturing Lucas being dragged away as she sobbed out a story of abuse and forced prostitution to the sympathetic police officers. Of course it would never happen. Lucas would just disappear and she would be left to deal with his

anger when he returned. Stupid elf tricks, they ruin everything.

The entire uncomfortable drive to the house, Rina prattled on and on about mundane things. It was a mermaid habit—talking on and on, no matter what it was that was coming out. Rina was in no mood to act like everything was fine and normal, but could think of nothing but jumping out of the car as soon as it stopped in front of her home. So her mouth opened and words came out. She just wanted to be back in her quiet life, no matter how unfulfilling it was without her mate. It was better than this. This was fake, dishonest and torturing. Even though she didn't feel the love song, she still looked at Lucas and saw the man she had been with, the man who had callously broke her heart and the man she still wanted to be with anyway.

When the car stopped in front of the house, she scrambled to get out as quick as she could. Lucas reached out and grasped Rina's arm before she could get more than a leg out of the vehicle.

"A word before you leave, please." The last word was said as an afterthought, no doubt just a ploy to get his way, nothing more.

Rina sat back down, but left the door open. She looked up at the front porch and saw there was already a group of her mersisters congregating, staring with open shock and fascination. Dozens

of silver eyes flashed and sparkled in the headlights. It was an eerie sight even for Rina. Rina turned her attention to Lucas and gave him a bored look, even as her face heated with embarrassment over her mersisters watching this. She didn't want to give Lucas the satisfaction of any reaction other than barely restrained tolerance.

"I hope you seriously consider my offer, Rina. The council needs a mermaid representative and both Paxton and I feel you would fit the role to perfection."

His words seemed heartfelt, but Rina wasn't fooled, he didn't have a heart. "Yeah, I'll think it over and give you my answer in the morning."

Lucas held tight to her arm a moment longer, as if he wanted to say more, beg her to accept the offer perhaps.

Rina pulled her arm from his grasp and shook her head mentally – he wouldn't beg for anything, it was just wishful thinking. Like he had said, this guy Paxton wanted her there. Lucas probably didn't give a crap whether or not she accepted the offer, except perhaps so he could sleep with her when he felt like it.

She hurried up the steps and was engulfed in the group of mersisters there. Instantly disappearing into the sea of women, she turned an anonymous eye to Lucas and watched him drive

away. She knew she should be hoping this would be the last time she was ever this close to him. "Goodbye, Lucas," she whispered, a tear slipping down her cheek unchecked. A stray thought floated to the surface of her mind and she wondered if he still felt her words, if so, it was quite possible her whispered goodbye would reach him. She bit her lip as apprehension filled her, thankfully replacing the desperate sadness. No, it wasn't possible she decided, he hadn't seemed affected by her presence in any way. Of course he wasn't exactly known for his openness.

"Well one more of the missing has returned, relatively unharmed I see." Brook came out on the porch and grasped Rina's chin in a firm grip, silver eyes assessing her for damage of any kind.

"I'm fine, and tomorrow I will tell you all about it," Rina promised and gave Brook a pleading look meant to portray her haggard spirit and exhausted body. It worked.

"Yes you will, now everyone inside. We don't want the neighbors to see us all out at this early hour, especially without our contacts in."

The sun was still a couple hours from rising and humans would call this an ungodly hour to be awake. For an immortal, it wasn't so bad, no immortal needed much sleep and so the hours they kept always tended to seem odd to humans, if they were noticed. The group of mermaids

moved into the house and went back to whatever they were doing before the interruption. Late night activities usually included games of truth or dare and movies with lots of extraneous nudity. Tonight was no different and Rina joined a group of her mersisters huddled in the living room with a big bowl of popcorn and a very fine ass on the big screen. Acquanetta and Rive both gave her silent inquiring looks. She just nodded to assure them she was okay and definitely didn't want to talk about it. They left her alone, for which she was thankful.

"Woo-hoo, damn I wish he weren't human. I would be all over that like it was a salt lick," Rive said enthusiastically and earned herself a couple of emphatic agreements from the others.

"Or better yet, a sugar pop, Nautia added enthusiastically.

Rina tried to laugh along with her mersisters and enjoy the senseless movie, and delicious bare skin, but it was hopeless. She just couldn't concentrate on anything other than her own messed up feelings.

Rina escaped the living room when there was a full frontal nudity scene and her mersisters were distracted with comparing the size and shape of his cock to any and all they had seen before. She hurried up the stairs, but just before she reached the safety of her bedroom, her mother appeared in

the hall between her and that blessed safety.

“Oh, Rina, you’re back,” Rio said with a little hiccup, still tipsy from earlier.

“Yeah, and I’m exhausted,” Rina said with a dramatic sigh, trying to edge around her mother.

“Of course you are, out partying all night with your sisters.” Rio sighed deeply. “I just don’t understand you young girls. Raine and her constant boyfriends, this latest one seems like a real piece of work. I don’t know why she bothers, you sing your song the moment you meet your mate, not after you’ve dated him three or four times. Never will she find happiness with any other.” Rio continued on her way, completely oblivious to the fact that she had just poured salt into the deep wound where her daughter’s heart had been torn from.

Rina stumbled into her room and fell onto her bed as a torrent of tears started to fall. She would never find love, would never sing her love song to her mate who was devoted to her in the same way she was devoted to him. She was destined to live alone and lonely, and it was not about to change.

Just before dawn, Rina finally fell asleep

* * * *

Lucas’s whole body shuddered when Rina’s goodbye hit him. It took all his restraint to keep

from turning around right then and forcing her to forgive him and accept him as her mate. He was sure she had no intention of joining the council no matter what had occurred between them at the hotel, and it scared him like nothing else could. He needed her there, needed her close and was not afraid to coerce her in any way necessary.

There was lust in her for him and he could use that to his advantage, get her to trust him again. He tried not to think about how she hadn't sung for him, like every other time they'd had sex. What it meant he wasn't sure, but he didn't like it. He just had to wait and see what she said tomorrow so he could find the one thing to change her mind. It would be so much easier if he could just tell her what he felt, but he couldn't, not when she so obviously wanted to feel nothing for him. Paxton needed her on the council, and if Lucas scared her off by revealing his feelings, then he would not only lose his chance at winning her back, he would also piss off a very dangerous vampire.

If only Rina had given him some indication of feelings for him. She hadn't seemed anything more than annoyed and angry, even her lust seemed oddly resentful. He should have expected as much since he had not left her with any hope for a future with him. Intended, and for her own good, he knew it had been a cruel break, one he

hoped to spend the rest of his immortal life making up for. If only she would give him the chance.

Jack pouted in the passenger seat where he had retreated after a failed attempt at comforting Lucas. "Sorry I'm so moody, Jack, it will all change once Rina is back where she belongs *in my arms*. The memory of her soft body pressed against his as they made love, not just fucked for lust as they had tonight, was all the motivation he needed to find a way to be together.

Jack squabbled.

Lucas could feel the hostile anger the tiny monkey was putting off. "Now, Jack, my feelings for you won't change when I have Rina back and I am sure she will love you, too, if you don't try to attack her again."

Jack didn't respond, but Lucas was too distracted to care. There had to be something to tip the scales in his favor and he needed to figure out what before morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rina awoke to an abnormal level of noise and activity downstairs. In a house that was never quiet because there were always a few mersisters awake, and none of them could keep their mouths shut for any length of time, noise was to be expected, comforting even. This was more than that. This was the sound of fearful excitement and it could mean only one thing. A sister was in trouble.

Rina scrambled out of bed and caught sight of herself in her mirror. She was still wearing Lucas's shirt. For just a moment, she allowed herself to breathe deep the scent of his body clinging to the cloth. She imagined herself wrapped tight in his arms, breathing his sweet scent straight off him. How many mornings had she awoken to this delicious scent all around her? Not enough.

The continued flurry of activity downstairs and a rush of footsteps past her door brought her back

to reality. She threw off Lucas's shirt and slithered into panties and a pink strapless sundress. She combed her fingers through her short red curls and was about to leave her room when the door swung open.

Acquanetta and Rive hurried inside.

"What's going on?" Rina asked as she backed into her room to let them in.

Acquanetta wore a look of determination over fear and Rive looked pissed, but resigned.

"It's Raine," Acquanetta said, handing Rina a purple flyer, the kind that was usually handed out on street corners advertising after hour clubs. Only this one advertised torture and death rather than fun and excitement.

Congratulations!

One of your clan has been selected to be part of my scavenger hunt. The rules are simple, get to your species representative before anyone else gets to theirs and your species representative will live. If you don't get there first, your species representative will be killed. Sorry there can be only one winner. The first clue will be delivered shortly. In the meantime, choose your scavenger hunt representative hunters. No more than three to a team.

Happy Hunting!

"What the fuck?" Was all Rina could come up with when she finished reading the insane

invitation for the third time.

Yeah, that's what I said, too," Rive said.

"How...what..." Rina stuttered, unable to comprehend just what was going on.

"It was delivered just a few minutes ago. We were all in the kitchen, except for you, and Raine, who never came home last night."

"That little bastard Walker Weston, freakin' Wizard Extraordinaire! I knew there was something off about him, but I was too distracted with Lucas to care. Oh my God, this is entirely my fault," Rina moaned. She had felt his evil soul and said nothing.

"You're not the only one who missed it, Rina. No one else noticed anything off enough to worry," Acquanetta said, trying to comfort Rina. "Now get dressed in jeans and comfortable shoes. We are leaving as soon as the clue arrives."

Acquanetta's tone was so strong and sure, Rina wasn't positive it had come out of Acquanetta's caring mouth. "What? Why?"

"We have the best chance of getting to her. We will go to Lucas and you will accept his offer of joining the council. Then we will enlist their aid. But we have to do it without anyone knowing. If Brook finds out what happened last night, she will insist we all stay here. She won't see it as a good idea."

"I'm not sure *I* think it is a good idea."

“Neither do I,” Rive agreed emphatically. “But I won’t let Netta do this without me and she seems to think you have the best chance of anyone, with our help of course.”

“So get dressed, Rina, our sister is in trouble and we are going to save her.” With that command, Acquanetta rushed herself and Rive out of the room, presumably to change out of their sundresses.

This can’t be a good idea, but is it the worst idea? She couldn’t imagine any of her mersisters out there fighting against more powerful immortals for the clues and racing to save Raine first, including herself. “This is insane,” Rina whispered as she dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. She was shoving her feet into tennis shoes when Acquanetta and Rive rushed back in, both dressed similarly in jeans and t-shirts, backpacks slung over their shoulders. Rina shoved a few things into a backpack and she was ready as well. “So what’s the plan?” Rina asked.

“Netta is going to go downstairs and watch for the clue to arrive. She will be the least noticeable down there. You and I need to stay up here, out of sight. If my mother sees us, she will remember we all have some explaining to do.”

“O—” Rina’s entire body convulsed with the sudden extreme desire to sing. Lucas was in the house and he had flashed in. No gradual arrival

this time.

“What?” Rive and Acquanetta said in unison, but their answer came swiftly in the form of Lucas’s voice raised downstairs.

“Rina! Where the hell is she? Where is Rina? Rina!”

“Crap,” Acquanetta said and grabbed Rina by the arms. “You don’t want to sing to him, no love song wants to come out for Lucas.”

Rina staggered back, head exploding, throat constricting painfully. She felt the song, like a living creature, cry out as it was pushed back down, buried deep and trapped by Acquanetta’s persuasion.

Rina didn’t have a chance to fully recover before footsteps pounded their way up the stairs and her door was shoved open. Lucas stood there, eyes wide, mouth agape and breath coming in obvious pants, he was terrified. The look turned to overwhelming relief when his gaze landed on her. He strode forward and pulled her into a rough embrace.

When he pulled away, he once again had a mask of calm over his features, but his voice shook with emotion when he spoke. “I thought it could be you. When my sister called and told me what was going on, I thought it could be you.” His hands were gentle as they cupped her face and his swirling brown gaze searched her silver one as if

trying to see all the way to her soul.

"It wasn't, but I *am* going after the bastard, and I hope the Council of Immortals is willing to help," Rina said with a slight shake to her voice.

"Are you accepting the position then?"

Rina narrowed her eyes at him. He would deny her if she said no, something made her very sure of that. "I am," she said, wishing she could say no and her sister wouldn't suffer for it.

"Then yes. Let's go now, we will meet with Paxton and the others in Portland."

Lucas flashed them away.

As soon as they materialized in a dark room, Rina reached out and smacked him as hard as she could. Her palm stung, but she didn't care. "Don't you ever do that without my permission again! I won't go alone, I need Netta and Rive or I refuse to be a part of this. Now go back and get them or take me back right now." Rina's words sang out high with her anger and some of the nearby glass shivered with the vibrations. She stomped her foot for emphasis, right on top of his sandaled foot.

Lucas stared at her, expressionless except for a slight widening of his eyes, no doubt shocked by her actions. He disappeared an instant later and then reappeared with Rive then Netta.

"Bastard, how dare you do something like that without my permission!" Rive yelled as soon as she recovered from the shock of transport, her

anger-raised voice managing to pop a nearby light bulb. Rina and Acquanetta were used to that sort of thing happening, Lucas was smart enough to ignore it.

“My apologies, but I think we can all agree there is no time to waste and Rina insisted she have the two of you here.” Lucas’s tone was anything but apologetic, but none of them could argue with his statement—time *was* important here.

“Okay, so now we are all here, wherever here is. What do we do? We don’t even have the first clue.”

“Ahh, but we do,” a silky smooth voice announced quietly.

Rina turned at the voice. A tall, pale vampire was in the room with them. He wore an old-fashioned smoking jacket and slacks, his long black hair tied back in a ponytail and his bright blue eyes alert, taking in the sight of them all. He looked right at home in the room they were standing in. His home she assumed. This must be Paxton. Rina and her mersisters all took an involuntary step back as he came further into the room he was a predator and they were prey. He eyed the broken light bulb with an amused twist to his lips, but didn’t say anything as he stepped around it to avoid the glass.

“Worry not, girls, I don’t care for the taste of

mermaid blood. Too fishy, and those voices, I would never want to take those away from the world, absolutely hypnotic, if a bit dangerous to my glass," Paxton said smoothly.

Although she was offended by the fishy blood comment, she was flattered by the hypnotic voice comment, and no less worried by the statements. She kept her distance from the vampire.

"Rina, it is so wonderful to finally meet you." Paxton extended a pale manicured hand.

"How did you know I was Rina?" she asked skeptically, not offering her hand.

"Ahh, good question, and one I don't feel necessary to answer at the moment. I am delighted you have accepted our offer. The council would not be the same without you." Paxton reached out with lightning speed and grabbed her hand. He bowed slightly in a very old-fashioned sort of way, full of gallantry and respect.

He brought her hand to his lips, which she was surprised to find almost as warm as her own skin. Cold dead skin was a myth about vampires, invented by humans, but she still found the touch uncomfortable. She felt like dinner under his assessing blue gaze. Rina looked away. She knew he could mess with her mind if she looked into his eyes—it was how they fed from humans without the human becoming any the wiser. Except for those who still killed their prey and drank in their

fear as much as their blood. Frowned upon it may be, she knew some still did this and she wouldn't want to bet on any vampire she met as not being one who did.

"The first clue has been received?" Lucas asked, changing the subject and stepping forward, forcing Paxton to break the contact and step away from Rina.

Rina hated to be thankful to Lucas for anything, but in this, she was. Paxton made her uncomfortable and knowing she didn't have her power of persuasion at the moment made her completely helpless to the powerful immortals that surrounded her. It was her only weapon and she had willingly given it up to keep her dignity around Lucas. She didn't regret it, yet.

"Just now I was alerted through the V-net, vampire network. It is how we stay connected, without having to interact with each other," Paxton explained. "Some human inventions are quite convenient."

Rina bit back the rude reply that popped into her head at his statement, but just barely. No need to offend her blood-sucking host. She had heard of their Internet community, ads like V/F seeking V/M for blood play. It was disgusting.

"Great, what is it and how was it delivered?" Lucas prodded.

"It was delivered to the parents of the vampire

girl who was taken, Jessica. They said it simply appeared, much like the original note. It was not there and then it was, that simple, a wizard one-of-one trick. It doesn't tell us what kind of wizard we are working against here. He could be a powerful warlock or just a simple wizard protégé."

"He introduced himself to me as *Walker Weston Wizard Extraordinaire*," Rina said, trying to be helpful.

"You met him? When, where, how?" Paxton and Lucas shouted in unison and turned intense looks on her.

Her heart sped up and she took a step back. "Last night at my house, right before we left to meet with you, Lucas, he was there to pick up my sister, Raine, for a date."

"What did he say, exactly, and what did he look like?" Paxton pressed, his blue eyes tingeing red around the outside as his whole body intensified.

Rina took an involuntary step back. "I didn't really talk to him. We just said hello to each other, he wanted to meet Brook."

"What did he look like?" Lucas prodded.

Rina relaxed, then scolded herself—Lucas was no less a predator, just a different kind. "He was shortish, no taller than me for sure. He had long black hair and dark eyes, around thirty looking. Not attractive really, and definitely not the usual

type Raine brings home from a con.” Rina wanted to kick herself for not paying better attention.

