

# STORMY SEDUCTION

*Pacific Passion*

*Vivian Arend*

  
SAMHAIN

*Sensual water shifters meet volatile air shifters—there's a storm coming.*

*Pacific Passion, Book 2*

As morning-afters go, this one is looking pretty bright. Both air shifter Laurin Marshal and water shifter/shaman Matthew Jentry are aware, though, that trouble won't be long in coming. And they're right—before they've barely begun to work out the details of their mystical bond, the People of the Air find them to challenge Laurin's right to choose Matt as her mate.

Fending off Laurin's would-be suitors is easier than Matt anticipated, but there's another dilemma still to face. His own people. Laurin is just beginning to trust that his heart and body are completely hers, a radical change after she's spent the past two years alone and on the run. What will happen when his skittish, innocent partner encounters the playful, sensual—even lusty—ways of the Otter Clan?

Especially since they are arriving at the peak of the traditional summer solstice fertility rituals. And tradition demands they be the main attraction...

Warning: Incoming extreme passion yielding one otherworldly adventure. Don't let the book length fool you—there's enough heat in this story to challenge global warming. Four plus two equals one ceremony so explosive it may throw the earth off its axis.

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# Stormy Seduction

*Vivian Arend*

## Dedication

To my friend, Leah Braemel, who motivates me to keep moving forward as we do Flying Fingers word sprints in two different time zones. You make me smile, girl. Onward and upward.

# Chapter One

So this was what it felt like to be in the eye of a hurricane.

The beach under her butt was still wet from the previous night's pounding rain. The storm that had driven them to this small, secluded island had finally broken in the wee hours of the morning and now the crisp promise of a new day surrounded her. Laurin Marshall tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, the cool breeze off the water brushing her skin like a caress.

The calm was deceptive and soon to be torn apart.

Out in the bay the sunrise turned the water to shimmering gold, framed by the distant mountains of the British Columbia coastline. Marring the tranquil scene were the bare white boards of the underside of the *Stormchild* as she lay tilted awkwardly, the single-masted yacht trapped on the sandbar they'd hit during the storm. A flash of anger rushed Laurin—being stranded like this was not what she'd expected. Not what she'd fought so long and hard for during the past two years. She picked up a stone from beside her bare feet and tossed it angrily at the ocean.

She'd made sacrifice after sacrifice, the greatest of which had been never shifting.

Laurin rose, wiping the sand from her palms against the dangling tails of the only garment she wore, the oversized shirt they'd found in the cabin where they'd sheltered for the night. She needed to move, needed to burn off some of the nervous energy racing through her veins.

It had felt incredible to be able to be herself again for one brief moment. Forced by the storm to abandon ship, Laurin had thrown herself into the wind and shifted into an osprey. The wind under her wings had been achingly good... She shivered at the memory. She hadn't wanted to change back.

She hadn't wanted *anything* to change, but it seemed that was all she was going to get. Damn it all. Laurin kicked at the sand in frustration, torn between crying and raging at the injustice of it all.

*There are many things we don't ask for, but still receive.*

She paused in mid-stomp, the words of her grandfather returning to her. That first time, when she'd surprised her whole clan, he'd looked at her so seriously. So kindly. Laurin snorted in bitter amusement. She'd been wavering between tears and shouting that day as well...

"This...you call this a gift? How can this be good, Grandfather?" Her limbs trembled from the aftereffects of her first flight. Her first time ever having turned into one of the giant birds of prey that the People of the Air could assume.

Only she was of the peregrine falcon clan, and she'd shifted into an eagle.

Grandfather sat back, waving away the rest of the people crowding around. Finally only her parents remained, her mother cradling her in her arms. Laurin turned her face into her mother and breathed deeply, smelling the familiar scents of home and happiness. Today was supposed to be a celebration, and instead there had been shouts of fear and confusion. Her ten-year-old heart and mind were overwhelmed.

Grandfather drew on his pipe. Slow and even. His measured and thought-out actions were unlike most of the People of the Air who tended toward impulsive and rash behavior. He pulled the end of the pipe from his mouth and pointed the end at her as he spoke. A rush of tobacco and incense swirled on the air, and his words wrapped around them like an entangling vine covering the mountainside.

"There are many things we don't ask for, but still receive." He motioned over the foothills that lay before them, gestured up to the snow-covered crags of the Rocky Mountains towering at their backs. "The sun rises and warms us. The earth and rivers provide food, and beauty to delight our eyes in the colors of her flowers and the richness of her grasses."

Laurin pulled away from her mother's comfort, propping her fists on her boyish hips. She was upset; she didn't want to hear about the bounty of the earth right now. "Grandfather, I changed into an *eagle*."

"So you did." He smiled at her and opened his arms. She crawled into his lap as if she were no more than a baby. "My child, the Great Spirit knows what he is about. Trust that there is a reason for this."

A reason for her to be different from all the other children? Not what she wanted to hear. The pleasure of the flight was the only thing keeping her from fully bursting into tears. "I don't want this, Grandfather."

"I know, but it is what you are. There will be good from this—I see it. The water wears down the mighty mountains, carving her destiny. The air carries the seed on the wind to a new home, bringing new life. You will be the one who brings balance, my child. It will test you, and shake you, but you are strong. You are *Hawáte*."

He kissed her nose, then settled into a gentle rocking motion, humming a prayer song low under his breath. Laurin pressed her ear against his chest and listened to his heart beat, strong and steady. She would bring balance. Okay. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all...

Laurin blinked and shook herself. She'd resettled on the beach as she reminisced, seated cross-legged, her body rocking with the tempo of her Grandfather's tune. She deliberately finished the prayer song, rubbing the stone she discovered in her fingers. The smooth surface warmed under her touch and she swallowed hard.

She'd left her clan when it became clear that the only balance the men were interested in was the balance of power. Once she had grown to maturity, and it became common knowledge she could shift into any of the air shifter clans, the rumbles had begun. Especially when it was learned her ability as a *Hawáte*

would enhance the power of her mate. Yet she had no intention of becoming a pawn in some kind of hierarchy battle amongst her people. A cooling breeze ruffled her hair and she looked out over the ocean.

Hiding only worked if she didn't shift, and last night she'd as good as sent out a beacon announcing her whereabouts. After two years of working as a traveling teacher, her cover was blown. There would be air shifters arriving sometime today, looking to claim her.

Prophecies and predestined omens were a pain in the butt.

The ship in the bay caught her eye again. The only bright spot she could think of was Matt. Tall, dark, infinitely droolworthy. Although she should probably consider the shaman of the People of the Sea, even in her thoughts, with a little more respect than *yummy*.

It was difficult to believe they were lovers. She'd spent two years hiding, and remaining celibate. The first man she'd broken her sexual fast with had not only rocked her world, they'd set off a magical backlash that seemed to indicate they were... Well she wasn't exactly sure what they were. Definitely something more than a one-night stand. Her cheeks flushed at the memory of crawling out of his bed the previous morning with the objective of never seeing him again. It hadn't worked. Their one night of bliss had been followed by a tangled web that had eventually led them here, to this island.

It seemed the Great Spirit was still playing games with her.

Suddenly she had to see him. Had to be with him. Wrapping her fist around the stone, she ran the thin path through the trees back to the rustic one-room fisherman's cabin.

Storm-freshened air surrounding her, Laurin slipped silently inside. She leaned against the door and watched enthralled as her lover stood after loading the small stove with wood. The embers caught rapidly, and golden light flickered off Matt's dark skin, the firm muscles of his legs and ass shifting smoothly as he wandered to the tiny sink to grab the solid tin coffeepot.

She licked her lips and hummed in appreciation. "There is something so sexy about a man's bare butt."

He twirled, stark naked, a happy smirk on his face. It was impossible to ignore the proof that his interest in her grew more and more by the second. "You were gone when I woke. I thought maybe you were going to try to skip out on me. Again."

She shook her head as she tore her gaze from his groin. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that yesterday. One-night stands never have been my thing."

"And it wasn't this time either—a one-night stand, that is." Matt strode to her side and cupped her face in his hands. His voice softened, caressing her ears, smoothing her senses. "Good morning, Miss Marshall."

"Mr. Jentry." Laurin's heart rate sped up as he rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. "Are you planning on getting dressed sometime soon?"

"Clothing optional, at least for now."



His lips brushed hers, fleeting, like a lingering gust of wind from the tempest that had chased them into this remote island cabin. She could hardly curse the storm—it had been the catalyst that had brought them together as more than simply lovers. Laurin pressed her mouth against his, longing to feel the fire that he'd awoken in her, the magic.

Matt leaned closer, his skin heating her through the fabric of her shirt. She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and melted, welcoming his touch, his kiss.

A loud *pop* rang out from the fire, interrupting their interlude. She had no idea how long they'd stood there, but somehow already the kettle whimpered and hissed, and they reluctantly separated.

Laurin nodded toward the stove. "I'll get that. I don't want you to splash anything...vital."

He laughed as she brushed his erection with her fingertips en route to the kettle. He was hard, his cock jutting out proudly, and she really couldn't care less about making coffee. Still, at some point, this day was going to change from carefree to one with an agenda.

It was difficult to believe how much her world had changed in less than two days. From being a simple traveling teacher amongst the People of the Sea to—she wasn't sure what she would be called now. She glanced at Matt. He stood beside the single bed they'd shared the night before and was making it up, his bare butt teasing her as it flexed.

"What are we?" she asked, attempting to ignore the streak of fire that shot through her. The temptation to touch him, to press him to the bed and crawl on top for more sexual delight overwhelmed her senses. Whatever magic they had loosed between them, a water shifter shaman and an air shifter, the residual effects were powerful and long lasting.

Matt sat on the mattress and considered her seriously, his dark hair falling across his brow in heavy contrast with the dazzling purity of the blue in his eyes. "I don't know if I understand the question. Are you asking if as part of a shaman couple you have a formal title? Or are you asking if we're married or..."

Laurin frowned as she replaced the kettle on the tiny countertop and put together cups of coffee for them both. "I know we're partners—we established that last night. We belong together and I have no issues with it. I just don't understand it completely."

He held out his hand for the cup she offered and settled her at his side. "I don't understand it completely either. As a shaman, the balance of nature directs me to healing and helping. My strong tie to the ocean comes from being a water shifter. As a trained physician, I see where a person's sickness is wrapped up with the ills of nature. Curses and blessings, disease and cures—they are simply different sides of the same coin."

The steaming hot coffee cleared the final morning foggiess as Matt spoke. Laurin curled her legs up and leaned on the back wall, her feet tucked under his hard thigh.

She couldn't resist touching him.

"I know your role as a shaman, or at least I know what the shaman from my clan, from the People of the Air, did. What I don't understand is why the two of us set off such an explosive reaction. Have you ever heard of an air shifter and a water shifter joining?"

Matt nodded slowly. "A few times. It's rare, partly because you air shifters, my beautiful woman, tend to stay in the mountains. Too far away for us poor ocean dwellers to witness your beauty and fall hopelessly in love."

She stilled. It was too soon to speak of love. She admired him, she wanted him. There was no denying there was something mystical to indicate they were meant to be together at least for a short while, but love?

Not after thirty-six hours. Not when there were other issues flapping their way toward the island.

He put his mug to the side and captured her free hand in his. "What are we? For now, accept that we are meant to be partners as we head to your next teaching assignment and my next medical tour. Beyond that, we will be there for each other as needs arise, and somewhere along the line I hope it will become clearer exactly what we *are*."

The doubts and fears she'd been wrestling with on the beach returned. "Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that *needs arising* thing is probably going to be fairly soon, at least on my part."

"Your pursuers?"

"Since the storm didn't break until nearly three in the morning, we might have until noon. But I wouldn't be surprised to see a group of men arriving as soon as they can get here." She stared at their linked hands. "I'm sorry for bringing trouble on you so quickly."

Matt lifted her fingers to his lips. "Now you're assuming I don't want to have a good fight to prove my affections for you are of the highest quality."

When she raised her head to stare into his eyes, she spoke firmly, resolute. "I don't want you to get hurt."

He snorted in derision. "Are you forgetting I'm a shaman? I have more power available to me than second and third sons could ever dream of. Any lower-level opportunists from your people hoping to gain advancement using you will have to go through me."

As long as that was *only* who arrived. She needed to warn him, just in case. "There might be a few...higher-level males as well." He raised a brow and she hurried on. "I can shift into any of the air forms, remember?"

"As I can for the water people. Go on."

She hesitated. How much should she say? "There were a few clans—the golden eagles and the red-tailed hawks—that have twins as potential leaders. Only one brother can eventually take charge of the clan, and..."

The expression on his face calmed her fears a little more. He was furious on her behalf. "They were jostling to join with you for a power booster. Don't worry, I can handle them."

Mysteriously, her coffee mug disappeared and she found herself pressed back against the mattress. Matt loomed over her, his fingers circling the buttons on her shirtfront.

“You think the storm last night slowed them down? Since there’s really nothing I can think of that needs to be done right now...” The fabric parted and his warm fingertips drew designs on her bare skin, his gaze fixed on her torso.

She swallowed hard. “The *Stormchild*. I saw her on the sandbar. Shouldn’t we be seeing if we can get her afloat?”

Matt leaned over to lick a circle around one nipple and a great shiver of desire shook her. His voice was husky when he lifted high enough to hover over the tightly pebbled surface. “The tide is low. Nothing we can do...except wait.”

He lowered his head and enveloped the aching tip with his mouth, hot and wet, and Laurin moaned in appreciation. Their lovemaking felt fresh, like the sparkling water droplets clinging to the grass outside the cabin. Matt plied his skills on her body, taking one breast, then the other, under his tongue. Teasing the sensitive tips to rock-hard points before brushing the back of his knuckles against the tender under curve.

He played her, working his hands down her body, kissing his way back up to her lips. The journey was slow, thorough, as he licked her collarbone, suckled on the pulse point in her throat. Traced intricate patterns with his tongue behind her ear before dipping into the hollow of her ear. The erotic sensation of his tongue mixed with the sheer wickedness of his finger’s path. Over her belly, stroking through the curls of her mons. When his tongue delved into her ear, it was in time with the press of his fingers into her sex.

She moaned out his name, opening her legs wider to allow him better access. Her thigh pressed against his erection, moisture clinging to her skin where his seed brushed her.

Thirty-six hours and he already knew exactly where to touch her to drive her wild. Whether it was because they were destined to be partners, or because he was just that good a lover, Laurin really didn’t care about the whys at this moment.

She rolled toward him and captured the back of his neck in her hand and forced their lips together. The whys could wait. Right now she needed to let the passion building between them find a path of release that would allow the tiny cabin to remain intact. The image of flames surrounding them as they made love filled her mind, flickers of heat licking up her spine as she pictured riding him hard.

Matt pulled back from her lips with a laugh. “We are going to have to experiment to discover why I see all your dirty dreams.”

*Oops.* Although it was a fascinating discovery, there were other things on her mind. “I’d forgotten about that. Sure. Research. Later.”

Strong hands gripped her and Laurin found herself straddling his thighs, solid muscle under her limbs. The firm length of his shaft was trapped upright between them as he dragged her tight against his torso.

“Let’s try not to set any fires, but if you want to be on top, I’m all for it. Set the pace, my ray of moonshine.” Matt nuzzled her neck and Laurin laughed.

Shaking with anticipation, she lifted her hips and reached down to guide him. The hard, hot tip of his cock nestled between the lips of her labia as she slowly, an inch at a time, accepted him into her body.

