



Mermaid's Song (Dark Sea Academy 1)

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: My life as I know it is over.

And no, I'm not being dramatic. I've been living as a human, but now I have to return to my mermaid roots because my dad is the new king of Valora. As soon as we arrive, he sends me to the Dark Sea Academy. Whispers and glares greet me at every turn. Students accuse my dad of killing the previous king, his brother.

My first night, the most popular girl tries to kill me. I barely escape, only to run into Bash. He's older and one wrong move from being expelled. Also as gorgeous as he is arrogant. For some reason, he keeps looking at me with concern in his eyes while giving me a crooked smirk. Almost makes me forget all my problems.

But I can't let myself get side-tracked by him. I won't. If I'm to survive the academy, I need to focus on staying alive. Unfortunately, that means relying on Bash—and he's a distraction that could very well cost me everything.

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Chapter 1

The wailing won't stop. It's growing louder by the moment.

I grope at the things on my nightstand, knock a few items to the floor. When I finally find my phone, I manage to silence the shrill alarm.

Fatigue squeezes me. Did I get any sleep? I'll have to open my eyes to find out.

Seven-thirty.

No! I overslept. Why today? I fling off my covers then scramble out of bed, almost crashing to the floor because of the tangled blankets. Halfway across my room, I trip over a shoe. Then my backpack. Nearly slam face-first into the corner of my desk.

Mom's right. I really should pick up this mess I call a bedroom.

This isn't how I want to start today. There's too much on my calendar to be running behind so early. Big track meet. Spanish test. Something else. Can't remember what, though. The history project? No, that's not it. Oh, right. College applications. I have to get those tedious things submitted.

My phone trills an upbeat tone.

A text this early? Only my best friend would reach out at this hour. I glance at the screen. Yep, it's Ivy. I read her message on my way to the bathroom.

Ivy: Marra!! Emma says Roman likes YOU!

The proclamation is followed by a bunch of hearts and kissing emojis.

I nearly drop the phone into the toilet. Roman Lewis likes me? The hottest guy in school? She has to have gotten her signals crossed. Like a bad game of Phone we used to play as kids—when someone purposely changes the message as it travels around the line. Admittedly, it was usually me.

Not this time. Someone is messing with me now. My heart races faster than my mind as I wash my face. No way Roman likes me. It's a cruel joke. There are tons of prettier girls to pick from. More popular ones. Sure, I'm the school's best runner. The trophies along my walls prove as much.

But nobody cares about track.

My phone rings.

Don't be Roman.

It's Ivy.

Relief washes through me. I accept the call.

“Marra! You saw my message. Why didn't you reply? Can you believe this?”

I take a deep breath on the way to my room then dig through my closet for something to wear. Something cute, just in case she's right about Roman.

Even though she's not.

“Hello? Earth to Marra.” If Ivy were here, she’d be waving her hands in front of my face. Thankfully, she isn’t.

“Where did you hear that rumor?” I hold up a lacy teal top that brings out my eyes.

“Straight from Roman’s best friend’s sister.”

I hold back a groan. Definitely a bad game of Phone. “Doesn’t sound promising. I’m not going to hold my breath.”

I choose the shortest skirt allowed by the school dress code. I hate wearing skirts.

“It’s Roman Lewis!” Ivy squeals. “He likes you.”

“Doubtful. And besides, I have important things to think about today. Like that track meet and filling out the rest of my college applications. I hardly have time to think about him.” I put my phone on speaker to get dressed.

“Don’t remind me. The things are driving me crazy. You still applying for Princeton?”

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“Harvard.” I zip the skirt.

“Think you’ll get accepted?”

“I’ll only know if I apply, and that isn’t likely to happen if I’m distracted thinking about Roman.”

“You know, you two could always fill out the applications together.” She sighs like that’s the most romantic notion on earth.

I hate to admit I like the way she thinks, so I change the subject. “How are things with Jackson?”

“We’re gonna break up.” Ivy’s tone sours. “It’s just a question of who dumps who.”

“That bad?” I peer into my vanity mirror and bemoan my hair, which is sticking out in every direction. Too late to wash it. “What happened?”

“We never text anymore, and when we talk, it always ends up in an argument. Always. Last night, we fought about who would make it into the Super Bowl. How lame is that? Maybe you can talk Roman’s best friend into dating me.”

“You make it sound like Roman’s my boyfriend. It’s not going to happen.” I pull my hair into a bun. Still messy, but at least it looks like I meant it that way. “And besides, maybe you can work it out with Jackson. You like him too much to give up so easily.”

“Let’s talk at school. Mom’s on my case to get out the door.”

I glance at the time. Definitely running late. “Okay. See you there.”

We end the call, and I apply some eyeliner. I don’t know why I try. With my strawberry blonde hair, super pale skin, and freckles, there’s no way Roman even knows I’m alive much less has any interest in me. There’s nothing interesting about me.

Why did Ivy have to say anything about it? Now that’s all I’m going to be thinking about.

I add some mascara and lipstick. Not really much of an improvement.

Knock, knock!

“I’m almost ready!” I rub in my foundation. Should’ve done that first. I suck at this. Ivy would be so disappointed.

“You want me to make you a green juice, hon?” Mom calls.

“Yeah, thanks!” I’m glad she’s offering to help instead of chewing me out for running late.

I finish getting ready, stuff my books into my backpack, then head downstairs. And I’m thinking about Roman Lewis instead of the track meet. I need to think about that. And the Spanish test. My applications too. I need to forget about him. How ridiculous—Roman and me. As if that’d ever happen.

I skid to a stop in the kitchen.

My dad is sitting in his place at the table, sipping coffee. Should've left hours ago. He nods at a cup filled with green juice. "Sit, Marra."

His tone sends a shiver down my spine. It's made worse by the fact that he's here and not at work.

Mom's eyes are red, like she's been crying. She won't look at me, which makes me think she doesn't want me to know how upset she is.

My heart skips a beat and I try to figure out what's wrong. I hold out hope that it isn't too bad, and I pretend not to notice her. "Can this wait? I've got a Spanish test today and my track meet this afternoon. College applications when I get home."

Dad's brown eyes look yellow for a second before turning back. Maybe I imagined it. He sets down his mug. "We need to talk now."

I nearly choke on my juice. "Why?"

Mom sits at her spot, keeping her gaze down. Dad stares at me.

"Sit." Dad has such an air of authority. His eyes narrow, but not like he's mad. Just warning me.

Pulse pounding, I sit. My brain scrambles to figure out what they're not telling me.

"Nobody's sick, are they? You're not dying, are you?" I glance back and forth between the two of them. There's no way I can handle losing someone else. I look at the empty chair and my heart aches. "What's going on?"

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Mom and Dad exchange a look. One of those looks parents give each other when there's bad news. I wish they'd just tell me what's wrong. Is one of them going to die? My throat closes up. I don't want to lose either one of them. Sure, we have our differences, but I can't live without them. I can't.

Dad reaches across the table to take Mom's hand. She looks away and blinks quickly. He places his other on top of mine.

I break out into a cold sweat. "Who's dying? Is it me?"

He gives me a kind smile. "Nobody, sweetheart."

It takes me a moment to realize what he just said. I look between them again. "You're not sick? I'm not?"

They both shake their heads. Then exchange another look before Dad clears his throat. He gives me an apologetic glance, but his eyes shine with excitement. "We're moving back to Valora."

There's no way to describe my shock. To say someone yanked the air right out of the room wouldn't do it justice. I can't blink. Can't speak or even breathe.

Mom scoots closer to Dad but keeps her gaze on me. Her eyes are definitely red. "Your ... your—" She turns to look at him. "I can't do this. You tell her."

Dad turns to me. "Your Uncle Tiberias is dead."

I haven't seen him in years, but the news guts me. When I was little, he was my doting uncle. My mind flashes back to the moment I found out my younger sister Aria had died in the car crash. I struggle to breathe.

My dad says something, but I have no idea what.

Not only have I lost my uncle, but this affects every other aspect of my life too. I can forget about Roman, college applications, and getting a track scholarship. We're moving to Valora.

I shake my head, and tears blur my vision. "No! I'm not moving back there."

Dad frowns. "We don't have a choice."

"Can't we just go to the funeral and come back?" I plead with my eyes, despite knowing the answer. It isn't that simple. But there has to be a way out, and I'll find it.

"With my older brother dead, I'm the new king of Valora," Dad says. "There's no avoiding it. And besides, we already missed the funeral. Not that we'd be welcome for it, anyway."

I jump from my seat. "But you said we'd never have to go back! You promised!"

Mom wipes her eyes. "We never expected Tiberias to die so young." Her voice cracks. "It's a shock to everyone."

I struggle to find a loophole. Then I realize the big one. "But Dad was banished! We can't return. We can't!"

He shakes his head. "We have to. Despite my differences with Tiberias, I'm the new leader now. My banishment is lifted."

“I’m not going.” I dig my heel into the ground.

Dad gives me a sympathetic glance. “It doesn’t work that way. You’re next in line after me. You’re now the new heir to Valora’s throne.”

“No.” I step back, shaking my head. How can they throw all of this at me at once?

Mom gets up and wraps me in a warm embrace. “I know it’s a shock. But that’s where we belong. We aren’t meant to live on land.”

“I’m doing just fine, thank you very much. Yes, I’ll miss Uncle Tiberias. But I haven’t seen him since I was a kid, and I have my life here.” I step back and glare at Dad. “In fact, I’m doing so well that I’m going to get another track medal this afternoon. Then I’m going to Harvard. Notice how none of my plans involve an underwater city? Not one.”

Dad rises. “You’ll get a better education at the Dark Sea Academy than even at an Ivy League school. You’ll have far more opportunities as the king’s daughter. And you’ll be able to use your real gifts. Ones that don’t involve legs.”

“I’m not going anywhere!” I grab my backpack and run out of the house.

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Chapter 2

Hot, angry tears blur my vision. I blink them away and focus on the road. How can my parents throw this at me? My uncle's sudden death and us moving to Valora!

There's no way I'm going back.

Not happening.

I've built my life here on the land. Blended in with the humans. Made friends. Created dreams. I have a full life ahead of me that has nothing to do with an underwater city or their politics. I've managed to push aside most thoughts about being a mermaid. As long as I avoid the beach, I'm fine. Nobody's ever questioned anything.

Well, not ever. Ivy's definitely noticed my avoidance of the water. She's my best friend, and she knows everything about me. Well, almost. I can't tell her this. Not like I think she'd sell me to science if she knew my true nature, but it sounds so ridiculous. Unbelievable. If I hadn't lived the mermaid life as a child, I wouldn't believe it myself.

Honk!

Green light. I wave an apology and hit the gas. Time to focus on the road. Once I get to school, I can figure out what to do. There has to be a solution, even if I have to run away. I can make it on my own. Sure, it won't be ideal, but it's doable. It'll be harder without my parents' money, but I can find a way. Even if I have to live in Ivy's closet

for a while. Even that would be preferable to Valora.

Shorecrest High comes into view. I take a deep breath. I can pretend everything's normal until I get home. Mom and Dad will be furious at me for storming off, but they'll get over it. Just like they'll get over me staying on land. Eventually. Maybe. Even if they don't, does it matter? It's not like I'll ever bump into them on the street.

I park in the lot and make my way to the main building.

"Marra!" Ivy waves at me from the courtyard.

I wave and plaster on a smile. If I act like everything is okay, maybe it will be. At least until I get home. I have until tonight to figure out what to do. How to get out of this mess.

Ivy catches up to me and looks me over, a smirk crossing her face. "You want to impress Roman."

In all the madness, I'd forgotten about him.

"You should wear skirts more often." She nods with approval. "You've got killer legs. Could use some tanning cream, though. Want to use some of mine? Or we could get a spray at the salon."