“Anything else, Rina, the smallest thing could be helpful to us,” Lucas prodded again.

Rina thought about it, but all she could remember was trying to get out of there before Brook came down and questioned her further. “The only thing I can think of is that he was odd. He used our last name, Oceanaria, and he labeled us. Like he would say, *is Brook, leader of the mermaids, around. Or, nice to meet you, Rina Oceanaria, mermaid.* It was weird.”

“That won’t help us find the bastard,” Rive mumbled. “We would have to get close enough to recognize him first.”

“It might, we will see. The clue certainly will get us started.” Paxton held up a piece of paper he had written the clue on and read. “*The first one’s easy, but so much fun. It’s a fright breezy, but full of sun. Blowing surf, jagged rock. No one’s turf, now tick tock.*”

“What the hell kind of sick bastard would think that is a clue?” Rina grumbled loudly, her voice peaking just below glass breaking point. It didn’t make any sense at all. They were doomed.

“Think on it, Rina, and when the others arrive, we will see what kind of plan we can come up with,” Paxton said in his silky smooth voice that made her want to curl up and fall asleep.

Rina glared at him, stupid vampire tricks. She ushered her sisters away from him and they sat together on a small couch.

“What do you think of all this?” Rive whispered.

“I don’t know, but I still think it is our best chance of getting Raine back.”

Everyone was quiet and thoughtful as they waited for the others to arrive. Rina’s mind replaying the encounter with Walker Weston over and over in her mind, trying to hit on some detail which would help them, but she came up with nothing. She could kick herself for not paying closer attention to the man her mersister was going to be alone with. Normally she never would have thought it a good idea, not after feeling so oddly about the man. She was so distracted by her own issues, damn Lucas for showing up and causing all of this.

Paxton moved with lightning speed to the farthest corner of the room just seconds before the front door flew open and sunlight lit half the room they were in. Rina’s entire body had tensed at his movements and her gaze was locked on him, assessing for danger. But all she saw was a vampire trying to stay protected in the darkest corner of the room—he didn’t even seem annoyed by the fact that he had to. She relaxed a tiny bit, until a giant werewolf and a tiny woman, of what

species she wasn't sure, walked into the room. As they came in, Rina saw the woman's eyes were quite odd—one brown like a werewolf's and one blue, like a vampire's. *What the hell is she?*

The man was big and blond, and looked like he could snap the woman, who he had a loving arm draped around, like a twig. He glared at the other two men in the room, his eyes yellowing slightly, indicating his increasing anger, practically shouting that this woman belonged to *him*.

"Why don't you just pee on her?" Rive said under her breath, not missing the meaning in the man's eyes.

The woman's gaze flew to the three of them on the couch and her lips quirked in a slightly amused smile. The man growled as she pulled away, but didn't force her to stay glued to his side.

"Ahh, Ian, it is so nice to see you again," Paxton said, acting the gracious host as he moved away from the corner and back into the once again darkened room.

"Like I would let Alexia come by herself when there is a madman on the loose and hers is the only species he hasn't collected."

The man's voice was everything Rina would have expected from an angry werewolf—gruff and growly. His obvious concern for the woman's well-being made it less frightening. It was kind of sweet. She wished there was someone to care for

her like that.

The memory of Lucas shouting in fright through her house that morning came back to her. She pushed it away and bit her lip. *There was nothing to that.* She concentrated on the pretty creature in front of her. "What is she?" Rina blurted out without thinking, as usual. Her face turned bright red with embarrassment as all eyes turned to look at her with shock over her rude question.

"Oh my, you do have a beautiful voice, just like the mythical creature who sings sailors into the rocks," Alexia said without apparent malicious intent. "I am a werepire," she added proudly. "Most immortals don't even know that I exist, and as far as anyone knows, I am the only one of my kind."

"More were than vamp," Ian mumbled.

Alexia patted his chest in a loving gesture.

Rina swore she heard him give a contented growl. Rina's heart ached a little, to see two people so obviously in love, and different species, too. It hurt and yet gave her hope, for her mersisters at least. Perhaps they would find mates among the other immortal species out there, mates that would be accepting of their differences.

"Which of you is joining our council?" Alexia asked, changing the subject.

"I am," Rina said, rising to shake her hand.

"Stop!" Lucas shouted and appeared in front of her, blocking her from Alexia. "Get your wolves away from her. I have never seen anything as disturbing as the way they are sniffing at her."

Rina froze and looked around, but couldn't see a thing, not that she expected to. A werewolf's wolf counterpart was only visible to its human part, its keeper, unless it was in the moonlight, full moonlight, then it was visible to all. But how did Lucas know they were sniffing her?

"Damn it, I knew it," Ian roared. "You Animal Elves *can* see our wolves, can't you?"

"Yes, now call them off right now. They are licking their lips for God's sake."

Rina stepped closer to Lucas, pressing her body against his back for protection. She didn't think the wolves were a danger to them, but couldn't be positive. If it was enough to disturb Lucas, then she would take it serious.

"I apologize, but you know there is no danger to them. The wolves are just curious, they smell like fish," Alexia said.

"The hell we do," Rive said, rising from the couch, hands on hips, silver eyes narrowed.

"Actually you kind of do, which is a good thing if you want to know the truth. No vampire would want to drink your blood," Paxton said with laughter.

Rina glared at Paxton, but couldn't argue with

his logic there. She turned to look at Lucas. "Do I smell like fish to you?"

"You smell like *mermaid* to me," he whispered and let his guard down just long enough to smile at her.

That one brief moment almost melted her. She wanted to smile back and press their smiling lips together, but all too quickly his smile was gone. The look of impassiveness that replaced it did more than a bucket of cold water to cool her beating heart and heated core. Last night's mistake would not be repeated.

"I don't see what's wrong with the smell of fish," Acquanetta said, still seated.

"Let's continue with the introductions, shall we?" Lucas said, stepping out of the way so Rina could shake Alexia's hand and introduce her mersisters.

After that, they settled down and got to business.

"So do you know the werewolf who was taken?" Rina asked Alexia and Ian.

"It was my brother, Terrance, and why he hasn't escaped yet, I don't know. The dumb bastard could walk right out of there and he is choosing not to do it!"

Way to go, Rina, piss off the werewolf. She scooted back as far as she could on the couch as she watched Ian's fists clench and his neck muscles

tighten. His eyes started to turn yellow. Then Alexia touched his arm and his whole body relaxed.

That is love. Rina couldn't stop her gaze from wandering in Lucas's direction. His eyes were locked on her and the power of his intense gaze made her entire body shiver. She felt her mind try to assimilate the input with the persuasion and lose, but just barely. She wasn't sure how much longer until she would need Acquanetta to persuade her again. She looked away, determined not to make things worse by looking at him, or thinking about the way their bodies fit together so perfectly, how he had made her scream, his delicious cock sliding into her waiting body. They had explored every sexual position they could imagine in their short time together and she often daydreamed of it when she was alone in her room. Her body heated, wanting to put those daydreams to reality. *Damn, this is going to be harder than I thought.*

"How many species do you estimate were captured? And is this the total members of the council? I am sorry to say, but it is a poor representation of the immortals of the world," Rive said with her usual bluntness.

"We are just starting to form the council, so yes this is it so far. And we have no way of knowing how many were captured. I imagine as many as it

was possible for the man to get,” Paxton informed her.

Paxton read the clue again and they all sat silent, thinking.

Rina tried to think about the clue, but her mind kept wandering back to Lucas – no matter that she scolded herself each time it did. She thought about the words sun and surf and her mind conjured up a deserted beach where she and Lucas could be alone, rolling around in the hot sticky sand. She would be covered in scales, but it wouldn’t matter because there wouldn’t be any humans around to see. He would be without glamour, just sparkling skin and pointed ears, long white hair braided down his back, or better yet, loose and caressing her bare skin as he sunk deep into her. *No*. Lucas was not the focus here, her sister was and she had to figure out the clue. She concentrated on the words of the rhyme, trying to pick out the most important ones. Her throat began to tickle and she coughed delicately.

“Is anything the matter?” Lucas asked with little concern apparent in his voice.

“I’m fine, just a tickle.” She coughed again and this time she couldn’t deny the song was trying to scratch its way out. She needed more persuasion, fast. She darted her gaze to Acquanetta to portray her need.

“Perhaps she needs a drink, I know I do,” Ian

commented gruffly. "If there is anything in this house other than blood, that is."

"I'm afraid I am quite lacking in entertaining supplies, other than blood and brandy," Paxton replied without a hint of remorse—, he wasn't apologizing for what he was.

"My sisters and I can run out and grab some breakfast," Rina said quickly, grateful for the excuse to get out of the house so Acquanetta could persuade her again.

Paxton and Alexia shared an intense look that Rina caught out of the corner of her eye. "Bad idea," Alexia said, voice rough, eyes narrowed at Paxton.

"Come now, Alexia. Give us men some time to talk. I promise not to bite your mate."

"It's not your bite I'm worried about," she mumbled, but stood. "Okay, girls, we are all being kicked out apparently." Alexia bent and kissed Ian.

"I don't think so. You are not leaving my side while that madman is out there."

"Oh, Ian, you worry too much. He most likely doesn't even know I exist and the race has already begun. I don't think he is out there looking to capture any more players, not that I have any species members to race for me."

"I still don't like it."

"I was in more danger from Lillian than I am

from this wizard, I am sure.”

“Lucas’s sister seems to be a danger to a lot of people,” Rive commented, not even trying to be quiet or hide the fact she blamed Lucas in no small part for his sister’s actions.

“I am going and it’s not like I will be alone.” Alexia waved her hand to indicate the three mermaids who were inching toward the door.

Ian gave the three mermaids an assessing look, not impressed. “They don’t look like they can defend themselves even.”

“All the more reason for me to go with them, I can defend all four of us.”

Ian growled, but didn’t argue and Alexia walked to the front door.

Rina was frustrated by the turn of events, but had no good excuse to argue so she followed the woman out. Lucas’s gaze followed her out and she could feel it boring into her back. In more than a small way, she had hoped to hear Lucas argue it wasn’t safe, that he was concerned for her and wanted her to stay. Of course he didn’t, which just proved he didn’t really care for her like she cared for him, against her better judgment. To him, she was merely a fellow member of his stupid club, not his destined mate.

“So what do mermaids like to eat?” Alexia asked as she held the door open for the them.

“Fish,” they said in unison.

"Figures," Alexia replied.

Rina was sure she saw her stick her tongue out at the darkened corner of the room as she held the door open a moment longer than necessary.

"So I guess the sun doesn't bother you." Rina pointed out as they walked to a black SUV parked at the curb.

"Not all the time. I can stand about five hours of sunlight a day. But I have to keep careful track, even at five hours, I am quite sensitive to it."

"What about you. I have never met a mermaid before and I must say I expected fins and scales and a voracious need for saltwater."

Rina smiled, she liked Alexia. "Scales only when wet, so we must be quite careful around humans, tails only when we want and we do crave salt, it is rejuvenating for us."

"Cool," Alexia said and they all climbed into the SUV.

Rina looked back as they pulled away and saw both Ian and Lucas standing in a window, watching them. Ian wore a look of fury, no doubt covering worry over his mate, Lucas's face was blank, but she couldn't help fantasizing he was worrying about her as well.

Rina's mind pounded with the memory of Lucas giving her looks of concern and love, memories of her singing to him in reassurance that she would be there with him forever. She clamped

her eyes shut and held her head in her hands. She heard someone groan in agony and realized it was herself. Pain exploded further and her throat twisted and constricted as the song tried to claw out. She didn't have the strength to control anything other than the song.

"Shit, what's wrong?"

Rina thought she heard Alexia's voice, but it sounded so far away and was clouded by the loud pounding of her heart.

"Don't pull over! Get away as fast as you can," Acquanetta's voice commanded.

Rina's body pushed back as the vehicle accelerated away from Lucas. With every passing second, the need to sing lessened and soon she was able to breathe again.

The pain in her head disappeared as the last of Acquanetta's persuasion wore off. She opened her eyes and cursed. Alexia glanced at her, horror written all over her face.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Pull over at the next convenience store and I'll explain," Rina said quietly, tired but relieved.

Alexia slowed down to the speed limit and pulled into the next store they came to. Her back was stiff and silence filled the vehicle.

"I don't know if this is such a good idea," Rive commented.

Alexia cut the engine and looked at the three of

them for an explanation.

“Alexia, we have to trust you not to repeat anything we are about to tell you. This is a personal matter and no one’s business but our own.” After Alexia nodded agreement to the terms, Rina explained about the song of love and the persuasion. Then why they were doing it, why it was so important to keep Lucas from knowing Rina still felt he was her mate and always would.

By the end, Alexia was wide eyed and open-mouthed in shock.

“Can you keep it a secret?” Rina asked.

“Sure, but I must say I don’t agree with what you’re doing. In my experience, that kind of thing just won’t be denied. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

“It’s my choice,” Rina said with vehemence.

Alexia looked like she wanted to argue, but thought better of it. “Okay then. I will just go inside and get a few things, you girls do your thing out here and I will be back in a couple minutes.” Alexia got out.

Rina turned to Acquanetta. “Okay, do your thing.”

“It doesn’t seem to be lasting very long, Rina. I don’t know if this is really going to work in the long run,” Rive said, ever doubtful of the plan.

“It has to, its Raine’s best chance and right now that’s all I am concerned about,” Rina said and Acquanetta agreed, even though they both knew it

wasn't completely true. Rina was very concerned about keeping her love of Lucas a secret, forever. Rive crossed her arms and looked on with disapproval as Acquanetta once again persuaded Rina to forget about the love song.

* * * *

Lucas's whole body rejected the idea of Rina leaving his side, but he had no claim over her, no basis for denying her doing whatever she wanted. So he had to stand there in the window and watch her drive away. Ian growled at his side, just as unhappy about the situation.

"Come now, boys, your mates will be back soon and in one piece, I assure you."

"And what makes you so sure?" Ian growled.

"I have faith in the ones who are meant to be on the council. No harm will come to them between now and the time of my vision. Otherwise I never would have asked Alexia to take them."

"How can you say that when you have already admitted things aren't going as your vision predicted?" Lucas pointed out, a hint of anger seeping into his tone.

"Ah but I have, since our last conversation, had an epiphany of sorts. You see, since Ian is Alexia's mate and Terrance's brother, it makes sense that he would be here as an interim council member at

times. I believe my vision was correct, he will be there at the time my vision spoke of, as an unofficial member in his brother's stead."

"You want me to stake my mate's safety on such speculation?" Lucas asked.

"I do, which is why I asked Alexia to take the women out of here. I wanted to speak with you and Ian about the situation. Would anyone care for a drink?" Paxton walked away, obviously not caring for an answer, and poured three glasses of brandy.

Lucas was not convinced Paxton was correct in his reasoning, but was willing to listen to what he had to say.

Paxton handed each man a glass and waited while they all sipped for a few moments. "I do believe we have to come to an understanding of sorts about the women. It is imperative you two not be completely distracted by the thought of your mate being in danger while you are out there. You must believe your mate is capable of protecting herself enough so you can concentrate on what you need to do. I won't have you making them a liability to our cause."

"Easy enough, they won't go. I will set them up in the colony and they will stay there, safely out of danger, until this whole thing is over."

"I don't think so. Alexia will go nowhere near that psychotic sister of yours. She will stay safely

at my father's pack up in BC."

"Fine, send your mate where you think she will be safe, as will I."

Lucas and Ian nodded agreement at each other and both took a drink.

"Neither mate will be tucked away," Paxton stated flatly.

Lucas and Ian glared at Paxton.

"I won't allow either member of my council to be tucked away. They are equal members of this council and they will be responsible for taking care of themselves out there, the same as you. If you try and keep them from this, you know they will just try and do it on their own anyway, and that is the best way for them to get hurt. They will go, you will deal with it and if you don't think you can handle it, *you* will stay behind. That is my decision and it is final." Paxton sipped at his drink, unflinching under the glaring gazes directed at him.

"Who are you to make that kind of decision?" Lucas said calmly, pulling himself back in control.

"I am the council head. Therefore I can make the decisions I want and if it would make you feel better, we can vote on it once the women return. I am confident they will be in agreement with me."

Lucas knew it was true and it would only make Rina think he was trying to be controlling. She would overreact and he would be even farther

from his goal of having her forgiveness. "Fine," Lucas said.

Ian grunted his reluctant agreement.

"Alright then, now that that's settled, we had better figure the clue out fast. We aren't the only ones searching for this guy, remember that, but we are certainly the only ones trying to save all the captured immortals." The three sat quietly thinking over the clue without much luck.

"Perhaps we should contact our packs to see if there has been any other news," Ian suggested.

"Good idea," Paxton agreed and pulled a laptop out of a cupboard.

Ian excused himself to call his pack.

Lucas flashed himself to his colony, appearing in the hall outside his sister's rooms. If there had been any new developments, she would be the first to know about it. He knocked at the door and waited. There was no answer and he knocked again, louder this time.

"What is it?"