He dropped his head back and groaned aloud. “Sweet mercy, that feels incredible. So right. Oh God, Laurin, don’t stop.”

As if she would. She undulated over him, one deliberate movement after another, moisture gathering in her core as he pierced her deeper than she thought possible. The drive of his thick shaft into her sex made her pant with desire. She changed the tempo, mixing it up. First fast, then slowing to barely move over him until he broke.

He clasped her hips and stood. She threw her arms around his neck with a squeal. “I thought I got to set the pace.”

Enormous dark pupils stared back at her as he jostled her, finding his balance. His cock imbedded in her body, her legs wrapped around his waist, he staggered two steps to press her against the nearest wall. “I lied. You’re going too damn slow.”

Laurin laughed in delight for all of a second before the air rushed from her lungs as he lifted her hips and drove her down hard. Again and again he plunged her onto his cock, stretching her with his width, the rigid length hitting sweet spots inside that made her quivering need expand out to encompass her entire body.

She tried to participate, but was unable to do much more than cling to him, her breasts bouncing against his chest on each thrust. The sounds of their moans and words of desire intertwined with the scent of their bodies, sex and masculine desire. Then the fire she’d seen in her imagination flamed to life and took hold of her. It began in her womb and spread outward to consume her. Matt grunted and angled his hips for one final thrust before shaking with his own release, heated semen flooding her passage as he came with a cry. She tightened her grasp, fighting to hold on as her vision fogged. Each breath seemed to sizzle, the cooler air around them catching fire as it entered her lungs, her body so heated by their exchange. It took a long time until there was nothing left but lingering sexual satisfaction and the flickering threads of the inferno slowly dying away.

They collapsed back to the bed, Laurin on top of Matt in a sweaty, satiated heap, and she realized while there were some things she didn’t understand, she was more than content to face the future with him by her side. His fingers trailed down her back, intimate, tender. They lay together, pounding hearts slowing.

“I thought you said you couldn’t work magic?” Matt exhaled hugely, contentment pouring from him as he continued to caress her skin.

She laughed. “I can’t. I just enhance other’s powers. *Hawáte*—it means one. I join with you and strengthen your abilities.”

He pressed his lips to her temple delicately. “Hmm, I could have sworn there was magic involved in what we just did.”

The teasing answer she’d been about to make vanished as a piercing scream broke the stillness, carrying through the log walls. The haunting cry of a predatory bird at the hunt, and Laurin stiffened.

The air shifters seeking her had arrived, far earlier than expected.

## Chapter Two

“Dress.” Matt pointed to the shirt he’d recently stripped from Laurin’s body. He waited to make sure she followed his directions before touching her cheek gently. As a shifter, nudity didn’t bother him, but he was suddenly very possessive about anyone getting to see Laurin. Especially men who were interested in her for what she could provide, not because they cared about her.

He made his way to the window to check what was happening outside. A little forewarning was a good thing, even though his strengths as a shaman should be more than adequate for any challenge.

“So much for them showing up after noon,” she complained, joining him at the window, her body pressed warm and soft against his back as she peered over his shoulder.

Matt slipped his arm around her waist, breathing in her scent, loving the way she instinctively nestled closer against him. “Now is better than fifteen minutes ago. I’m glad they didn’t interrupt us.”

A light kiss connected with his cheek. “I’m glad as well.”

He took his time to consider and judge what to do. Waking to find Laurin missing had thrown him for a loop for a moment. The connection he felt for her was incredibly strong for knowing her such a short period, but until she caught up to his level of devotion, he would bide his time.

But waiting for her to grow to care for him didn’t mean that the blood pounding through his veins was any less hot to administer justice upon her tormentors. No one should have to hide from their family or clan. No one should be able to affect another life that powerfully without their permission.

He reached deep to find peace, seeking the cool energies of the ocean to settle the fiery burn of the sun. High in the air a group of birds circled, riding the currents far above them. “They must have impressive wingspans for me to be able to see them at this distance.”

Laurin snorted. “About the only thing impressive about most of them.”

Matt led her to the door, and paused. One long, slow perusal over her revealed pretty much what he expected to see. Her blonde hair hung in a beautiful mess over her shoulders, her ruby lips were swollen from their kisses and her face still held the flush of her arousal. She looked as if she’d been ravished, and if that alone didn’t set their visitors off with a challenge or two, the People of the Air had less balls than he expected.

He cleared his throat. One last thing to organize. “You need to promise me you’ll let me handle this.”

She frowned. “Me woman, you caveman? Matt, I hid the past couple of years because I felt it was the best option, one that would cause the least fighting among all my people. Since that choice is no longer

viable, I'll do what needs to be done. And while I'm very grateful for you to be by my side, I am capable of helping you."

What excuse could he use that she would understand? "Of course you are, but this is my first encounter with the People of the Air since I officially became shaman. Other than you, of course. If I don't put in a strong showing, it could make my life more difficult down the road."

This was one of the first times to gauge exactly how powerful he could be when the need arose.

"Oh. That does make a difference." The tension in her body increased. "Matt, we don't need to—"

"Need to what? Prove you deserve to live your life as you choose?" She'd run for so long, she no longer realized her habit of hiding was stealing her joy. She deserved far better—and it was time she got to relax. Besides, everything in him called out to protect and care for her. She truly had slipped into his soul.

Laurin straightened and caught his hand. She paused, then spoke clearly. "I trust you."

The words were simple, but the look that accompanied them added volumes of meaning. Total acceptance, complete respect. She gave herself into his keeping, and the level of dedication that took humbled him.

"I won't let you down." He whispered the words against her cheek, holding her to his naked body for a second before leading them outside.

High overhead a dozen avian warriors circled, wings swept wide to catch the morning breezes off the water. A few circled lower as Matt and Laurin stepped out from the trees onto the sandy shore. Matt glanced over the water—his beloved *Stormchild* was still beached on the sandbar, but she looked to be intact. Once they dealt with Laurin's tormentors, they could turn their attention to the ship and get her underway again.

One minute the hawks and eagles were airborne, the next, five plummeted to the ground, shifting to human form to land with various degrees of ease. Matt noted the couple that made the change and landing look effortless. They were probably the most dangerous to deal with.

Laurin pointed her way around the circle forming before them. "Jessup from the Laird Range. Cody, once part of the Crowsnest Pass clan, until they kicked him out. Kilade of Assiniboine Mountain." Her voice trembled and he stepped closer to her side, their bodies touching at the hip. So, she had particular concerns about Kilade, did she?

The men facing them stared intently, taking note of his proximity to her, the intimate stance between them.

"Who are the others?" He gestured at the two she hadn't named on the ground and those remaining in the air. "Should we expect those still above to join us?"

Laurin shook her head. "They will only drop to rest. They must have decided they are too weak to challenge for me, considering who else has arrived. And I don't recognize the other two."

"You've drawn a nice crowd."

The disgusted expression on her face made him laugh. “I guess I should feel complimented so many men think I’m worth fighting for.”

There was no way he could let that one pass. Ignoring the air shifters he turned Laurin in his arms and held her tight. “You are totally worth fighting for.”

She flicked a glance at the challengers. “Umm, Matt? You know, if you weren’t here, they’d fight amongst themselves. Last one standing would claim me, or at least try to. They don’t know you, so you’ve become the focus. You just put a target on your back.”

He raised a brow. “A target, hey? Shall we make it very clear that if any claiming is going to be done *you’ve* already selected the man you want?”

Matt turned his back to the others as if he considered them no threat at all, then scooped her up and kissed her senseless. If he cheated and used a touch of his shaman magic simply to ensure no one jumped them from behind, screw it. He wanted to enjoy this moment.

Laurin was stiff and unresponsive for all of three seconds before threading her fingers into his hair and giving their kiss her undivided attention. Her tongue stroked his, the sweet taste of her mouth making him long for more than a quickie kiss. He cupped her butt, reaching under the tails of the shirt to caress the smooth bare skin. God, she was driving him insane. The cooling touch of her magic slid over his and he shuddered.

Pulling away from her was the toughest thing he’d done in a long time. She sighed, running her fingers down his cheek as she shook her head slowly. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

She stepped back, retreating toward the ocean, adjusting the shirt to cover herself more adequately. Matt eyed her hungrily. “I’m in love with that shirt, you know. I think if I bent you over my arm I could—”

“Matt.” Laurin took a quick peek at the others before returning his stare. “Stop it.”

With one final wink in her direction, he slowly pivoted, reaching inside for the connections he had with nature to prepare him for what was to come.

The faces that greeted him were stern and fearsome. He smoothed his own features to give no outward sign of the emotion within his chest. The People of the Sea valued peace and tranquility, unlike the mountain clans who seemed to be far more open in revealing their angry passions.

“Welcome, brothers. I trust you’ve had a pleasant journey.” He bowed slightly, giving the smallest token of respect possible. He was shaman here. This was his home territory, and his woman they had come hunting. Not that he’d word it that way in front of Laurin or she’d be likely to carve off his nuts with a spoon. Still, he would defend what was his.

The two unnamed arrivals stepped back, unease in their eyes. He stared them down as they retreated, a swell of pride flashing through him. Had they really imagined they could simply march in and take Laurin without a fight? If not with their own people, but with her? She was too strong for the likes of them.



The redhead Laurin had identified as Jessup stepped forward, his thin limbs bringing him within a few paces of Matt before he halted. The derision on his face as he looked Matt up and down was impressive for its arrogance.

“It was an interesting trip, but I long already to return to my family.” He glanced past Matt, as if dismissing him as unimportant. “I am eager to escort you home, *Koldunya*. I have searched for you for a long time.”

Sorceress? Even from ten paces behind him, Laurin’s heavy sigh was audible. “Jessup, do the words *fuck off* mean absolutely nothing to you? I’m sure you’ve heard them often enough.”

Matt kept his face blank but he wanted to rub his temples. Oh, yeah, she was doing a great job so far of letting him handle it. *Not*. Anger flared in Jessup’s eyes at Laurin’s words, and he moved toward her without regard for Matt. Being completely ignored was unexpected, but he’d take advantage of the opportunity. He reached out and grasped Jessup’s wrist, twisting and dragging the man to his knees in one smooth motion.

Matt pressed the arm he’d captured higher. “I gave you a polite greeting, brother. Do I need to train you in etiquette?”

Jessup grunted in pain, unable to move without dislocating his shoulder or snapping his arm. He tossed back his head and Matt snatched at his hair with his free hand, completely immobilizing the newcomer.

Matt watched the other two cautiously, gauging their response to his rapid takedown of one of their contemporaries.

The one Laurin had called Cody broke into a grin and laughed out loud. “I always thought you’d be an easy mark, Jessup. Accept your paddling and let the real men step forward.”

Under his grip Jessup went slack and Matt readied for anything. Anything, except for Jessup to speak quietly. “I withdraw. Laurin is free from my attentions. I give my word and will leave the battle to others.”

Matt remained frozen. It had been too simple.

Laurin called out to him. “Matt, let him go.”

“You can, you know. I won’t aid you, but I won’t fight you either.” Jessup sighed heavily. “I had to make the attempt. I hope you won’t think poorly of me.”

Matt eased his grip. He’d never fought with an air shifter before, and found this rapid and complete surrender very confusing—it took a lot to get water shifters to start fighting, but once they began, it didn’t stop easily.

“She’s enough to make anyone want her,” Matt said.

He pulled Jessup to his feet, staying lightly on his toes in case of a double cross. Jessup eyed him with perplexity. “You do not fight like I expected. What clan are you from?”

Matt wanted that secret for a little longer. He told the truth, such as it was. “Clanless.”

Jessup's brow rose. "You and Cody should have an enjoyable...discussion then."

He turned and bowed deeply to Laurin, shifting back into his hawk form as soon as he straightened. A few strong flaps brought him to a perch in a nearby Sitka Spruce.

One down, two to go. Matt faced the remaining challengers.

Cody directed a twisted leer at Laurin briefly as he cracked his knuckles, showboating his thick biceps. "I won't go down so easy," he warned.

Without another word he dove at Matt, slamming his shoulder into Matt's gut and taking him to the sand. Matt rolled, using the slight slope of the shoreline to his advantage, kicking hard to separate their bodies. Wet sand clung to their skin and Matt was suddenly very aware they were fighting in the nude.

Screw diplomacy. He had much better things to do with his balls than let them get smashed by some overgrown turkey vulture on a mate quest.

The beach was his turf, and he used the location to his advantage. A broken fragment of shell, a partially buried stick of driftwood to spear into an unsuspecting foot—Matt saw all the obstacles at a glance and planned his attack accordingly. A feint to the right let him throw a punch that connected hard with Cody's jaw. The man's head snapped back briefly as he roared out his displeasure, spitting blood from his mouth. Matt was unable to avoid the huge hamlike fist that slammed into his ribs in retaliation. *Goddamn*. Nothing broke, but his bones creaked in protest. Matt spun away, then darted back to land a duo of blows to Cody's face. Forget hitting the man's torso. If he hadn't seen Cody shift from a bird, he would have sworn the man was a bear.

Knowing how to fight on the sand helped, the uneven footing and sharp objects Matt led Cody toward aiding his fight. Yet for every couple of blows Matt landed, Cody got in at least a single hit. Matt saw stars after one, his vision blurring for a second. He was so concerned about remaining upright he almost missed it. A sliver of movement in his peripheral vision was all the warning he got, and he went to his knees.

Over his head a heavy branch whistled through the air to connect with Cody's temple. The beefy man didn't even sway, simply dropped like a rock to the ground as Matt backed to a safe distance to face the newcomer. The branch fell from Kilade's hand, a dirty grin on his face as he approached. "Hello, *hoga*. I think my brothers underestimated you."

*Hoga?* Matt circled cautiously. It was obvious there would be little honor used in this part of the battle. Keeping his gaze on his opponent, Matt sidestepped until he caught a glimpse of Laurin. She stood close to the water's edge.

"You have me at a disadvantage. Our clan tongues are different—what pet name do you give me?"

Kilade sneered, but remained silent.

From her safe position Laurin answered his query, "He called you a goldfish in Assiniboine."

A smile escaped. *Cocky bastard.* Matt dragged the back of his hand over his mouth and wiped away a trickle of blood. “I see you’re getting your water shifters confused. Even the eagle treats the mighty orca with respect.”

He moved, flashing to Kilade’s side as the blows rained down. Elbows, knees, the heel of his hand—each struck a new location as Matt darted quickly in and out of the larger man’s space. The mountain dweller’s bulk moved slower than Matt’s lean mass, but when he did land a strike it was enough to rock Matt’s brain in his skull.

Anger threatened, gnawing at Matt’s control. This man, and the others, had been responsible for Laurin having to hide for over two years. They deserved no mercy, wanting her only for personal advancement, using her ability to shift into any air form to increase their strength.

Still, he couldn’t fight while enraged. He thought instead of Laurin’s bravery, her willingness to share her talents with all the clans of his people. She deserved the right to make her own choices, and that realization gave strength to his limbs when he thought he could fight no longer.

After delivering a particularly hard series of punches, Matt stepped back, chest heaving, fighting for breath. In the background, Cody staggered to his feet, shifted, and unsteadily flapped his way into the tree to perch beside Jessup. Across from Matt, Kilade leaned heavily on his knees, torso bent low. Blood dripped from his knuckles, bruises and red splotches marring his torso.

“You do have a few moves,” the air shifter admitted, admiration in his voice. “Shall we come to an agreement?”