"Yeah, sure. That sounds great."

She tilts her head and studies me. "You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" I try to push aside all thoughts of Valora. Good luck with that.

"You seem distracted." Ivy puts her hands on her hips.

“Got that Spanish test and the meet today. Lots on my mind.”

She arches a brow. “And Roman Lewis.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Ivy glances at my skirt. “But you’re trying. And he already likes you!”

I grab her arm and drag her toward the entrance. “Let’s go. I need to get a folder from my locker.”

She stops, forcing me to also. “What’s the matter? Something’s definitely wrong.”

“Nothing is.”

Ivy narrows her eyes. “Liar. I’m your best friend. You can’t hide anything from me.”

Except I’m a mermaid.

“What is it? Why won’t you tell me?” She pouts. “Don’t you trust me?”

I pull her beyond the courtyard, where we have some privacy. I’m going to have to fess up. “You can’t tell anyone.”

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She pretends to zip her lips and throw away the key. “I knew you were hiding something.”

A lump forms in my throat. “I’m moving.”

Her mouth drops open. “What?”

I nod, not trusting my voice to say anything more.

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

Her face flushes. “You need to graduate with us! They’re ruining your life! How can they do this to you?”

I open my mouth but close it. Can’t exactly tell her my dad is now king of an underwater territory. “His work. He has an opportunity to move up.”

Ivy folds her arms. “Lame. How far? Where is it?”

“Pretty far.”

“Can you still come here?”

I shake my head.

“Remember Liberty Jones? Her parents filled out some paperwork and she was able to graduate with her class, even though she moved a couple cities away.”

“I’m going to be farther away than that. Unless ...” Do I dare tell her my crazy idea of living in her closet?

“What? Unless what?” Her eyes widen. “Tell me!”

I take a deep breath. “I was thinking I could live with you. In your closet, if I have to.”

Ivy squeals. “We’d be like sisters!”

Excitement drums through me. Maybe it could work.

Her smile fades. “Sorry. That was insensitive. Your sister ...”

My heart aches at the mention of my deceased younger sister, but I don’t let the hurt show on my expression. “No. You’re right. If you and I lived together, we would be like sisters.”

“I’d never try to replace Aria.”

“I know. Do you think your parents would go for it?”

“Totally.” She hugs me. “And even if they don’t, we’ll make it happen. It’ll be like the bunny I hid from them in the sixth grade. Remember?”

“The one they found?”

She gives me a sheepish glance. “I doubt you’ll escape and poop on their duvet.”

I snicker. “You never know ...”

Ivy shoves me.

The warning bell rings.

I tighten my hold on my bag. “We’d better go. I can’t be late for Spanish.”

She marches toward the building. “Not to be the bearer of bad news, but I heard Lopez’s test is killer.”

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“Good thing I studied.”

As I’m spinning my locker combination, some of our friends join us.

Natalie runs her fingers through her perfect natural blonde hair. “You two joining us at Raven’s pool party this weekend?”

“Can’t,” I say too quickly. “Family drama. Sorry.”

“You afraid of wearing a swimsuit, Marra?”

I slam my locker shut. “I said I have family stuff to deal with.”

She steps closer. “You never go to pool parties. Like, ever.”

“Maybe next time.” I shrug. “Gotta get to Spanish.”

Emma grins at me. “Roman’s going to be there.”

I swallow. How many people know about his supposed interest in me? “I’m sure he’ll have fun.”

“You’re impossible.” She spins around and walks away.

“Really, you are.” Natalie flicks her hair. “Nice skirt. For Roman?”

My cheeks burn. I whip around before she sees me blushing.

“Don’t listen to them,” Ivy whispers.

“Thanks.” I march toward Spanish class.

“But maybe you should go to the party. It’ll be the perfect distraction. Especially if Roman is there.”

I don’t want to admit how much I’d love to go. Maybe I can go without actually getting in the water. People go to pool parties and just hang out, right? Possibly? Probably not.

“You can borrow one of my suits.”

“I appreciate it, but I can’t go.”

Ivy frowns. “When are you moving? I mean, when are your parents moving? When are you moving into my closet?”

I shrug. “I left before they told me.”

“We’ll talk at lunch. Don’t worry about it. My parents will go for it, and like I said, if they don’t, I can hide you.”

“As long as you don’t expect me to stay in Fluffy’s cage.”

She bursts out laughing.

We part ways and I step into my Spanish class just as the final bell rings.

Señora Lopez shoots me a glare. Several kids giggle. I pretend not to notice as I take my seat in the front row.

She starts speaking in rapid-fire Spanish about the exam. I take a deep breath and try to get my mind in the right place. All I can think about is the pool party and how I can't go without growing a tail. I'd be the laughing stock of the school.

Not gonna happen.

The teacher tells us to take out our pencils while she hands out the tests.

The intercom buzzes. Then the secretary's voice sounds over the speaker. "Please send Marra Ayers to the office."

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My stomach knots.

Seriously, could this day get any worse?

“Sí, por supuesto.” Señora Lopez glances at me and nods toward the door.

Some kid whispers, “You’re in trouble!”

I ignore him and grab my bag. As I head for the door, other kids whisper and giggle. I can’t help but wonder if kids are any better at the underwater academy.

Stop! I shove that thought from my mind. Who cares if they are better? I’m not going.

I hurry out of the classroom and make my way to the office. Am I in trouble? I can’t think of anything I did wrong. Haven’t missed any assignments or done anything to interfere with participating in track. Maybe they just need to tell me something about the meet. Yeah, that’s probably it. I hope.

When I get to the office, the secretary smiles at me. “Hi, Marra. Your dad’s in there, waiting for you.” She gestures toward a conference room.

My dad. Great. If he missed work for this, I’m really in for it.

I can run. Never look back.

“Go on.” The secretary gives me a reassuring glance.

I take a deep breath and march into the conference room, my head held high. I'll just tell him to tell everyone in Valora 'hi' for me.

He's standing next to the table, hands in his pockets. Not even sitting. Just waiting. His lips purse. "We need to continue the conversation we started earlier."

"I already said all I had to say. I'm not going."

Dad just shakes his head.

I don't budge.

He doesn't, either. But his stance is more intimidating than usual. I hope it's just my imagination because we're in the school office and not some regal-thing that's changing him in a more permanent way.

"Say what you came here to say."

"Not here."

"Then why'd you have them page me?"

He steps closer. "We're going to discuss this at home."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"But I just got to school. I have my Spanish test and a track meet after school—"

"You won't be doing any of that, Marra."

I open my mouth to protest.

He cuts me off. “Come with me.” His hands ball into fists. “Now.”

“I’ll meet you at home.”

He shakes his head. “I’m driving.”

“But my car is here.”

His eyes flash yellow. It’s so brief, I doubt seeing it. “You won’t need it anymore.”

The room spins around me. “What?”

“Come on.” He places his hand firmly on my back and guides me out of the room.

“We’re leaving now.”

He doesn’t mean Shorecrest High. We’re leaving everything.

Today.

Chapter 3

My parents stand at opposing ends of the living room, each blocking my only means of escape. I plop onto the couch and play with a loose lock of hair. No way am I looking at them. Not when they're doing this to me. Taking away everything and everyone I care about, no matter how it affects me.

"We know this is hard," my mom says.

I glare at her. "You have no idea what this is like for me!"

"We're leaving our lives too, Marra."

"But you have lives to go back to in Valora! I don't. I was a child the last time I was there! Don't you get that?"

"Your mother just said we know this is hard." My dad's brows knit together.

"Hard? That makes it sound like a track meet. This is impossible! You're not even letting me say goodbye to my friends. Not taking my feelings into account."

He steps closer, leaving some space for me to run out of the room.

I wait for a better opportunity.

His eyes fixate on me. "It's our duty. With Tiberias dead, we're next in line. I'm king. You're the princess."

I sit up straight. “Nobody asked me if this is something I want. For the record, it isn’t.”

“Aria wanted it. She dreamed of returning to Valora.”

He may as well have slapped me across the face. I ignore the lump growing in my throat. “Well, she’s not here now, is she? It was her dream, not mine.”

His eyes narrow. Turn yellow. “You need to pull yourself together. Stop acting like a toddler. We’re leaving, and that’s final.”

I jump to my feet and avoid looking at his eyes. “I want to say goodbye to Ivy. You owe me that much.”

“Text her.”

“You want me to say goodbye to my best friend through a text?”

“We don’t have time!” He raises his fists and little yellow bolts of electricity shoot out. Static swims around the room, makes the hairs on my arm stand on end.

“Why isn’t there time for me to say goodbye? You’re yanking me from my life. I don’t think this is too much to ask.”

He marches closer to me, stopping just before our feet touch. The electrical charge grows even stronger. His eyes are still yellow. He stares me down. “We’re leaving, and that’s final. Do not cross me. I tried being nice. Now I’m putting my foot down.”

Electricity dances around me. Makes goose bumps form along my arms and down my back. I swallow. “What about our things? The house?”

“You think anything will survive underwater? You’ve seen what happens when homes get flooded—everything is destroyed.”

“So, we’re just leaving it?”

“We don’t need any of it.”

“But pictures! Memories. My trophies. What about—?”

“Enough!” He spins toward Mom. “Talk sense into your daughter. We leave in ten minutes.”

Ten minutes? My hands fall to my sides. Ten minutes.

That’s how much time I have to say goodbye to my life.

Dad storms out of the room, and the air returns to normal.

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Mom turns to me, tears shining in her eyes. “He’s really stressed. We need to back him up. He needs us.”

The image of him with yellow eyes and electricity in his fists pops into my mind. “He has a funny way of showing it.”

“Like I said, this is stressful. He has to go from his life here on land to being king. King. Can you imagine that?”

“And I’m a princess.” The word itself makes me shudder. Makes me think of a sparkling cartoon character with big eyes and a pet that follows her around.

She puts her arm around me and sniffles.

I step back and study her. “Why are you more upset about Uncle Tiberias’s death than Dad is?”

Mom clears her throat. “You know how complicated their relationship was. Those two didn’t get along at all. Why do you think we were banished?”

“I don’t remember. I was really young when we left.”

She wipes her eyes. “Why don’t you take a minute to call Ivy?”

My chest tightens. “I can’t have that conversation over the phone!”

“You’re going to have to. I had to give notice on my job. Actually, it wasn’t notice. It

was quitting on the spot. It's not easy, but we all have to sacrifice."

"Dad doesn't."

Mom sighs. "He's hurting inside. We just can't see it."

I turn the conversation back to the move. "Can't we ever come back?"

Mom shakes her head. "I'm sorry. But instead of mourning what you're losing, try looking forward to what you're getting. Cousins. Old friends. Halen will be thrilled to see you."

The mention of my childhood best friend brings back a vortex of memories. Almost all of my earliest memories involve her. We both grew up in the castle and were the same age, but that wasn't what drew us together. We got each other. Neither of us were thrilled about the stuffy rules forced on us by the authorities. We just wanted to have fun, and we did just that every chance we got. Between the two of us, we thought up every kind of trouble possible.

But none of that matters. I have a track meet. College applications. A pool party. And Roman Lewis wants me to be there.

I glare at my mom. "Why did you guys tell me we'd never go back to Valora?"

"Because Dad was banished. Tiberias told us we'd never see our beloved city again."

Their beloved city. Not mine. I grit my teeth. Hold back comments that would only get me in trouble. "What's going to happen to our things? This house?"

She takes a deep breath. "We have a full bank account and the bills are all paid automatically, so I imagine it will just sit here until the funds run out."

“And then what?”

“Everything will be seized. The bank will sell the house, auction off our things.”