Lucas spun around to find his twin sister, Lillian, standing behind him, choosing to meet him out here rather than let him into her rooms. An odd action, but he didn't have time to wonder at it. "Have there been any new developments on the missing elf?"

"Not that I know of, other than that very odd clue. I assumed you were taking care of it so I

haven't put much thought into it. I am rather busy at the moment."

Lucas gave his sister an assessing look. She was breathing hard, her face was flushed, her hair slightly askew. Never in his life had he seen her looking so off, and for her not to be demanding vengeance against the one to hurt her colony, it was beyond odd, it was concerning. "What is going on with you, Lillian?"

"What is with *you*, Lucas? Where is Jack?"

Lucas didn't respond just flashed himself to his hotel room. How had he forgotten about Jack? The poor little monkey was really going to hate Rina now.

CHAPTER SIX

Rina gorged herself on sushi as they sat around Paxton's living room, having a picnic style breakfast. The persuasion was really taking a lot out of her, she was feeling less than refreshed, even after the few hours of sleep she had gotten, and was hungrier than usual. But it was totally worth it, to be able to sit next to Lucas and not embarrass herself by throwing herself at him. She would keep it up for as long as she had to. After all, it only hurt her.

Rina glanced over at Acquanetta, her partner in this perfect trick. She was looking a little pale as well. The persuasion shouldn't have a negative effect on her though. Acquanetta was delicate, she probably just felt stressed because of the kidnapping of their sister and this insane race to find her.

"This is really fresh Ahi, tastes like it does in Hawaii," Rive commented happily around a

mouthful of the delicious fish.

“Hawaii!” Rina shouted and all eyes turned to her, wondering what had made her suddenly turn into a crazy woman. “*No one’s turf*—Hawaii isn’t claimed by any immortal species. *Sun and surf*—hello Hawaii. That has to be it.”

“I think she might be right,” Paxton said, his eyes wide with shock.

“That was way too easy. We won’t be the only ones to figure it out so quickly,” Alexia pointed out.

“We need a more specific location. There are a lot of islands.” Rina’s blood rushed through her veins, ready for action. They had to be smart about this, needed a sure location, couldn’t waste precious time searching blindly.

Paxton pulled out his computer and linked up with the v-net. “There are quite a few theories being thrown around, the focus has turned to Hawaii though. The windiest spot is on the big island. There is a blowhole on Oahu. Jagged rock is all over pretty much.” Paxton fell silent as he read the posts and everyone wracked their brain for an answer. “There is sandy beach on the southern point of the big island where it is so windy, but the blowhole on Oahu is on jagged rock and it’s windy.” Paxton looked up.

“I think it’s our best bet, let’s get there before anyone else does,” Lucas said matter-of-factly, as

if the decision where all his to make.

"I can't leave until dark, eleven hours and twelve minutes from now," Paxton said.

"I would never make it. I don't have that much sun time left," Alexia announced with regret.

"I could flash there, but not before full dark over there. I have never been and don't know of a safe-from-human-eyes place to land. I wouldn't want to risk being seen," Lucas said with a hint of regret.

"We can swim there in no time," Rina and her sisters announced in unison with wide smiles of satisfaction and pride radiating in their singsong voices.

"No way," Lucas said with finality. "You can't protect yourselves. It isn't safe for you to go alone. What if you meet up with a demon or a witch while you're there?"

Rina narrowed her eyes at him. "We don't need anyone to protect us."

"Of course you don't," Paxton agreed, snapping Lucas out of his uncharacteristic glare of emotion. "You will go because it is your strength to swim there. When you arrive, you will investigate the blowhole. If there is danger, you will avoid it. You will get a room and prepare it for our arrival, then call and Lucas will flash us there."

Everyone seemed satisfied with this decision, or at least no one dared argue with Paxton.

“Lucas, do you know of a safe place on the coast to flash us?” Rina asked, trying not to sound smug.

Lucas looked at her for a moment, his face devoid of emotion, except for a slight tightening around his mouth that indicated his displeasure with this turn of events. “I do.” He stood and grabbed Rina’s arm, flashing them away without another word.

They materialized in a dark cave, ocean water rushing in with each wave and sea lions barking loudly at their sudden intrusion.

“Thank you, now my sisters, quickly,” Rina said, trying to pull out of his grasp. He held tight and his swirling brown gaze bored deep into hers, making them flash intense sliver as her body became aware of him.

“I think we should talk, Rina.”

Her heart stuttered and her breath caught in her throat. Images of him asking her about last night or how she had gotten over him and forcing her to admit she never had, swarmed her. She forcibly pulled out of his warm grasp, dropped her gaze and stepped away cautiously. She forced herself to breathe steady and calm herself. “Whatever it is, I am sure it can wait until my sister is safely back with the clan. I refuse to leave Raine wherever she is a moment longer than necessary. So this isn’t really a good time for whatever it is you want to

talk about.” Rina knew she was grasping for reasons here, but didn’t care. There was no way she was ready to discuss anything personal with him.

“No, I guess it’s not. Just be careful and don’t do anything dangerous. If you have to wait for the rest of us, then do.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” Rina turned away from him and kneeled down to pet a nearby sea lion, dismissing him as best she could. It took him a moment and she wondered if he was going to say more, force her to talk to him. In a terribly ashamed part of her, she hoped he would. But he didn’t and when he left, she felt it with her whole body. Even with the persuasion, she could still sense him and her body was constantly trying to assimilate that awareness with the absence of the song. It was exhausting.

“I really hate that,” Rive said as she materialized with Lucas. Lucas didn’t say a word just flashed away again and returned in a blink with Acquanetta.

“You girls know what you are supposed to do. I expect we will be hearing from you soon.” Lucas flicked his glance to Rina for a second before flashing himself away.

Rina’s heart ached at the brief glance of vulnerability she had seen there, or she had thought she had seen. *No way was it actually there.*

Lucas was anything but vulnerable.

“Let’s get this party started,” Rive said with a clap for emphasis.

“How are you feeling, Rina? We didn’t have a chance to talk about what happened last night after we left you with Lucas,” Acquanetta asked, concern furrowing her brow.

“I’m good and I don’t want to talk about it, so let’s go.” Rina started shedding her clothing, avoiding the gazes of her mersister. She didn’t feel good, didn’t even feel fine. She felt a little like she was living inside someone else’s body with all her own memories. But she was ready to see this through and without delay.

All three of them stripped down and dove into the cool water. Scales covered their bodies instantly. They merged their legs into fins so they could slice through the water faster than any sea animal or boat.

Halfway there and Rina felt great. Swimming free with her mersisters, there was nothing better. At least nothing better she would ever get. The only thing that would be better would be swimming with her mate, not going to happen, ever. No happy ending waited for her. But her sisters all deserved their own chance at it, which was why she had to do all she could to save Raine. Raine would someday meet her mate and get her

happily ever after. Love was worth sacrifices by those around them who truly cared, love was worth breaking rules and long followed traditions. For her it was, too bad it hadn't been for Lucas and his sister.

Rina kicked harder, faster, more determined than ever to get there before any other species. Rive and Acquanetta matched her burst of speed and they continued on, full out for miles. The sea life they passed skittered out of the way of the threesome. After a while, Acquanetta started to lag behind. Rina headed for the surface. A break was overdue for them all. "We are close," Rina said between gulps of much needed air.

"Are you doing alright, Netta?" Rive asked with concern.

Acquanetta was floating on her back, limp. "I just need a moment to rest is all, don't worry."

Rive snorted, but made no comment.

Rina lay on her back, staring up at the bright sky. A plane passed high above, no doubt heading for Hawaii as well. Rina was sure they would get there long before the plane landed, glad she was a mermaid today.

She was lost in contemplation when her senses were tripped by something, something immortal in the nearby water, and not a mermaid. She moved to an upright position and concentrated on the feeling, her worst fear seeming like a very real

possibility, to be trapped in the middle of the ocean with so few mersisters and be attacked by a clan of selkies.

“What is that?” Rive asked, sensing it as well.

“Oh Gods, selkies,” Acquanetta whispered.

“I don’t think so, it feels more like...” The water rushed past them and although the beings were invisible, even to the mermaid’s immortal eyes, Rina knew what they were. “Water Elves. Let’s get going, girls. We certainly won’t be the first there now.”

Rina took a deep breath and dunked under the water, propelling herself forward with all the speed she could manage. They wouldn’t catch up to the elves—Water Elves were the only thing faster than a mermaid in the water. Even selkies couldn’t beat a mermaid, they could keep up pretty well though, making them a dangerous enemy.

They wouldn’t be too far behind the elves, Rina hoped.

When they were in sight of the blowhole, they had no choice but to stop. There were humans milling about on the rocks. A few were even wading into the water nearby. If they swam any closer, there would be a real danger of exposure.

“Damn, we might have to wait until dark,” Rive said, slapping her tail against the surface.

“Maybe not,” Rina said thoughtfully. “The clue

isn't necessarily up there, right? It could be in the cavern below. Let's swim down and check it out."

They dove under and swam forward. When they were close, Rina started sensing something, some kind of magic that left a bad taste in her mouth. It was familiar. *Where have I encountered this before?* The closer they got, the stronger it was and her heart started pounding in her chest.

Walker Weston. That is where she had felt this. It was his magic she was sensing, which meant they were getting close to the clue. Rina gave her mersisters a thumbs up and hurried forward, focused on the magic she sensed. She could see the cavern. They were close. She saw something shinning in the darkness within, it had to be the next clue.

A flash of smooth silver caught the corner of her eye and she turned just in time to see a selkie ram into Acquanetta's side. Damn, she should have been expecting this and where there was one, there would be others. Rina rushed to Acquanetta, gaze darting back and forth for the approach of any other selkies. The one that attacked looked like it was about to make another run. Rive rushed it and the selkie turned and swam away. No others approached—it must have been alone, maybe going off to gather its friends.

Rina motioned for them to go find a safe place to get out of the water. She would get the clue.

Rive shook her head and tried to argue, but Rina pointed at the obviously injured Acquanetta and then swam quick as she could toward the cavern. Selkies or not, she was getting that clue because her mersister depended on it.

At the entrance, she hesitated. There was a light glowing within, a light that could only be of a magical source. It didn't do much to light the rest of the small cavern however. She couldn't be sure it was empty. She pushed into the cavern, full of fake courage. Once she was in, she realized it was much too small for another creature to be hiding within, comforting and a little claustrophobia inducing all at the same time.

The light she had seen was a floating orb with seemingly nothing within. She reached out a hesitant hand to the thing and it pulsed as her fingers caressed the edge of it.

"Mermaid." A small rolled note appeared within.

Rina was completely creeped out, but reached in and pulled out the clue, thankfully wrapped in plastic so the water wouldn't ruin it. As she backed out of the cavern, she heard a tiny squeal and collided with the wall as she tried to jump away from the noise. A tiny water sprite was crawling beside her, trying to reach the orb.

Sprites were tiny immortal creatures that were much like what humans thought of as fairies,

Tinkerbell and such, and just as harmless. Rina felt a surge of anger at the monster who would capture such a small and helpless immortal.

Rina smiled at the skittering sprite and hurried back out of the cavern. She looked around with all her senses, searching for selkies, but could find nothing so she hurried in the direction Acquanetta and Rive had taken. She found them in a rocky cave where they were able to climb out of the water without being seen.

Huddled together, both still almost fully scaled, Acquanetta looked worried and exhausted, Rive looked pissed and exhausted.

Rina felt exhilarated and exhausted. They were quite the trio, no real match for any kind of danger at this point. "Are you alright, Netta?" Rina asked, hurrying to their side.

Acquanetta smiled, weak but determined. "Just a little bruised ribs, nothing serious. I don't think it was trying to do any real harm, just slow us down perhaps."

"It worked, you are going nowhere for at least a day, which means neither are we." Rive looked meaningfully at Rina.

"I won't hold anyone back and Raine is still in danger. This wound will heal far faster than the one her death would cause. Did you get the clue?"

Rina held up the small paper, unwrapped it from its plastic and read. "*Second one's nice if you*

like mice. Mile after mile remember to smile. Bite into the apple get ready to grapple. No time to lose no one here will snooze."

"I know what it is," Acquanetta trilled happily.

Rina and Rive stared in shock at the triumphant face of their mersister.

"Miles of mouse ridden area, a sewer. In New York, the big apple, the city that never sleeps!" Acquanetta's voice rose to a pitch only a clan sister would be able to hear and comprehend.

"That makes sense," Rina agreed.

They needed to tell the others right away, but they had to wait until they were dry enough to keep their scales from showing and reflecting every bit of light. Also until it was dark enough to offer some kind of cover for their naked bodies, until then, they were stuck in the cave.

Rina talked on and on about nothing. It provided a familiar comfort to them all, and also kept the conversation from going anywhere near her and Lucas.

When they were dry, skinned and the sun was gone, they left the cave. Acquanetta was clearly in pain and leaned heavily on Rive as she limped along, but she didn't complain. It was slow going. Luckily they didn't have to search long before they spotted a house.

"You two wait here, I will go get us some clothing, I am pretty sure your persuasion has

worn off me now. I should be able to take care of anyone I run into," Rina said and hurried away before they could argue. Acquanetta needed a rest anyway. Each step she took seemed to be a struggle. Rina had never seen an immortal react in such a mortal way to an injury. It was disturbing and if she wasn't so worried about Raine, she would be all over Netta for an explanation. *One crisis at a time.*

Rina hurried to the back door, staying to the shadows. She listened inside, but couldn't tell if anyone was home. She braced herself and knocked. A moment later, the door opened and a young man stood there, staring wide-eyed and open mouthed at her naked breasts.

"You will close your eyes and let me come in and get some clothing for myself and my sisters. You will remember nothing," Rina persuaded, feeling powerful and satisfied as the boy closed his eyes and stepped out of the way, allowing her to enter. Rina hurried inside and through a kitchen to a laundry area. She grabbed some board shorts and tank tops then rushed back out, swiping a bag of skittles and a saltshaker as she passed. "Have a good night." She persuaded as she shut the door and hurried to her waiting mersisters.

"Ooh my fave!" Acquanetta said spotting the

skittles right off.

Rina handed her the candy, then the saltshaker. "You need the salt, too, it will help you heal. Sorry I didn't see a water bottle, saltwater is preferable, but eat some anyway, it should help."

Acquanetta poured half the salt into her mouth, then washed it down with skittles.

Rina passed out the clothing. It was all baggy and all male, but at least they could walk in public without being arrested, or molested.

"You couldn't have at least grabbed *clean* clothing?" Rive complained.

"I don't think there was any, that guy was a slob," Rina said.

Acquanetta sighed around a mouthful of skittles and they all started walking again. They stopped at the first beachside hotel they came to and persuaded a room out of a very cute surfer behind the desk. Once safely tucked inside with Acquanetta resting in the tub, Rina sent Rive out to find food and supplies. Then she called Lucas.

"Rina!" he said with deep relief that sent a shiver of satisfaction down her spine. "You are safe?"

"Y-yes," she stuttered, his clear relief at her safety making her knees quiver and her heart thud. Then she reminded herself that she held the clue and this was no doubt why he was glad to hear from her, nothing more.

"You are in a safe place for me to bring everyone?"

"Yes, but it isn't necessary."

"Did you already find the clue?" he asked with surprise.

"Yes, and we figured it out, too. Well, Netta did," she said smugly. She read the clue and told him what they thought it meant.

"Sounds about right and of course it is in the opposite end of the US. Well then I will retrieve you shortly."

"No, just take the others to New York. We will be fine here resting for a night. Call when you have the clue. Or I will call when we are ready to be retrieved," Rina said evasively, not wanting him to know Acquanetta had been injured.

"Marina, you are hiding something."

His accusing voice didn't come from the other end of the phone and Rina screamed with the shock as she spun around to find him standing behind her. She had forgotten about that little trick of his. Luckily she'd had Acquanetta persuade her before making the phone call. Just in case she had found it was best for them to return for some reason.

Lucas stalked toward her and threw his hands out, running them around her body, no doubt searching for injury of any kind.

"Stop that, Lucas, I am fine." She slapped his

hands away and stepped back.

His eyes narrowed and his lips smoothed to a thin line of emotion. "There is magic in your throat again, Rina. The same kind of magic that was choking you before, when you almost drowned in the ocean!"

His face had returned to beyond calm and Rina recognized the look as that of deep concentration. He was still sensing her energy even though his hands were now at his sides.

She stepped farther from him. "Don't worry about it."

"How can I not? There is magic in your throat that is not your own. Someone is seeking to harm or control you."

"You need to get the others to New York," she said, desperate for him to leave and stop questioning her. If she could have persuaded him, she would have. Where were her mersisters when she needed them?

"Tell me what is going on, Marina."

The use of her full name was powerful. She looked into his swirling brown eyes and remembered him calling her that as they made love, his long white locks falling over her naked body as he brought her to exquisite climax over and over again. She wanted to scream with frustration. Instead, she whirled around and planted her hands on her hips. "My life is none of

your concern anymore, Lucas, and that was your choice. Go now so my sister and all the others can be safe and have a chance at a happy life." Her voice cracked at the end and silence greeted her from behind. He couldn't deny her words and she told herself she was relieved he didn't try, but her heart tore when she felt him disappear. She wanted him to try. She wanted so badly to lose herself in him again, maybe just one more time. *No!* She did have her one last time and it had changed nothing. He still wasn't asking her to be his mate.