Suspicion colored Matt’s response. “What kind of agreement?”

Kilade straightened, one hand dropping to massage his kidneys. “Do you claim the witch girl?”

Matt snorted. *I wonder if Laurin likes her nickname as much as I like mine.* “Laurin? She and I belong together. The only agreement I will make is for that decision to remain as it is.”

A grin broke across Kilade’s face. “Done.”

He held out a meaty hand and Matt hesitated. This was not possible. Damn air shifters... “Why would you fight, only to give up so quickly? Why challenge in the first place?”

“Perhaps I wanted to be sure she had a strong enough provider.” The air shifter threw back his head and laughed out loud, the deep sound of his tainted mirth rolling back off the nearby trees with haunting echoes.

Matt let go his control and swept his mystical awareness over Kilade, seeking his motivation. What he found surprised him almost as much as the rapid conclusion to the fight. *Damn.* The man wasn’t lying. “You truly do want her to be with me.”

The man raised his brow. “I am of the mountains, you are of the sea. There is no need for us to contest. She has made her choice, and I will abide by it, now that I know you are eager to keep her at your side, safe from all who would threaten her.”

Kilade stepped back and turned to face Laurin. He bowed deeply. She deliberately turned away, refusing to accept his honor. Kilade snickered and spoke to Matt. "At the same time I hope you are strong enough to beat some respect into her."

Before Matt could retaliate for his insult, Kilade shimmered, shifting back into a huge golden eagle, his eight-foot-wide wingspan beating the air hard as he mounted into the sky. He circled over the beach once, twice. The third time he dipped his wings and headed back for the mainland and the British Columbia interior.

The others perched in the tree took to the air. Those still circling far overhead wheeled as one, and the whole mismatched flock of them followed behind Kilade's retreat.

Their rapid departure en masse left no time for anything other than a gasp of pain as Matt's own bruises made themselves known.

Laurin raced across the beach toward him, sand kicking up from her feet as she closed in. She skidded to a stop and shook her head sadly, her gaze darting over his face and torso. His lip throbbed as it swelled, vision in one eye diminishing.

"What am I going to do with you?"

Her touch was light, but he still winced as her fingers brushed a raw cut on his cheekbone.

She slipped back to the water's edge, stripping off her shirt as she went. When she returned, it was to press the ocean-soaked fabric against his aching eye. He leaned into her, using her strong body as a support under his arm. When she stroked her fingers through his hair, he groaned. In spite of the pain in the rest of his body, the sensual touch was too powerful to ignore, especially with her naked body so near, and his cock woke up. A good fight always encouraged good hard follow-up sex.

Then she tangled his hair in her fingers and yanked his head back. Hard.

He squawked in pain. "Ouch, shit, what was that for?"

"You ass. I had to stand there like some helpless creature and watch you get pounded. I couldn't move for fear I would distract you at the wrong moment. Why didn't you simply use your powers?"

Matt laughed, drawing their lips together. He kissed her softly before staring into her eyes. Dark, mesmerizing. Inside them he saw her concern and the care she felt. It wasn't love, not yet, but it was enough of a start he would take it.

"Why didn't I simply flash them with my super shaman power?" He couldn't tell her that it would have been too effortless, and he needed to stake a bigger claim. On his territory, and yes, a bigger claim on her. She wouldn't understand the driving need in his veins to defend and make her completely his. He cupped the back of her neck and touched his mouth to her forehead. Satisfaction filled him as he smiled over her head, her warm naked body snuggled against his chest. "Let's just say there are times that a little honest physical threat goes a long way."

## Chapter Three

The *Stormchild* rocked gently. Laurin hung onto the railing as Matt secured the anchor, and they were once again vertical and seaworthy.

"I can't believe there's not more damage to the ship." She ran her hand along a bulkhead, admiring the woodwork. After having spent almost twenty-four hours tilted on her side on a sandbar, the single-masted yacht appeared relatively unscathed.

Matt glanced around, a proprietary smile on his face. "She's a sweetheart. Strong and beautiful, all clean lines and sensual curves."

Laurin found herself at his side. "Hmm, I think I feel jealous of your former love."

His brow went up. "Oh, no. I'm sorry to have tell you there's nothing former about my love affair with my ship."

He danced out of reach as she swung at him, their laughter carrying on the breeze. She chased him good-naturedly, darting out her hands to tickle and tease. When they reached the wheelhouse he twirled and captured her in his arms, pressing her against him tightly.

He'd shifted to return to the ship, and the change into a dolphin had healed the wounds he'd gained in the fight. She ran her fingers over his torso, appreciating the softness of his skin over the firm muscles, the individual bundles flexing and stretching as he explored her body as well. The expression in his bright blue eyes made her breath hitch. Then he lowered his head and took her lips with his.

The kiss was soft, a blessing of his mouth against hers, his fingers tugging through her hair to allow him deeper access, his tongue dancing across the roof of her mouth. A moan of desire escaped her, the need for him to touch her growing by the second. Her breasts felt full and heavy, an aching emptiness between her legs.

It might be sexist, but watching him battle earlier, fighting on her behalf, had really turned her on.

He stroked her cheek. "We can set sail in the morning, and still make it to Bella Coola by dinner on Saturday. Does that give you enough time to prepare for teaching this coming week?"

She thought quickly. "All of Sunday to finish the final adjustments to my lesson plans? Fine by me. Will you be okay for setting up for visits?"

"Easily. Someone is arranging the general drop-in clinic ahead of time. I won't see individual patients until midweek." Matt lowered his hand to cup her butt again like he had at the start of the fight. His fingers

traced the edge of the bikini bottom she'd pulled on after flying over to the ship. He whispered against her lips, "Why'd you get dressed?"

"I didn't think you wanted me hanging out while we were getting the *Stormchild* underway."

He nodded his understanding even as his fingers massaged her butt cheeks. "Well, for what it's worth, rest assured I have no issues with you hanging out, ever, around me. No matter what we're doing."

Laurin popped open the button on his shorts. "Ditto. Well, I don't think I want you naked when you're treating patients."

He caught her hands in his and pressed her open palms against his rising cock. "You want to play *doctor* with me?"

The image that popped into her mind had nothing to do with him in a lab coat, but everything to do with an intimate encounter. Did he want to play? Maybe he could take her from behind, pressing her against the raised decking, the glowing sunset shimmering off their bodies. She lowered his zipper and released his cock, smoothing a stroke down the hard length. Capturing the fluid leaking from the tip on her thumb, she lifted her hand to her mouth and sucked it.

He watched her, mesmerized. Pupils dilating. Breath increasing in pace.

The salty taste of his seed splashed over her tongue and she remembered the feel of taking him in her mouth earlier, during their first trip on the *Stormchild*. Of him filling her, controlling her, and she groaned out with need. She'd loved every second of it.

"Damn it, Laurin." He dropped his head back and thrust into her fingers. "I can see what you're thinking."

*What?*

He hissed his pleasure out, cupping a hand around hers to tighten her grasp. Every rock of his groin forced his shaft through her fingers from tip to root. "It's not your hand I see. It's your mouth. I'm fucking your mouth and it's so hot and wet and tight. I'm dying here."

Laurin smiled. He had mentioned that yesterday, and this morning, that he saw her fantasies. She'd never heard of such a thing. Hmm, maybe this was something they should explore in more depth. A mischievous thought overtook her, and she pictured herself on her knees before him, breasts supported only by her bikini bra. Like watching a movie trailer, she zoomed in from a new angle, to see herself looking up, her tongue extending to touch the tip of his erection.

His body jerked at the moment of envisioned contact.

Under her fingers his cock was hot and hard. In her mind it glistened with her saliva as he plunged into her mouth repetitively. Matt groaned aloud, his head dropping to her shoulder, her hands encasing him.

"Oh God, it's not enough. I need..." His words faded away, his rhythmic thrusts breaking tempo.

His breathing grew frantic but she wasn't ready to stop. Her mind's view changed to her lying face down over the raised section in the forward area of the *Stormchild*. She mentally opened her legs wide, showing him touching her from behind, his cock pressing into her slick opening.

Matt lost it. He pulled her hands from his body and lifted her into the air.

"Matt!"

It was only a few steps later he dropped her to the decking, twirling her around and yanking her against his body. He dragged a hand down her torso, caressing her breasts before fitting between her legs to cup her mound. The very obvious, and very full, length of his erection fit between the cheeks of her ass as he ground against her.

"I need to be in you, Moonshine, not simply watch the pretty pictures." His fingers slipped to her hip, and he snapped the sides of her bikini with ease. The tatters of fabric fell to the ground. "No matter how incredible the pictures may be."

He forced her forward, her upper body coming in contact with the smooth wood of the cabin roof. One hand between her shoulder blades locked her in place. He used his knees to separate her legs farther. Then his cock rested at her entrance and she held her breath. He'd placed her in the same position she'd imagined moments before.

"Show me," Matt demanded.

The visual images returned, this time mixed with the very tactile additions of reality. Not only did she see herself bent over, ass in the air, ripe for his possession, she felt—everything. The solid wood under her torso as her body warmed it. The press of his hand on her back, the cooling breeze off the water dancing over her heated skin.

The exquisite pleasure of his shaft sliding into her sex.

Laurin closed her eyes to absorb the bliss invading her system. The ridged head of his erection pushed through the throbbing lips of her labia. He stretched her slowly, and completely. No escape, no quarter given. She attempted to picture some other kind of lovemaking...face to face, her on top...but this time he laughed.

"Oh no, you troublemaker. I think I've got your number. We're not going anywhere but here." He cupped her hips tighter, holding her firmly as he increased his drives into her willing body. Laurin called out in delight as an orgasm flashed—her passage clutching his cock. She hadn't expected to come this quickly and the electrifying release swept her entire body.

"This is so good, Matt. Feels so good."

"Oh, Moonshine, this is better than good." He found a way to get a hand underneath her, and his fingers pressed her clit in time with his thrusts. "Try awesome. Fabulous. Incredible."

Each word meant another plunge into her core, deep and demanding, and the tingling sensation that always accompanied her climaxes shot to the heights again. Laurin squirmed, trying to give back,

squeezing tighter on his shaft, pressing into his groin as his balls slapped against her. Time paused until there was nothing but the physical sensation of being possessed. The sounds of their bodies joining created a wet and sensual counterpart to the sounds of the ship. The musical chimes of the wires against the mast, the flapping of a flag, the smack of the water against the sides.

When she cried out again in pleasure, he went as well. His seed splashed into her depths, hot and wet, his shaft jerking within. It was a long time later the hands clutching her hips eased, and he rubbed gently at the slightly bruised skin.

Endorphins raced through her body, her muscles limp. She opened her eyes to peer at him over her shoulder. The blissful expression on his face—she was sure it mirrored the one she wore.

“So...?” There was no way to miss the satisfaction in his tone.

Laurin laughed as he withdrew from her body and scooped her off the platform. “So?”

“Better than good?” He nuzzled at her temple as he carried her back the wheelhouse.

She stroked her hand down his face and let the contentment she felt be her answer.

The heavy mooring rope thudded onto the deck, followed by the landing of a dozen feet. Matt wiped his smile from his face. The otter clan did nothing without a full contingency of supporters. Even now he saw the official greeting committee waiting on the dock. The entire clan must have turned out.

“Matt!” A pair of arms wrapped themselves around his neck followed by hard slaps to his back. He twisted to look into the eyes of a close friend from his university days.

“James, you devil. What are you doing here?” Matt gave him a quick hug. James had switched tracks from medicine to pure science, and Matt hadn’t seen him in months.

His friend grinned. “If I need to research algae, can’t I at least do it in the comfort of my own clan’s territory?”

Damn, it was good to see him again. Matt snorted. “I suppose. Personally, I think if you’re going to study algae you should have your head examined.”

James punched him good-naturedly in the shoulder. His gaze darted past Matt, and his eyes widened. He whistled softly. “Excuse me, mate. Angel needing assistance.”

The other man snuck around him before Matt figured out what had caught his friend’s attention. When he did turn, a string of curse words rose to his lips and he bit them back in rush. Laurin had gone below to grab her bag and had just appeared up the steps into the full sun of the late afternoon. Her blonde hair shone in the light like a halo, her pretty face and tidy dress drawing attention to her trim body and firm breasts.

*Fuck.*



The otter folk clambered around the ship deck, fastening the *Stormchild* to the pier, grabbing medical supplies from the cargo section, and generally snooping into everything. Through the chaos, all Matt saw was James hanging over Laurin like a lovesick sea cow.

He should have expected this to happen. Of all the clans, the otter folk were the most blatant in their sexual appetites. Not that any of the People of the Sea were shy, but the otters—they took the whole definition of sensual to new levels.

“Thank you, but no.” Laurin twisted James away and pushed between his shoulder blades to direct him toward the pier.

“Troubles?” Matt called, fighting his way through the extra bodies on the deck to her side. It was hard to believe they’d been the only two on the ship ten minutes ago. It felt like forever since they been alone.

Especially when she turned and gave him that look—the one that said she had something very naughty in mind. He concentrated on keeping his body in control. He did *not* want to sport a massive hard-on when he met the greeting committee currently marching toward them. It could be too easily misconstrued, and he didn’t need any immediate offers of “servicing” from one of the many willing volunteers.

A cool breeze floated past his mind—that light touch he was beginning to associate with Laurin’s connection with him as a *Hawáte*. She winked, then smiled sweetly. Damn, he was going to paddle her butt. She knew what she was doing to him.

He cleared his throat and focused on the issue at hand—his friend, who was as close to a sexual bomb as anyone could possibly be. Matt stared pointedly at James. “Laurin? You having trouble with anything? Anyone?”

Even as she shook her head, she pushed James’s hand off her shoulder. “No, no troubles in particular. Why would you ask?” She tugged James’s fingers off her waist.

James pressed against her back and leered over her shoulder, not even attempting to hide the fact he was peeking down the front of her dress. “I’ve missed you, sweet teacher. I’m longing for more advanced lessons than you gave me last time you visited.”

More? What the hell had the bastard done with her? Matt shoved James away and tucked Laurin against his side. He glared hard, sending out all the warning signals he could. “There will be only lessons in pain if you try to seduce my woman.”

James froze. “Really? She’s with you?”

Matt nodded, thankful for once Laurin added nothing in response. “Really.”

The otter shifter held up a hand. “No worries then, mate.” He paused for all of two seconds before his face brightened. “Of course, if you need a third, you know where to find me.”

The man just didn’t give up. Matt pulled Laurin toward the pier. She leaned closer to whisper in his ear. “Third? You’ve been doing kinky things I need to know about?”

Sweet Jesus. That was exactly the kind of question he wanted to avoid having to answer with a full formal greeting about to occur.

Although—this was the otter clan, and he had his suspicions about exactly how this greeting was about to run. Could she really not know what to expect? “I thought you said you’d visited here before.”

She grinned. “Well, since you’re aware James already propositioned me, you should know the answer to that one.”

Any response he would have made was lost as the rest of the clan moved forward to greet them.

“Shaman. Be welcome here.” The leader Willam held out his hand, shaking Matt’s firmly before turning to face Laurin. “And teacher. You honor us with your renewed presence.” The man clapped his hands and called out loud, “Come, give them greeting, then we can lead them to their quarters.”

Matt opened his mouth to protest. To inform the clan of the change in the living arrangements—details like they would only need one sleeping room—when he found his mouth suddenly full...of tongue? *Damn it all.* He peeled the clinging woman off him as quickly and yet as carefully as he could, concerned Laurin would be upset over him being kissed by another female.