My stomach lurches at the thought of people bidding on my belongings. “How long?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

Mom shrugs. “Two years? Three? I’m not sure. We won’t be here to see it. Call Ivy. We’re leaving in a matter of minutes.” She gives me a kiss before walking out of the room, looking lost in thought.

I glance at the door. If I run away, nobody could stop me. However, it would be a challenge to get to the school without my car. How long will it take for it to be towed? When will people figure out that I’m gone? That my whole family is missing?

“Marra,” Mom calls.

I groan.

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“You don’t have a lot of time.”

What am I supposed to tell my best friend?

The truth. That’s exactly what I’ll tell her.

I race upstairs to my room and try not to think about the fact that it’s probably the last time I’ll see it. Or is it? If the house is going to sit for two or three years, I can always come back. It leaves me the chance to flee Valora and have somewhere to return. I won’t even need Ivy’s closet.

I’ll have an entire house with a full bank account. This isn’t goodbye. It’s see you later. I’ll be back, one way or another.

I sit on my messy bed and pull out my phone. Look around my room for a moment, taking in everything as though for the first time. My trophies. Framed academic achievements. Pictures—mostly of Ivy and me, but also other friends. A lifetime of memories. I try to burn them into my mind.

Then I call Ivy. Her phone is probably off because she’s in school. It’s not even lunchtime. I won’t be able to talk to her. I’m going to have to do this by text. But I’ll try calling. I have to.

My thumb shakes as it hovers over the call button. I push it. Tears blur my vision.

This isn’t goodbye. I’m going to make an appearance as heir to the throne, catch up with Halen, then take my first chance to escape. I’ll be back here before I know it—in

plenty of time to get the college applications submitted.

“Hold on!” Ivy answers. Muffled noises sound for a few moments.

Mom calls from downstairs. “Just a few more minutes, Marra!”

My stomach knots. “Hurry up, Ivy!”

More muffled noises. “Okay. I’m here. Had to leave my class. I’m in the bathroom. Where did you go? Everyone’s talking about you being called to the office then disappearing.”

“Ivy, my parents are moving me away right now.”

“What?”

“It’s horrible and mean, but that’s what they’re doing.”

“You’re leaving right now?” Her voice wobbles. “Like, never coming back to school?”

She’s going to make me cry. I clear my throat. “Not unless I find a way back.”

“I can’t believe they’re doing this to you. Who moves away so suddenly?”

“Apparently, the Ayers.”

“They can’t do this!” She sniffles. “Can’t they stay long enough to throw you a going away party?”

“No. We’re leaving in like one minute.”

“I can’t believe this. You’re not fighting them?”

I recall Dad’s yellow eyes. “I tried. They’re not having it.”

“You have to do something!”

“I know. I’m going to, but it’ll have to be later. Once things settle down. Then I’ll figure out a way back. We’re going to spend the rest of our high school careers together. This is just a break.”

“I hate them.” Ivy sniffles again. “I really do. You can tell them that. They’re crappy parents for doing this to you.”

“Believe me, I know. But I’m going to find a way back.” I almost promise her, but I don’t want to pull the same kind of promise my parents pulled on me.

Mom appears in my doorway. “Dad’s in the car, waiting for us.”

“Ivy, I have to go.” My voice cracks. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

Mom frowns and wraps her arms around me.

“Don’t do this,” Ivy begs.

Like I have a choice. “I’ll see you later, Ivy.”

And I will. Soon.

Chapter 4

My heart races as Dad pulls into the parking spot at the beach. We had to drive to the ocean because that's the only way to Valora. It's deep in the darkest depths of the Pacific. Way down where human explorers only dream of reaching but never will, because the merpeople will never allow it.

Dad glances back at me. "Come on, Marra."

I want to ask him if he'll be a monarch or dictator, but I keep my mouth shut. I'm going to play along with this cruel twist of fate until I have the chance to swim back to shore. Take a few days to catch up with life under the sea, then head back to where I really belong. If my parents want another heir, they can have another kid.

Without a word, I step out of the car and slam the door. Dad sets the alarm. For what, I don't know. It's not like he's coming back for it.

But maybe I can. I'll need a way to get home when I come back to land.

I turn to him. "What are you going to do with the keys?"

"Don't worry about it." He stuffs them into his pants pocket.

I make a mental note to watch. Will he take them or toss them?

My pulse drums louder in my ears with each step we take toward the water. The wind whips around us, pulling my hair from the loose bun. I take out the hair tie and let my

hair fall over my shoulders. Waves splash onto the rocky shore.

The dark blue water looks so cold. I wrap my arms around myself and push through the wind. Seagulls squawk overhead. My feet twist over the uneven rocky path.

We're really doing this. Leaving the land behind. Returning to Valora.

I pinch myself to see if I'm actually awake. Ow! Yes, this is happening. No chance of me waking to find all of this is just a nightmare.

A few people are off to the side with kites.

I clear my throat. "We can't transform now. Look, there are people over there."

Dad shakes his head. "We'll go over on the other side. Doesn't matter where we enter."

Of course.

We turn the opposite direction, and as soon as the humans are out of sight, Dad marches straight for the water. Doesn't bother removing his shoes or socks.

Mom glances at me and gestures for me to come along.

My heart feels like it's going to explode out of my chest. I want to spin around and run. I'm faster than them. I'm a track star. A mermaid faster than most humans with natural legs. That lump in my throat is growing and my tears are threatening again.

I hesitate then stomp toward the crashing waves. I'm not going to give into the tears. This is just a vacation. I'll be back home before I know it. On land, where I belong. Maybe in time for that pool party.

As soon as the frigid water laps around my ankles, a warmth spreads through my legs then up through my torso and down my arms. My skin tingles all over. My legs tickle, start to burn.

This is happening so much faster than when I take a bath in the sanitized water at home. Dad's slacks rip. I turn my back to him. Mom's pants tear.

"Hurry up," Dad urges.

We need to be in deep enough to swim when our legs merge into a single tail. My bones feel ablaze as I walk deeper into the water. I clench my fists and hold my breath. If only the ocean were colder, it would soothe the burn. At least that's what I tell myself. The truth is, nothing will help. I'll only feel better once the process is over, when my legs are gone and I'm left with a tail.

I'm now waist-deep. Can't wiggle my toes—because I no longer have any. My feet will be gone soon too.

Pain overtakes me. I cry out, unable to take it. Agony shoots throughout my body, running up and down my legs and spine. It feels like my entire body is going to explode. I think my kneecaps actually are coming apart.

Now I can't stand. I crash into the water. It soothes my pain. Water shoots into my nose, but it doesn't hurt. It fills my mouth, massages its way down my throat. I'm breathing water now.

I kick. No, not kick. Thrash my tail. Push forward. I'm swimming. Need to open my eyes.

All I want is to go back to school. I'll gladly suffer the searing pain of transformation without complaint if I can just return to land. To my friends. My life. Roman.

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Someone calls my name.

Instinctively, my eyes open. Everything looks so clear. Mom swims toward me, her aqua tail shimmering. Dad is just behind her, his deep blue tail moving quickly as he slices through the water. I glance down at my emerald-green tail. It glimmers so much more than in the bathtub. We all still have our shirts on but have lost all traces of leg coverings.

“Come on!” Mom waves me toward Dad.

I swim, following them. It feels so freeing. So right. And that angers me. I don’t want to enjoy this. Any of it. But my body betrays me. I swim in circles and do flips.

This feels so good. So much better than being in a confining bath. We all swim around, acting like young children. It’s hard not to. We’ve denied our true natures for so long.

The farther we travel, the darker it gets. I can still see—far more than a human could at these depths—things are just dimmer. We head lower. The ocean floor is too far to see. Fish at this depth look more like aliens than marine life. Most of them ignore us. A few give us funny looks but keep their distance. They must sense we belong.

Why do I keep thinking these things? I don’t belong here! My place is on land. I’m merely visiting the place where I spent my early childhood. That’s it. I’ll see how Halen is doing. Check in on some cousins, if they don’t hate me for what my dad did to get us kicked out of Valora. Did Uncle Tiberias convince everyone we’re monsters?

I breathe the water in deeply. It soothes me. Not that I want to be calmed.

The darkness grows, making it hard to see more than a few feet around me. I make my way closer to my parents. The last thing I need is to get separated and lost.

And this makes me wonder how easy it will actually be to get back to land. I'd forgotten about the dark waters. How easy it would be to lose my way. Veer off the trail then end up dinner for some awful creature.

I can still get back on my own. I'll find a way.

Grr!

"What was that?" I grab Mom's arm.

"Probably nothing, hon."

"Nothing just growled at us?"

Dad glances over. "Shh!"

I bite my tongue.

Grrr!

A shiver runs down my spine. The sound is closer, but I can't see what's making the noise.

Huge white eyes appear in front of us. The only thing scarier than them are the sharp teeth directly below them. Rows and rows of them. Whatever it is, it's large enough to swallow Dad whole and then finish its meal with Mom and me.

Dad's eyes glow yellow, illuminating the water around us. Whatever the monster is, it's about the size of a manatee. And there's another one behind it.

I cling to my mom. "What do we do?"

"Follow your father's lead."

I'm shaking so bad, I'm not sure I can do that. Not sure I can do anything. I'm going to be fish food. Never going to see Ivy or my room again.

Dad holds up his fists. Bolts of lightning run between them, buzzing. They're brighter than back home. Louder. The electricity stronger. It massages my skin. Eases my worry.

The enormous creature scoots back.

Relief washes through me. We're actually going to survive this.

Then the other fish widens its mouth and rushes at us. The rolling wave from its movement pushes me away from my parents. I try to swim toward them but the current is too strong.

The first fish exposes even more teeth and lurches toward my dad.

A combination of fear and indignation pulsates through me. That thing will not hurt him.

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I race toward it, fury pounding through me. Everything takes on a different hue. Almost the same color as my tail, but far brighter. The monster comes into focus. Crystal clear. I pass my mom and reach for the beast, my fists tightened. Green bolts of lightning shoot out, cling to the thing's eyes and teeth.

It whimpers, moves back.

“Let me do this!” Dad yells, shoves me aside. Pushes in front of me then attacks it with his own electricity. Grunts as he continues assaulting it.

The other creature comes over, aiming straight for us.

I move around Dad and focus my energy on the electricity I created. Green energy shoots from my fingers.

It stuns the fish. Dazed, it looks all over, doesn't move. Cries out.

They both turn and sulk away.

I lower my hands and gasp for air—I mean, water. It massages my insides, calming me.

My dad turns to me, his brows drawn together and his eyes yellow. “What were you thinking?”

“I was trying to fight off those things!”

His nostrils flare. “Well, don’t do that again. Do you understand me?”

“But I—”

“Never again.”

Mom turns to him. “Drake, did you see that? She has the Ayers power.”

His mouth contorts as he continues glaring at me. “You don’t know how to control it. It’ll sap all your energy. Then where are we? Come on. We need to get to Valora.”

Chapter 5

Light finally shines in the distance. This far under the surface, that can only mean one thing. A city. We've already passed three other underwater civilizations.

"Is that Valora?" Hope eludes me. My body aches from traveling so far and using muscles that have long been ignored.

"The greatest city under the seas." Father smiles proudly.

I try to smile but can't, so I just nod. He goes on about how fantastic the city is, but I can't pay attention. All I can think about is the life I'm leaving behind. My best friend. The track team, who has become more of a family than just a team. And Roman ... what could've been? If he actually does like me, could it have worked?

The brightness of Valora makes my eyes ache after being in such deep darkness for so long. It's brighter than the hottest summer day on the surface. The buildings are so colorful. From this distance, it looks like a rainbow.

We reach the outer edges of the massive city. The surrounding wall is lined with shells and gems that sparkle like they've just been cleaned. The two guards lower their weapons and bow as we near.