* * * *

Guilt ate at Lucas and he could do nothing about it, she was right. He had left her, had chosen to let her go, had told her to forget about him even. But he hadn't wanted to and now she had moved on. He was left wishing he'd had the guts to stay with her when she had wanted him. As much as it killed him, he knew she was right, he had no right to ask about her life.

"What's the news?" Paxton asked as Lucas appeared back in the room.

"To New York we go. I will fetch the girls later, when they have rested." Lucas was more determined than ever. If he could save Raine, then maybe he was worthy of Rina's forgiveness,

maybe. He knew she harbored resentment, could feel it whenever she was near. Now she was in some kind of trouble and wouldn't let him help because she hated him so much.

"You better tell us the clue before we go rushing off," Ian proclaimed.

Lucas repeated the clue and what the girls had come up with for an answer. "It seems reasonable to me. I am willing to go after it there. Of course it's not as if we all need to go. I do want Paxton there, he senses magic well and with so much ground to cover, that will come in handy. But, Ian, you and Alexia could wait here."

"Fine with me," Ian agreed quickly.

"I don't think so. I won't be left out of all the fun," Alexia countered and gave her mate a good-natured smack on the arm. "And besides, Ian's nose and mine are quite good. We will be just as much help in sniffing out magic."

Lucas couldn't argue, and Ian had the good sense not to. So Lucas flashed them one at a time to a dark corner of New York he knew of.

Once in the sewer, Ian and Alexia merged with their wolves, Ian's special magical talent allowing them to do so without having to undress first, or ruin the clothing they were wearing by ripping out of them. The sight of Alexia as a merged werewolf was something Lucas had not been prepared for. Her vampire half dominated and so

she ended up as a sinuous blend of wolf and human rather than a giant wolf as Ian did. It was as if Ian became one with his wolf, but Alexia's wolf became one with her.

Ian growled fiercely at Lucas, making him realize he'd been staring.

"Sorry," he said to both of them.

"Don't worry, I'm used to it," Alexia said, then readjusted her spine and went to all fours like her mate. They nuzzled each other lovingly for a moment, then set off sniffing for magic.

Lucas sent his own senses out and searched for immortal animals, but found nothing. They very well might be the first ones here.

"I think I can smell the magic, it's faint, but it is definitely the same as was on the note," Paxton said, taking the lead.

They followed him around endless curves and through puddles of what Lucas didn't even want to contemplate. Hours passed and the scent of magic grew stronger.

Ian howled.

Lucas was sure it meant they were getting close. Until Ian herded Alexia against the wall and growled ferociously at what seemed to be nothing.

Lucas and Paxton had a moment of confusion, then a demon parted from the shadows. He had bright red horns, indicating he was a Fire Demon. His long black hair was loose around his

shoulders and he was dressed in a black duster. His dark eyes narrowed accusingly on their group.

“One and a *half* werewolves, a vampire and an elf walk into the sewer. The beginning of a bad joke or some kind of alliance doomed to fail?” the demon said, small puffs of smoke escaping his mouth with each word. He was angry.

“If we are allied, why don’t you join us? The more we have, the better chance of getting the prick.” Lucas offered, playing the diplomat.

“I think not, after all, only one can be saved. That one will be my brother.” The demon summoned a fireball in each hand.

Lucas flashed himself behind the demon and grabbed his horns, temporarily disabling his powers.

“Not fair, elf. That is playing dirty.”

“We don’t want to hurt you and we are trying to save *all* the captured immortals. Join us and fight with us,” Lucas offered again.

“Join you? Why, so we can turn on each other one by one and end up killing each other in the end when it is impossible to save them all?”

“It won’t happen,” Lucas said, calm as ever.

“And if I don’t join your little group? Will you kill me here and now?”

“He is not the one, Lucas,” Paxton said.

Lucas knew what Paxton meant, this was not the Fire Demon who Paxton had seen sitting on

the council in his vision. "So you think I should –"

"Keep him safely at the prison in your colony so he cannot interfere," Paxton said.

Lucas flashed himself and the demon into a cell, then flashed back out before the demon could even realize what was happening.

"We will definitely want to send his brother to release him when its time. That boy is dangerous and very angry," Lucas commented when he returned to his group.

They continued on without incident and found a glowing orb, reeking of magic.

Lucas reached out a careful hand to touch it.

A voice proclaimed, "Animal Elf." Then a small note appeared inside.

Lucas grabbed it and pulled it out.

"I wonder," Paxton said, reaching out to the orb.

"Vampire," it said and another note appeared within.

Paxton grabbed the note. "Kind of creepy," he commented then opened it and read. "*This one's hidden where no civilian is bidden, Deep underground it will be found, with the sun or the night this will be a fight.*"

"Well that's helpful," Ian said, sarcasm dripping from his words. Having split from his wolf, he was now able to communicate with more than growls.

After flashing everyone back to Paxton's house, Lucas excused himself to call Rina. He knew there was no rush, she was likely resting from the long swim, but he wanted to hear her voice. Wanted to know if she was still angry with him, most of all he wanted her to give him an excuse to go there, or to bring her here. He wanted things he knew he didn't deserve, not yet anyway. But he would, hopefully soon. This new clue was not helping things however. It didn't make any sense to him, so he couldn't play the hero holding the answer to this next leg of their hunt. Of course that could be partly because it seemed to be very human and his kind stayed as far from the humans as possible. It wasn't likely he would have concerned himself with some kind of top-secret government goings on in the human world. He walked outside and dialed the number Rina had called from earlier.

"Hello," Rive's voice came through the phone.

Lucas almost hung up. This was not who he wanted to speak with. He debated for a moment. He could demand to speak with Rina because she was a member of The Council of Immortals, but that would only get him attitude and probably a hang up, from Rive. "It's Lucas, I, or rather *we*, found the third clue and are now back at Paxton's, trying to figure it out. Would you three like me to fetch you now?" He was crossing his fingers with hope. Disgust filled him, he was acting like a

pansy.

“No, we are fine here for the night. What’s the clue?” Rive said, none too friendly.

Lucas gritted his teeth, but forced calm into his voice as he repeated the clue for her.

“Okay thanks, we will think on it and let you know if we come up with anything.” Rive hung up.

Lucas was left to glare down at the phone he had crushed in his palm. They all hated him, the mermaids. They all thought he was an unfeeling monster for what he had done to Rina. None of them knew he had been working to make a feasible life for them ever since. *Would they even believe it if I told them?* He doubted it. Rina didn’t act like she wanted to give him any kind of chance.

It had taken years for an opportunity to come along. Paxton presented it to him in the council. His sister had unknowingly, and no doubt regrettably, perpetuated it with her little justice stunt against Zyra and Tarquin. Bringing them in and holding a trial, claiming it went against the laws of nature for two different species to mate. If it hadn’t been for their daughter, Alexia, showing up, he wasn’t sure it would have gone his way. As it was, his sister and all the Animal Elves had been forced to admit two creatures of different species could mate because a child could be produced that

was a balance of the two species. It was all laying the groundwork for his union with Rina, if only he could gain her forgiveness.

He would explain it all to her as soon as this mess was over with and she was firmly seated on the council. He knew it would be wrong to take advantage of her already delicate state of mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rina stood under the hot shower spray, trying to relax her nervous muscles. Alexia had figured out the clue early this morning. Lucas was coming to fetch them soon. Acquanetta had already persuaded her and each time it seemed the song was struggling harder and harder to not be repressed. She wasn't sure how much longer she was going to be able to keep this up. She just hoped they found Raine soon so she could tell Lucas to shove his council where-the-sun-don't-shine and never have to see him again. The thought made her heart ache with the excruciating loneliness. Try as she might, she still wanted him, always would. That was just the way it went with mates, you couldn't live a happy and complete life without them, and in her case, couldn't live with him. She was destined for a life of lonely pining, but she wouldn't do it in sight of the object of her obsession. She had too much pride.

The next clue was hidden in an underground government facility known to humans as Area 51. It supposedly held UFO remains and was one of the tightest held security sights in the world. How they were going to get in, Rina had no idea. Even if they persuaded the people they came face to face with, there were still plenty of snipers and computer operated traps that wouldn't be affected by a mermaid's persuading voice. And Lucas's glamour would be tricky under such scrutiny. So they had to brainstorm their best course of action very carefully.

Rina let her mind clear for a moment as the water sluiced down her scaled body. She grabbed a salt scrub Rive had commandeered from some unsuspecting shopkeeper downtown and rubbed the wonderful stuff over her body. The salt was energizing and her tense muscles relaxed. She rinsed and stepped out of the shower to dry off and dress in a very cute skirt and t-shirt Rive had also commandeered for her. She took care with her hair and a little makeup. Telling herself she was going for confidence, not trying to impress anyone. Sometimes the little lies were what got her through the day.

Finally satisfied with the curling of her short red hair and slight darkening around her eyes, she went to leave the bathroom, but stopped when she heard the harsh whispering on the other side. She

cracked the door and listened.

"I won't let you keep doing this, Netta. You are hurting yourself for what? So Rina doesn't embarrass herself, well pooh on that. I am going to tell her and you know as well as I do she will put a stop to this herself."

"Rive, this is not your decision and I refuse to agree. If I wanted Rina to know using persuasion was painful and weakening, then I would tell her myself, and besides, it isn't that big a deal."

"Not that big a deal! Are you kidding me? You aren't healing from the wound you received yesterday because you are so weak. You will have to keep doing it until Rina decides she is done playing this stupid game. Who knows what kind of shape you will be in at that point! I won't stand by and let you do this any longer. I care for you too much." Glass shivered as Rive's voice rose with intensity.

"And so do I," Rina said quietly, pushing the door the rest of the way open.

"Oh, Rina, I don't need your concern. I am fine and if I didn't think it was worth it, I never would have volunteered. Remember this was my idea from the beginning, not yours."

"I know, but I would never have agreed if I had known. Is that why you almost never use your ability?"

Acquanetta turned and limped to the window.

"I don't want anyone to think I'm weak. Rive only knows because she was with me many years ago when I was forced to use so much persuasion I blacked out from it. I am fine in small amounts. It's only a slight pain, but with you. I have to put so much force behind it that it's nearly overwhelming." She turned back and looked intensely at Rina. "I won't stop though. I am prepared to see this through because it is the best way to save Raine. Don't ask me to quit now, Rina, don't take away my best weapon to help."

Rina looked to Rive for help, but all she saw there was painful indecision—the same she had in her own heart.

"We all have to make sacrifices, this is mine," Acquanetta whispered.

No one spoke for a long moment. No one knew what to say. How far would they go, how far would they let a sister go, to save another?

"Are you girls ready to go?" Lucas asked as he flashed into the middle of the room, putting a halt to any more arguing or discussing of the matter.

"We are," Acquanetta said with a confidence she rarely showed, but was becoming more and more prevalent as this charade continued. She stepped forward and Lucas flashed her first, then returned and took Rive.

He returned again and it was just the two of them.

He approached her without emotion on his sparkling face. Today he wore a traditional elf style tunic and pants that flowed over his lean body. His hair was loose around his body except for two braids, one at each temple. His brown eyes were swirling and hypnotic, making Rina want to dive into them. It was unfairly deceiving to have such warm welcoming eyes on such a cold cruel creature.

She tore her gaze away and put one hand on her hip, emphasizing the space of skin peeking out between her low-slung skirt and top. His gaze moved to the skin exposed there and she was satisfied by a slight tightening of his lips.

“Rina...you look lovely today, as always. Your night was restful?” He seemed to be struggling for the right words.

That was something she had never seen him experience before. “Thanks, should we be going?”

Lucas stepped closer and put his hands on her shoulders.

She expected a flash, but nothing happened. She looked up to find his face quite close to hers and an intense unguarded look in his eyes. She didn't dare move, hoping shamelessly for a kiss. Even if it meant nothing to him other than a physical desire for her body, she wanted whatever she could get.

He didn't move, just looked deep, searching her

eyes. Frustration clouded his features a second before he was smashing his lips angrily to hers. His hands went behind her back and crushed her body against his. Rina responded to him like she would any attractive man, but even to her there was something missing. Something wasn't there and he could no doubt feel it, too.

He pulled away, anger covering his face, and flashed them to Paxton's house without a word of explanation.

He hadn't seemed to mind her kiss a couple nights ago and she wondered what could have changed. The lack of emotion behind it wasn't new. Dropped in the middle of everyone and knees still weakened by the kiss, she wanted to cry. It wasn't her fault there was no love coming out of her. It was the persuasion, but how could he be angry about that? He didn't love her anyway, didn't want her as his mate. He was the one being unfair, trying to take advantage of her body again. He would take her to bed and leave her after he had once again fucked her to his satisfaction. Anger took over Rina and she was thankful for it as all eyes assessed the two of them—they had taken longer than necessary in arriving and it hadn't gone unnoticed. "What's the plan?" she asked, determined to get things moving and to keep the subject off her and Lucas.

"We need to figure out who has the best chance

of penetrating security," Paxton said.

"I say Lucas. He can use glamour to look like he belongs and can't he make them do as he says?" Ian said with obvious disdain.

"Not exactly, I can definitely look like I belong and I can convince them to see what I want and even believe me. But there is always a chance it won't be enough, I would be better off taking Rina with me to persuade anyone who isn't easily convinced. I can only make them believe as far as they are willing to believe. If they are really skeptical, they will need extra persuading. Rina can do that. Making them feel attraction for me won't benefit us. An attractive trespasser is just as likely to be shot at or taken prisoner as an unattractive one."

"I'm not sure I'm up to that," Rina said quickly. She couldn't persuade anyone right now, and even if she could, she did not want to be alone with Lucas, especially after their kiss.

"Well, any mermaid can do that. I think I would be the best fit," Acquanetta said. "I have more powerful persuasion than Rina or Rive."

"I don't think so. You are injured still, stupid selkie. I will go so you can rest longer," Rive said, standing.

"Rina and I will go." Lucas grabbed Rina's arm and flashed them away before anyone could argue more.

She pulled out of his grasp when they materialized and she nearly fell with the force of her movement. "How dare you! Take me back this instant. I will not go with you."

"Why?" he asked, unconcerned by her anger.

"Because...because." There was no reason she could give him that would convince him and not embarrass herself. So what could she do, other than hope they made it back before the persuasion wore off? It wasn't as if she could have Acquanetta persuade her anymore anyway, not after finding out what it was costing her. She was doomed to either leave the council and the best possibility of saving Raine or let Lucas know she still had a love song for him. "This sucks," she mumbled, then spun around to investigate their surroundings. "Where are we and what is the plan?"

"We are in Vegas, I keep this residence here."

Rina looked around the room. He had, like a typical man, flashed them into the bedroom. She had a brief horrifying vision of him flashing some other female, an Animal Elf no doubt, into this room. She shoved the thought away. It was too painful to think of him with another.

She looked around the large space. It was decorated very basic and reminded her of a hotel room. Obviously he didn't spend a lot of time here, probably bought the place and never

changed a thing—beige walls and carpet, a blue comforter on a simple bed. Her gaze stopped on one picture hung on the wall, it seemed quite out of place. It was a bright colored picture of a mermaid lounging on a rock, long red hair flowing to her waist, seashells cupping her large breasts and a green shimmering tail slapping the water. It was a typical idea of a mermaid for a human, but perhaps it was a sentimental memory of her for Lucas? Rina dared to hope for a moment, then turned and saw him looking relaxed, guarded and unemotional as always, the bastard. “And the plan is?” she asked, not mentioning what she thought of the room or the picture. She thought she saw his mouth tighten just the slightest bit but, couldn’t be sure.

“We are about eighty miles from Area 51. We will drive as close as possible, then go in on foot with glamour showing and use persuasion as necessary.”

“I...I don’t think the persuasion will be necessary,” Rina said, face turning red with horrible guilt. She could get them both killed because of this lie, but wasn’t ready to tell him. “Let’s get going,” she said to distract him from her obvious guilt.

“Rina, is there something...something you wish to talk about?”

“No,” she said simply, letting her silver gaze

meet his without faltering. There was absolutely no lie in that one word. There was not one thing she wished to discuss with him.

Lucas looked at her, unblinking, for a second before turning and walking from the room, expecting her to follow.

She did, but only because there was no time to waste being vindictive, as much as she wanted to. If she was really, really lucky, she would make it out of this retrieval with her secret, and her dignity, intact. If she somehow managed that, she would have to come up with a new plan to keep up the charade as long as necessary to save Raine.

The car ride was beyond uncomfortable and filled with her relentless chatter of nonsense. She knew it was horrid, but couldn't stop herself. She talked on and on about the shop and where her sisters wanted to move next, time was running out where they were at. Soon humans would start to notice the non-aging group of women in their midst.

As she spoke, she swayed between glaring resentment for the forced situation and extreme guilt for lying and possibly leading them both into danger with false hopes of a weapon to get them out in one piece. Granted they were both quite hard to kill, they could still be injured and if injured bad enough, there was risk of death. There was also the absolute worst thing that could

happen, for all immortal kind, discovery by humans.