He needn’t have worried. She couldn’t see a thing, wrapped in a huge bear hug and being thoroughly kissed by Willam. Matt fought off other women’s hands as he waited impatiently for Laurin to break free.

It seemed to take an extraordinarily long time.

She was rosy-cheeked when finally released, sucking for air as she touched the back of her hand to her mouth. Matt reached for her even as she strong-armed off the next man waiting his turn. She slipped to Matt’s side, and he scrambled to speak the words needed to fix the situation.

Laurin beat him to it.

One arm flung around his shoulder, her body pressed intimately to his, she surveyed the crowd gathering before them, the gentle rise and fall of the ship continuing beneath their feet.

“We would like the cabin at the top of the rise. I enjoyed that location the last time I stayed with you.” Her voice rang out strong, imperial. She slipped farther into his arms, somehow tugging his hand across her torso, cupping his palm intimately around her breast. He fought to control his body’s instant response, but it was impossible. Especially when she lowered her lashes and glanced up at him flirtatiously. “We need a large enough bed. And it had better be sturdy.”

Matt groaned as she slid her hand around his neck and sealed their mouths together. The contact was aggressive, intense. Far more intimate than the kiss the otter woman had stolen a moment before. When Laurin dragged her fingernails down his chest and nicked his nipple, his cock jerked, pressing against her belly. She moaned with approval, grinding their bodies together, making him hard as a rock.

The cool sensation he’d come to associate with her ability to enhance his skills wrapped around them both. He felt a sudden tug and from nowhere, his magic flared. Power poured forth, blazing with a frightening intensity. He stretched out his mental and spiritual hands to contain the outburst. He stretched

out his literal hands to take control of Laurin and separate them. He gazed down at her dark eyes to see them filled with lust, and a fair bit of amusement.

Around them the usually rambunctious otter clan had fallen silent, everyone staring with astonishment. One by one, they lowered their gazes, respect apparent in their posture.

Even Willam paused. He nodded slowly, an inscrutable expression on his face. The staccato sound of his clap rang out again. "Arrange it as teacher has requested."

There were a few final glances of astonishment cast in their direction before a dozen of the clan hurried to follow their leader's orders.

Willam bowed low. "You honor us greatly. I trust your time with us will be...fruitful."

Matt bowed in return, wondering what exactly was going through the man's mind. Matt prepared to use his powers to check, but before he could, Willam disappeared, vanishing into the mass of clan members still surrounding them.

The crowds flowed around them, whispered words of respect echoing as they passed. Matt waited until they were relatively alone before tugging Laurin to face him. He couldn't be upset—it had been one solution, although not the one he would have selected himself.

"Why didn't you simply let me tell them we were together?"

She raised a brow. "By the time we'd have gotten a word in edgewise you'd have had to kiss your way through ninety percent of the clan. No way am I accepting other people's leftovers."

He snorted. She *had* visited this clan before.

She turned and led the way up the path, her hips shimmying in a way that heated his blood. He got lost staring at her butt, imagining all the things he could do to that firm ass when she paused and turned back, hands resting on her hips. She jutted out her chin, and something inside him melted a bit more. He had teased that the *Stormchild* was strong and beautiful, but his ship had nothing on his lover with her temper in full sail.

There was a challenge written on her face and in her eyes. "Besides, sometimes a little honest physical threat goes a long way."

## Chapter Four

Laurin gave a groan as she straightened up from where she'd been hunched over her computer keyboard, leaning her head to the side to stretch the tight muscles of her neck. She'd been staring at the computer monitor for three hours straight, finishing the next set of lesson plans to distribute to her students who were scattered across the Pacific Inside Passage. They'd spent two weeks with the otter clan so far, and tonight it was time to put aside the work and take a breather.

Warm hands landed on her shoulders, brushing her hair aside, and she smiled. As Matt's lips touched her neck she reached up to stroke his fingers gently. "Hey. You finally escaped."

"I swear there are four times as many clan members as last time. I don't remember general clinic hours taking this long before. Ever."

She swung her chair around to face him. It was after eight p.m., and he'd been at the clinic since seven in the morning. There were crease marks at the side of his eyes from his exhaustion, and she wanted to wrap him up and soothe him. She'd been working all day as well, but teaching had its own built-in breaks. Building sandcastles with the elementary students to demonstrate different kinds of tactile strength was more amusing than physically taxing.

Matt held out his hand and she went into his arms willingly. They snuggled close, Matt burying his face against her neck and breathing deeply. "I don't know what I want more. Food, sleep or you."

She laughed. "Why don't we do all three, in that order?" She tugged him toward the door. "Come on, I've got our evening planned."

It had taken a few days to figure out who to bully to get things accomplished around camp. It took a special kind of bartering and bossing to not become overwhelmed by water shifters in the first place. The otters had no sense of ownership and few boundary lines. Her trunk full of clothing was finally off limits only because she'd laid down the law and had Matt loan her an enhanced lock.

They took the "share and share alike" motto a touch too far in this community. Especially when it came to Matt. She glanced at him briefly, not even trying to deny the proprietary feelings she experienced.

Laurin led Matt by the hand toward the beach, swinging past the communal kitchen and grabbing the basket she'd prepared earlier. It felt heavy enough, but she took a quick peek to ensure no one had absconded with any of their picnic supplies.

Matt took the basket from her, linking his fingers through hers. "You have been busy."

“I figured you’d have another late night. I used it to my advantage. You’re free until noon tomorrow, right?”

“Unless there’s an emergency, but things seem quiet.”

“I’m done as well. The night is ours.”

They exchanged smiles before she led him down the path. Time had been passing in a blur with both of them working like crazy. The relationship seemed to have helped them both settle quickly into the community in some ways—although there were tough moments. If she was honest? She missed the intimacy of being alone with him on the *Stormchild*.

They walked in silence, the soothing repetition of the ocean washing the shoreline their only background music. Even though it was late, this far to the north the sun still hung above the horizon. It was more than hour away from disappearing into the waters of the Pacific Ocean that filled the Bella Coola inlet. Matt’s soft chuckle broke the silence as they mounted the ridge and the cabana she’d had set up came into sight. The bright color of the fabric shone against the bleached white of the sand and the neutral tones of the rocky shoreline behind it.

“Laurin, you are a miracle worker.”

“Wait until you see inside.”

He dropped her fingers and ran, all his earlier tiredness seeming to disappear. She chased him, her laughter bursting out. Every step they’d taken away from the settlement had felt as if they’d cut restraining ropes. She’d never realized how much energy it took to live up to others’ expectations—or others’ expectations of who she didn’t feel she truly was.

Matt pressed aside the fabric door and turned to face her. “Did I say miracle worker? I meant a magician. It’s gorgeous. Oh my God, there’s a bed.” He dropped the basket on the small table at the back of the cabana before falling face first onto the mattress.

Laurin tossed herself beside him, brushing his hair back from his face. “You want to nap first? Or eat?”

He rolled, snatching her up to drape her limbs over his body. “Talk. Then sex. Then eat, then sex.”

A yawn escaped him and Laurin giggled. “Or we could start with a nap.”

He shook his head. “I had no idea this stop at Bella Coola was going to be this insane. How have your students been doing?”

Laurin folded her arms on top of his chest and positioned herself more comfortably so she could look him in the eye as they spoke. “The teaching part is going great. Being partners with the shaman? I’ve never had so many questions I couldn’t answer before. It’s like they think since I’m with you, I know everything you know as well.”

Concern etched his face. “Is it causing troubles? That’s an issue I’d never imagined arising.”

“It’s not bad—if anything it’s been humbling to realize there is so much I don’t have the answers for.”

He stroked a knuckle along her cheek tenderly. “If you need me to drop in or speak to anyone, you let me know.”

Laurin resisted voicing the evil thought that flashed through her mind. She could imagine what the women of the community would think about that—him leaving his busy practice to help her with the children. They already thought she’d somehow managed to snatch up the moon. She’d be considered a true goddess to have the shaman at her beck and call.

She’d never been the type to gloat, but then she’d never had someone like Matt in her life before either.

“There’s one question you can answer for me. What’s your clan?”

He paused. “I don’t have one. I’m shaman, and—”

“I know, you’re a part of them all. I meant, where is your mother from?”

A huge sigh escaped him. “One of the dolphin clans from the far north. We’re not really close.”

Laurin leaned up to drop a quick kiss on his lips. “Sorry, didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, no. It’s okay. I need to go visit her again sometime. It was easier to avoid going back than to deal with how I feel about the whole child-of-the-shaman issue. Silly, really. I’m too old for those kind of avoidance games.”

She laid her head back on his chest and tried to send soothing thoughts. Family. Even when everyone got along, dealing with them could take a toll. Laurin changed the topic as best she could. “What’s happening in terms of you and your clinic? Are you nearly at the end of the rush?”

He nodded, his eyes closing as he continued to stroke her body and play with her hair. “And I have to say thank you—there are a whole lot less random females popping in to ask for full physicals in the hopes I’ll take one look at their naked body and be unable to resist ravishing them right there on the examining table.”

“Glad that my presence in your life is working as a decoy.”

Laughter rang out, his face bright even as his eyes remained closed. “You minx. You know damn well it’s not simply your presence. The fact you stood up in the communal kitchen the second day we were here and announced you’d skin any one who poached on your territory has a lot more to do with my lack of annoyances than simply your pretty smile.”

*Shit.* A flush of embarrassment hit. She really had no idea what had come over her that day. “You heard about that? You hadn’t said anything, so I thought...”

His body shook under her as he laughed. “I heard. In fact, I had to offer the same kind of threat at the bonfire after you left that night. The men were all so impressed with your grit and figured you must be some kind of hellion in bed.”

A warm curl of excitement lit in her belly. He opened his eyes and she fell into the blue depths. “I can be a hellion, with the right person.”

Somehow they maintained that eye contact as their clothing disappeared. Warm naked flesh covered her, wet kisses and long shiver-inducing brushes of his fingers followed. They moved easily together on the bed, giving and receiving pleasure. Soft sighs and little gasps for air escaped her throat, and she didn't even once try to send a dirty image into his mind. Everything she wanted to experience was right there, everything she needed to fly over the moon already at her fingertips.

A warm breeze fluttered the curtains of the cabana, and Matt stopped his exploration of her body to slide open the fabric on the ocean side. The setting sun had turned the sky to brilliant orange and pink, bands of radiant light streaking across the bed and shimmering over their skin. She pulled him back to her side, reveling in his touch, the caress of his tongue drawing lazy designs down her belly. The intimate stroke of his fingers, the rapid beat of his heart as he brought them together, and they joined. Fullness, heat, and over it all, the tenderness pouring out from his soul.

She wiggled, trying to escape. It was too quick, and she wanted to give to him first. Pleasure shot through her as he leaned in harder, his body pinning her to the bed and holding her trapped.

"Please, I want to—"

"No. This time I give to you." He kissed her cheek, his eyelashes fluttering against hers like a butterfly and she relaxed back.

How could she resist his touch? Each caress brought her higher and higher. Drove the pleasure in her core outward like the streaks of color highlighting their bodies. They lay in a pool of fading sunlight, sparks of stars bursting through the haze of darkness appearing at the edge of the visible sky. Her nipples throbbed in time with her sex, both heavy with anticipation as Matt caressed and primed her until there was nowhere to go but deep into pleasure. Rolling waves of it that crashed far louder than the ocean that surged meters away from them.

"Matt, oh God, yes."

She clutched his shoulders, clinging tight to him as he merged them again and again. The intensity of her orgasm made her vision grow dark, her body squeezing and claspings so hard she felt completely out of control. Laurin gasped for air, striving to stay alert, needing to ensure his release as well.

The sound of shattering rock from the nearby cliff echoed around them the same moment Matt stiffened, his body held rigid over hers. He pumped his hips in tiny pulses, as if trying to dig even deeper into her core. His whispered words were too quiet to hear, but his eyes spoke volumes.

Laurin tugged him on top of her, his body weight crushing her to the mattress for a moment before he rolled them to the side, still connected. They lay there for a long time, touching, staring. Kissing slowly then pulling back to stare again.

The connection between them might be somehow mystical, but Laurin had a sneaky suspicion that there was the possibility for more. First she had to decide if she could allow herself to fall in love with a shaman of the People of the Sea.

Laurin dropped a kiss against his chest before yawning and forcing herself to crawl out from under the covers. Even the best of getaways had to come to an end, and their time was rapidly approaching. The supper picnic had been consumed at midnight after they'd waded and washed in the ocean. They'd talked and laughed and spent the rest of the night waking each other and tangling the sheets until she felt totally used and achy in all the right spots this morning.

They had time for a quiet breakfast and not much else before they had to leave.

She stood and stretched, turning to sneak a little secret ogling of his naked body into her morning. Instead it was his gaze fixed on her that caught her, a worried frown marring his forehead.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Do I have something in my teeth?"

Matt sighed. "No, I'm just trying to figure out how to say this."

"Is something wrong?"

"If you're talking about last night? Oh hell, no. That was everything I could have asked for, and I'd kill for another couple days of you-and-me alone time."

Her thoughts, exactly. "Then why the frown?"

"There's something you need to know, but I don't want to shock you."

Now he was being silly. She reached for the bra and T-shirt that were draped over the back of the chair by their bed. Somewhere during their exertions last night, he must have found all their clothing—she didn't remember hanging them up.

"I'm pretty sure I'm a big girl now. You can spit it out, and if I need to have the vapors, I'll warn you, okay?"

Something hit her in the back of the head and she turned with a laugh, scooping up the pillow and flinging it back at him.

"Okay, if you think you're ready. Tomorrow is summer solstice."

He fell silent. Laurin waited, reaching behind her to fasten her bra. "And...is that it? I was aware of that fact, Matt. Teacher, remember?"

"Yeah, well, there's a party tomorrow night, and I'm not sure you should go."

Laurin rested her fists on her hips, shirt dangling from her hand. "Are you trying to tell me to stay home while you go out rabble-raising? What, is it a guys-only macho thing?"

"No. Fertility ritual."

*Oh, shit.* Yeah, those could get out of hand. Still, she wasn't a baby. "I've seen it before. I'm sure we have something similar among the Air People."

Matt shook his head. "We're talking the otter clan. As long as you're prepared, I guess it will be all right. Just...don't nod your agreement to anything, okay?"



She poked her head through the fabric of her T-shirt to see him staring seriously at her. “What are you talking about? What am I not supposed to agree to?”

“To participate.”

This conversation was going nowhere fast. Laurin stepped closer and leaned over him. “Matt, exactly what kind of ceremony are we talking about? I somehow don’t think it involves gathering seeds and grasses and tossing them on the bonfire, does it?”

He sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. “There is a bonfire and seed, but not the type you’re thinking of.”

She sat next to him and grabbed his leg. “Spill.”

“I’ll have to.”

What in the world? Laurin punched him in the arm. “Stop talking in code.”

Matt dragged his fingers through his hair and sighed. “Look, if you weren’t here I would’ve had the toughest time explaining why I shouldn’t be an active participant. As it is, they will still expect me to spill seed.”

*Okaaaay...* maybe the air clans *didn’t* do this ritual. “Are you talking about sex? I mean, your semen? And if so, exactly how and where do they think your seed will spill?”

“I’ll masturbate.”

“In front of them?”