Dad gives a slight nod as we pass, but I can't look at them. I can't handle being bowed down to. It's so ridiculous. When we enter through the gate, a warmth spreads through me. Everything is so bright, it's hard to remember I'm not on land.

The whole experience is surreal. I've had plenty of time to think on our way here, but I still can't wrap my mind around the fact that we're actually coming to Valora. I'm going to see Halen. Will my childhood best friend be excited to see me? Will anyone be happy about our return? Or has my uncle so tainted our reputation that people will recoil at our sight? Given the angst between the two brothers, the latter situation wouldn't surprise me—our people could be disgusted at the thought of my dad as king, and therefore at me being the heir to the throne.

A shudder runs through me. Now I want to go back home for entirely different reasons. But could I find my way? Dad led us here. I could find my way to the surface, but with my luck, I'd end up in the middle of the ocean with miles and miles of water between me and the land.

The towering buildings in front of me pull me from my thoughts. Mom and I shopped in many of them when I was a child. We often brought Halen along, and the two of us would get into trouble every time. One time we wandered off and got lost. Another time she knocked over a mannequin and it took out a whole row of them.

I snicker just thinking about it.

Mom turns to me. "Are you happy to be here?"

"Just remembering that mannequin."

"The one you broke?"

"It was Halen."

Dad glances at us. "Come on. We're already late."

"Aren't you king?" I ask. "Can't you show up whenever you feel like it?"

“Not on my first day. I need to show everyone I mean business and am serious about this.”

“Does it matter? They still have to do what you say, right?”

He gives me one of his looks, and I know to drop the subject. My stomach rumbles and my muscles ache. If he gives me any say in what we do when we arrive at the castle, I’m going to have an enormous lunch then sleep for hours before finding Halen.

We make our way through the city and near the busy part. We manage to avoid the most crowded areas and finally make it to the castle. It looms before us, the largest and most decorated building in all of Valora. The light around it is even brighter than anywhere else.

I turn to Mom. “Where are the lights?”

“You don’t remember?”

“It’s been over ten years. Everything is fuzzy.”

“Valora’s enchantment keeps everything lit. It’s what keeps everything going.”

“Oh.” That seems like something I should remember, but in many ways, it feels like this is my first time here. The memories hardly feel like my own. They’re more like watching a home movie from someone else’s life.

We reach the entrance of the castle. I vaguely remember there being many entrances, but I can’t be sure. The guards lower their weapons and bow even further down than the guards at the city gates. They open the doors then Dad rushes forward. Mom and I have to hurry to catch up with him. We zig and zag through hallways and corridors.

It's enough to make my head spin. How did I ever find my way around on my own as a young child?

People move out of our way. Some gasp. Others point. Most bow. Almost everyone whispers.

We're a spectacle, and this is inside the castle. What's it going to be like in the city? Or worse, the academy? My stomach knots thinking about that. Right now, I have my parents. At school, I'll be on my own. Maybe Halen will be with me, or maybe she's moved on and doesn't want me as a friend anymore. Not that I could blame her. So many years have passed. Everything has changed. We've changed. I've spent most of my life pretending to be human. Everyone here has spent their entire lives in Valora.

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Dad leads us to a large room. It could hold hundreds. And though it's mostly empty, it's horribly intimidating. I move closer to Mom as Dad holds his head higher and makes his way to the front of the room where two jewel-encrusted chairs sit on a platform.

He picks up a trident and holds it in the air. "Finally, you're mine."

The golden weapon grows brighter and waves of light shine out.

A grin spreads across Dad's face. "Can you feel that power?"

Mom inches toward him. "I can see it."

"But can you feel it?" He holds it higher, the light shining brighter.

"I can. It suits you, darling."

He plops into the bigger of the two seats and pans his palms toward the rest of the massive room. "Imagine it tonight. So many of our royal subjects will be gathered here as I make my first speech as king."

She looks around and smiles. "It's going to be everything you've always dreamed it would be."

He'd always dreamed about this moment? That can't be. They always told me we'd live out the rest of our lives on land. But now they're saying they've been planning for this?

I swim toward them. “What do you mean?”

“About what?” Mom sits on the second seat and her expression clouds over. She wipes her eyes.

“You’ve been dreaming about this?” I ask.

Dad rests his trident on the ground. “Of course, daughter. My father was king. My brother was the only thing in between me and this throne since our father died.”

“But you said—”

“Never mind anything from before. This is our new life.”

My stomach rumbles loud enough to be heard all over the castle.

Dad arches a brow and looks like he’s holding back a laugh. “Looks like we should eat before sending you to the academy.”

“Already?” I exclaim. “I haven’t even had a chance to settle in yet! Haven’t seen my room. I need a nap after swimming all the way here. I can’t think about school today.”

He waves his hand toward me, then turns to the side. “Servant, bring us a meal.”

I glance over and jolt when I see a man standing behind the platform. He blended in perfectly. I examine the room and notice a handful of servants I hadn’t seen before.

Could anything be creepier?

Dad motions to one I didn’t even see. “Grab a chair for the princess.”

“Yes, your majesty.” He bows and scurries out of the room.

I turn to my parents. “You aren’t really sending me to the academy now, are you?”

Mom rests a hand on Dad’s arm. “Drake. We just arrived.”

Dad taps the trident on the floor. “Exactly why she needs to hurry on over.”

Irritation runs through me. “That makes no sense whatsoever.”

The servant returns with a chair and helps me sit on it next to my mom.

Dad runs his fingers down the golden rod. “It makes perfect sense. You’re the princess—heir to the throne—and you’ve spent most of your life away from Valora. You need to learn our culture and everything else about the city, and the best way to do that is at the Dark Sea Academy. It’s where all the royalty has gone for generations.”

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I frown. “Wouldn’t it be better if I ease into it? I mean, really, think about it. I woke up this morning in the human world. I’ve spent the majority of my life there. Let me adjust.”

He slams the trident down. His eyes glow yellow as his nostrils flare. “I’ve made my decision. The first lesson you need to learn is obedience. Humans are so defiant. Uncultured, hideous creatures. You will go to the academy after lunch, and you won’t put up a fuss. Understood?”

Has he lost his mind? I open my mouth to protest, but my mom speaks first. “I’m sure she’ll make us proud, Drake. She’ll adjust quickly.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’d better.”

Mom leans close and whispers in my ear, “Don’t question him in front of his subjects. He’ll be forced to apply strict discipline. We have to remember he’s king, even to us.”

I bite my tongue so hard it bleeds. If I say what I want to, he’ll probably have me thrown in a dungeon. Or worse. Maybe going to the academy isn’t so bad. There I won’t have to bow down to my dad’s ultimate authority. My mom’s always been a doting wife, but even this is too much. How can she go along with it? Acting like he needs to be obeyed. I want to pick up my chair and throw it across the room.

Luckily, servants arrive with food. I salivate at the aromas—I can’t say my mouth waters since water is now what I breathe. It feels as natural as air, but seems so odd. The servants set up tables and spread the food out.

I rise to scarf down as much as I can, but my mom grabs my arm. She shakes her head and gestures toward my dad. I groan, recalling something about the king doing everything first before the others follow.

The Dark Sea Academy sounds more appealing by the moment.

Chapter 6

I barely set my napkin on the table before Dad calls over a servant to take me to the academy.

“Mom!” I beg her with my eyes to talk to Dad since anything I say seems to be taken as a direct assault on his authority.

She kisses me on the cheek. “You’ll do fantastic. I know you’ll do us proud.”

I stare at her. “You’re going to let a servant take me? You two aren’t coming?”

Dad shakes his head and rises. “We have important business to attend.”

“Won’t you check in on me?”

“Of course. The staff will keep us informed.”

What a jerk. All he cares about is being king. Now that he has the position he’s apparently been dreaming about, being a dad is just an inconvenience. If only I could get him alone in a room to tell him off. At least I won’t have to look at his face once I’m at the academy.

Mom rises and wraps her arms around me. “I’ll miss you, sweetheart. But your dad is right. School is where you belong. You’ll learn all you need to know there.”

Or I’ll just fall behind in my real studies. I can’t wait to get back to the land and my

old life. Hopefully I can do that before everyone forgets about me.

Dad just nods at me before returning to his throne.

I bite back an annoyed comment before turning around. I nearly bump into a mermaid with a pink tail and brown hair, who can't be much older than me.

She bows. "I'm here to take you to the academy."

"You don't have to bow."

"I do, your highness." She bows again.

This is going to get old really fast.

"Okay." I turn around to say goodbye to my parents, but they're both surrounded by servants and royal officials. Guess I know where I stand. So, I spin around to the servant. "Let's go, then."

"Follow me." She bows yet again before leading me out of the room and through a maze of hallways.

We leave through a side door of the castle. I knew there were multiple exits. We face an underwater version of a forest. It's filled with deep sea plants, thicker than any woods I've ever seen. The colors are unlike anything I've seen on land. As many dark colors as bright. Foliage in every shape imaginable, including stars and twisty swirls. The only thing I can think to compare it to would be the game Candy Land.

The servant heads straight for the forest.

"We're going in there?"

She glances back at me. “Yes, your majesty.”

“Can you just call me by my name?”

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head.

“Why not?”

“It would be an abomination.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, m’lady.”

I hold back an eye roll. “Then at least let me call you by your name.”

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“Just call me servant. Come now. We can’t be late.”

“Yes, it’d be a disaster.” I actually roll my eyes. I’m going to lose my mind if I don’t leave this place soon. Living at home without my parents and their stupid rules and even stupider royal rules sounds like a dream.

“It would be a disaster.” The servant’s eyes grow even wider. “Your father would have my head.” She makes a slicing motion in front of her neck.

I cover my mouth. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

She shakes her head.

“My dad would never kill anyone.”

She moves closer and lowers her voice. “No, your majesty. He’s worse.”

My mouth falls open. Sure, he’s being a jerk, but he’s no killer.

“Come on. Unless you want to see my head rolling.”

“Okay.” I hurry toward the forest. “And don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone you said that about him.”

“I’m not worried—he wants everyone to know it.”

“What?”

“That way he has strict obedience.”

Do I even know my parents? Or is my dad just projecting that image so that the people don't revolt? Maybe he fears an uprising because of the change of power. That has to be it. Although, I can't help but wonder how much they've been hiding from me.

The servant pushes aside some plants. I hate thinking of her like just a servant—she needs a name. “If you don't tell me your name, I'm going to call you Sally.”

“As you wish.”

“I wish you'd just tell me your name.”

“Sally is acceptable.”

How can these people live like this? If they knew what life was like on the surface, they'd be as eager to leave as I am.

“Hurry, your majesty.” She makes that slicing motion in front of her neck again.

I make my way into the woods and let her lead the way. Before long, the plants spread out and we come to several paths.

Sally races to the middle one. “This one leads to the academy.”

I follow her, and before long, goose bumps form along my arms and the hairs on my neck stand on end. “Is someone watching us?”

“Possibly.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Could be fish. There are some nasties living in these woods. Downright dreadful ones.”

My skin prickles all the more. “That doesn’t worry you?”

“I have a weapon.”

Somehow that doesn’t make me feel any better. I move closer to her, though. “Why didn’t my father give me a weapon?”

“You won’t be allowed one in the school, m’lady. Not outside of your weapons class.”

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“Weapons class?” That sounds interesting. Fun, even.

“Yes. It’s a basic course required for all royal students. You need to know how to defend yourself.”

“Why?”

She gives me an odd look. “Because people are always trying to kill those in power. The higher your rank, the more your life is in danger.”

I gasp. “You’re pulling my leg! Or, I mean, my tail.”

“Pulling your tail?”

“It’s an expression.” I rub my temples. “What I mean is, you can’t be serious!”

“Of course I am.”

“So, I’m heir to the throne. In other words, Valora’s second most likely to be murdered.”