When the conversation lulled and silence was sitting heavy between them, Lucas pulled over and turned to face her. "I believe we are close enough to continue on foot, disguising the car with glamour would be too difficult. We will go in as if we were on foot patrol."

"O-okay." Rina took a deep breath and got out of the car. Lucas instructed her to stick close so the glamour could cover them both.

"My plan is to show an ID to anyone we encounter. I should be able to convince them we are what they expect to see, if it doesn't work, you can persuade them to believe it. I won't put off any hormonal messages because that would only cause a scene. It is best if we remain unnoticed by as many humans as possible."

"Sure." Guilt assaulted her again. This was about more than just her pride. This was endangering their mission to save Raine and the others. If she told him now, there was still time for him to fetch Rive. "Lucas, there is something I must tell you." Her heart beat in a wild rhythm and she wanted to cry at the unfairness of making it this long and having to now admit her shameful secret, wondering if Lucas would laugh at her for her stupidity of loving him, or just be angry with her for endangering them both.

Lucas stopped and looked at her, expressionless and expectant, waiting for her to speak.

Rina opened her mouth and for the first time in her life, nothing came out. She didn't even know where to begin and really just wanted to be convinced she didn't need to admit to anything, that this was all going to work out fine.

"Well well well, what do we have here? A little double-team action? Now that won't work so well when only one of your friends can be saved."

Rina sighed with relief at the interruption until she turned and saw it was a threesome of witches doing the interrupting. They were three beautiful women, with a slight green tinge to their skin, indicating they had recently cast a spell. Their skin would become greener with each spell cast and then as the spell wore off their skin would return to normal. Their eyes were purple and they had black hair of various lengths. They were dressed identically in black leather and purple velvet, breasts overflowing their bustier style tops. Spike heeled black boots that reached almost to their knees completed their kick-ass outfits. All in all, they looked like crazy scary bitches, which is exactly what they were known for being in the immortal world.

"Stupid mermaid, did he tell you he was on your side? Don't you know you can't trust a man, especially an *elfin* man?" one said with false

concern, followed by a delighted cackle that was nothing like what Rina had expected. It was almost cute, in an evil bitch sort of way.

"How exactly do you three plan on walking in there and retrieving the clue, Leticia?" Lucas asked, ignoring the comment.

Rina tried not to think too hard about the fact Lucas and this beautiful witch knew each other and she obviously knew him well enough to know what he was like. A wave of jealousy washed over her and she felt her song gain power from it.

"We have our ways," the vocal leader of the group said with a smile. "As you well know." Then she snapped her fingers and rendered the two of them immobile, her skin darkening slightly with the casting of a spell. "Something similar to that should do quite well," she said smugly. "Don't worry. It will start to wear off in a couple of hours, just enough time for us to get a good head start." Leticia cackled again, then the three of them hurried away, floating an inch above the ground and moving at human running speed.

Rina wanted to scowl, wanted to curse and wanted to scratch those bitches' eyes out, but couldn't move. Other than stand and breathe, there was nothing she could do. She could turn her eyes and just barely caught sight of Lucas, still as stone and just as expressionless beside her. His eyes, however, were swirling pools of rage and

she almost felt sorry for those three witches who had just earned his wrath.

Luckily Lucas retained enough of his powers to keep them hidden behind a creative glamour, making them appear to be nothing more than a couple of cacti in the desert. So at least there wouldn't be any humans running out to shoot them down and take them inside for inspection and dissection.

Rina didn't know what the witch meant by not lasting *too long*, but was sure it would be too long for her. By the time it wore off, there wouldn't be any persuasion left in her body. Already she felt the song awakening, stretching its notes and getting ready to jump out at the first opportunity. At least by the time it burst forth, she should be free to run as far and as fast as possible from him and wouldn't have to see his pitying looks.

As the second hour of their immobility approached, Rina felt the tingling of feeling coming back to her, but it was starting in all the wrong places. In her throat, rising up from that place in her soul dedicated to her mate.

She was helpless to stop it, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to try. She held her breath and visualized Acquanetta persuading her. She even went so far as trying to persuade herself, not that it was possible. Nothing worked and she couldn't

hold it back any longer. It was clawing its way out, like a living beast inside of her that had glimpsed the object of its only obsession. It would stop at nothing to get out and reveal her shameful secret.

Rina closed her eyes, opened her mouth and gave her entire being over to the song. If she wasn't able to stop it, then she could at least give it all she had. No doubt it would be the last time she ever sang it and she had always said if she had known the last time was going to be the last time, then she would have made it the best ever.

Her soul poured out of her as she sang. Relief spread through her body with the release of the song and she couldn't regret finally letting it out. By the end of the song, it had become a forlorn call for a mate who had rejected her and tears were streaking down her cheeks in thick rivulets, leaving behind glistening pink and white scales. Silence surrounded them and Rina refused to look in Lucas's direction. She thought she heard him swearing under his breath, but couldn't be sure.

"You two!" a voice rang out from behind, loud and accusing. "You two are breaking my rules!" Short, dark and wearing a cape, Walker Weston stomped his way into Rina's line of vision. His face was pinched into a scowl and he pointed an accusing finger at the two of them. "You two are trying to work together. I don't know what your

plan for the end could be, but it won't work, no matter what it is. This is *my* game and it will be played *my* way."

Rina's heart was pounding in her chest and her palms were starting to sweat. She was helpless and facing a monster. Her finger twitched, the spell was wearing off. Soon she wouldn't be helpless. Or soon Lucas wouldn't be helpless and would flash away and leave her here with the psychotic wizard, a more likely scenario.

Walker strode closer to Rina and peered into her face. "You look upset. A familiar look on mermaid faces of late." His evil self-satisfied smile filled Rina with rage. She pictured this evil little man hurting Raine and wanted to kill more than she ever had in her life. She used that rage, filled herself up with it and tried to force movement into her limbs. A twinge here, a twitch there, she was getting closer.

Walker stepped away from Rina and moved in front of Lucas. "And you, taking advantage of a helpless little mermaid to further your own way." Walker tsk-tsked.

Lucas moved so quick Rina wasn't sure what had happened until she reviewed the whole thing in her mind. Lucas must have freed himself from the spell somehow and reached out, then flashed himself and Walker away. As she struggled with comprehension, she crumpled to the ground and

realized she, too, was freed from the spell. "Hell of a lot of good it does me now. I am in the middle of the desert, alone," she grumbled. Then realized very quickly that alone she was not and it would have been better if she were.

"Stand up and put your hands behind your head. You are trespassing on private property of the government of The United States of America." Three guns were trained on her, held by three very serious looking camo-dressed men.

"Of course, I am just a little lost. I was hiking out here and got separated from my boyfriend and..."

"Stand up and put your hands behind your head. We will escort you to your vehicle off of the property."

Rina's first instinct was to agree, to cooperate and get away as fast as possible. She was a mermaid, a very weak immortal creature. But she needed that clue. She had to get inside the compound, deep underground, as the clue had said.

One of the soldiers came forward once she was standing with her hands behind her head. He patted her down to check for weapons, like she could be hiding anything in the scraps of fabric she was wearing. His hands lingered longer than necessary and Rina knew she had him. She focused her energy on the soldier.

"You should take me in for questioning," she persuaded quietly, so only he could hear her.

"We should take her in for questioning, just to be safe," he said to his friends with confidence.

"Jacobson, sir?" One of the other soldiers said, confused by the turn.

"She needs to be questioned." The soldier, Jacobson, grasped her elbow and motioned for the other two to lead the way.

"One hot body and the man starts breaking protocol," one soldier whispered to the other.

Not just a hot body, Rina thought with satisfaction. They all walked to an army jeep and Rina was shoved roughly into the back. Jacobson took the seat next to her. Rina kept her mouth shut as they approached a metal monstrosity in the middle of nowhere. They passed quickly through multiple checkpoints, Jacobson repeating his intent to question her inside to each soldier that questioned them, never faltering once. Humans were so easy, Rina thought to herself with a smile of satisfaction.

They didn't encounter any real problems along the way, even after leaving the vehicle and entering the compound on foot. She was guessing this Jacobson guy was a high-ranking officer. Everyone seemed to respect him. He led her through a metal door and down a bright lit concrete hallway, then pushed her inside a cell

and shut the door behind her.

“Damn,” she cursed. He didn’t come inside. Now she would have to wait until someone decided to come question her. She looked around the room and cringed. There was a single wood table, bolted to the floor, two wood chairs, chained to the table allowing for minimal movement. This was an interrogation chamber, complete with one-way glass filling an entire wall. Rina waved cheerfully at the mirror and took a seat calmly at the table. Certainly *someone* would come in for *something* before long. She hoped.

“Way to go, Rina. Get yourself locked up while trying to break Raine out of a different prison. Great plan, now what am I going to do?” she mumbled. The worst part was no one knew she was in here and there was no way to get out or get to the clue without a soldier first coming in to speak with her. So there were holes in her plan, so what? She told herself it was a plan and at the time it was the best plan. So she waited, somewhat patiently.

* * * *

Lucas flashed himself and the little twerp wizard to the colony prison. As soon as they materialized in a cell, he tried to flash out, but couldn’t. He tried again, panic filling his chest. Rina was alone

out there. Rina had sung to him. She still loved him and he had abandoned her. And this little bastard was at fault. Lucas narrowed his eyes at the wizard, not caring he was showing emotion.

“What are you doing?” Lucas asked with calm, despite the anger on his face and in his gut. The smile of satisfaction on the wizard’s face told him exactly what he was doing. He had cast a spell that wouldn’t allow Lucas to flash away. No wonder he was able to hold an Animal Elf prisoner. “If you know what is good for you, you will let me go, now.”

“Or what? It seems to me you are in no position to bargain here. I, however, am, since I hold the key to your being let out of your own prison.” Walker laughed loud at this and leaned back casually against the wall.

“Do you have any idea who you are dealing with here? I am the leader of this colony and—”

“And you are very important, very vindictive and very powerful? Believe me, Lucas, Animal Elf, co-leader of the Oregon Colony, I know exactly who and what you are. I also know you were breaking my rules. You were working with that mermaid and others I do believe. What I don’t understand is what you had hoped to gain by this. Only one can be saved in the end. How were you going to decide who was worthy enough at the end to be saved?”

Lucas stood, stoic and silent. He would admit nothing to this man.

“Oh, I see, you were going to save them all? Was that the plan?” Walker laughed again, so hard this time that spittle flew from his mouth and his face started to turn red. “That is wonderful, but you have no idea how impossible that would have been, still is. I am tempted to let you try. It will add another layer to my game, make things more interesting. Things have not been as entertaining as I expected so far, my clues are too easy I think.” Walker paced back and forth in the small chamber, hands rubbing together and a look of dark pleasure on his face. He let out a quiet chuckle, then stopped and turned to face Lucas. “I will let you continue to play and I will allow the change of rules. Good luck to you and your friends, I will be watching you all very close.” With a dramatic puff of smoke, he disappeared.

Lucas spun around, searching for him. No way was he able to do that, was he? If he was indeed that powerful, then they were all in more trouble than they had ever imagined. Lucas took a deep breath, sent up a prayer to anyone who was listening and flashed himself back to the spot where he and Rina had been discovered—twice. He covered himself in a glamour to blend with the surroundings and spun around, looking for Rina, expecting to spot her nearby. She was on foot. She

couldn't have gotten far.

Lucas's gut twisted, his heart pounded and his hands clenched into fists as fear tore through him. Rina was nowhere to be found. He flashed himself back to the car—empty. He turned and looked toward the menacing metal building so far off in the distance. She must have gone in on her own, damn her.

"Fuck, Rina," he cursed and flashed back to Paxton's. He appeared before a scene, much like the one he had left earlier. Ian and Alexia were cuddled up on the loveseat and Rive held Acquanetta's head in her lap as Acquanetta rested peacefully. Paxton stood in a corner, ever watchful and uncomfortable to have people in his home that weren't there to service his various needs.

"Rina is in trouble," Lucas announced, gaining everyone's instant attention. Even Acquanetta awoke and sat up, as if she had been awake the whole time. "We had a couple run-ins. First with a coven of witches, then with the master planner himself, Walker Weston, now Rina is inside the Area 51 compound, alone!"

"Take me there, now!" Rive commanded, standing and walking toward him.

Lucas really didn't like Rive, but he would spend time with whomever necessary to save Rina. Because damn it all, she loved him still, just the same as he loved her and he would not lose

her now that he knew. He was convinced he could make her forgive him now and didn't want to delay.

His monkey, Jack, hopped to his shoulder out of nowhere. Lucas gave him a pat on the head. Obviously the monkey was deciding to forgive him for forgetting about him before and leaving the poor guy in the hotel room. In Lucas's great distress, Jack was by his side, a true little friend, and possibly he would come in handy.

"Where was he hiding?" Paxton asked, surprised to see the thing.

"Under the couch, our wolves had been guarding him, for our dinner no doubt," Ian said casually.

Lucas wanted to say something to Ian about the rudeness of his animal instincts, but Alexia had the decency to look embarrassed and Rina was not getting any safer as time passed so he decided to let it go, for now. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Lucas flashed them as close as he dared to the building and threw a glamour over them both. "Stay close so the glamour won't falter. We are going in as soldiers. You will have to persuade anyone who isn't fooled by the glamour," Lucas explained as they hurried forward, seeming as casual as possible.

"I can do that," Rive said, standing up straight

and exuding confidence as she swaggered along beside Lucas. "This had better work or I will never forgive you for hurting her. This is no doubt your fault," Rive accused.

"I will take the blame. I love her and I will never put her in danger like this again, if I can help it." If she wasn't so stubborn, Lucas knew that would be an easier task.

Rive had no response.

Lucas wondered if she was debating telling him Rina had been lying to him this whole time. She never spoke, so obviously she wasn't willing to divulge her sister's secrets, a good quality, he could respect. Maybe she wasn't all bad he decided.

"You should have taken me to begin with," she said, "I wouldn't have let a bunch of witches keep me from my mission."

And maybe she was. Lucas decided.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rina sat there for what felt like forever, but was probably only five minutes. She was not an idle creature and this was torture having to sit here and wait. No doubt it was their way of getting the enemy to talk, bore them to death. "This really sucks and I could use a glass of water or something!" She was sure there were people on the other side of the glass listening in.

When no one rushed to do her bidding, she turned to face the mirror and smiled as an idea hit her. She was more than capable of producing a sound that would rip the glass into a million little pieces. Of course it would let them know she wasn't human and cause her a boatload of new problems. Okay, bad plan she decided.

She propped her head on her hands, elbows on the table and closed her eyes. She concentrated on the energies around her, searching for the clue or any other immortal energy flitting about. Perhaps

a friendly shape-shifter would like to save the helpless mermaid stuck in here.

She felt the residue of the witches, but they were long gone, no doubt well on their way to the next clue. Bitches! She followed their line of immortal energy further into the compound and found what she was looking for. The evil magical residue of Walker Weston, the clue, it was further below ground than she was now, but not terribly far. She was going to need a very good plan.

After ten minutes, she decided a plan was not going to be necessary as the familiar tickling of her love song's notes began to rise up in her. Lucas was near and she couldn't help but feel relief, as much as she hated it. She didn't want to see him, let alone rely on him to save her, but she did. He would get her out of this because she was a member of The Council of Immortals, if for no other reason.

Even as she chastised herself for relying on a man, especially that man, to save her, she relaxed and let the song build within her uninhibited. She would sing him to her. She waited, held it in until she was sure he was close enough to hear her, even if his ears were no longer sensitive to her voice, as they would be to his mate's. She opened her mouth and let loose with a loud burst of song. Seconds later a couple of armed guards were in her room looking at her like she was nuts,

pointing guns at her head in confusion. She kept singing because she was helpless to stop it until it had run its course and hoped they wouldn't actually shoot her.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" one guard yelled. "Go get Jacobson. He is the one who insisted she be brought in, he can deal with this." The guards backed out of the room and soon Jacobson arrived.

"What is going on in here? What are you doing?" he questioned, baffled by her behavior.

The song ended and Rina took a deep breath. Then she smiled at Jacobson. "You should take me to the bathroom, downstairs," she said, her soft voice laced with persuasion.

"Follow me to the bathroom, ma'am." Jacobson spun on his heel and walked from the room, expecting her to follow, but taking no precautions to restrain her.

When she stepped out of the room, she was disappointed to see two armed guards waiting there. They fell into step behind her, guns trained on her back. Rina felt Lucas and Rive's presence—they were close. She hoped they would follow her right to the clue. "Goodness it's chilly in here, I wish I had worn more clothing," Rina said, just to get her voice out there, letting her friends know where she was. She heard a rustling behind her.

"Frank, what the hell are you doing?" one of

the soldiers behind her said.

"The lady is cold," the other said in a no-duh kind of way.

"So you were going to give her your uniform jacket? Are you insane?"

Rina couldn't help, but giggle at the exchange and turned her head to peek at the men behind her. They weren't the ones who had found her. They were two of the three who had raced into her room when she started singing.