“Trust me, very few people will be watching me.”

“What else would they be watching?”

“Sex.”

The word stuttered from her lips. “Se-sex? In public? You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, you innocent woman.” He caught her in his arms and wiggled her around until she rested in his lap. “I thought you’d stayed with this clan before?”

Holy shit, this got weirder and weirder. The sexy interlude they’d shared the night before had seemed daring—out in a cabana with the curtains open to the air. But unless they’d had some peeping Toms, she thought their sensual performance had been far enough down the beach to remain unwitnessed.

The otter folk were managing to surprise her after all, and a part inside her that longed for the typical privacy demonstrated by the People of the Air quivered—a little in disgust, and a little...with desire?

It was as if there was a wild child inside her wanting to escape. “I have stayed with the clan before, but I obviously give off much more innocent vibes than I thought. I mean, I’ve been propositioned dozens of times, but I’ve managed to avoid seeing any open-air sex.” Matt tensed under her, and she hurried on, trying to reassure him. “And I’ve never accepted any of the individual offers, or wanted to.”

“You will not be participating. In fact, I really think you should stay back in our quarters.” His voice dropped a level, now insistent and firm.

Bullshit. He could chalk it up to jealousy if he wanted to, but no way in hell was she agreeing to that.

“While you go jerk off in front of the crowd? Or get accosted by one of the women? ‘Are you all alone, shaman? I insist you let me help you.’” She stuck out her lower lip in imitation of a few of his more persistent hangers-on, and he laughed.

“Fine, but you need to follow my instructions while we are there without question. Please, this is important to me. I really don’t want this event to get carried away.”

Her curiosity flittered higher. “Get real. You’re planning on masturbating in public and figure no one will be watching you because there’s going to be something else more interesting happening? Oh, right—public sex. How in the hell can you be worried about the event getting carried away? I can hardly wait.”

Matt grinned sheepishly, right before he snagged her wrist and tugged hard enough she fell back on top of him. Their mouths met, and suddenly there was nothing on her agenda but the rumbling desire for him that never seemed to leave her and a streak of inquisitiveness that she’d have to wait to satisfy.

This fertility ritual sounded very interesting indeed.

## Chapter Five

The knock on the door was expected, but came far earlier than he'd hoped. Laurin still wore the flimsy swath of fabric she claimed was a housecoat, but he considered nothing more than fabric foreplay—he got hard every time she pulled the damn thing on.

The otter clan leader stood on the other side of the threshold, bowing deeply before passing over a set of ritual outfits for them both. Matthew accepted the clothing and placed it on the table beside the door.

“Our thanks. We will be there at twilight.”

Willam stared at Laurin's body as she drew alongside Matt at the door, and Matt held off blocking her from view by sheer willpower alone.

“You know, I would be very grateful if you would reconsider your decision. Such an important occasion would be made even more significant with both of you participating.” His gaze lingered blatantly on Laurin's breasts and Matt's hands clenched into fists.

Laurin stepped forward, and Matt held his breath. If she misspoke...he couldn't let her get roped into this situation, but she'd proven her intelligence over the past weeks. He rested his hands on her hips and sent her positive thoughts.

“Willam, your community has been very gracious in caring for our needs. As a visitor among many clans as I've traveled with my teaching, I have to say there is a special atmosphere here among the otter folk that I've not experienced anywhere else.”

Matt hid his grin. Like the fact they were constantly trying to get into her pants? No, he was sure that didn't happen everywhere.

She continued, “We are merely visitors to your people. We would not dream of taking away an honor from them.”

Willam lifted his chin. “They would gladly give it up if I asked.”

“Ahh, but that is not what your clan needs. They need a strong, decisive leader, as you have demonstrated yourself to be by having selected the participants.” Laurin shook her head and crossed her arms to finally cover her chest. “No, we are honored to witness. That is our rightful place.”

“But—”

Laurin leaned over and kissed his cheek quickly before snatching up the clothing and retreating into the cabin. “Matt, I really will need your help getting into these garments. How *do* the People of the Sea dress without assistance? I've never seen such...”

Her voice faded away into low mutterings as she laid the items out on the bed. Matt faced Willam again, the leader's expression far too readable.

"Your woman is a handful," Willam rumbled in frustration.

She was. She'd also proved more than capable of taking care of herself. Matt was ashamed that he'd felt the situation would be too much for her to handle. It was another reminder that they were only in the first stages of getting to know each other, no matter how much his heart was drawn to her.

He stepped outside to join Willam on the stoop, closing the door behind him. "She is strong and independent—and correct. You are a good leader, Willam. Taking away a position of honor at the last minute from two of your people would do nothing to enhance your powers, and everything to taint the ceremony."

"But you are shaman."

"And as such, I am connected to all the clans, not only your own. You are the heart of your people—you must keep them strong."

Willam stilled, his weathered face back at peace. "I shall. Thank you, Shaman. I will see you in an hour."

He strode away, head held high, and Matt waited until he'd disappeared into the collection of huts. The best and only way to have appealed to the man—his leadership.

Matt slipped open the door and stared at Laurin. She twisted to face him, garments hanging from either hand.

"Was that okay?" She tossed the fabric back on the bed and joined him in the middle of the room.

"It was inspired." He lifted her chin and kissed her lips briefly. "I owe you an apology."

Laurin frowned. "Why?"

"Because I should have known you could handle the situation. I forget that you've not only traveled among my people, you're a teacher. You're educated, and intelligent, and courageous enough to have left your home to do what you felt was right." He dropped to his knees and kissed her stomach, burying his face against her momentarily. Breathing in her sweet scent eased away some of the nervousness that had flared at discovering Willam at the door. He raised his head until their eyes met. "I'm sorry for having doubted you."

"Matt. Stop it." She tugged on his shoulders. "Stand up."

He stayed put. "Will you forgive me?"

She pulled again. "Not when you're on your knees like that. You were worried. I understand."

He stared up at her face, sensing the connection between them that he couldn't completely comprehend. "I was still wrong to treat you as I did."

Laurin sighed, shaking her head in exasperation. She dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around him. "People of the Air don't ask forgiveness like this. If they absolutely have to, they say *I was wrong*, and move on."

"We of the sea like to make a bigger deal about apologizing."

She grinned at him. "So I noticed. You do tend to do things in big ways, don't you?"

An image of what she would witness in a few hours flashed through his mind. "Bigger than you expect."

Her lips brushed gently against his cheek as she leaned in close enough to whisper in his ear. "You're forgiven. Now come and help me figure the silly costumes out. I have no idea what we're wearing."

Matt squeezed her tight before leading her to the bed and untangling the bits and pieces of the garments. When he finished placing them in two piles, Laurin bent over and peeked under the bed.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She shook her head. "That can't be all of it. There's not enough material to cover anything of importance."

He raised a brow and waited.

"Oh shit. Okay, maybe I should stay in the room."

"Sorry, that option is no longer available." He tugged on the belt of her robe, running a finger down her torso as smooth skin appeared.

If they didn't have a deadline to meet, he would have had far more fun getting her dressed. As it was, he had to be satisfied with dropping hurried kisses on her nape as he helped tie the skimpy halter bra around her neck. He pressed a kiss to the smooth skin visible above the scant skirt hugging her hipbones before lifting his gaze to admire her barely covered body.

"If there's a strong wind I'm going to put on a show." Her voice had dropped lower, filled with lust, and he trailed his fingers up the inside of her leg to touch her naked body. The curls covering her sex were damp and he couldn't resist rubbing the apex of her mound. She moaned, her head falling back, and he steeled himself. Pulled his hand away. Slipped on his own scrap of fabric masquerading as a loincloth.

"We need to go." He ground the words out. They had to leave now, before he buried himself in her heat and they didn't move for days, let alone soon enough to make the ceremony.

None of his desire had faded by the time they reached the ceremonial stage. They were greeted in a surprisingly innocent manner for the otter folk, and led to the chairs of honor at one end of the raised dais. Across the circle from them Willam sat in state, his chair rising high above the fire pit and allowing all the adults filling the perimeter of the area a clear view of his magnificence.

The scent of pine smoke and incense carried on the air. Torches were lit one by one around them, the warm glow melding with the sun's fading light. Matt reached out again to stroke Laurin's braid, the heavy weight of her blonde hair woven tightly into a single tail hanging down her bare back.

She shivered under his touch, and the needy ache that had begun long before they even got dressed for the ceremony threatened to undo him before the ritual officially got underway.

He closed his eyes, centering on the people around them. Considering their needs, their dreams. Using the mystical bond he had with the ocean and the people to draw in strength and send it out again. It worked, to a small degree. Only it wasn't the gathered otter folk who filled his awareness most keenly, it was the woman at his side who was easily the most mysterious and the most intimate connection he felt.

Laurin wiggled uncomfortably on the solid wood of the chair. The hard surface had warmed under her bare buttocks, she was happy there was no cushion to sit on—it would have been soaked already by the liquid sneaking from her sex. She squeezed her knees together tighter and sat ramrod straight in an attempt to keep the tiny bits of nothing draped over her breasts strategically lined up.

Whatever fabric they'd skimmed on to create her and Matt's costumes had been used for Willam's. Across the staged area, he grinned down at her, as if he knew exactly what she wasn't wearing under her garment.

Which, of course, he did, and that made it all the more sexual when he methodically looked her over. When he turned his head and took in Matt with as thorough an inspection, she hesitated. The first intense scrutiny had made her uncomfortable; the second filled her with an ache deep inside she didn't want to name.

Was she jealous? Perhaps. She reached without thinking to place her hand possessively on her lover's knee.

Willam's grin flashed even larger, and he nodded slowly, as if accepting her motion as a choice.

Oh my God, had she done what Matt had warned her not to do? Had she just agreed to something?

At her side, Matt dropped his fingers over hers. The warmth of his palm on the back of her hand held her in place, trapped against his leg. He leaned over. "They are about to begin. Last chance to chicken out."

She turned her head, their cheeks touching. "As if I could leave now. Everyone would be able to stare at my butt the entire time I walked away."

He kissed her and withdrew, but not before she caught his low laugh.

Laurin blew out a deep breath. It was official—she was in big trouble.

Above her, the night sky had filled with stars, the darkness a charcoal canopy. Off in the distance, the wind shook the treetops gently, rustling them together in time with the constant roar of the surf. There was no confining roof holding her in. If it came down to the worst-case scenario, she could always shift and escape to the sky.

And suddenly, that made everything all right again. Her ability to shift was there to be called on in an instant if needed. Matt was by her side, and she trusted him implicitly and...he was driving her crazy.

Matt had removed his fingers from her hand and now rested them lightly on her thigh, his thumb tracing tiny circles on her flesh.

A wave of heat raced over her that had nothing to do with the temperature, and everything to do with what she unexpectedly wanted. There was going to be a sexy performance tonight? Bring it on. Maybe it was time for her innocent air shifter ways to be woken up.

A horn sounded, long and low, and the intermingling voices dropped to a murmur. Willam stood, his hands raised in the air and the gathered adults all hushed.

After delivering two sharp claps with his hands, Willam sat. There were no words spoken, and Laurin was puzzled. In her tribe, the storyteller would have sung and prayed. The noise generated during ceremonies tied them together and taught the lessons for the next generations to remember.

At her side, Matt stood. He looked over the crowd, and the brush of what she called his shaman senses passed her. Was he testing the response of the people? Preparing them? He nodded once at Willam.

Eager faces turned from staring at the clan leader to waiting for Matt. When he reached down for her hand, she placed her fingers in his hesitantly, shaking slightly. She mentally chastised herself. What outrageous thing did she think he was about to do? She stood at his side willingly, looking out into the crowd as fearlessly as possible, only the flutter of her heartbeat at her throat giving away her nervousness. The gazes of the men in the crowd grew hungry, the women—some appeared jealous, the more mature, eager?

Matt squeezed her fingers briefly before turning her in his arms and cupping her face. He kissed her, an almost chaste brush of his lips. Her magic woke and she trembled at the intense power building inside her. It was as if he'd held a flame to a stick of dynamite, and she wondered exactly how long the wick would turn out to be.

She opened her eyes slowly, catching a flicker of amusement sparkling in his gaze. He motioned for her to sit before joining her, keeping their fingers tangled together.

As one, the rest of the people settled, all attention focused on the center of the stage.

From one side of the dais a form strolled forward—one of the young, unattached women of the community, with a strong body and hair elaborately coiffed about her head. She strutted her way around the edge of the gathering, ignoring the raised platform slightly off-center of the stage. She swung her hips, taking her time to pivot before the young men and undulate her torso sensuously. The diaphanous shift covering her body was somehow far more erotic than if she'd walked on stage totally nude.

In the background, a beat began—not a drum, but something more organic. Pulsing hot and heavy as if the surface of the stage was alive. The woman twirled, her shift rising to expose her limbs before falling again in a curtain. Laurin leaned forward, her own heart synchronizing with the pulse, making her entire body tingle and throb in rhythm.

The sun disappeared completely, the golden orange flames of the torches seeming to leach the color from the sky. Radiant beams danced over the woman, highlighting her dark skin, the swell of her breasts against the fabric. She paused for longer in one place, staring intently into the crowd, her actions slowing and becoming more sexual. Her skin glistened with oil that reflected the flickering torchlight. She tossed her head, raised her hands in the air and turned in a smooth circle. The throbbing in the air increased in tempo, in volume until, with a jerk, she pointed into the crowd and everything froze.

There was complete silence but for the sound of rapid breathing, Laurin's own shaky inhalations loud in her ears.

From where the woman pointed, a young man rose to his feet. Laurin recognized him from her days amidst the clan. Tall, strong-limbed. One of the men who had propositioned her and been totally astounded to be turned down. A path opened before him, allowing him to stride easily to the stage where he took the woman's hand.

And the beat resumed. Louder this time, a staggered cadence that fit the movements of the two on the stage perfectly. They danced, his hands wrapping around her body, intimately caressing her back. Slipping down her waist and hovering over her butt for a split second. The shimmering fabric of her shift moved like moonbeams under his hands' direction. Laurin swallowed hard, feeling a pulse growing within her sex as she watched the performance. His costume was similar to what Matt wore, a scrap of cloth in the front, his buttocks revealed in the back as he turned his partner only feet before them. He too was covered with oil, the edges of his muscles showing cut and strong with the light reflecting off. When he twirled the woman and pressed her back to his front, one hand cupping her breast, a small moan escaped Laurin's lips.

Matt released her fingers and instead caressed the inside of her wrist in a steady motion. She couldn't look away from the stage, but didn't want to miss a single touch Matt offered. Squirming did nothing to ease the ache between her legs, and she snuck her free hand to her lap, casually, as if she simply needed to change position. The gentle weight wasn't enough, and she let her legs open slightly, the cool night air sweeping up her thighs. The cream that had already escaped her core met the air and she shuddered. Wanting more. Needing more.

The dancers twined together, intimate and slow. The woman threw back her head and he held her draped over his arm, her body leaning far enough back her breasts had broken free of the flimsy fabric. When he straightened them to vertical the shift clung to her hips for a second, then pooled on the ground. She stood naked before the crowd, her chest heaving as she gazed into her partner's eyes.

The pulse increased in tempo and volume, and this time Laurin spotted the source. It was the people of the clan. With their feet or hands, they pounded against the stage. Hammering out the rhythm together as if they too were a part of the dance.