Sally nods, her expression like I’m talking about something as innocent as what to eat for lunch.

“And I’m only allowed a weapon in the weapons class?”

“Nobody’s going to try to kill you in the academy. There are strict rules against it.”

“Oh, that makes me feel much better.” I want to race back to the castle and slap my parents. How could they have brought me here into such a vicious place? What’s wrong with them? And how long have they been planning this?

Nothing is as it seemed this morning. My parents have been lying to me since the moment we left this city years earlier.

Sally continues taking path after path. Each one forks here and there. I’ll never be able to find my way back to the castle. Not that I’d likely ever have to take it alone. Servants are never going to leave my side.

“What’s it like at the academy?” I ask.

She turns to me. “You’ll have your room and your classes.”

“That’s helpful.”

“It varies by person. You might have sports or debate club. Maybe you’ll be in choir. I have no idea what your experience will be like.”

I take a deep breath. “Okay, then. What was your experience like?”

“Oh, I didn’t go to the Dark Sea Academy.”

“You went to one of the other ones?”

“Of course, your majesty. I went to the servant’s academy.”

Right. They’re all based on class. How classy. “What was it called?”

“It has no name.”

“Now you’re definitely pulling my leg.”

She just shakes her head.

This place is absolutely insane. Seriously certifiable. I start to say as much when the building comes into view. And calling it a building is an insult. It’s not as big as the castle, but it’s close. And Dark Sea Academy is the perfect name. The structure is made of black brick and the tall, skinny turrets make it look like something straight out of a horror movie. The carvings of fish heads with sharp teeth only make it more so. As far as I can see, the structure is protected with tall, thick, black—of course—rods with pointy ends. They must hold some kind of magic to be able to keep merpeople from just swimming over.

I kind of like the building. In fact, it’s the first place in Valora I actually want to check out.

A shiver runs down my spine. I feel like I’m about to enter a legit haunted mansion. It wouldn’t surprise me to see bats fly out, except bats don’t breathe under water.

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Sally turns to me. “I know it looks intimidating, but it isn’t so bad.”

“Not at all.”

She tilts her head. “Let me show you in.”

We make our way to the front doors. There are no guards. Nobody bowing.

What a relief.

Sally opens one of the doors and gestures for me to go in.

I do, and what I see is everything I hoped for—creepy statues, old portraits on the dark wood walls, and even a song playing on an organ somewhere. I actually smile. This place could actually be fun.

“This way.” Sally leads me down a well-lit hallway which is, unfortunately, far cheerier. Bright statues of mermen and merwomen line the way. Colorful gems and shells decorate the floor—no real worries of anything being destroyed without feet to trample them.

Conversation sounds not far away. I peek in the direction and see people at tables. Books line the walls as far as I can see.

“That’s the main library,” Sally says.

Several students look up. Eyes widen. People whisper and point. More glance my

way. Some scowl. Others gather their books and flee.

Nice. Maybe this place actually sucks as much as the rest of Valora. I miss being invisible back home. Nobody paid me any attention. If only I'd known to appreciate such a luxury.

I notice Sally has moved on, and I catch up with her. "I take it everyone knows who I am."

"You're the heir to the throne." We continue down the hallway. Portraits of important-looking people line the walls. Underneath the frames, some have name plaques. Most of the stuffy mermen and merwomen were deans of the academy. Dozens and dozens of them.

"How old is this place?"

Sally pauses. "Several hundred years? Maybe more. I'm not entirely certain. I'm sure someone who goes here would know."

"Probably."

She leads me down another hallway. Now I recognize the people in the portraits. Former kings and queens. My ancestors. The last one is of my uncle. I wonder how long it'll take before my dad insists his picture be added to the lineup.

Sally stops. "This wing is your school."

I give her a double-take. "Isn't the whole building my school?"

"The entire structure is your academy. Your school is the group of students in your class."

“So, they’re all first-years?”

She takes a deep breath. “No. You’re part of the royal class—as is everyone else in your school.”

“Let me get this straight—all students are part of the academy, and within the academy are different schools, depending on the social class.”

Sally nods. “Precisely. And there’s a pecking order in each school. Not everybody in the academy is in the royal class. But you’re all in the upper social classes.”

“What’s the school pecking order based on?”

“Various things. Could be grades or performance, or it could be talents and abilities. You’ll figure it out.”

Things are so much simpler at my high school.

“Let me introduce you to the Dean of Mermaids for your school. She’ll be in charge of everything from where you live to what classes you take. You’ll do well to stay on her good side. She can make your life pleasant or miserable.”

“Awesome. So, what’s my school called?”

“The Royals.”

How original.

“We need to hurry. Can’t have the dean telling your father we were late.”

“No, we can’t have that.” I bite back a more sarcastic comment.

Sally leads me down a hall full of doors. She stops at one with a golden plaque that reads Mrs. Daphne Middlebrooks. Doesn’t sound so bad.

“You may enter,” a nasally voice calls from the other side of the door.

Sally twists the knob and pushes open the door. She motions for me to enter, then she follows me in and looks at the dean. “This is Marra Ayers.”

The dark-haired merwoman looks me over, her mouth twisting into a scowl. “I know who she is.”

I stand straighter and force myself to smile at the judgmental woman who basically holds the fate of my next four years in her hands. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Have a seat.” Mrs. Middlebrooks pushes some hair from her eyes then glares at Sally. “You may leave now.”

Sally leaves before I can thank her for her kindness.

I sit and look around the room. Awards line the walls and books fill the shelves.

The merwoman narrows her eyes and stares at me. “Let’s make this quick. I don’t have all day. There’s really only one thing you need to know to make it through your education in the Royal School.”

I lean forward. “What’s that?”

Her upper lip curls and her eyes turn black. “Stay out of my way, and you’ll do just fine.”

Chapter 7

Terror rips through me, but I quickly recover from my shock. “Okay.”

Mrs. Middlebrooks flips her long hair behind her shoulder and her eye color returns to normal. “I believe you meant to say, ‘Yes, ma’am.’”

A shiver runs down my spine. “Yes, ma’am.”

She straightens her shoulders and smiles slowly. “Much better. Now, like I said, I don’t have time for you. Here’s an info sheet with all you need to know.”

While she digs into a drawer, I size her up, trying to figure out what Mrs. Middlebrooks has against me. Is she a Tiberias supporter and hates my family for taking over his reign? Or is it something else entirely? Does she hate leaders in general? Or is she jealous?

She hands me a stack of papers. They’re heavier than typical paper—or should I say paper used on land. It’s normal weight for paper down here, made from special plants that will last centuries in saltwater. I’m just not used to it.

Mrs. Middlebrooks presses a button. “Come show the heir to her room.”

No response comes. The dean flips through papers and mutters to herself.

Well, I didn’t want to be bowed down to. I should be happy. Maybe I should wish for no extremes. But I have a feeling that’s all I’ll get around here as the king’s daughter.

Knock, knock!

I hope it's Sally. It's probably not, but that doesn't keep me from hoping. More than likely, it's someone with as much disdain for me as Mrs. Middlebrooks.

"Come in." She doesn't look up from her papers.

The door opens, and in comes the most gorgeous guy I've ever seen. My heart actually skips a beat. If I was on land, my mouth would go dry. This guy is the physical embodiment of masculine perfection with slightly wavy black hair hanging just over his ears, piercing blue eyes, and just the right amount of facial scruff.

He doesn't even look my way. Just glances at the dean. "You called for me?"

"Yes." She still doesn't pull her attention from the paperwork. "Take Marra Ayers to her room."

Now he glances my way, then looks me over—head to ... fin. Kill me now. My heart is going to explode out of my chest. I can't think. Those eyes. He lifts a brow, and with just that one gesture, I swear he dissolved me into a puddle—if that were possible at the bottom of the Pacific.

He flips his hair, and as his arm moves I realize just how muscular he is. "The Marra Ayers?"

I need to say something. My voice has fled. I nod like an idiot.

The guy lifts his other brow and kind of twists his mouth. I can't tell if he's impressed or couldn't care less. He turns to Mrs. Middlebrooks. "I assume she's in the Royal School."

“Yes, Bash.” She flips a paper. “It’s all in her paperwork.”

Bash. That has to be the most perfect name ever.

What is wrong with me? Why am I mentally falling all over myself because of this guy? He’s just a merman in Valora. I’m going back to land and focus on track, college, and ... what’s his name? Think!

Bash does that thing with his mouth again. “Come on, princess.”

I rise. “You can call me Marra.”

“Whatever, princess.” He whips around and goes into the hallway.

I hate that I like him calling me that. Doesn’t matter, anyway. Once he takes me to my room, our paths probably won’t cross again. The tattoo peeking out from his tighter-than-necessary shirt tells me that much.

We head down the opposite direction than Sally brought me. Bash turns to me. “What’s your room number?”

Where’s my voice? I shrug since my voice box seems to be broken.

He grabs the papers from my hand and flips through them. “Surprise, surprise. You’re in the suite.”

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I clear my throat. “What’s the big deal?”

Bash shoves the papers toward me, and I take them purposefully brushing my hand against his. It’s so soft. Must be the water.

He tilts his head. “The suite?”

“Yeah.” I straighten my back and determine to prove to him that I’m not the princess he thinks I am.

“It’s usually reserved for fourth-year students who’ve racked up a boatload of achievements over the years. Not for a first-year who spent her whole life on land.”

So, he knows about me.

“Everyone knows about you, princess.”

Did I say that out loud? My face flushes. I need to change the subject. Fast. “So, what kind of a name is Bash, anyway?”

He holds my gaze with those icy blue eyes. “Short for Sebastian.”

“Sebastian what?”

“Marlowe.”

Bash Marlowe. It has a nice ring to it. And he’s looking at me like he expects a

response. “That’s nice. Why go by Bash?”

“Because Seb sounds like a loser. Bash sounds like someone to be respected.”

“Makes sense.”

“Whatever. Let’s go. I have more work to do after I show you around. Do you have any questions about the academy?”

Yeah. Are all the guys as attractive as him? I’m I going to be stumbling over my words and thoughts every time I run across a male student?

“No? Perfect.” He leads me up a staircase, which I find ironic since none of us have feet.

We pass another level and keep going up. Bash enters a foyer, and I follow. “This is where the uppities hang out. Usually the upper-year students, but since you live on this floor, it might include you.”

“Do the first-years usually live somewhere else?”

He points to the ceiling. “Top level. This level is for fourth-years, the next is for third-years, and so on.”

“Oh.” I start to ask why I’m here, but stop before the words reach my mouth. It’s because of my dad. He either pulled strings or simply that they—whoever they are—put me here because he’s king.

Everyone’s going to resent me for getting special treatment. This is going to suck royally. Yeah, I get the irony of that thought.

“Come on, princess. Let me show you to the suite.”

“Seriously, you don’t have to call me that. My name’s Marra.”

He doesn’t respond. Just leads me down a hallway to the door at the end. “Your suite.”

I stare at the door. Is it locked? Do I just go in? Who’s my roommate? Someone else who hates me?

“You gonna go in or what?”

“Don’t I need a key?”

“It’s not in your paperwork?” He arches a brow.

I’m not a puddle. I’m not a puddle. “How would I know?”

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Bash takes the papers and holds up an envelope. “Your key.”

I snatch it from him then unlock the door and open it. Freeze at the sight. It’s no dorm room—it’s practically an apartment. “I have a kitchen?”

“You have everything.” He smirks.

My internal organs all disintegrate. I have to stop looking at him. Clearing my throat, I manage to pull myself together. “I didn’t take it from an upper-year student, did I?”

His smirk deepens.

I look away. Whoever had the suite before me is going to hate me with a passion. “Are they in another suite?”

“There’s only one suite per school, princess.”