"Jacobson, where are you taking her?"

"Bathroom."

"And why have we passed a bathroom twice now?"

"Heading to the downstairs bathroom," he said simply and with such assurance it left no room for argument or questioning by the other soldiers.

Rina smiled with satisfaction, simple human minds. Of course, they were also the most dangerous creatures on this earth. Most capable of total destruction, of not only the immortals, but themselves as well, which is why being this close to them was such a delicate and dangerous matter for her. It took away some of the joy she found in controlling them so easily.

They went down three flights of stairs and the air grew quite cold, the walls became nothing more than exposed rock and each step echoed through the cavernous hallways. "Gee it's really

nice down here," Rina said, for lack of anything better. She could feel that Lucas and Rive were close. She had to keep them aware of her presence as well. "Are we getting close?"

"Quiet," one soldier said behind her and prodded her none too gently with the end of his rifle.

Her steps faltered and as she caught herself, hands to the ground, she felt the presence of evil, of Walker Weston, very close by. It had to be the clue. Rina looked around her, to the right was a heavy metal door, no doubt it held the clue. "You should put me in there," she whispered to the young soldier who was helping her up, the one who had almost given her his jacket earlier, Frank.

The soldier straightened and pulled out a key. He had it in the lock and turning before either of the others noticed what he was doing.

"What the hell, Frank?" the other said.

Jacobson sputtered about, "I'm taking her to the bathroom downstairs."

"I am putting her in here," Frank said in a flat tone.

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"Of course you aren't, I am taking her to the downstairs bathroom," Jacobson said and grabbed her arm.

Oh shit, Rina thought.

"I am putting her in here," Frank said, opening

the door and grabbing her other arm.

"This isn't tug of war on Rina," she said firmly and both men let go. Whoa, she thought, persuasion on two at once, that was new—probably only worked because they were both already acting under her persuasion, which gave her a very useful tool. She looked at the third guard. "You want to do as I say."

He blinked. Then narrowed his eyes at her. "Like hell I do, what's your game here, miss?"

"Damn!" she cursed. It only worked as far as the person would allow it. This man wanted to follow orders and he had no intention of pleasing her, just her luck to run into a military fanatic—new plan. "Go get a superior," she told him.

The man turned and left without hesitation.

Rina smiled at his retreating back and then turned to the others. "Stay out of the way while I go in here." They stepped back and watched as she walked into a large storage locker. It was filled with odd-looking weapons labeled with words like *dehumanizator*, *particle-ionization stream*, *molecular defibrillator* and *spastic-combustionizer*. "Holy weapons, Batman," she whispered as she looked around for the clue. She spotted a glowing ball, the same as before, and reached inside for the clue.

"Mermaid," the voice said and a note appeared within.

“What the hell do you think a *Pimptasticator* does?” A cheery voice trilled behind her.

Rina whirled around and squealed with delight when she saw Lucas and Rive standing there. Rive was running a hand over a phallic shaped weapon.

“I don’t think we want to find out,” she said, hurrying forward. “Now get us back to Paxton’s. The witches are ahead of us and definitely not willing to cooperate. But I don’t think anyone else has been this far yet.”

“Shut the door, Rive, and I will be back in a second.” Lucas grabbed Rina with a rough hand, holding her close to him, pressing her body against his for the half second of flashing.

That half-second was more than enough to make her body melt and her heart speed. She wanted to sing again by the time they materialized back at Paxton’s. She wanted to give herself to him, no matter if it was just for one night or two. Whatever he was willing to give her, her body screamed for satisfaction that only he could give. In that moment, she would take anything and give everything, just to be able to touch him, kiss him and hold him close. To have him take her rough, sweet, fast or slow, she didn’t care, she just wanted to be taken by him. Wanted him to mark her.

Lucas flashed back to get Rive and the small

break was enough time for Rina to calm herself, or pretend to at least. She didn't care if he did know the song was still there and always would be. She would not allow herself to be used by him. She deserved better than that.

"Where is everyone?" Rive asked.

Rina looked around, amazed to find they were alone in the room. She hadn't noticed a thing upon arrival. Too distracted by all the things Lucas made her want. Damn good thing they hadn't flashed into danger, she would have been too horny to even try and save herself. "I don't know. Hello!" Rina sang out quietly, knowing the super hearing of the immortals would pick up the word easy if they were indeed within the house. Paxton came into the room with lightning quick movements that made Rina brace herself.

"You are safe, how wonderful," Paxton said, his velvet voice soothing her.

"Yes, and bearing gifts." Rina held up the clue. "Where is Acquanetta and where are Ian and Alexia?"

"Acquanetta is resting peacefully in a bathtub of saltwater. It would have seemed like an odd request if she were not a mermaid." Paxton smiled and his eyes glinted, tinged a bit red. "Ian and Alexia are taking some private time in one of my guest rooms."

"Oh," Rina said, her cheeks heating with

embarrassment. "Should we wait for them?"

"No, let's read it and start thinking of where we should be heading next," Lucas said, so close behind her she jumped a little when he spoke.

She moved away and unrolled the note.

Only two more clues feel those blues. Where it wasn't washed away it is still fun to play. So much immortal history this shouldn't be a big mystery.

They all sat down and took turns reading the note. Immortals had history everywhere, just like mortals. There wasn't one place Rina could think of which had so much more than others.

"Transylvania?" Paxton said. "Transylvania is a very important part of vampire history. That is where our last Supreme King held court."

"Possibly, but there isn't history for other immortals there, just vamps," Rive pointed out. "Atlantis has the greatest history for mermaids," she added. "But again, not for other immortals."

"Also not fitting," Lucas said. "If we are talking elves, it would be Ireland."

Ian and Alexia walked into the room, Alexia's eyes were slightly aglow, one red and one yellow. It was creepy to look at, Rina thought. She could never pass for human, unless she was at a rave. Rina's gaze moved over Ian and she noticed the two fang marks in his neck. She nearly choked

with shocked disgust—how could he let her do that? Her eyes watched the pair as they walked into the room, holding hands and smiling at each other, so obviously in love. Rina had to admit if she felt that kind of love with someone, she would probably let him suck her blood, too. But it was still gross.

“I am so glad you are back and unharmed it seems,” Alexia said.

Rina felt guilty about the disgust she was feeling earlier. Alexia was a wonderful er...werepire and didn't deserve to be thought of in such a negative way. “We have the next clue,” she said to keep the subject away from herself and the horribly embarrassing journey with Lucas.

“Let's have a look,” Ian said, taking the paper from Lucas.

“This talks of all immortals and it mentions the blues and washed away, how about the Big Easy?” Ian suggested, making Rina feel like an idiot for not seeing the obvious herself.

“New Orleans! That has to be it. It makes sense, but where in New Orleans?” Rina said, her excitement dimming. It was a big place and the witches could already be there, searching.

“We will sniff it out when we get there. Let's go,” Ian said with a firm tone—he did not want to be left out again, it seemed.

Which was fine with Rina, she did not want to

be alone with Lucas again, ever. She felt his gaze on her as she thought those words and a shiver ran unchecked down her spine. Without the persuasion, she was helpless to the reaction of her body. She hummed to relieve the pressure of the song, but knew the only real way to stop it was give in to it and Lucas. Only through sex with your mate would the song be satisfied to stay down for any real length of time and there were some things she just was *not* willing to do.

“We don’t *all* need to go, do we? I mean why should we all trek down there for this one?” Rina said, trying not to sound over eager to stay.

“We all should go, the other immortals are getting edgy and we will need the numbers to keep things in our favor,” Paxton said in a tone that left no room for argument.

“We need to show unity and we need to be as powerful as possible. As well as be prepared for whatever human interaction we may encounter,” Lucas added, fully in agreement with Paxton.

“Of course those of you who are not members of The Council of Immortals are more than welcome to stay behind. I do, however, require the presence of council members,” Paxton said, taking away any chance Rina had of backing out with grace.

“Well, Acquanetta certainly won’t be going,” Rive huffed. “I will run up and let her know we

are leaving. I assume she is welcome to stay here while we are out." Rive didn't wait for a reply from Paxton, just hurried from the room to do as she wished.

"I will be going if Alexia is going, of course," Ian said gruffly.

"Where can you flash us to in New Orleans?" Paxton asked Lucas.

"It's dark, which makes it pretty simple. I can take us to a stretch of beach I know. It should be deserted enough to be safe." Lucas's eyes flickered to Rina as he spoke.

Rina knew what stretch of beach he was speaking of. No doubt it was the stretch of beach where they had first met and first made love. What the hell was he trying to do, taking them there? Certainly he didn't mean it as some kind of romantic gesture, but that didn't mean her body wouldn't take it as one, of its own volition.

"Best flash us men first, just in case," Ian pointed out with a puffed chest, ready to take on the world for his mate.

Alexia growled at her mate's decision, but he ignored her and Paxton spoke up before she could argue.

"Not a bad idea, things will just get more and more dangerous as we get closer, no reason to put the women on the front lines."

It seemed to Rina that although Alexia didn't

like the idea one bit, she didn't dare argue with the vampire who was the self-appointed head of the council. So Lucas flashed Paxton, then Ian before the women. Rina was last to go and when Lucas appeared in the room to take her, she was choking with the need to sing her love to him, to beg him to accept it and her.

"Rina, you don't look well."

Rina glared at him. Of course she didn't look well. Her mate didn't want her and she was dying to sing to him. It didn't get much worse, for a mermaid. "I'm fine," she ground out between clenched teeth. "Let's go."

Lucas walked close to her and placed his hands on her shoulders, but he didn't flash them. He looked deep into her silver eyes with his swirling brown ones and let his face soften just a tiny bit. "Rina, I want to speak with you when this is all over."

"I don't know what you think we have to discuss but—" Lucas's lips pressed against her own. Heat shot through her, straight down between her thighs and added fuel to her burning song until she was helpless to hold it in any longer. She broke the kiss and let the song flow, tears streaking her cheeks as Lucas's strong arms held her close while she sang. She could hardly stand it, this is what she wanted and would never have. It was unfair to feel this joy for even a

moment, knowing it was a sham. Lucas was not holding her because he loved her and wanted to hear her song. He was holding her because she needed to be in tip-top shape for the hunt. Rina cried as she sang and didn't care one bit that it totally ruined the song.

When it was over, Rina dried her eyes as best she could on his tunic. Her face red with embarrassment, she didn't think she could ever face him after her horrible emotional display. She kept her gaze on the floor, waiting for him to either speak or flash them.

"That is what I would like to speak with you about, but not until this is over and everyone is safe again." Lucas paused, but she didn't say anything. "Feel better?"

"You know I do. Can we go now please? It is quite rude to keep the others waiting." She had a pretty good idea of what he would speak with her about. No doubt reiterating the fact that they were an impossible match and although he thought she was a great addition to the council, he still wouldn't mate with her. They were words she didn't ever need to hear—she already felt his rejection deep into her soul.

"I told Paxton we might be a couple minutes, but you are right. We have been long enough." Lucas flashed them.

Half an hour later they were all slinking down a

dark street, senses stretched in every direction, searching for a hint of the clue. Rina's senses were less than focused. She was still reeling from the encounter at Paxton's. Added to it were the memories she had been assaulted with when they had materialized on the stretch of beach where she and Lucas had met. With it all in her mind, she couldn't concentrate on anything other than the sway of Lucas's hair as he walked down the street in front of her. Even with the evil little monkey on his shoulder he was hot. Right now he wore a glamour that made him appear to be a tough biker with a half-bald head, long black ponytail, tattoos all over his arms and up his neck, black leather chaps and vest, torn jeans and no shirt. It was his idea of a scary enough guy to defer any human interaction with their small group. Between that and Ian's real look of big tough guy they were pretty well avoided by onlookers, aside from staring. After all who wouldn't stare, her and Rive and Alexia were totally hot, especially after stopping at a gothic clothing store and persuading some outfits off the girl working there.

They were dressed in matching leather pants and knee high boots with spiked heels, red fishnet shirts over black tube tops. They were hot and they were blending well with the crowd in this part of town. Even the silver eyes of the mermaids and the brown and blue eyes of the werepire were

not so odd when compared with the contact-enhanced eyes of the humans about.

Rina drifted to the back of their group and tried to refocus on the mission. She looked about, searching the shadows and alleyways for signs of wizard-magic. There was plenty of magic about, old and new. New Orleans was thick with immortal history. With the recent influx of immortals after this clue, Rina's senses were on overload and without the ability to focus, it was hopeless. She wasn't doing her mersister any good at this point.

Without realizing what she was doing, she drifted farther and farther back from the group. Soon they were nearly a block ahead of her as she walked slow and studied each and every influx of magic residue she sensed. She stopped at a juncture that seemed to lead nowhere. The alleyway to her left looked to be a dead end, but she felt something. She wasn't sure what it was, it didn't feel like a clue, but it was definitely something.

Her heart began to pound in her chest and she was helpless to stop her feet from taking her down the alleyway. One slow step at a time she moved, closer and closer to something, something was calling to her, needing her, wanting her. She was completely flooded by the feeling of acceptance, belonging and love. Her steps hurried as the

feeling increased and her mind calmed more than it had since before she met Lucas. It felt as if everything in her life had just clicked into place and she was just...content.

* * * *

Lucas knew the moment it happened, felt his soul rip apart inside his body, his every sense telling him to turn around and run as fast as possible to save her, but it would still be too late. Rina was gone.

Lucas froze in the middle of crossing the street and doubled over with the shock. His glamour flickered around him and disappeared, causing a couple of drunks to stumble into a parked car, setting off the alarm and waking a sleeping bum nearby. The others hurried to pull him off the street and into a dark doorway. Their voices buzzed around him, but he couldn't make out any words. Not that anything they were saying could matter. Rina was gone and he was alone for the rest of his immortal life.

"Damn it, Lucas, talk!"

Ian's growl and accompanying smack on the back pulled him out of his shock. He blinked up from the ground at the faces surrounding him and covered himself with his glamour once again. "She's gone," he said simply, his voice weak.

Everyone pulled back and as it dawned on them that Rina was not there any longer, sorrow of varying degrees passed across their features.

Except for Rive, her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened, but not a touch of grief lay there. "My mersister may not be here, but she is far from dead. I would know if I had lost a clan sister, the song of death would have flown from me as soon as her heart stopped beating. She is alive, but something is definitely wrong."

Hope filled Lucas so fast his glamour started to flicker and threatened to disappear again. "You are sure? Why do I feel as if my mate is dead? Explain that to me."

"I don't know, I don't know how your bond works. I only know how mine does."

"Who would have the power to break your mate bond?" Ian asked.

"I don't know, a wizard, perhaps. He had the power to keep me from flashing. Walker is much more powerful than we anticipated and he is watching us particularly close."

"What does that mean?" Rive asked.

"It means he just upped the stakes and we had better get a move on, fast. Rina won't suffer a moment with that psychotic wizard more than necessary." Lucas spoke with such force, even Paxton nodded with quick agreement.

CHAPTER NINE

Rina lounged against a hard bench, her butt numb from sitting on concrete and her body covered in scales from the dampness all around her. Her clothing was dirty and torn. She had lost the heel of one boot along the way and her normally wild red curls were absolutely feral, spiking up around her head in short angry bursts. Half her nails were broken and she was pretty sure her shoulder was dislocated at one point. She healed fast and it had popped right back into place with minimal soreness remaining.

She had a vague, very foggy memory of being shoved around. Pushed, pulled and knocked about, but couldn't picture who did it. She wanted to concentrate, try to remember what exactly had happened to her, but it was too much work so she stopped. She contented herself with the knowledge—not that she knew where the knowledge came from—that whoever had done it

was punished after she was turned over to Walker. Walker was angry, she thought, about her obvious mistreatment and he had dealt out a swift punishment, she was pretty sure. So she was okay with whatever it was that had happened, she felt good enough now anyway.

She didn't care about any of it. She was absolutely and completely content. So very content that nothing else mattered one bit. Through the bars of her cell, she saw into the cell across from her and watched as a very attractive Fire Demon paced back and forth. He moved his hands with such agitation, no doubt trying to produce the fireballs they were famous for, and coming up empty.

Rina didn't understand what he was so frustrated about. This place was great. Rina leaned back and closed her eyes. Peace swirled around, a foggy blanket over her mind and she drifted off to a semi-conscious sleep state.

Rina was dreaming. She knew it was a dream because in real life things were nice, calm and perfectly wonderful. In this dream, she was filled with squeezing anger, overwhelming love and unequalled frustration. All was directed at one man, a tall pale man with sparkling skin, long white hair, deliciously pointed ears, swirling brown eyes and an expressionless face.

In the dream, Rina was showing him her every

emotion and he stood expressionless, hiding everything or feeling nothing, she wasn't sure which. Then suddenly his face cracked and chunks fell away like plaster. Underneath was a face beautiful like before except this one moved, it smiled, it frowned and it even laughed. Rina ran to him and was embraced lovingly in his familiar warm arms. Then just when she was getting comfortable and all the hurt and confusion was leaving, he shoved her away, pushed her to arms length. He took the mask, glued back together and held out by a woman so beautiful and so similar to the man it could only be his sister. He put the mask on without a word. He turned from Rina and followed his snickering sister.