Something feral broke free. She'd never seen anything so profound, so intimate and yet cohesive. Her own feet itched to join in the noise making, but she fought the urge. A tug on her wrist brought her



attention to Matt. He stared, the bright blue of his eyes reminding her of the water they'd paddled together the previous week, and it hit her. He was part of it as well, a part of the environment of ecstasy swelling around them, and suddenly it wasn't nearly enough to sit passively and witness the dance.

Matt slid back in his chair and pulled her easily toward him, settling her on his lap. His erection bulged against her hip, his hands tender on her body as he adjusted position. Laurin leaned into his warmth, the bare skin of her back meeting his naked chest, and she sighed with contentment.

His touch melted her defenses, and when the side of his hand brushed the bottom of her breast, she didn't protest at all. Matt's lips touched her ear, his whisper barely breaking the vocal silence. "Join me in the celebration."

She looked over the crowd. All eyes were fixed on the duo in the center of the stage where the woman had one of her long limbs wrapped around the man's hip as he held her against his groin. A shiver went through Laurin—electric heat hit her core and her emptiness became too apparent.

She and Matt sat in full sight of the clan, yet for all the attention they received, they could have been completely private. Unable to deny what her body begged for, Laurin turned her head to capture his lips for an instant. "I will celebrate with you."

His body heated under her, as if her words were the catalyst for the next step they would take together. He slid one hand up her body, one down, and sudden pleasure poured through her limbs. A single digit stroked her slit. His thumb and forefinger teased one nipple. Laurin closed her eyes to concentrate, only to have Matt nuzzle her neck until she focused on him.

"Watch. There's more. See it, feel it. Celebrate with my people."

His eyes held a hint of laughter, and more. Something she couldn't stare at for very long—it was too powerful and breathtakingly beautiful.

She nodded, and then kissed him. Full on, lust filled. A tangle of tongues and teeth that combined with his touch took her to the edge of a climax in a single bound.

He broke away from her and she turned back to the stage, ready to witness the conclusion of the dance. Hoping it would be over soon so she could take Matt back to their cabin and fall into bed with him for the rest of the night.

Where she expected to see two people, there were now three.

## Chapter Six

Laurin's gaze stuttered over the naked bodies, slowly untangling the connections between the limbs and the torsos. The man who had danced earlier sat on the large covered platform that now filled center stage, his hand grasping the woman's hips as he mouthed her breasts. At her back, another male had joined in, pressing kisses along the line of her shoulder. He reached around to splay one hand over her belly, the other cupping one full mound, lifting it as if an offering to the one seated before her.

Matt copied the motion, teasing her with his fingertips, massaging her breast with his hand over the tiny scrap of fabric clinging to her skin. It was torture to have him so close, and yet so far. She took one more rapid glance at the crowds. There was no doubt—all attention was on center stage, and rightly so. Laurin watched in fascination and with growing lust as the seated man lay back and the dancer crawled over him, her hips centered over his face.

Oh my God, he licked her. Touched the woman intimately, just as Matt's finger stroked Laurin's sex. The trembling in Laurin's limbs increased, and when she realized exactly who the new male arrival on the stage was, she shook hard enough Matt grabbed onto both her thighs, locking her against him.

James danced around the two bodies touching on the platform. His erection thrust out from his body, but he danced as if unaware his arousal was evident to all. When he turned and faced her and Matt, his face clearly showed his desire.

Laurin squirmed, attempting to close her legs. Matt restrained her, his touch against her core continuing, his lips and teeth lapping and nibbling on the curve of her ear. He slipped a finger into the wetness of her sex at the same instant he slipped his tongue into her ear and she cried out as her body responded. A burst of pleasure, connecting from top to bottom, exploded—unexpected yet completely welcome. Her sexual tension didn't fade, but slipped from being painfully aroused to anxiously waiting for the next, higher level of gratification to arrive.

Matt spread his knees. Since her limbs were draped over his, the motion opened her wide, her bare crotch facing the stage. Laurin hesitated before reaching to tug the rest of her skirt out of the way. A sense of being incredibly wicked hit as James stared directly at her from only a few paces away.

Matt whispered in her ear, the warmth of his breath fluttering past her cheek. "You are beautiful, Laurin. All of you, not only your body. But tonight, let your body be what you share for others' pleasure."

She tensed. Was he going to let James touch her? She couldn't—

His lips touched her temple, his words coming quickly to stay her fears. "Peace. You are mine. I am yours. Only watch, and allow the others to witness your passion as well."

Matt kissed her lips, so gentle and intimate, even as his fingers stroked her clit, dipping into her core and pulling up her cream to ease the motion of his fingers over the sensitive bud. Sexual tension rallied, small strokes of electricity flying from wherever he touched to congregate deep inside and add to the building pressure.

The thumping against the stage stilled again and she snapped her head back to see what it meant. Even as Matt had played her body, the dancers had turned to more erotic connections. The woman perched over one man, her slowly descending hips angled exactly right for Laurin to see his erection piercing her sex. Small pumps with her hips echoed by the crowd's hands on the ground, the beat resuming as the pulse of their joining was copied among the clan. Matt's fingers brushing her clit weren't enough, and Laurin dropped her own hand to rub more firmly, needing a little more to fly.

Watching another couple have sex was incredibly arousing.

Matt leaned forward, tilting her until her hips rose into the air, and then—

"Oh...Matt." She whispered the words, uncertain if she should speak or not. Unsure what the rules were. She stared back over her shoulder to catch his eye as the tip of his cock pressed to her labia, and he rocked, coating himself in her cream.

"Yes?" he asked.

Laurin waited until the next pass when he was lined up perfectly, then gripped his forearms and pulled, plunging his entire length into her body. She was far too ready to need any more foreplay.

Full of hard, stretching power, she rested, letting him take back control. Laurin squeezed her inner muscles and tore a gasp from his lips.

She turned back to the stage, ready for anything. Anything except to see James present the tip of his rigid cock to the woman's ass and press into that tight passage. Torchlight flickered off glistening skin—the oil from earlier now coating their entire bodies. Matt seemed to swell inside her as she clenched in response to what she witnessed.

Two men taking the woman at the same time—the act was never spoken of among the air people. Since coming to the coast, she'd heard of it, but thought it would be awkward, and ugly. Painful at the least and a turn-off at the worst. Instead, the sight fed the fire inside hard enough to send her desire flaring upward. The woman sang out in pleasure between her lovers, her face bright with delight. The pounding racket from the clan increased, the thrusts of the men alternating into her body.

Matt fisted Laurin's hips and brought her down on his cock hard enough to force a gasp from her. Again and again he took her in time with the lovers on stage, in time with the pounding heartbeat of the community. When another male joined the central gathering, Laurin thought her body would burst. There

was too much energy in the area, Matt's power spilling out, her own magic escaping in small eddies that swirled around them.

She could take no more—her every resistance had been torn down. Her natural reticence to witness such a public display was erased by the beauty of the connection. Laurin closed her eyes and concentrated on Matt, bringing a small measure of privacy to their lovemaking.

Silence fell again and her eyes flew open, needing to see what it foretold this time. Matt pulled her back, his hands cupping her breasts, then moving to play at the apex of her clit. Spinning her lust into a frenzy as the third man circled the joined trio, reaching out his hand to skim his fingers lightly over their bodies. He stepped beside the platform and stoked his cock, fisting from tip to base.

*Thump.*

Another stroke of his hand, and another beat rang against the ground as the crowd picked up the rhythm. Each thrust he made bought the tempo to a higher speed, the men entering the woman's body joining in, and when the standing male approached the woman, she threw back her head and laughed out loud. Opened her jaw wide, and took his cock into her mouth.

The dancer was filled to completion, three men worshipping her body, three sets of hands stroking and priming her. The passion in the center of the stage glowed like a miniature sun. Laurin was no longer shocked, or embarrassed, or any of the things she'd imagined she should feel. Fire licked her skin, filled her core, sparkled along her fingertips and exploded out from her.

She'd had enough watching, and all she needed was to reach a final conclusion.

With Matt.

She rose from his lap, painfully empty as his cock pulled from the shelter of her sex. Laurin turned to face him, reached up to strip off the bikini top. She cupped her own breasts and his gaze fixed on her hands. He ignored the ceremony, ignored the noises rising on the air as the tempo of feet on the ground was joined by what could be nothing less than the echo from bodies connecting. The slap of skin meeting skin rang loudly, and yet his attention remained solely on her.

Laurin peeled away the tiny skirt to stand naked before him. Seeing his attentive fascination made her forget, and yet not forget. She knew where she stood. She knew there was the possibility that others were even now staring at her naked butt.

She didn't give a damn. He was hers to claim. Laurin straddled him, surrounded his shaft with her hand and stroked until a moan of pleasure fled his lips. She held his cock vertical and eased him into her body.

So good, so exactly what she needed. Matt adjusted her and leaned in to catch a nipple between his teeth. She gave a little scream. Pain and pleasure wrapped around each other, and she arched into him, wanting more. His fingers dug into her hips as he moved her, helping her to rise and fall, spearing them together. One hand slid to cover her butt, his lean fingers tracing the line between her ass cheeks. When he

rubbed the tight star hidden there, she gasped. When he pressed in to the knuckle, sparks exploded behind her eyes, and she was lost.

All around them magic and nature blended together in a perfect finish. Her orgasm seemed to make the stars pop out brighter in the sky, a flash of northern lights shimmering in the air. The whoosh of an ocean breeze fluttered through the gathering, ruffling her hair and cooling the heated surface of her skin. All the time he pumped into her, the thickness of his cock forcing her to accept additional shards of pleasure after she'd already experienced more than she'd imagined possible.

"Laurin... Oh, yes." Matt flexed his hips one last time before stilling, a drop of sweat trickling down his temple as his cock jerked within her. A backlash of aftershocks took her and she quivered in his arms. There was nothing in the universe but him and her, and all the stars swirling against their skin, depositing desire and lust with each flicker. He wrapped her close, their skin sticking together as they clung together tightly, her climax going on and on.

She collapsed against his chest and let him support her, the loud thumping in her ears seeming out of place until she realized it was the sound of Matt and her heartbeats alone. The clan's rhythmic contribution had ended, although she wasn't sure exactly when. They remained seated, Matt's hand roaming over her shoulders, her back. Resting lightly on her hips.

That had been the most incredible experience of her life. A yawn escaped and he laughed quietly.

"Did I wear you out?"

Silence surrounded them. A flash of recollection hit and her face heated. She'd ridden Matt like a bull in front of the entire clan. "Is everyone still here?" she whispered.

He smoothed the back of his knuckles against her cheek. "Would it matter?"

Yes. *No*. She lowered her head and stared at him from under her lashes and he grinned.

"You can peek. It's safe."

She turned slowly, her ears alert for the sounds of the clan. There was nothing except the continued sound of lovemaking from the center of the stage. The four participants lay curled together on the massive platform, hands still stroking. Mouths connecting.

The entire area around the stage was empty, only six torches remaining to light the area.

"Where did everyone go? Why didn't I hear them?" Laurin whispered the words, not wanting to interrupt the foursome.

"They left after the ceremony was complete. I imagine they left rapidly with things on their minds."

She peeked at him. A wide grin split his handsome face. "You don't know for sure when they left?"

He shook his head. "I was distracted."

Warm contentment filled her. She hadn't been the only one then.

There was no chance to escape the kiss he dragged her into. Not that she wanted to, but they couldn't sit there all night, naked and kissing.

Could they?

A purr of contentment followed by a sharp needy gasp made her twirl her head to seek the source. James had his face buried between the woman's legs as her other lovers stroked and suckled her breasts. Impossibly, another streak of desire hit. How could she possibly feel the urge for any more sex after that incredible climax she'd just experienced?

"Are they going to have sex all night long?" Aching need lingered in her mind and yet now that she wasn't in the flush of desire, embarrassment as well.

Matt used his hand to turn her face to his. "They will. Tradition states the longer they last, the more fruitful the coming year will be."

Such dedication to hedonistic pleasure. She squeezed her legs together at the thought of three men taking her over and over.

He placed his arms under her limbs and stood, carrying her easily. Laurin rested her head on his chest and wished she were brave enough to ask if they could stay and watch for longer. Her discomfort with feeling such a desire warred with the level of curiosity screaming inside her core. She was truly becoming the most forward creature, but that seemed to be what Matt needed, and her part of their relationship bargain was to be there for him, as he'd been for her.

She held back a gasp of shock when Matt stopped beside the platform and lowered her to stand with him. They stood, naked, as the dancers—the lovers—rolled apart and rose to their feet. Laurin stared as all four, one after another, kissed Matt full on the lips. He smiled at them all, nodding his acceptance.

In unison they turned to her.

She waited, uncertain what to do. The female dancer stepped forward, pressing their unclothed bodies together in a hug that felt far softer and warmer than any feminine connection Laurin had ever experienced before. A light kiss landed on her lips before the woman withdrew. The first male dancer bowed more formally, scooping up her fingers and kissing them. The other man did the same, then backed away, regaining the platform with the woman and falling back into each other's grasps.

Only James remained. Laurin snuck a peek at Matt, her hand sneaking involuntarily to cover her chest. James's grin widened.

At her side, Matt spoke quietly. "Laurin, this ass wants to give you honor as well. Will you let him?"

She stepped closer, seeking the protection of his warm body. "What exactly is he intending on doing?"

Matt's hand brushed her back, coming to rest intimately on her hip. "Nothing but a kiss. Unless you want more."

Her head whipped around and she stared at him. "But surely you don't want me to... I mean—"

Matt's grip tightened. "No, I don't want him to do anything more than complete the ceremonial ritual, but it's your right to accept more."

“No. Nothing more.” The words exploded out, and she watched James’s expression fade from one of anticipation to resignation.

“Ah, well, a fellow’s got to hope, you know.”

Matt growled lightly. “Go on, and don’t take all day.”

James dipped his head politely, then reached out a hand to Laurin. She glanced hesitantly at Matt. He nodded, and she took a steadying breath and placed her fingers in James’s. He kissed them briefly before tugging her closer and nestling her tight against him. Her naked skin had cooled in the brief time they’d stood talking, and a physical connection between them flickered like embers under a fine layer of ashes. Banked heat, waiting to flare up with the slightest provocation. He slipped his fingers around her neck and pressed their lips together.

Deep disappointment and blessed relief hit simultaneously. The man was sexy, and giving, and...just didn’t turn her on. The thought of having another man touch her while she made love with Matt—that didn’t seem as far-fetched as she’d believed at the start of the evening. There was something simmering far below the surface that had been extremely turned on watching the performance.

But not with James.

The otter shifter released her with a sigh, shaking his head sorrowfully. He clicked his tongue and turned to Matt. “Ah, mate, you’ve found yourself a fine one with this lady.”

Matt surrounded her, taking possession and hiding her frame against his. “I have, and you remember it.”

James tilted his head cockily. “Well, if you’ll not take me as a third right now, then I’d best return to my party.”

He spun and strode the few paces back to where the others of his clan had resumed their lovemaking. Laurin had had enough. She tucked her face into Matt’s neck and shook as the whole evening crashed in on her.

His lips touched her temple. Tender. Warm. “Let me get you home.”

She let him take her by the hand and lead her back to their cabin, and all the time that word spun in her brain. *Home*.

It was becoming clearer that meant less a physical location and more wherever Matt happened to be.

## Chapter Seven

The tide would turn in a few short hours. Matt moved smoothly over the deck as he made the final adjustments he needed to ready the *Stormchild* to sail. There were extra bodies scattered all over the ship—members of the clan lending a hand bringing his and Laurin’s possessions on board, as well as stealing a final opportunity to snoop on the shaman and his lady’s private space.