Of course there is. “Who’s my roommate?”

“Got me. Hurry up and change into your uniform. Like I said, I have things to do, but I have to show you around first.”

“Okay. Chill out.”

“Chill out?”

“It’s an expression. Never mind.” I rush inside and take in the suite. Half of it is set

up as a two-person bedroom, and one side is already filled with belongings. Between the bedroom and the kitchen is a living room area.

“I said hurry. Get dressed.” Bash slams the door.

I go over to my roommate’s desk and look at the framed photos.

Halen!

Relief washes through me. My childhood best friend is my roommate! The one person who won’t despise me for my position as heir to the throne.

Or will she? I haven’t seen her in over ten years. What if she’s grown to dislike me as much as the students who glared at me in the library? Or as much as Mrs. Middlebrooks?

Knock, knock!

“You dressed yet?”

“Hold your horses!”

“My what?”

Ugh. “Have some patience!”

I study the pictures of Halen. She has the same bright smile I remember. Same curly dark hair and friendly eyes. One photo of her with a pearl necklace makes her look elegant and grownup. None of the pictures include me. There aren’t any from our childhood.

My stomach flip-flops. What if Dad set this up, but she didn't want it? Maybe she only said yes so she could live in the suite.

Knock, knock!

"Hey, princess!"

That guy is annoying when I don't get to look at him. I don't bother responding. Instead, I look around for my uniform. Nothing on my bed or desk. It's all empty and void of personality, and yet I have no belongings to add. My things wouldn't last under water.

I open a door between my desk and bed. A closet. It has two identical shimmery deep blue polo-style shirts. The same color as the one Bash has on.

He's in the Royal school?

Is it bad that I assumed he wasn't?

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I shake off my thoughts and pull off my shirt.

Knock, knock!

“Are you still in there? Do I need to come in?”

“I’m almost dressed!” I grab a shirt and pull it on before he decides to barge in. Then I look in the mirror. The shirt is a perfect fit, as though it had been tailored to me. How is that possible?

The door opens, and Bash comes in. “I don’t have all day.”

I spin around. “It’s a good thing I’m dressed!”

He looks me over. “That you are.” Neither his expression nor his tone tell me if that’s a good thing or bad.

“If you have to leave so badly, just go. I’ll show myself around.”

“And risk Middlebrooks’s wrath?” He shakes his head. “Not happening.”

I glance at his tattoo. “You don’t look like the kind of guy who cares about getting into trouble.”

He purses his lips. “One more wrong move, and I’m outta here.”

“Meaning?”

“Expelled.”

“You’ve gotten into that much trouble?” I ask.

“Why do you think I’m showing you around? It’s a punishment.”

Disappointment washes through me, though I shouldn’t be surprised. I look away. “I won’t tell her you left. I’m sure I can figure this place out on my own.”

“Can’t risk it. Come on, princess.”

“Fine. Do I need those papers she gave me?”

“I doubt it.”

“Okay, then.” I take the room key, stick it in my shirt pocket, then follow him out.

Bash points to a set of double-doors. “Those lead to the bathrooms, not that you’ll need them. Everyone else pees and showers there.”

“I didn’t ask for the suite.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, princess.”

“Quit calling me that!”

“Why?”

“Because I have a name.”

“Whatever.” He then shows me the community kitchen. “Not that you’ll need that,

either.”

He continues the tour, making sure to point out all the things I personally won’t need because I took the suite from some deserving fourth-year students. Then we finally leave the living area, and he leads me to the part of the building where the classrooms are.

“There are more outside.” He nods toward a set of double doors. “Gym, choir and band, and some of the magical classes. Basically, anything that could get noisy. Want to see them?”

I shake my head. “Wouldn’t want to eat up more of your precious time.”

“It’s my job. If you want to see them, I’ll show you.”

“Like I said, I can figure it out on my own.”

Bash shrugs and glances at a clock on the wall. “Better get to the dining hall. It’s almost time for dinner.” He glances behind me. “Oh, and here comes your roommate.”

My stomach drops to the floor. It’s the moment of truth. I’m about to find out if Halen is still a best friend or has become an enemy.

Chapter 8

I try to hide the fact that I'm shaking as I turn around slowly. Halen looks just like her pictures. Just like I remember her, only older. More beautiful, curvier.

Her eyes widen.

My breath hitches. This is going to be bad.

"Marra?"

I chew on my lower lip. "Halen."

She grins then rushes toward me, nearly knocking me over with an embrace tight enough to block my breathing. I fall back against Bash. He's so firm. I can feel each muscle pressed against my back.

He moves to the side and coughs. "See you two first-years in there."

Before either of us respond, he rushes into an enormous room filled with long tables and platters of food.

Halen lets go of me and looks me over. "I can't believe it's really you! I never thought I'd see you again!" She gives me another hug.

I hug her back, finally starting to think straight. Hardly able to believe my luck. We're still friends. "I never thought so either."

She looks me over. “You’re even prettier than before. Not fair.”

I laugh. “Not fair? You’re gorgeous!”

“Hardly.” Halen waves me off.

“What are you talking about?” I exclaim. “Have you looked in a mirror recently?”

A bell sounds.

“We can’t be late!” She grabs my arm, drags me toward the dining hall, then leads me to the long table second to the right. “We always sit here. This is for the Royal School.”

“We’re not allowed to eat with anyone else?”

She looks at me like I’m crazy then sits in an empty chair near a platform at the front of the room. “Never.”

I take the seat next to her and look around. The platform has a similar long table with adults sitting at it. Everyone at our table has the same shirt as me. Nobody seems to have noticed I’m here, but that won’t last long. I look around for Bash. He’s way down at the other end, near the doors. Must want to make a quick exit. Or be as far from me as possible. He’s probably one of those guys who sits at the back of a classroom to avoid being called on.

“Dig in.” Halen removes the cover of a platter and scoops something creamy onto her plate.

I want to ask how all this works with us being underwater, but I keep my mouth shut. It just works. Everything is enchanted, and nothing would last a moment on land—in

the air. It's just like how nothing from up there would last down here.

Halen talks about how amazing the suite is while I dish up. Despite having eaten not long ago, I'm famished again. Must be the stress. Or maybe my body readjusting to underwater life. I went from breathing air to water, from being a nobody to a princess.

And based on the looks people around the table are giving me—everything from shock to disgust—it would seem I'll never again be a nobody as long as I stay here. I'm an underwater celebrity.

What I wouldn't give to be invisible again. I had no idea how good I had it.

I smile at everyone I make eye contact with, even though I want to glare back at everyone giving me dirty looks. But the only way I'll convince them that I'm not as bad as they think is to prove them otherwise. And that means being as sweet as possible.

Relief washes through me when people start putting their silverware down. Once the meal is over, I'm going to flee to the suite and hide out. The only thing I want is to unwind and relax. I'll figure out how to handle everyone tomorrow. I'm done dealing with everyone for the time being.

A horn blares from the platform. It's shrill enough to shatter eardrums. I cover my ears, but nobody else seems bothered by it. People are staring at me. I pull my hands from my head. This is so embarrassing, but why am I the only one who seems to feel like the sound could kill me?

Once the noise eases, I lean over to Halen. "What on earth is that?"

"It's the horn."

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“That doesn’t tell me anything.”

“Sorry.” She puts her hand on my shoulder. “The staff uses that to get our attention when they have announcements or whatever.”

Now that everyone else seems to have forgotten about me, I rub my ears. “Is it really necessary?”

“They want to make sure nobody sneaks out before they take care of business.”

I start to ask if it was as offensive to her ears when she first got here, but Mrs. Middlebrooks moves to the middle of the platform. “Attention, everyone!”

I’m pretty sure she has it. How could she not after that noise?

Chatter around the room dies down.

Mrs. Middlebrooks smiles as she looks around the dining hall. She’s actually quite pretty—it was just hard to tell before when she was scowling at me. “I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors about our new student.”

Oh, no. I look for a place to hide. There’s nothing.

Halen gives me a reassuring glance.

It doesn’t help.

Mrs. Middlebrooks turns my direction. "I'd like to introduce you to Marra Ayers."

Everyone else, students and staff alike, turns my way. Literally everybody is looking at me. I try to will myself back to high school. Doesn't work. Maybe if I do something everyone will turn back to the platform. I wave. And feel like a total idiot.

It's so quiet you could hear a pin drop. If you could hear one drop in the ocean.

Halen nudges me. "Get up!"

Even better. I rise and force a smile.

Silence. Just stares.

My heart races. Should I say something? Or just keep standing here like a fool? Well, not standing. Floating. When will I get used to this place?

Luckily, Mrs. Middlebrooks speaks. "I hope you'll make her feel welcome. I'm sure it's a big adjustment moving from land to Valora. If you have questions about life outside the water, ask. I'm sure she'll be happy to answer them. Right, Marra?"

"Of course." And how thoughtful of her to offer for me. The woman clearly hates me but is trying to put on a show for the rest of the faculty.

"And if you need anything, feel free to ask anyone." She gives me a syrupy-sweet smile.

I give her an even sweeter one. "Thank you."

"You may sit."

I do, but I don't feel any better. So many people are still staring at me. I wish I'd have thought of something brilliant to say, instead I just made myself look stupid in front of the entire academy.

Mrs. Middlebrooks starts talking about some dance, but I can't pay attention. My mind is racing with things I should've said, not that it matters now.

Halen leans closer. "Don't feel bad. She likes to embarrass all the new students. But it's usually all together on the first day."

"I'm just lucky."

"You'll be fine."

Mrs. Middlebrooks continues on, talking about some banquet now. I try to pay attention because I'm probably going to need to know all of this stuff. She moves down, and I ready myself to flee, but an old guy with white hair takes her place and discusses the synchronized swimming team. Then another gets up and discusses a magic club.

The only good news is that everyone seems to have forgotten about me. With any luck, that'll continue. I just want to race to my plain bed and stay there until I'm forced to go to class in the morning.

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A young blonde teacher is the last one to give announcements, then she excuses everybody.

Relief washes through me.

“Daughter of a murderer.”

I whip my head in the direction of the voice.

A girl with long black hair down the table from us narrows her eyes at me. “That’s right. I’m talking about you.”

“Did you just call me the daughter of a murderer?”

She straightens her neck. “You heard me.”

Giggles and whispers sound around our table.

“Killer.”

“Ugly princess.”

“Snob.”

I leap from my seat. “What have I done to any of you?”

Halen jumps up. “Would you give her a chance? Don’t you remember her from when

we were kids? She's not like that!"

"What was it like living with humans?" asks the black-haired girl, her tone full of sarcasm.

People around us laugh.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I stare her down.

"That's why I'm asking. Mrs. Middlebrooks said we could." She smirks.

Oh, how I'd like to wipe that smirk right off her face.

"If you really want to know—"

Halen moves in front of me. "Earwyn, leave her alone!"

Earwyn? Like an earwig. Sounds fitting.

She rises and glares at Halen. "Sure you want to associate yourself with the daughter of a killer?"

"It's better than being associated with you!"

I move around Halen and glare at Earwyn. "Stop calling my parents killers!"

She purses her lips. "Why? Everyone knows your dad killed Tiberias."

My mouth falls open with shock before I can hide my surprise. "You know that's a lie as much as I do! We've been on land for over ten years."

Earwyn and several girls around her all giggle and exchange glances.

“What?” I demand.

“You don’t know your daddy very well, do you?”

“I know him better than you do!”

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Snickers spread throughout the table.

Earwyn puts her hands on her hips. “You don’t know half of what you think you do. You’ll see.”

“No. You’ll see! How is it you think you can get away with talking about the king like that?”

She tilts her head. “Should I be worried? You gonna have him kill me?”

“Even if I tried, he wouldn’t kill anyone. Just leave me alone, and I’ll leave you alone. Deal?”