Rina fell to her knees in a torrent of tears. She thrashed about and woke herself up with a jolt. As consciousness settled over her so did the wonderful calm of this beautiful place.

"Hey, are you alright over there?"

Rina looked across to the Fire Demon who was now gripping his bars and watching her with concern. "Of course I'm alright, why wouldn't I be?"

"You were sobbing in your sleep and crying out for someone named Lucas."

"Bad dream, I just won't sleep anymore and I will be fine," Rina concluded, happy, as it made perfect sense to her. When she slept, the sweet

nothingness went away and she did not want that – so no more sleep.

“I don’t think you are fine, you’re a mermaid. Aren’t mermaids supposed to be emotional?”

“Aren’t demons supposed to be selfish and cruel?” Rina pointed out.

The demon smiled darkly at her, his eyes seeming to reflect fire from within. “Oh we are, but when it suits us, we can be quite nice.”

His smile was lascivious and Rina had no doubt about the kind of nice he wanted to be. Lucky for her, her fog-bogged mind wouldn’t allow her to get either turned on or annoyed by him. “What is your name?”

“Blaze.”

“Hello, Blaze, I am Marina, but most people call me Rina.”

Blaze looked at her with tilted head and pursed lips. “Most people laugh when they hear my name. A Fire Demon named Blaze. I mean come on, that is funny. You are as emotionless as an elf over there.”

His words made Rina twitch with feeling wanting to come out, but it was soon dampened by the wonderful fog. “There is nothing wrong with that, trust me it is much better than the alternative.”

“Why are you here now? The game started days ago, all the species were captured then.”

"I...I am not sure, but I am happy to be here, I know that. I am not a captive here, not part of the game."

"I think your mind has been messed with, my dear, which means you are of no help to any of us here." Blaze turned away and went back to his pacing and failed attempts at fireball making.

Rina relaxed, laid back and stared up at the cracked ceiling. She couldn't imagine anywhere else she would rather be, or who she would care to be of help to. She lost track of time, couldn't tell if it was minutes, days or hours passing. At one point, food appeared next to her—a delicious salmon roll with cream cheese, a bottle of saltwater and a bowl of gummy worms for desert. She ate it all and knew they were her favorites, but there was none of the usual joy she found in eating it. Of course she couldn't make herself care, she just ate, then laid back down, staring up some more. Later she heard howling and remembered the full moon was upon them, but it was soon quieted down.

She went on uninterrupted for what might have been a day, judging by the number of meals that appeared beside her at what seemed to her, random intervals. Then she heard the creak of an opening cell door and turned her head with lazy disinterest.

Walker Weston stood in her cell.

He was dressed in a floor length dark blue robe and wore a traditional pointed wizard hat. If she had been capable, she thought she would have smiled or laughed at his ridiculous outfit. But as it was, she regarded him with mild interest and noted a passing wonder within her mind at her lack of reaction to anything.

"I am glad to find you comfortable here, Rina. I apologize again for the overzealous actions of the young wizards I sent for you."

"Oh. I am quite comfortable here. I don't think I have ever felt so comfortable in all my life."

"Good, good. I wish all my guests could feel that way, but of course I did not deign to give them the same gift I gave you. Seeing as they are here for an entirely different purpose."

"That is quite nice."

"Now it is almost time for my game to end, so I need you to come with me and play a part." He motioned for her to stand.

She obeyed without thinking. "Are you sure I must, I am enjoying myself here."

"I am sure, now come along."

Rina sighed and followed, wishing to return to her hard bed on the floor. But she would go with him because it would have taken too much energy and thought to disagree. She just didn't have it in her. As she followed Walker out of the cell, Blaze eyed her suspiciously.

“He has done something to you, Rina, fight it and save us all.”

Rina looked at Blaze as she passed, his words buzzing in her mind. She wasn't sure why she had heard them, Walker hadn't seemed to or he just didn't care. But Rina didn't really care either. She forgot Blaze's words as soon as she passed his cell and followed Walker past cell after cell of immortals. Each one hissed or growled or pleaded as they passed. Walker made no reaction and neither did Rina, until she heard the familiar voice of her mersister.

“Oh my Gods, Marina, what are you doing here? Why are you with that monster?”

Rina stopped and looked into the cell at her sister. She looked terrible, scared and beyond pissed. All the things Rina started to think she should be. Why wasn't she?

“Rina what's wrong with you? What has he done to you?”

“I—”

“Come along Rina, we don't fraternize with the pawns.”

“Rina, you have to snap out of it,” Raine pleaded as Rina walked away.

Rina's mind was pricked with thoughts that threatened to disturb her sweet foggy mind. She pushed them away and welcomed the peace. She followed Walker up a stone staircase that twisted

up and reminded her of an old dungeon. She wondered briefly if they were in a castle, but the train of thought took too much effort to hold onto so she let it go.

The staircase ended in a hallway, long and windowless with only a few flickering candles to light the way. She continued to follow, silent and content. At the end of the hallway, Walker held open a door and she stepped out into a very modern office, complete with a wall of computer screens showing different scenes. Some showed the prisoners, some what she assumed were the surrounding grounds and some were of places she recognized as where the clues had been hidden, all were dark with night and lit up green with night vision and infrared.

“As you can see I have been entertaining myself with the progress of the game,” Walker said behind her, self-satisfaction lacing his voice.

“I see.” As she watched, some of the screens flashed to different scenes. Suddenly she was looking into a cell that held Raine. She was huddled on the floor, knees drawn to her chest and head resting on her knees. Tears streaked down her face, revealing yellow and silver scales. Rina’s heart ached at the sight of her mersister’s misery. She wanted to help her, needed to help her, but the picture switched and the fog once again blanketed her mind and emotions.

“Ah there they are.” Walker tapped on a monitor showing a wooded area.

Rina didn’t see anything at first, but when he pushed a couple buttons and brought the camera up on the main screen, she saw five figures creeping by. It was impossible to tell who they were and Rina didn’t care enough to try and figure it out. “Can I go back to my cell now?”

“No, no. You are going to play a very special part in my game. You can sit tight right there until it’s time.”

A chair appeared behind her. She sat and waited, mind drifting to the point where she had no idea how much time had passed when Walker snapped his fingers in front of her face to grab her attention. She was, however a little annoyed he had brought her out of her sweet nothingness, but that passed and she was covered in fog again.

“It’s show time, my dear, follow me and try to look alive.”

“I am alive, aren’t I?” Rina asked as she stood to follow him. He didn’t answer, just laughed and walked to a door she hadn’t noticed before, not that she had noticed much of anything. Walker led her up a spiraling staircase, then across a bridge. From what Rina could tell, it was at least four stories above the ground. They went down a staircase and through a narrow hallway. He paused outside a door and turned to face Rina. He

looked her over with an assessing eye, scowling with disapproval.

“You look like shit, but I guess that might work to my advantage.”

Rina knew she should be offended, but she just couldn't get there. So she stared at him, expressionless, until he turned with a chuckle and opened the door.

“Welcome! Welcome!” Walker shouted as he entered the room.

Rina followed and found it wasn't a room, but a balcony of glass overlooking a large room below. “I am so glad to see you have all come this time, well all except for one.” He grabbed Rina's arm and forced her forward. “This one was already here.”

Rina looked over the edge and saw what must have been the five figures on the screen earlier. Lucas, Rive, Paxton, Ian and Alexia. They looked tired, dirty and angry, except for Lucas whose face was blank, calm.

Lucas's gaze locked onto Rina's and seemed to ask a million questions. Rina looked away. His gaze made her uncomfortable with the threat of renewed feeling.

“Walker I don't think you need to hide behind a woman, why not send her off so we can talk,” Lucas called up.

“Hide behind this frail shell of a being? Ha!

Hardly," Walker scoffed.

"Come down here, Walker, let's settle this," Ian called with a growl. His body was shaking and his eyes were glowing yellow. Beside him, his mate's eyes were glowing red and yellow.

Rina was sure they were both close to merging with their wolf counterparts, but she wasn't sure why.

"Making demands on me? That is not how this works I'm afraid. This is my game and it will be played by my rules and demands. I have already changed those once because I was amused by your little alliance. I even sent the rest of the immortals on one extra clue hunt to be sure you would all make it here first. But don't think I intend to let you have what you want, this is still my game."

"Can I go back to my cell now?" Rina whispered, leaning against the wall so she was out of sight of the others. Lucas was down there and he was making her feel things, things she didn't want to feel. Things Walker had taken away—all the pain, all the hate, all the sorrow, all the lost love, and all the loneliness she never wanted to feel again. Now Lucas was down there and just the sight of him made those feelings start to prickle back into her consciousness.

"What have you done to Rina? Why can't I feel our mate bond anymore?"

"You can't? Well, I assure you I did not intend

for that to happen. It must be some kind of reaction she chose to have to my spell, interesting.”

“Why did you spell her? You already have a mermaid species representative,” Paxton pointed out.

“You guys changed the game when you became allies, almost as if you had created a whole new species. So I had to take one of yours, just to keep things fair.”

“We don’t intend to save just one, Walker. We intend to save them all,” Ian said with a gruff growl to his voice.

“Yes, I know what you were intending, which is why I have decided to give you what you want.”

“You have!” Rive cheered, her musical voice filling Rina’s mind with memories of songs sung, songs of happiness, sadness and love.

“What are you giving us *exactly*?” Lucas asked, not trusting.

Songs of love, her love song, for Lucas, Rina remembered the joy of singing their love song, the joy of being held in his arms. The fog started to lift. Then she remembered the sadness, the betrayal and the loneliness and she pulled the fog tighter around her mind and body. “I want to go back to my cell,” she whimpered.

Walker grabbed her arm and pulled her

forward. "I am offering you a choice, the mermaid, Marina, Lucas's mate...or all the others."

Silence hung heavy in the room.

Rina's mind hung up on Walker's words—*the others*. There were others here and they didn't want to be here, others who she, Rina, was supposed to be trying to save. Hate for Walker and fear for her mersister crept over Rina. This time she didn't push it away, this time she welcomed it and the fog dissipated a little more. As the fog left little by little, she felt her love song begin to take precedence in her body.

Walker was debating and arguing with the others, distracted for the moment.

Rina concentrated on pushing away every last effect of the fog and embraced the hatred of Walker that took its place. She was seething by the time Walker declared a decision had to be made at that instant or he was going to make the decision for them. She would not let them choose her and wasn't sure they wouldn't choose her. She opened her mouth and let loose with her love song. It was so sudden and so loud it distracted everyone—most importantly, it distracted Walker. He turned his attention to Rina and in the next instant, there were two merged werewolves and one enraged elf on the balcony behind him and in the next instant, the weres were tearing through his body like

butter.

Rina cringed away and found herself embraced in Lucas's arms – he turned and shielded her from the carnage with his body. Rina was thankful. She would have nightmares from the little bit she had seen, and the sounds, oh Gods the sounds. She would never be able to forget the crunching, the growling and the screams as Walker was torn apart by growling jaws.

“Okay, for the last time, I will not let you go until you swear to me you will not attack me or anyone else,” Paxton was saying to an Ice Demon who continued to throw out icicles when he didn't feel Paxton was working fast enough on his release.

Rina was wrapped in the loving embrace of her mersisters, waiting for their turn to be flashed home. Lucas and a couple other elves who had not fled immediately after receiving their powers upon Walker's death, were flashing every captive home and trying their best to alert the other *players* to the end of the game and favorable result.

The Animal Elf who had been held captive approached the huddled three. “I think it's your turn, girls.”

Raine went first, then Rive. Rina told them she was more concerned about their health than her own, but really she just wanted to wait that much

longer and see if Lucas would show up. They'd had no time to talk about anything after Walker had been killed. The captives had begun escaping with the return of their powers and all hell had broken loose in the dungeon. As a member of The Council of Immortals, Lucas had taken charge of the recovery effort along with Paxton and Alexia. He had ignored her then, showing no concern for her health or safety after a quick perusal to assure she wasn't injured.

The crisis was over, she had agreed to be a member of the council and now he had no desire to see her or reason to care about her. It was as she had expected. Nothing had changed. He was still an Animal Elf who was too good to mate outside of his wonderful species and she was still a lowly mermaid not good enough to be his anything.

When it was her turn, she left with head held high and tears choking her throat. The only thing worse than her terrible sorrow was facing all her mersisters and her mother and admitting she had lied, broken rules and deliberately deceived her leader. When she arrived home, she was surrounded by her clan, hugged, kissed and praised for her bravery.

"Just don't ever do anything like that again, ever," her mother scolded with a soft tone. Mermaids were a forgiving lot, it came with being over emotional and a bit flighty.

"It was that stupid elf again, he brings nothing but trouble for you, Rina. We don't blame you for anything happening around him, how could you be held responsible for reacting to him," Rive declared and the others all chimed in with agreement.

She was forgiven and absolved of guilt. She couldn't imagine a more loving group of beings in the entire world than her mersisters. Sometimes she was happy and proud to be a member of such a species. There was no shame in being a mermaid, even if others saw her as less. She knew she wasn't, none of her clan was.

When she was finally alone in her room, she let the tears fall. She was once again alone and it felt as bad as it had the first time. Her heart ached and her song wept.

"Rina, can I talk to you?" Acquanetta's voice came out of the darkness.

Rina jolted out of her misery. "Sure, come on in. You were quiet earlier. I mean, quieter than usual. Is everything okay?"

"I just...well, I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I let you down. I didn't keep Lucas from finding out about the love song and I feel terrible. My stupid weakness, no one was supposed to know about it and it wasn't supposed to hurt you, too."

“Oh, Netta.” Rina opened her arms and welcomed her mersister into them. They lay down together and neither spoke for a long time. “You know I don’t blame you. I am grateful for all you did. It never could have been a permanent solution anyway and I think we both knew.”

“If I was stronger, it could have been,” Acquanetta whispered, ashamed.

They fell asleep together, both needing comfort from someone who had an inkling of what kind of pain they were in. How terribly alone they felt, even surrounded by their clan. Everything was different now. Everyone knew Acquanetta’s secret and Rina was a member of a council not directly related to the mermaids. These things would set them forever apart from the others and they would no longer be seen as the same carefree sisters as before.

Rina worried all night about what it would be like to face them in the light of day. She got no sleep and snuck into the shower when Acquanetta was still sleeping. She took a long shower, trying to scrub away the memories of everything, and failing. Then she dressed in her favorite sundress and glittery flip-flops, trying to remember what she had felt like not so long ago, before Lucas had shown up outside the shop.

She could remember, but couldn’t feel it. She could, however, fake it with styled hair and

applied makeup. She strolled downstairs as nonchalant as she could manage with her heart racing and her palms sweating to the point of revealing scales.

The familiar sounds of her bustling family eased her nerves a bit and the smell of seaweed pancakes relaxed her even more. She was home and here nothing had changed. Her clan sisters still argued over whose sweater was whose and which calendar firefighter had the biggest hose. No one said more than a passing greeting to her, as if she had been there yesterday morning and the one before.

When she walked into the kitchen and Raine was talking about a convention in Oregon that was coming up, she knew her fears had been misplaced. Maybe not unfounded, but misplaced in importance at least. Here in this house, things would always be the same, no matter what disaster had just taken place. These mermaids would not change and they would not expect her to either.

Rina was almost comforted by the knowledge. If it weren't for the tiny thought buzzing about—but what if *she* had? Judging by the cautious look on Acquanetta's face as she entered the dining room, Rina was pretty sure she felt the same way.

"Who wants to work the shop today?" Brook asked, coming into the room, same as she did

every day about this time.

“I will,” Rina said quickly, there was no way she wanted to be alone with her thoughts today.

“I’ll go as well,” Acquanetta said.

Brook looked at them both carefully, no doubt assessing their ability to work. “All right, get going then, we don’t need to open late, it’s Saturday.”

CHAPTER TEN

Rina didn't even need to think about what she was doing as she readied the shop to open. She'd done this same thing for so many years it didn't even register in her mind. Her mind, without sufficient distraction, wandered between the horror of how Walker had made her feel and the horror of how Lucas still made her feel. She didn't want to feel nothing, like when she was with Walker. It was terrible. Given the choice, she would take her overemotional mermaid state any day. Of course feeling once again as if her heart had been torn out and spit on by Lucas was almost enough to go find a wizard for a little relief. Almost.

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to come in alone. When her and Acquanetta were readying to leave, Nautia had insisted on a word with her daughter. Rina hadn't argued, thought nothing of the time to herself. Now she wished for someone,

anyone to talk to so she could be distracted.

When the bell tinkled above the door, signaling a customer, she was nowhere nearer a decision of which kind of torturous hell she preferred. So it was no wonder she snapped at the intruder who would dare enter before she flipped the sign to open. "We are closed! Can't you read the damn sign?" She didn't turn from the shelf she was stocking to see the customer, just assumed they would leave when she told them to. No bell tinkled to signify their exit so she turned around. What she saw nearly made her scream.