Matt had never looked forward to moving to a new community more in his life.

“Ho, the ship.” Willam stood at the railing, peering toward the wheelhouse. “Is your woman already on board?”

Probably hoped Matt would somehow forget and leave without her. As if that was possible. Since the night of the ceremony they’d been linked even closer. Not only in their physical reactions, but it was as if the ceremony had triggered some kind of revelation in both of them.

“She’s with the children, saying farewell and giving last-minute assignments.”

Willam nodded. He clapped his hands and a group of men appeared, carrying a heavy chest and lowering it carefully to the decking.

Matt strode over. “What is this?”

The otter chief grinned. “Your wedding gift from my people.”

“But we can’t—”

The man’s hand rose regally to stop Matt’s protests. “You honored us by being the first community you visited after becoming one. We honor you as is your right and our privilege.”

Willam crossed his arms over his bulky chest. Stubborn, good-hearted fool. There was nothing Matt needed from this clan, but to turn the gift away?

He bowed. “We give you thanks.”

Willam smiled, his teeth flashing white. “You’re welcome.”

The clan leader turned to the dock and clapped again, and another group scurried on board. Matt eyed the second chest with trepidation. Generosity was one thing, but he had to be able to stow all these new items safely and the *Stormchild* wasn’t built like a barge. “Are there many more, sir?”

A loud laugh escaped the man. “This is for Laurin. She can thank me properly the next time you return.”



There was far too much innuendo implied in that comment, but Matt chose to let it go. The leader turned and walked away without another glance, leaving Matt silently amused as he directed the clan men where to store the chests.

The rest of their leave-taking was far less dramatic than their arrival. Laurin arrived within five minutes of her expected time, the gathering of little ones who had escorted her scattering back to their mothers as she made her way over the plank to reach the deck. He waved, and finished his prep, watching her every chance he got until she ducked below and disappeared from his sight. When she returned topside she wore a thin tank top, her arms bare to the sunshine and the rising breeze. She leaned back on the cabin house, her dark eyes fixed on him as he took them out of the marina. A dozen of the clan still sprawled naked on the deck and she raised a brow and indicated them with her head.

“It’s okay,” he called out. “They’re simply looking for an adventure.”

She crossed her arms. “How long is this adventure supposed to last?”

“Not long.” The *Stormchild* broke free from the harbor, the waves rising to greet the keel and the clan shouted in delight. One after another they raced to the prow and leapt from the deck, shifting in midair to land with a splash in their otter forms.

Laurin rushed forward, laughter escaping as she wrapped an arm around Matt’s waist. “They are the most rambunctious, the most fun loving, and the most alive of any of the People of the Sea.”

Matt nuzzled under her ear with his nose, keeping one arm wrapped around her waist and the other firmly on the tiller. “And they can totally drive a person insane.”

She smiled at him, her eyes widening as she stared over his shoulder. “Shit. I think we picked up a stowaway.”

Matt twisted his head and swore. The last thing he’d expected, the last person he wanted to see. “James. You sea dog. What the hell are you doing?”

His friend pushed off the tarp that had covered him and stood, running a hand through his dark hair. He was naked, as usual, and grinned at Laurin while wiggling his brows. “Just thought I’d check one more time if you needed me for anything.”

“Go.”

Matt roared it out at the same instant Laurin seconded his command, pointing back toward the village, her other fist firmly planted on her hip.

James raised his hands in entreaty. “Fine, I’ll leave. But you’ll need a third sometime. I wanted you to know I’m available...”

Matt didn’t think of using his shaman power. In fact, he was sure he had a tight grip on his reflexes, but suddenly James slid across the deck, hit the railing and tipped over backward. The size of the resulting splash indicated the man hadn’t had time to shift to otter before reaching the water’s surface.

Hell. He didn't know Laurin had the ability to do that. Matt twisted to stare at her in surprise. "Remind me not to piss you off."

"Me? What did I do? I didn't think that was a very nice way for you to treat your friend, even if he's got sex on the brain."

"That wasn't me." He let go of the tiller and went to peer over the railing. Otters danced and played around the *Stormchild*, leaping the wake in some crazy imitation of their dolphin cousins.

Laurin's face was white. "Then how...?"

He motioned her to wheelhouse, switching the controls and preparing to sail. "We can talk about it more when we get underway. But I think, perhaps, your powers and mine decided James had had enough of our time."

"We did that together?"

"It's the only explanation." She looked so concerned he paused to smooth a hand down her arm, comforting her. "It's okay. As strange as it seems, there was no harm done by it. And don't worry about James—trust me, it's not the first time he's ever been kicked out from where he wasn't requested."

She gave a laugh and nodded, kissing his cheek before moving to get out of his way.

Laurin tucked the last of her things into the compartments in the forward berth. Leaving any community was usually bittersweet, but this was the first time she'd actually not looked forward to her next destination.

The journey there with Matt—time with some privacy—was all that was on her mind.

She'd never realized how very lonely she'd become over the past years. Moving from community to community had ensured her secrecy, but had also never allowed her to find anyone to confide in. This past month having Matt by her side had been a delight. Someone to talk to in the evenings, someone to bounce ideas off, even if it was in the stolen moments between his busy schedule and her own.

The cold empty ache in her core was warmer these days, and she would willingly confess it was because of Matt's presence in her life.

She made her way toward the deck, stopping in the galley to put on a kettle of water for coffee. The tidy kitchen area made her smile—everything about the *Stormchild* reminded her of Matt. Organized, neat, and yet full of energy and surprises. His very presence was felt in the surroundings. She stirred sweetener into their drinks and covered the mugs with travel lids to take topside with her.

He was unfurling the spinnaker, aligning it with wind and letting the *Stormchild* move slowly with the rising breeze.

"Need me to do anything?" she called out.

He tossed a brilliant smile at her over his shoulder even as he shook his head. "Nearly done."

Laurin put his coffee into a cup holder alongside the aft seating before wandering forward to face the direction of their travel. Sunlight danced on the ocean's surface, tiny sparkles flashing as waves curled and broke before their prow.

Traveling forward. Headed for new destinations. She had children to teach all along the coast, with adjustments to make to fit her schedules with Matt's. Every place they stopped she'd find new delights to entertain her. The ship dipped and rose, cradled by the ocean. It reminded her of flying—of the rise and fall when she soared on the wind currents, and suddenly the similarities between their worlds seemed far greater than the differences.

A pair of arms wrapped around her, Matt's cheek pressed close to hers. His breath warmed her as he spoke. "You happy?"

She nodded. "I had a wonderful time with the otter folk. The teaching went well and..." How much could she say? How much did she want to admit? The connection between them grew deeper all the time, but she still didn't understand why.

He twisted her to face him and slanted his mouth over hers. Kissing away her fears that lingered on the surface. When she would have moved against him, though, he withdrew, brushing his fingertips over her lips. "And what? You can't start a sentence like that and not finish it."

Laurin stared at the horizon, the bright water meeting the endless sky. "We still don't know why we're together."

"Do we need to know?"

She frowned. "Of course."

"Right now? Isn't it enough to know that we're headed in the proper direction?" He cupped her face in his hand, the ocean she always saw reflected in his eyes flooding her soul as he stared back. "We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but for now, I am content that we are together. Not just physically, but in all the ways that count." He adjusted their position, turning his back to the wind. "I admire you, Laurin. The advances you accomplished with the children in a limited time—extraordinary. The way you handled the clan and their idiosyncrasies in a polite and yet direct manner—political genius."

She laughed. "Yes, finding new ways to ask for my clothes to be returned always involves diplomatic sweet talk."

They exchanged smiles, the warmth of their bodies melding together like a soft and comfortable blanket. Then the bright light in his eyes deepened to hunger. She saw his passion rise and knew it was for her. Because of her. His voice, when he spoke again, had dropped a level, turning thick with desire.

"You put aside your natural modesty and honored me with your body. That meant your mind and soul willingly gave as well, and I will never forget it."

A shiver ran along her skin as his magic washed her. A blessing. A promise. Her own powers stirred and meshed with his—creating an almost intoxicating blend.

He kissed her again, this time an increased urgency accompanying his touch. She fell under his spell, letting her own needs surface. They could have carried on, been carried away into the most natural consequences if the wind hadn't chosen that moment to gust, flapping the sails wildly.

Matt stepped back, his gaze stroking her skin even as he moved to the ropes to fasten them tighter. "I'm not done with you."

"Promises, promises."

She danced away as he made a teasing grab in her direction. Laurin slipped out of reach, sliding closer to the wheelhouse, only to discover a large chest she hadn't seen before tucked against the wall. The clasps opened easily and she nudged the lid upward, a flash of brightness hitting her eye.

On top of a layer of fabric rested a picture frame. Tiny pieces of abalone and minute shell fragments intertwined in the most intricate design, forming a triad of chains woven in relief against the vertical and cross posts. In the center there was a picture of her and Matt, the sun backlighting them. She stood on the rocky outcrop outside the village, her hand extended toward him. He was reaching up toward her, his head tilted back, feet firmly placed on the beach. Their fingers had just touched, the sun shining like a spotlight on the connection point.

Her heart skipped a beat.

She stared for the longest time, only subtly aware of the ship's movements as Matt guided them. When they'd set out together, not so very long ago, it had been a relationship built completely on mutual attraction. The mystical attachment that followed had been unexpected, but he was right—all they had to do right now was acknowledge it existed. The *why* would eventually make itself clear.

But there was another emotion growing. She clutched the picture to her chest and twisted to stare at Matt as he turned them into the shelter of a bay for the night. He guided the *Stormchild* confidently, as he'd dealt with so many other issues over the past days. He'd said he admired her...

There was plenty to admire about him as well.

The splash of the anchor hitting the water woke her from her reverie and she started. He approached smoothly, his expression indulgent and pleased.

"You found our gifts from the otter clan. Is there something that pleases you?"

She nodded, then held out the picture. Laurin waited to see his response, anxiety fluttering inside—maybe he wouldn't see the significance of the shot. He knelt beside her and brushed her hair behind one ear. He cupped her neck, touching their foreheads together. They stayed that way for a long time, their breaths synchronizing, bodies swaying slightly with the gentle movement of the ship as she rested for the night.

He tilted her chin and Laurin saw it in his eyes. He understood. A rush of emotion hit her and she wondered how fear and joy, uncertainty and confidence, could all be present simultaneously, but somehow, they were.

Matt brushed his lips against hers, speaking with the whisper of the wind. “We will move forward together. Wherever this path takes us.”

Laurin smiled and leaned into his frame, tucking into the protection of his body. Accepting the worship of his hands, the steadfastness of his caring.

The water’s path was uncertain, but she’d take the journey. With him.

## About the Author

Vivian Arend has hiked, biked, skied and paddled her way around most of North America and parts of Europe. Throughout all the wandering in the wilderness, stories have been planted and they are bursting out in vivid colour. Paranormal, twisted fairytales, red-hot contemporaries—the genres are all over.

Between times of living with no running water, she home schools her teenaged children and tries to keep up with her husband—the instigator of most of the wilderness adventures.

She loves to hear from readers: [vivarend@gmail.com](mailto:vivarend@gmail.com). You can also drop by [www.vivianarend.com](http://www.vivianarend.com) for more information on what is coming next.

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*These elements have no desire to be tamed...*

## Stormchild

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### *Pacific Passion, Book 1*

As the new traveling doctor for the Pacific Inside Passage settlements, Matthew Jentry balances dual roles for his water-shifter people—caring for their health as a human-trained physician, and for their spiritual needs as a shaman.

Distractions of the female kind are not on his agenda, but his magical bloodline makes him a target for every marriage-minded woman within range. There's something about the mysterious Laurin Marshall, though, that he finds far too enticing. It's just as well that it's time for him to move on.

Laurin thought she had perfected her guise as a mild-mannered teacher, but the sexual fireworks she and Matt touch off are threatening to blow her cover out of the water. Luckily it's time for her to catch the boat to her next assignment.

When she discovers she'll be sailing with Matt, she realizes there's only one thing more dangerous than their unforgettable one-night stand—being trapped with him on a boat that gives “riding out the storm” a whole new meaning...

*Warning: Contains strong sexual currents and powerful waves of desire that break down inhibitions. Recommended only for those able to navigate through extremely steamy situations, on land and at sea.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Stormchild:*

She jerked herself upright. *What the hell was up with her hormones?*

Laurin enjoyed sex. Not in the “need it, gotta have it” daily kinda way like her caffeine or dark chocolate. But ever since she'd laid eyes on Matthew Jentry, she'd been like a homing pigeon trying to come back to roost. She imagined his capable hands on the wheel, guiding them through the dangerous passage. Better yet to imagine his hands on her body, smoothing up her torso to cup her breasts, his dark skin contrasting with her fairness. He'd roll his thumbs over her nipples while supporting the aching globes in his palms.

Laurin leaned back on the short countertop and closed her eyes. God, she could almost feel it, the tingling sensation from her tight nubs trailing through her body to fire her core. She rubbed her breasts in an attempt to stop the throbbing. The sensation felt so wonderful she trailed a hand down her belly, slipping under the elastic waistband of her shorts to press on her aching clit. Desire wrapped around her like a cloud on the mountaintop and she was powerless to stop it.

Curses sounded from the deck above her and she startled, suddenly realizing she was fondling herself where Matt could walk in at any time. Heat flushed her face and she hurried to deal with the now-singing



kettle. Her heart thumped in her throat and her hands shook as she poured the water into the French press she'd found. Then she leaned her forehead on the cool glass of the small round window in the saloon, trying to calm her soul. By the time the coffee was ready she was back to being agitated instead of direly horny. She stirred an extra spoonful of sugar into her travel mug in the hopes the calories would help her deal with the stress.

She stared at the second cup in frustration. She didn't know how he liked his coffee and she was scared to death to go up the four steps to the wheelhouse and ask him. That would require actually looking at his face. Speaking to him.

Oh hell, she was screwed big-time.

The engine sound faded and she turned in a panic to face the door, her hands clutching her cup protectively in front of her like a shield. Solid footsteps paced away for a minute, a loud splash sounded, and then the steps returned. The door opened smoothly and his sandaled feet appeared as he took the stairs toward her two at a time. He stopped at the base, his chest heaving. His nostrils flared as he glared at her with his cobalt eyes.

He slowed his approach. One step. Two. The third put him toe to toe with her and she shrank back against the counter. He loosened her death grip on the cup, reaching past her to place it somewhere behind her. Their torsos touched and scalding heat flashed. Laurin realized she held her breath and she released it slowly, a puff at a time. He shifted and his firm chest brushed her already erect nipples. He caged her, one arm on either side of her body before deliberately pressing his hips into her. Oh hell, his erection felt huge against her belly. Moisture flooded her passage and she whimpered.

Matt leaned into her harder, every inch of their bodies in contact. He tilted his head and approached her mouth. She was sure he must hear the roaring beat of her heart. He touched their lips together, his eyelashes brushing hers like a butterfly's kiss and she exhaled with a little moan.

She was on fire. This wasn't what she'd expected.

Matt spoke against her lips, his voice shaking. Every word punctuated with a soft kiss. "You're...driving...me...insane."