Earwyn laughs loudly. “You think you can strike a deal with me, first-year?”

Halen loops her arm through mine. “Let’s go.”

I shake my head. “I’m not going to be intimidated by Earwyn.” I glare at my enemy. “I don’t know what your deal is, but I’m not looking for trouble. I just want to get through the academy like everyone else.”

“Is that why you’re in the suite? To be just like everybody else?”

“I’ll have you know, I didn’t ask for that!”

“Right.”

“I didn’t. And I don’t have anything to prove to you.” I race out of the dining hall before she can say another word. If this is what it’s going to be like, I’d rather not have any part of academy life. Not only am I a fish out of water—well, actually in water—I have to deal with the animosity of people who believe my dad is a killer. No thank you. Who started such a rumor, anyway? Someone who’s upset about my uncle’s death? Or somebody who has it out for my dad—or our whole family?

Students are milling around my path back to the suite, so I go in the opposite direction and find myself in a dark hallway similar to the one I entered the building in. This one has different portraits and statues. I slink into a corner and take deep breaths.

Part of me wants to go right back to the dining hall and punch Earwyn in the nose. But that won’t get me anywhere. I’m not winning any popularity contests, and the last thing I need is to make things worse for myself.

What I need is to get back home. If I had any doubts about being here, they’ve been solidified—I don’t want to be here, and nobody other than Halen wants me here either. I should be back in my own room with my belongings and Ivy and Roman and my other friends. A place where people don’t hate me. And it’s not like my parents will miss me. They’re in the castle, ruling Valora, while I’m stuck here. Dad basically couldn’t wait to get rid of me.

I just need to figure out how to get back.

Chapter 9

Idon't know how long I've been sitting in this corner, plotting my escape—and coming up with nothing useful—but the chatter down the hall has died down. If I'm lucky, I can find my way to the suite without running into anyone. I creep down the hallway without crossing paths with anybody.

When I come to a fork, I can't decide if I go straight or right. Everything is starting to look the same.

Music sounds from somewhere. It has a nice beat, and the singer sounds out of this world. His rich voice sends warm ripples through my body.

Is that from the dance Mrs. Middlebrooks was talking about? Now I wish I'd paid attention. No matter. It's not like I'm going to participate. I don't even remember how to with a tail and water.

I follow the sounds to a room about the size of the suite, where a band is playing. Nobody's watching. I sneak in and watch them from behind a large plant.

My heart leaps into my throat. Bash is the lead singer. It's his voice that's massaging my on-edge muscles. He's also playing guitar, and killing it. These guys are seriously better than anything I've heard before. They'd be topping the charts back home. Yet nobody's even paying them any attention down here.

I move aside some leaves for a better view. Bash finishes off an unbelievable guitar solo, then returns to the mic, singing angsty lyrics. My heart skips a beat and his

voice continues soothing my insides. All the stress from my day is actually melting away.

A spunky girl with super-short dark hair moves up to the other mic and belts out lyrics in tune with Bash. They lean in toward each other and their voices blend perfectly, like a match made in heaven. It wouldn't surprise me if they were boyfriend and girlfriend. Not only are they really cute together—why does that thought make my stomach turn?—but both are full of attitude, both have tattoos. Not that being adorable singing together and having awesome ink automatically makes them a couple.

Why am I overthinking this? Why am I thinking about it at all? The guy clearly is annoyed by my existence. He was only showing me around because he had to. Punishment, he'd said.

He and the girl pause for just a moment, then the band starts another song. This one has the perfect beat. It makes me want to move out from behind the plant and give underwater dancing a try. Bash's voice melds with that girl's again, and they move in close, smiling at each other as they sing some romantic lyrics. Despite the music calming me, they manage to make my skin crawl.

"There you are!" A hand rests on my arm.

I whip around. Halen. I turn back to the band and torture myself watching Bash with that girl.

"Come on." Halen grabs my arm and pulls me into the hallway.

"What are you doing?"

Her eyes widen. "I've been looking all over for you! Why are you watching them?"

“Their music is amazing.”

She contorts her face. “Annoying, is more like it.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Halen gives me a funny look. “No, but I think you’re kidding me.”

I glance back into the room. Bash’s hair is getting into his eyes and his muscles are flexing with every move he makes. Now he’s singing a solo, and that chick is nowhere to be seen. Finally.

Halen pulls me back. “We need to get into our room for bed check.”

“Bed check?”

“Didn’t someone give a tour? Explain things to you?”

“Middlebrooks gave me a packet. I didn’t really look at it. Bash showed me around. That’s about it.”

“Forget about Bash and his band. They’re bad news.” She pulls me again. “First-years have to be in bed the earliest.”

“I can’t believe I have a bedtime. What happens if we miss it?”

“First offense is a warning, but then after that it gets increasingly worse. They’ll give us hard labor and even banish us from our favorite activities.”

“I don’t have any favorite activities.”

“Yet.” Halen takes me up a staircase that looks familiar. I think we’re nearing our dorms. “And besides, I’ve already used up my warning.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Because you were too busy watching Bash.” She says his name like he’s something stuck on her shoe. Not that she has shoes. I need to stop with the analogies that don’t work here.

“What’s wrong with him?” Other than the fact that he can’t stand me.

“Those guys are total troublemakers.” We come to our floor and I follow her to our suite.

A girl with auburn hair makes a tsk sound, arching her eyebrows at us.

“We’re on time, Oceana,” Halen quips. “And besides, it’s her first day. She deserves a break.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, because I’ve been showing her around.” Halen yanks me into our room. “We have just a few minutes to get into bed when ...” Her voice trails off.

“What?” I join her in the room.

It’s been completely redone. My half is now filled with things. The shared areas have been redecorated. The whole suite looks like a page from a super fancy magazine.

She turns to me. “Is this what you’ve been doing?”

I shake my head. “I had nothing to do with this.”

“Your parents must’ve sent all this over.” Halen goes over to the new couch and runs her hands over it. “Oh, feel this!” She flings herself onto it and rolls around.

I close the door behind me and feel the fabric. It’s soft, but not like Bash’s skin.

Why do I keep thinking about him? I need to quit! He’s obviously with that singer. The way they were looking at each other showed what a deep connection they clearly have. Not to mention the fact that he doesn’t like me any more than anyone else around here. And I’m leaving soon.

“You’re not impressed?” Halen pouts.

“I am.” I sit on the couch and pull a lavender blanket over myself. “I’m just trying to take it all in.”

“Remind me to thank your mom the next time I see her.”

“Sure.”

Knock, knock!

Halen’s eyes nearly pop out of her sockets. “Quick! Get into bed!”

“What?”

“Now!” She swims across the room at lightning speed.

A key sounds in the doorknob.

My pulse pounds, and I fling myself across the room and yank the blankets up and climb under them.

The door opens, and Oceana pokes her head in. “Glad you’re in bed, but don’t forget lights out.”

Halen aims a remote at the wall switch and the room goes dark.

“Nighty-night.” Oceana disappears and closes the door.

“Who is she?” I ask. “Our dorm mother?”

“Basically. She’s the PA.”

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“What’s that?”

Halen sighs. “I forget what it stands for, but she’s in charge. And lucky us, we’re on the same floor as her now. We’ll probably get the first bed check every night.”

“Awesome. Can we change into our pajamas now?”

“If you can do it in the dark. We can’t have any light in here after bed check.”

“Do they think we’re twelve? We’re almost eighteen.”

“What’s special about eighteen?”

“We’re legally adults then.”

“Is that what it’s like on land?”

“Yeah. It’s not here?”

Halen snickers. “We’re not free until we graduate from the academy.”

“Seriously?”

“Have you forgotten everything about life under water?”

“Apparently.” I sigh. “So, what’s the deal with Earwig?”

“Earwig? What’s that? Hair for our ears?”

I hold back a laugh. “No. They’re disgusting bugs.”

“Interesting.”

“I was asking about that one girl at dinner. What was her name Earlyn or something?”

“Oh, you mean Earwyn.”

“Right. Like I said, earwig.”

Halen laughs. “A gross bug is pretty fitting. She’s the most popular girl in the Royal School. Rumor has it she started out as a scrawny thing that got picked on all the time. But she’s gotten meaner by the day and eventually topped everyone socially.”

“Why does she hate me? Was she a big Tiberias supporter?”

“No. That girl couldn’t care less about politics. She and her two besties were living in this suite until this morning. So, between that and the fact that you hold the potential to be more popular than her, you’re her public enemy number one.”

“That explains a lot.”

“Yeah. You’re going to want to watch out for those three. I’ll help you when I’m around, but I don’t know if we even have any classes together.”

“What are Earwig’s friends’ names?”

Halen yawns. “Cove and Vanya. Cove is the blonde one and Vanya has brown hair.

They're just as horrible as her, but they usually wait for Earwyn's permission before saying or doing anything—she's the one you're really going to have to watch out for. Goodnight."

I sigh. "Night."

My shirt itches. I've got to get it off. Hopefully with everything my parents sent over, they remembered pajamas. I can't sleep in the uniform.

"You still awake?" I ask.

Halen lets out a little snore.

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“Guess not.” I push off my covers and open the closet, careful not to make any noise. The last thing I need is to alert any of the fourth-years on the floor that I’m up. Luckily, my eyes are adjusting to the dark. It’s nowhere near as bad as it was when we were in the middle of the ocean. Valora’s enchanted light makes it so that it’s about as bright as a city.

My closet is now full of clothes—items for every occasion. There are casual clothes and formal dresses, and everything in between. I find a soft pajama top and change into it. It’s actually kind of nice not having to worry about pants. Less to think about.

Click, click.

The door.

How could Oceana have heard me up? I hadn’t made a sound.

I scurry back to bed and pull the covers up to my head just as the door opens. My heart thunders and I struggle to breathe normally.

Go away. Don’t notice me. I’m invisible.

Fingers wrap around the edge of my blanket and yank it off me.

“Oceana, I can explain. I—”

It’s not the PA.

Earwig and her two friends are standing over me.

“I ... How’d you get in here?”

Earwig smirks. “We all made copies of our keys. This is our room, you know. It looked a lot better before.”

“Do you want it back?”

“Shut up.” Cove smacks me.

I sit up and rub my cheek. “Did you just hit me?”

She smirks. “I can do it again if you don’t shut up.”

“What do you want?” I glare at all of them.

Vanya looks at Earwig. “Can I tell her? Or do you want to?”

Earwig shrugs. “Go for it.”

Vanya beams. “You weren’t here for first-year initiation. So, we’re going to give you an initiation of your own.”

Blood drains from my head. “You’re what?”

Earwig leans close to me. “You heard her, killer.”

“I’m not a killer!”

She puts a finger to my lips. “Stay quiet. You don’t want to make things worse for

yourself.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

Earwig exchanges a smug look with both of her followers before turning back to me.

“Oh, you’ll see.”

Then they all grab me and drag me out of the room. I scream, but someone covers my mouth which earns her a bite.

Vanya knocks me upside the head. “Shut up!”

Earwig holds up a long, sharp blade. “Yeah. Or I’ll shut you up.”

Blood drains from my face.

They all laugh.

Chapter 10

Earwig tightens her grip on my arm and shoves me toward the woods. They're even more ominous at night. "You're not scared of the forest, are you?"

I straighten my back. "I've seen worse on land."

"Good. Wouldn't want you scared."

Cove and Vanya giggle. One of them pinches me.

Despite how frightening the woods are, I'm far more worried about what these three are going to do to me. They think my dad's a murderer and that I stole the suite from them. Not only that, Earwig thinks I could usurp her popularity.