"If you treat all your customers that way it is a wonder you girls make any money at all. Of course from what I hear, you all do quite well. Your things are...neat. I am sure simple human minds just delight when they walk in and see so much delicate sparkly stuff. If only they knew how delicate and sparkly the girls who work here are."

"What the hell are *you* doing here, Lillian?"

"Now, now, is that any way to treat your mate's sister?"

Rina didn't answer, but if she had been capable, she would have hissed or growled at the insufferable woman. Lillian wore a glamour making her appear to be a human of movie star quality looks with long tan legs sticking out of a mid-thigh skirt and a tiny tank top with breasts

overflowing just enough to be classy, not trashy. She had a long mane of sunshine blonde hair and her face was a perfect heart shape with rosy red lips and bright blue eyes.

Of course Rina could see right through it and Lillian was much more beautiful than even the human glamour was. She was incredibly tall with white hair past her butt and delicate pointed ears. Small features on a porcelain sparkling face, swirling brown eyes and in her flowing robe-like dress, she looked like a Grecian goddess.

This was the type of woman Lucas was supposed to be with, not her, not a mermaid. It was a depressing thought and added to her already depressed state. Rina wanted to cry. Why was life so unfair? "Why are you here Lillian? You are not welcome and Lucas isn't here, you don't need to drag him away from me to do his duty to the colony again."

"I know Lucas isn't here, it's why I came."

"If you want to tell me to stay away from him, don't worry."

"Do you not love him anymore?"

"What does that matter? We can't be together. I am below him." Rina's last words were said with so much spite, she was shaking with it.

Lillian stepped closer.

Rina had to fight to not retreat. She would never show fear to this woman. This heartless

bitch didn't deserve to be respected, let alone feared.

"Rina, I have come to apologize, for everything."

Rina's head spun and she was sure she hadn't heard correctly. "What?"

"I was wrong back then to take Lucas from you. I was wrong to say two species could not mate. It seems love does not care what species you are. It chooses for you the one that is best and we are helpless to fight it."

Lillian sounded so sincere and almost as if she were speaking from a personal experience, but still Rina wasn't convinced. "It doesn't matter, Lucas is not here. He doesn't want me anymore."

"He does, he always has, but he could never come to you because of me." There was a slight hint of shame in her voice, which was unheard of for an elf.

Rina so wanted to believe her.

"And now he is afraid you do not want him, which is why I am here, to beg you to come with me. You must go to him, you must tell him you are still in love with him and want to be his mate."

Now Rina took a step back and leaned against the shelves, not out of fear, but as a precaution because she thought she was going to pass out. "You can't be serious, you *hate* me. Why should I trust you when I am pretty sure you wanted to kill

me the last time we met?"

Lillian's lip twisted in the barest hint of a smile. "Oh I wanted to kill you then."

"Lillian!" Acquanetta's voice drew both their attention to the back of the shop. "Leave here and never come back." Lillian disappeared, unprepared for persuasion. Acquanetta collapsed where she stood, groaning in agony.

Rina rushed to her side and cradled her in her arms. "Oh, Netta, why did you do that?" Rina held her close and rocked her until she blinked up with consciousness and pulled out of Rina's embrace.

"I am useless to this clan, aren't I?" Acquanetta whispered, shame filled her words.

"Are you kidding, I have never seen an immortal respond so quickly to persuasion. You did great, although you know you shouldn't have done that. Now she is going to come back pissed off and looking for revenge."

"She said she was going to kill you, what was I supposed to do? Turn around and leave?"

"I know, but still. I don't want you hurting yourself for me any longer. Okay?"

"Okay. But I won't stand by and let you get yourself killed either. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

Acquanetta sat up, rubbing her temples. "Do you think she will be back? Should we call

Brook?"

"Damn it, mermaid! I wasn't going to hurt your sister. I was merely trying to apologize and tell her that my brother is sulking like a big baby at home because he wants her back and doesn't think she wants him!" Lillian's voice filled the shop and the annoyance there was obvious, but no anger.

If she was showing one emotion, Rina was sure she wouldn't be able to hide another, so maybe she wasn't going to even things out—not that Rina trusted her any more than before.

"If he wants her, then why isn't he here, why didn't he tell her when they were together searching for the missing immortals? Hell, why didn't he show up during all those years they were separated?"

Rina put a hand on Acquanetta's shoulder to stop her. Then they both stood up and faced Lillian. "I may still love him, I always will and that is my curse. But I won't be with a man who doesn't love me enough to fight for me."

Lillian planted her hands on her hips and gave them a look of frustration. "That is all he did for years. He just doesn't work in big flamboyant ways. It isn't the elfin way. We are subtle and we take our time. But he never stopped working toward his ultimate goal. You."

"How so?" Rina asked, a slight twinge of hope lighting in her chest.

“He started looking for precedents of interspecies unions. When he found one, he made sure I saw it and took the bait. There was a trial where not only was I forced to say different species could mate without violating the laws of nature, but he accepted a position on that damn Council of Immortals, taking him away from the colony all the more. Now there are no grounds for me to say you cannot mate with him, and he you. I am forced to admit you are equals. But he does not think you want to mate with him anymore and you must go fix that. He will not do what he terms bothering you. Even though he suffers greatly while hoping you will let him know if you want him back. He is trying to be honorable and give you time. But I can’t stand seeing his stupid solemn face around the colony any longer.”

“It’s only been a day,” Acquanetta pointed out.

“Yes well, I have my own things to deal with at the moment and I don’t want him around, getting in the way.”

And there it was. Lillian’s real motivation for being here. Rina knew it had to be something selfish. Lillian was extremely selfish for an elf. Most elves were more concerned about equality than even their own happiness, but not Lillian. And if Rina was forced to admit it, neither was Lucas.

“Rina you have to go,” Acquanetta whispered.

Lillian politely pretended not to hear.

"I...I don't know what to do Netta," Rina whined. Lillian was offering her all her dreams on a silver platter, but Rina didn't trust Lillian and didn't know what she believed about Lucas.

"If you don't go, you will always wonder. You can always come back to the clan. You know your clan sisters will always be here for you."

Rina bit her lip and tried not to cry in frustration. Acquanetta was right of course. If she didn't go, she would forever wonder. She turned to Lillian. "Alright then, let's go get this over with."

"If I don't hear from you soon, we will storm the colony," Acquanetta warned.

"I am forever in your debt for this, Rina," Lillian said just before grabbing her arm and flashing them to the colony.

Rina's love song surged forward, but she swallowed it as Lillian knocked on the door in front of them. Movement sounded behind the door and it flung open. Lucas stood there, hair disheveled and clothing askew. He held a glass of something in one hand and seemed to sway as he stood. His eyes took a minute to focus, glaring first at Lillian, then when they spotted Rina, filling with such longing, such love, Rina couldn't deny it any longer. This was her mate and they wanted each other just as much as ever. She opened her

mouth and let the song flow as she flung herself into his waiting arms.

She was somewhat aware of Lillian and another body leaving the area as Lucas dragged her into his room and shut the door. He pressed tender kisses along her jaw and neck as she finished the song, then pressed his lips to hers and kissed her with intensity, showing her just how much he loved and missed her.

Rina opened herself to him, allowing his sweet tongue to glide past her lips and dance with hers. She moved her hands over his hard body, pushing on his clothing with impatience. He matched her with swift rips and tears at her clothing until they both stood naked. Lucas pushed her to arm's length and his gaze swept over her body.

"You are so beautiful. I don't deserve you for my mate." His gaze locked onto hers. "But I will never let you go again, not even if you ask me to."

"You better not," Rina said saucily and wiggled her hips closer to his aroused body, delighted.

Lucas groaned and crushed her to him.

Rina giggled when she found herself lying on his bed beneath his warm hard body. "Gotta love that flashing ability, wonderfully useful for impatient lovers," she teased as she nipped at his lips. The feel of him against her was incredible, his warm smooth skin, his long thick cock. She moved a hand down to embrace it, squeezing it until he

groaned.

“I have been patient for way too long. Now that I have you here, I will not wait a moment longer to have you. The last time was so cold, so empty. I should have known you weren’t really there, but I was too eager to care in the moment.” He slid into her already wet body and she cried out with delight at the sensation.

She held her mate deep within her body. There was no better feeling. Her cunt clenched around him, trying to suck him deeper. This was what she needed, what could not be lived without.

His hair fell around them in a shield of white. It tickled where it touched her bare skin and the memory of all the other times they had been in this position made her shudder with anticipation. She knew what magnificent pleasure was waiting for her in his arms.

“Oh, Rina, you have no idea how I have wanted you,” Lucas whispered at her ear as his body began to move, his cock sliding in a slow rhythm, stroking her in just the right spot.

“Lucas, I have missed you so much,” she admitted with a cry of pleasure as his finger found her clit, sliding over it. His other hand cupped and kneaded her breast, plucking at her nipple while his mouth ravaged her neck. She turned her head and found one of her favorite spots on his beautiful body – the delicate and delicious point of

his sensitive ear. She licked and nipped at it until he gave a guttural moan.

He rolled, pulling her on top of him and grasping her hips. Rina loved this position, loved the control and the easy access it gave him to her clit. As Rina started to move her body in quick hard strokes, his fingers played over her clit. Pleasure spiraled through her, each movement of his finger and cock creating a shockwave that traveled her entire body. Soon she was panting, her body moving all too quickly toward orgasm. It had been too long—she couldn't hold back, the feelings so incredible, so real this time.

Rina clutched at his shoulders as heat and desire spiraled through her body, increasing with each stroke and thrust of his cock. She met his gaze, his swirling brown eyes so alive with passion and love. Fire exploded in Rina's body and her cry of release was matched by Lucas's.

They collapsed together in a tangle of limbs and a blanket of hair. Pale and sparkling skin against tan and scaled in spots—it was a beautiful sight Rina hadn't thought she would ever see again.

Lucas ran his fingers up and down her thigh and arm. "I hope this means you forgive me," Lucas said, his words careful.

Rina looked into his face, the familiar mask in place. She reached up and stroked his cheek, smiling into his eyes and watched as his mask

melted into a wonderful and all too rare smile. His eyes reflected the love she felt for him and she knew that no matter what he did or didn't show on the outside, there was love for a mate inside of him. "I love you, Lucas."

"I love you, Marina." His lips descended and they made love again, slower this time and more tender.

Hours later Rina drifted awake. Her body was sated and her mind calm. She stretched, feeling unfamiliar sheets around her and an unfamiliar mattress under her body. She stilled, stiffened as her mind tried to assimilate these sensations into reality. A memory of Lucas's loving arms wrapped around her, his mouth trailing over her, leaving soft kisses behind, his body mating with hers in that familiar way. But it didn't make sense, she told herself. She couldn't be with Lucas. It must have been a wonderful dream. So then why was she waking up in a strange bed? She had no idea, but was afraid to open her eyes and find out.

The bed moved and something warm and furry touched her face gently.

Rina bolted upright and screamed.

"What? What's the matter?" Lucas sat up beside her, ready to defend against any enemy.

"Jack!" Rina stated, glaring at the little monkey who had skittered off the bed when she screamed

and was now huddled under a chair. "Your little hell monkey over there scared the crap out of me."

Lucas turned her toward him and ran his hands around her body, his gaze and mind searching for injuries. "What happened, what did he do?"

Rina pushed his hands away. "He just touched me. I wasn't expecting it and it scared me. He hates me. I don't want him in here while I am asleep." Rina knew she was sounding a bit like a whiney brat, but that thing really did scare her.

Lucas motioned for Jack to come over and the little monkey hurried up to him, crawling up onto his shoulder and patting his head in a loving way.

Rina glared at it.

"Jack, what were you doing to Rina?" Lucas crooned to the beast and pulled it off his shoulder. "I see." Lucas set Jack down and looked at Rina. "He was only trying to apologize, now that you have made me happy, he loves you."

"What happens if we ever get into an argument? Should I worry he is going to come after me in my sleep then?" Rina demanded, not trusting Jack even a little.

"Oh no, he will understand and besides, we won't ever fight."

Rina snorted delicately at that. "I don't trust it." The monkey in question raced up to Rina's shoulder and she tried not to squeal as it did so. Once there, it patted her head, like he did to

Lucas. Rina assessed the situation and realizing she was uninjured by the thing, relaxed.

“See, Jack likes you.”

“Or he just likes you enough to tolerate me for you.”

“Either way, you don’t have to worry about him harming you in any way, ever.” Lucas spoke with assurance and Jack nodded his tiny head in agreement, then jumped off and scurried away.

Lucas pulled her roughly into his arms and pressed a passionate kiss to her lips. Pulling away, breathless and hot, she stated in delight. “it wasn’t a dream.”

“What?”

“This, you, it wasn’t a dream. I am really here and I am really with you.” Rina smiled up at him and cupped his face in her hands. “I am so very glad it wasn’t a dream.” Rina pulled his face down to hers and showed him just how glad she was, kissing him with passion and need. Her body was ready for him again, her core on fire, her cunt wet.

Lucas pulled away and this time he was the one looking breathless and hot with desire.

Rina smiled, satisfied with his reaction. There was nothing better than seeing your mate hot and bothered by your kiss. She reached out and grasped his hardened cock, stroking him.

“You have no idea how long I have dreamt of seeing you just like this, naked, happy and in my

bed.”

“Probably just as long as I have wanted to be just like this.” Rina pulled him down with her to the bed, wrapping her legs around his waist as they fell back. She covered his mouth with hers and guided his cock to her aching cunt. He growled and shoved deep, filling her.

This time he kept control, moving against her as he wanted, making her pant and moan for more. His smile as she demanded he go faster was one of pure male pride, but she didn’t care. She only wanted what he could give her with a few hard strokes. “Oh, Lucas, now please!” She groaned.

He obliged this time, slamming into her hard and quick, tipping her over the edge to orgasm. Her delighted scream filled the room and then his and in the silence, she once again sang to him, a promise of an eternity of this.

As they lay, sated and happy, Rina looked around the room, noticing everything she had missed the night before. It was a large room, decorated in tan, silver and white. Very crisp and clean, just like an elf. Her gaze stopped on a picture like the one in his Las Vegas bedroom, a colorful picture with a red-haired mermaid lounging on a rock, tail slapping the water and a sea turtle swimming past. Rina smiled and turned to Lucas. “Did you get those thinking of me?”

“I did. I have stared at them for countless

hours, trying to imagine they were windows to you, and now you are here, I can hardly believe it." Lucas pressed a light kiss to her lips, then her ear. "Marry me, Rina."

A delightful shiver ran down her spine with his warm breath and wonderful words. It was all she had ever wanted, her mate's proposal. Lucas pulled back, his face slowly going smooth and guarded as she sat there, speechless.

"Of course we don't have to rush into anything, I—"

"Yes!" she shouted and pulled him to her. "Yes of course, I just, I have waited so long to hear those words and for so long that I thought I never would. You have no idea how torturous it has been since you left. It is impossible for a mermaid to forget her love song. She gets only one and it cannot be sung to another, unless her mate dies. Which for a brief time, I must admit, I thought a viable option. Of course, I dismissed it soon enough, but it...oh it was horrible and to hear you giving me everything I have dreamt of. It's amazing, Lucas."

"Oh, Rina, I will never be able to make up for what I did to you, but I hope you can understand it was just as torturous for me. I have thought of you and wished for you every moment since I left. Everything I have done since has been toward the ultimate goal of our happy union."

There were no more words between them as they expressed their joy and love. None were necessary, their bodies said everything as they clung to each other and shared their immortal passion.

EPILOGUE

Paxton smiled at the assembled group. It was shaping up just as his vision had foretold—Alexia, the werepire, Ian, the werewolf, Lucas, the Animal Elf and Rina, the mermaid. He wondered which member would be the next to join?

“My brother has been MIA since he was let out of that psycho’s prison. I still haven’t been able to yell at him for not walking out of the damn place from the start,” Ian growled, ever unhappy to be there as the interim for his brother, Terrance.

“I have a feeling I know where he is.” *And with whom*, Paxton added to himself. “He will return when he is finished with his personal mission. In the meantime, we are ever happy to have you with us again, Ian.”

A growl was the only response from Ian.

“So what is this meeting all about? You know you called us away from our honeymoon,” Rina said with annoyance and a smile for her mate.

Paxton smiled. "I have recently received much interest in our council and will need your help in meeting with other immortals to explain our purpose and goals. Mostly these are the less powerful immortals, looking for more safety by joining with us. It will be a wonderful start. So tomorrow we leave to visit with the sprites."

"Wait, why do we *all* need to go?" Lucas asked.

"Because there is safety in numbers and we all have plenty of enemies out there still. Not every immortal species group is happy about our alliance." After a little bit of grumbling, there was agreement and they planned their trip to visit all sprite subspecies and gain representation.

When the meeting was called to an end, Paxton sat back and watched the four others walk out. Paired up and hand in hand, to no doubt celebrate their love together. It was what Paxton was working so hard for now. There was really no rush to go visit anyone, but the sooner he got the council formed, the sooner he would be with his own fated mate. The threats, however, were very real and he was not willing to let any member of his council be harmed before his vision came into being.

At this point, everything he did was for her. He just hoped she would be able to appreciate all the sacrifices he was making to get to her.

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