Then the storm broke between them and his gentleness vanished. She flung her arms around him and pulled his lips to hers. Lightning flared between their souls, the frenzy of her needs whipping like the whitecaps outside on the ocean. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and she accepted it, sucking it in uneven pulses. Their hips ground together and she wrapped a leg around his hip, opening her body in an attempt to line up her clit with the tempting rock of his erection. He thrust into her, lifting her hips slightly to help and then it was there. Just what she needed—the angle, the pressure. She groaned into his mouth and he swallowed the sound. The air around them heated, rippling with magic as he lifted her to the surface of the counter. Behind her the coffee mug tipped, rolling harmlessly into the sink with a clatter. His hands were busy, unsnapping her shorts, tugging at her T-shirt.

“I need to touch you. I need to see you.” He growled and stepped back, shaking his head like a wild beast. The lightning came from his eyes and she stared in fascination as he leaned on the wall across from her. They were all of three feet apart and it seemed like a mile. “I don’t understand this. I will stop if you ask me to, but God I hope you feel like I do. I have to have you again.”

Panic hit. Then delight. Fear followed rapidly by desire. His need poured over her, echoed by her own arousal. *Now? Here?* “The storm...”

“The ship is anchored in a bay. We’re as safe as we’re going to get.” His hands clenched into fists, his entire body rigid. A wave of magic floated past her again, overwhelming her senses. She reached deep to try to counter it. It had been so long since she’d used that part of her nature her skin burned. The answering flash of passion that exploded from within was not what she expected. Instead of cooling her ardor for the shaman watching her with lust in his eyes, her fascination grew.

He was willing to stop? Oh God, if he stopped she would die.

*No strings? Try hopelessly tangled.*

## Serengeti Sunrise

© 2011 Vivi Andrews

### *Serengeti Shifters, Book 4*

Zoe King is itching to get out of Three Rocks. Sure, the pride is more progressive with her brother in charge. She's just got a bad case of wanderlust...and an even worse case of the hots for Tyler Minor.

The pride's mechanic sets her senses on fire one second, then shuts down and walks away the next. Before she hits the road for good, this lioness decides it's time to bring their cat-and-mouse game to a *satisfying* end.

Twenty years ago, Tyler's father walked out and left him with a mountain of responsibility. Now that his younger siblings are settled, the last thing he wants or needs is another obligation. Which is exactly what he'll get if he screws around with the Alpha's sister.

When Zoe offers—more like *demands*—a no-strings affair, temptation wins and he finds his hands in places they shouldn't be, and his thoughts straying to words like *his*. But Zoe's got her own ideas about possessive, chest-banging males. And they don't include white picket fences...or letting Tyler keep her out of the danger zone when an outside threat to the pride's secrecy becomes all too real.

*Warning: This story contains sexual relations, manipulations, ultimatums and two strong-willed shifters determined to be on top.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Serengeti Sunrise:*

Zoe launched herself out of the truck. "Tyler!" His only response was the clang of the heavy metal door to the garage slamming behind him after he ducked inside. "*Dammit.*" She stalked after him. Cutting through the garage was the fastest way to the main part of the compound, but they weren't finished here yet and she was going to make sure he knew it.

She ran to the door, jerked it open and surged through, carried on a tide of indignant frustration.

"Tyler!" Her shout echoed in the garage bay along with the ringing clang of the heavy door banging shut behind her. "Stop running and face me, you coward!"

Two yards from the front exit, Tyler's feet took root on the concrete floor. She could hear a growl rumbling in his chest. His lion must not have liked being called a coward. Well, hers didn't much like him running away from her.

Her lioness was ready for this fight, had been itching for it for months.

He turned to face her, his eyes narrowed and hands loose around his hips like a gunslinger. As they faced one another across the length of the garage, she felt that high-noon feeling herself. Tension snapped

in the air, the unavoidable sense that *something* was coming. Something that had been bearing down on them for a while now.

Love or war. Whichever it was, there wasn't any middle ground. They'd burned it all away with the friction of the last year.

"Coward?" he asked, his voice a soft, dark rumble.

"You have another word you'd prefer?" She strolled across the concrete floor, adding an extra sway to her hips as she came to stand directly in front of him. "Chicken? Pussy, perhaps?"

"Don't push me, Zoe." He rumbled the warning.

"Or what? You gonna show me who's boss? Or are you just gonna run away like you always do? Like a coward."

His lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl and he loomed over her. She could practically feel his lion pushing against his skin, burning with the need to prove to her, once and for all, which one of them would end up on top if it ever came down to a battle for dominance. He might play at being civilized, but Tyler wanted to make her submit. She could see it in the luminous feline gold of his eyes.

"Are you going to kiss me or throttle me?" Zoe tipped her chin back, meeting his eyes with a blatant challenge. "Whichever you're going to do, do it now. Because I'm sick of waiting for you to make up your mind."

"What makes you think I didn't make up my mind months ago and you just can't take a hint?"

"What hint was that? The way you stare at me when you think I'm not looking? How you take the longest possible path between your bungalow and the garage each evening just so you can go past my house? Or maybe the fact that you can't tell when I'm in heat because you *always* want me?"

He turned away, striding toward the door. "That's quite a healthy ego you have there."

"It's all in my head, is that it?" He put his hand on the door and Zoe felt her composure fracture. "Dammit, Tyler! What the fuck is your deal?" He didn't turn back to her, but he didn't open the door either. She shouted at his back. "You want me. I've made it embarrassingly obvious I want you too. So what is the big problem?"

"Your brother..."

"I'm twenty-seven years old. I don't have to ask his permission to fuck whoever the hell I want."

He turned, leaning his shoulders against the door, one hand still resting on the knob. "He's the Alpha—"

"So what? This has nothing to do with him. He doesn't even have to know."

"He'll know."

"Who the fuck cares? Because I'm the Alpha's sister, I'm not allowed to get any?"

"I don't want any more commitments in my life. I'm sick of being responsible for everyone."

“Who’s talking about a commitment? I’m talking about *sex*. Fucking. Screwing. Banging our brains out. No strings attached. I never *asked* you for a fucking commitment, dumbass.”

“It’s never going to be no strings. Not with the Alpha’s sister.”

“God, I am so sick of being the Alpha’s sister. I’m *Zoe*. Can we just have one conversation that doesn’t include Landon?”

Tyler thunked his head back against the door. “Look, Zoe, if I wanted to stay here at the pride for the rest of my life and mate with a little lioness who’d give me lots of fat babies, you’d be the first person I’d—”

She cut him off with a solid punch to his shoulder that made him wince. “You *asshole*. Would you listen to me for five seconds? *I don’t want to marry you*. I’m not Mara the fucking baby-making machine. If you tried to give me a picket fence, I would rip up the posts and shove them up your ass. So stop trying to put me in that box.” She slapped her palms flat on his chest, baring her teeth up at him. “I want sex. And I want it from you. So do you want me or not? Because I’m done waiting. We’re deciding this, once and for all. Are you a man or what? Because for someone with the teeth of an alpha lion, you’re awfully fucking scared of me.”

He grabbed her so fast her back was slamming against the door before she even realized his hands were on her waist. Her hat went flying, landing somewhere on the dirty floor. “Scared, am I?” He gripped her jaw and forced her face up to his. “Does this look like fear to you?”

His expression was harsh and unforgiving, the animal running close to the surface. There was nothing contained or distant about the heat in his eyes. *Who is this man and what has he done with Tyler Minor?* Zoe’s breathing quickened.

His claws flexed against her side. Zoe wet her lips. She’d goaded him to this.

A little flicker of misgiving flared in her chest.

“Hasn’t anyone told you not to bait lions?” he growled, palming her nape.

Zoe’s heart stopped then restarted and accelerated. The nervous sensation got lost in a flood of heat as he took command. *Finally*. This was it. After a year of foreplay, it was finally happening. Quick, rough, one and done. At last, she’d get over this stupid obsession.

Tyler Minor had her pinned between hard and harder, leaving no doubt in her mind exactly how much he wanted her. Then he leaned in and sealed his mouth over hers, and Zoe forgot everything but the taste of him. This wasn’t just a quickie to get him out of her system. This was *everything*.

*Being needed isn't half as desirable as being wanted.*

## Undertow

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### *Building Sanctuary, Book 2*

Victor left behind a life of crime to focus on a new vision—helping his alpha build an island sanctuary for werewolves. Harsh experiences prepared him for the hardships involved, except when it comes to dealing with the young female refugees of the brutal Boston pack—especially Simone, who rouses his inner wolf like no other. A woman he must resist, or risk becoming just the latest man to make demands on her.

Born to wealth and privilege, Simone lost everything when she fell for the seductive whispers of the textile heir who turned her. Once adrift, now she is fired by a new sense of purpose—the chance to broker peace between werewolves and European wizards. Yet even as Europe beckons, her instincts—the same ones that led to trouble before—keep drawing her back to Victor.

During a sailing trip to the mainland for supplies, Victor finds it impossible to hold himself aloof from the warm, engaging Simone. And when a winter storm traps them together during a full moon, she breaks through his walls so easily and completely, the question is no longer how he'll stay away, but how he'll let her go.

*Warning: This novella contains werewolves engaged in such improbable (but legal) activities as lobster fishing and sailing during nor'easters. The breaking and entering and instinct-driven sex on every surface in someone else's summer cottage is a little more criminal.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Undertow:*

Shifting back to his human form too soon would leave him feral and edgy, but staying a wolf too long would exhaust her. After a few hours, Victor began to herd her back in the direction of the cabin, willing to deal with his own discomfort to spare hers.

She caught on, but stopped short with a yip, and he had to nudge her on before she moved again. She paused again as soon as they cleared the trees by the cabin, watching him carefully.

He huffed and nipped at her flank, and she danced away and bounded to the door. He'd propped it open before shifting, so she had only to push it wide and run inside.

Magic rippled through the air as he ran in, and he found her already kneeling by the banked fire, her pale skin glinting in the dim light. "We'll have to stir this up."

Victor nudged the door shut and let her see to the fire. She had the advantage now. Freed from the call of the moon, she wouldn't fall victim to it again unless fear or pain brought the wolf to the surface.

He had a harder battle to fight. The moon hung heavy overhead and dug claws deep into his soul. The

wolf struggled, demanding another chance to run and revel, to be free and wild.

Long minutes passed before he knelt trembling on the floor, sides heaving with rough pants.

“You didn’t have to come back in,” she murmured. “You could stay out. I’ll be fine.”

“So will I.” *Eventually*. “I wanted to come with you.”

The flames jumped and crackled as the fresh logs caught, and Simone stood slowly. “Can I help?”

She was naked. Beautiful. His to take. Even with pain lingering in his body, his cock stiffened. “That depends. Do you still want me?”

She tilted her head, and a coppery curl fell over her cheek. “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want you.”

The answer was everything he needed. He rocked to his feet and crossed the space between them, stopping a foot away to admire the wicked curves of her body. Full breasts, flared hips, soft, pale skin... “You’re so beautiful.”

She closed some of the distance, her fingertips skimming his arms as her gaze drifted down his body. “So are you.”

He had to make it worth the wait. He had to make up for every moment of pain he’d caused her, erase it all and leave pleasure in its place. The bed was close enough to the fire to benefit from its warmth, so he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the rumpled blankets.

When he laid her on the bed, Simone bit her lip and held out her arms. “Seems silly to be nervous, but I am.”

Victor had no idea if Simone had taken a lover after Edwin, and had no intention of bringing the bastard up now. Instead he slid onto the bed, into her arms, and kissed her softly. “Nothing to be nervous about, darling.”

“It’s easy for you.” She wrapped her hands around him and pulled him closer. “Every time you kiss me, I turn to mush.”

“Just because I’m getting harder instead of softer doesn’t mean you’re not turning me to mush.”

Some of the nervousness faded from her smile, and she teased one hand down his side. “An interesting point. One I’ll have to bear in mind.”

He would kiss her first, he decided. Kiss her until she’d forgotten what nerves were, then trace every inch of her with his tongue. She deserved a slow seduction. Worship. He’d claim her by pleasing her.

Her mouth opened under his, soft and needy, and she made quiet noises of pleasure. Before long, her body arched to his, hot and seeking.

The feel of her soft skin under his fingers drove him half-mad. He spread his fingers wide on her abdomen, sweeping his thumb up and down until she nipped at his chin, then gave in and swept his hand up to cup her breast.

Her gasp echoed in the quiet of the room as her nipple hardened under his palm. “Yes.”

“You like this?” He teased his thumb over her nipple and delighted in the play of pleasure across her face. “Would you like my tongue? My teeth?”

Her breath caught, and she slipped her own hand to her other breast and echoed his movements. “Both.”

So he gave her both, teasing licks giving way to soft nips as his fingers traced her hip and her waist and the soft curve of her belly—anywhere but the beckoning heat between her thighs.

As Simone’s pleasure grew, so did her confidence. She smiled wickedly and rubbed her thigh against his erection. “Can I touch you?”

He couldn’t deny her anything with that light filling her eyes. “Any damn place you want.”

Her hand skimmed his stomach and his hip. “Here?”

If she wrapped her fingers around his dick, he’d explode. It might be worth it. “*Anywhere.*”

“Anywhere,” she echoed softly, the back of her hand grazing his hard flesh. “It’s been a long time, Victor.”

An answer to the question he hadn’t asked, and all the more reason to take things slowly. She’d tamed the feral edge of the wolf with her first hesitant smile, and it made it easy to roll onto his back. He tugged at her hand, pulling it up against his chest. “All the time in the world to get it right.”

She sat up, kneeling over his thigh. “You won’t hurt me.”

The fact that it was almost a question made him want to hurt *someone*, but he refused to bring anger to bed with them, no matter its object. “Not in a thousand years.”

Simone released a soft breath, one he doubted she knew she’d been holding, and bent over him until her lips met his bare shoulder.

It felt good—it felt fucking *fantastic*, but lying passively was its own sort of torture. He let himself thread his fingers loosely through her hair but didn’t try to guide her. Instead he channeled the need trembling inside him into words. “I’m going to spend hours touching you. So many places I want to kiss.”

“Here?” She kissed the center of his chest, then lower. “Or here?”

He tightened his fingers in her hair and lifted her head, giving her a deadly serious look. “I’ll let you lick my cock like an ice cream cone if that’s what you want, but you look me in the eye first and tell me *you* want to.”

Again, that gentle smile. “I wouldn’t if I didn’t want to, but I do. I want to taste you.”

Christ, he really *was* going to come like an overeager boy. And he didn’t care, as long as she let him keep touching her. “Do I get to return the favor?”

She laughed and nibbled at his stomach. “Absolutely.”

He was tempted—more than tempted—to drag her hips around and show her just what he could do with his tongue. Let her ride his mouth while she went down on him, see who lost it first. Tempting—but he didn’t want any distractions when he made her come the first time. Not for him, and not for her.



Simone stroked his cock, lightly at first and then harder, her eyes locked with his. "I like the way you look at me."

"How am I looking at you?" It came out as a growl, but she didn't seem to mind.

"As if there's no doubt at all," she whispered. "Like you *want* me." She touched her tongue to the head of his cock, licking delicately.

No power in hell or on earth could have kept his hips from jerking up toward the heat of her mouth. "Like I'm imagining how good you'll look riding me?"

Her blue eyes darkened with passion. "Like you can't wait to sink into me."

"I can't." Victor drove his teeth into his lower lip to keep rougher words from tumbling out. He wanted to fuck her with his tongue until she was limp and trembling. Slide into her cunt before she finished coming. Watch her face when she realized she was *his*.



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