She yanks me toward the deep darkness. I hold back a gasp. Should I offer them the room back again? That could be all they want. Or maybe it wouldn't matter. It might be better if I give her the impression that I'm not concerned, then she could back down after this. Yeah, that's the angle I'm going to go with. It's not like they're going to kill me. This is just an initiation. Once it's over, I can carry on.

No big deal. They're probably taking me somewhere the upper-years took all the first-years. In fact, it's probably been going on for ages. My parents never mentioned an initiation, but maybe they've gone through what I'm about to. A rite of passage. And once I get through with my head held high, everyone might show me respect.

I can hope, right?

The darkness makes it so I can't see anything, not even the plants I keep brushing up against. My eyes aren't adjusting fast enough. It's almost comforting having Earwig and her crew with me—at least I'm not alone.

"How are you holding up?" Cove asks, her high voice grating on my nerves.

"Couldn't be better."

The three of them snicker. Earwig's grasp on my arm tightens. I'm going to bruise. Hopefully, I have some long-sleeved uniform shirts in my closet. Not sure underwater makeup will do the trick. Or it might. How would I know?

We keep going and going. The academy has to be miles away by now. Sharp plants scratch my arms. My eyes aren't adjusting yet. Not much, anyway. All the plants are probably making it worse, blocking whatever helps my eyes in the dark water.

Something hits my side. Or I hit it. Feels like a tree. An underwater tree? Anything's possible, especially given how little I actually remember from my early years. We've stopped moving.

"Are you ready, killer?" Earwig shoves me against the tree, or whatever it is.

I want to attack her, but I clench my fists. Want to tell her to stop calling me that, but I bite my tongue. "Lay it on me."

"Have you heard about the Royal Initiation?"

"Maybe."

Cove and Vanya snicker.

Earwig squeezes my arm, this time digging her nails into my skin. “Whatever you’ve heard, this isn’t it.”

Her tone sends a shiver down my spine. I do my best to hide it. “How’s that?”

She pushes me into the tree. “Because it’s not every day we get the daughter of a murderer coming in and taking our suite from us.”

So that is what this is about. “So, what you’re saying is that you want it back?”

“No. It’s contaminated now.”

My mind races. “What do you want, then?”

“Payback. You’ve embarrassed me in front of the whole school. Every royal knows I’ve been displaced by a first-year. One who grew up on land and whose father is a murderer.”

“Shut up! He is not!” I whip her with my tail. It’s nowhere near as effective as if I had my legs.

She shrieks.

“Are you okay, Earwyn?” Vanya asks.

“The loser attacked me!”

“You gonna try to kill us?” Cove pulls my hair.

I yank hers. “You guys need to stop saying my dad’s a murderer!”

“He is one.” Earwig gets in my face. “You may as well stop defending him. Just makes you look as guilty as he is.”

I spit on her, not that it does much good in the ocean. Then I kick my tail and punch, not caring who I hit where. Or that I’m giving into them. I can’t stand quietly while they keep lying about my dad.

Fists slam into my face. Nails scratch my arms. A blade digs into my arm. They all speak over each other. I fight back as best as I can, but it’s three against one. I’m disadvantaged in every way. Someone hits me in the nose. Blood gushes out. I can taste it when I breathe in the water.

One of them pins my arms back. The other two wrap a rope around me. I struggle against them, not that it does any good. I can’t get away. The ties are tight, and they burn against my skin. No matter how much I struggle, I can’t move.

Then I remember that weird electrical power my dad and I were using against those fish. I try to summon it, but fail. Disappointment washes through me.

“Have a good night, killer.” Earwig slaps me across the face.

I gasp. They're leaving me here. "Are you coming back for me in the morning?"

"And be late for our classes?"

"Don't let the fish eat you." Cove's tone holds a song to it.

They all three giggle and start to swim away.

"You better rethink this!" I fight against the rope, but it still won't budge. "Do you really want to do this to the king's daughter?" I hate playing that card, but what other choice have they left me? Cove is right—I'll be fish food if they leave me here. "Think about it."

Earwig gets back in my face. "Believe me, I have. I'm not scared of you or your father. He doesn't deserve to be on the throne, and you don't deserve to be the heir. I'm going to throw a party the day Drake Ayers is removed from the castle."

"You're not worried about what the king will do to you for this? Despite how you feel, he is the king. And I guarantee you, he will be all kinds of pissed off when he hears about this."

"Good. Then he'll realize just what he's up against."

"You? He's not going to be afraid of you."

"No, but he'll realize how serious his opposition is. And once he hears my name, he'll know who my father is. Then your dear daddy will wish he'd stayed on land. He's going down. You all are."

With that, they leave me to be fish food.

Part of me wants to yell for them to come back and release me. This is crazy. Insane. They're going to get me killed. And they don't care. That could be what they want. Probably is. But Halen would know they were behind this. She's the one who told me how much Earwig hates me. She'll tell my parents, then those three will pay. But what good does any of that do if I'm dead?

A howl sounds in the distance.

Fish howl?

I struggle all the harder against the ties. Doesn't do any good other than to give me rope burns.

More howling.

My mind conjures up an image of those sharp-toothed fish my parents and I fought. What if they travel in packs down here? They could be the underwater equivalent to wolves.

I reach around the tree as far as I can. If I can reach where the rope is tied, I can try to undo it. Free myself. Then at least I wouldn't be attached to the tree while fish kill me by eating me slowly, bite by bite. That image sends a cold chill through me.

Can't ... reach ... the knot.

How am I going to get out of here? Where's a cell phone when I need one? Is there some way I can contact Halen or my parents? Or anyone. I'd take that awful Mrs. Middlebrooks at this point. Or even Bash. No, not him. I'd be mortified to have him see me like this. The last thing I need is to be a damsel in distress and have him swoop in.

No. I'm getting myself out of this. How, I don't know. But I'll find a way. If only I could reach the knot. It's too far. I'll dislocate my shoulder if I reach back any farther.

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If—no, when—I get out of this, I’m going to make it my number one goal to take down that trio. I’ll destroy them. Socially, that is. I’m no killer, even with as furious as I am at this moment. I’ll prove to them that we Ayers are not to be messed with, and not because my dad is king. But because I’m strong and smart and now have something to prove.

They’ve just unleashed a monster. Assuming I can get free. And find my way out of the woods.

My shoulder pops, so I give up trying to reach the knot. I’m going to have to find another way out of this rope.

Grr!

My heart skips a beat. What was that?

Growl!

I hold still. Don’t even breathe. Not that it matters. That fish can probably smell me. My bloody nose might have attracted every meat-eating predator out there.

More howling sounds in the distance. Is it my imagination, or is it closer this time?

Grr!

I look around, trying to force my eyes to see better. Doesn’t work. Can’t see anything. Whatever’s making all those noises can probably see me. Its mouth is likely

watering at the scent of my blood.

My pulse drums in my ears. At least it drowns out the growling and howling. I can barely think. Barely breathe.

I fight against the rope. Wiggle. Struggle. Scratch myself against the tree. Hit my head on the rough exterior. Burn my skin. Need to try that electricity thing again.

I close my eyes. Focus on my hands. They grow warmer.

Twang!

What was that? I hold still and listen. Focus on my fists again.

Nothing.

I try to break free again. Struggle. Try the electricity. My palms heat up.

Twang!

Could the rope be loosening? Breaking?

Hope surges through me. I give it my all, ignoring all my pain. My hands feel on fire.

Twang!

My right arm comes free. It's free! Holding my breath, I pull the other one out. Part of the rope falls loose. The rest is still tightly wrapped around my middle. I yank and twist, then snap! It all comes off.

I'm free!

Grr!

I swim away. Go in the direction I think we came. It's hard to tell. Hard to remember. I could be heading away from the academy. As long as I get myself out of the forest, I don't really care at this point.

Rustling sounds behind me. Something is following me. Probably something with enormous teeth. My heart pounds so hard I can barely hear anything else. I duck into a bush and breathe deeply. Need to calm myself. Have to think clearly, be able to hear.

I pull myself into a ball as best I can and wait. Listen.

Howling sounds, but this time it's quieter. Farther away. At least I've distanced myself from whatever that is. Now I just have to worry about what was growling and rustling leaves.

Everything is quiet. My entire body aches. My nose and jaw throb. The rope burns are more on fire now than when I was tied.

More rustling. Louder. Closer.

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I struggle to stay quiet. Still. Everything in me is begging me to scream. I cover my mouth. Shake.

Leaves quiver near my head. The water waves around me.

Something is mere inches from me.

Grr!

My ears ring. The loud sound echoes.

I can't breathe. Can't think.

It's so close.

Sniff, sniff.

I'm going to die. Going to be fish food. I don't have a weapon to fight anything off. Barely have any energy left after getting myself free from the rope. I'll never see Halen or Ivy again. Won't see my parents or Roman or Bash. Why am I thinking about Bash at a time like this?

Something cold brushes against my arm.

I scream. The sound echoes all around. I've alerted every deadly fish for miles of my whereabouts.

There's only one thing to do. The stupid thing. It's all I have left.

I swim away as fast as I can.

Chapter 11

I slow to a halt and listen. The only thing I hear is the water rushing around me from my sudden stop. No howling. No growling. Nothing.

How long have I been fleeing? Feels like hours. Probably just minutes. Twenty? Five? I'm still in the forest, but I've escaped whatever touched me back there in that bush. Everything hurts—muscles, bones, joints, wounds. I gasp for water, barely able to breathe in enough.

All I want is to get back to the academy and climb into bed. No, what I really want is to wake up and discover that all of this has been nothing more than a nightmare. To find that I'm not in the ocean, that my uncle isn't dead, and that everything is as it should be.

I will my cell phone to wake me.

It doesn't, of course, as I'm in the ocean. Hopefully, somewhere near Valora. Near the Dark Sea Academy, where almost everyone hates me. Or at the very least, distrusts me. Maybe it's only Earwig and her sidekicks who actually want me dead.

All of this is very much my new reality. I went from invisible to oh-so-visible. From a nobody to a celebrity.

I take a deep breath and keep going. My body begs me to stop. My eyelids are growing heavy.

Just need to get out of the woods. Going up and over them would be nice, but the plants are so high they look like they never end. I'm better off following the paths. I press on, listening as I swim. Using my sore tail to push me faster. I come to a path.

I can see. My eyes are adjusting. Light is coming from somewhere. I have to be close to the edge.

Must keep going.

Can't. Just want sleep.

Then I recall the cold flesh pushing against me in the bush.

I can do this. Get back to the academy. Then sleep for a week. Nothing sounds better. Just have to keep going. Almost there.

I follow the path, continuing straight every time it forks. It doesn't matter where I come out of the forest, just that I do. Then I can find my way back, even if I have to swim clear around the woods.

Bushes block the path. That leaves me with two choices. One is to turn around. Not happening. My other choice is to push through the plants. And that's exactly what I do. The leaves scratch my hands. I don't care.

I press through. Scratch my face.

The light of Valora blinds me. I close my eyes and cover my face. If it's this bright out, what time is it? Morning? Afternoon? Have I already missed my first day of classes?

I give it a minute before pulling my arms away from my eyes. Blink a few times. The

light isn't so bad. Looks like morning. Maybe I have some time to sleep.

If I can find the academy. I spin around. If I had legs, they'd give out on me.

The Dark Sea Academy looms in front of me. I'm at the back side of the enormous structure, but there's no mistaking it.

I made it to the right place. I'm not only out of the forest, but exactly where I wanted to end up.

Now to figure out if I can get out of my classes for the day. Surely, surviving an all-night hazing would be enough to get me a pass. One look at me would tell the faculty I'm in no condition to deal with school. My arms are a bloody mess and my pajama top is torn to shreds, with one missing arm and part of the bottom gone.

All I need is to get back to my suite without running into anyone. Just need to get cleaned up and climb into bed. I'll deal with my teachers later.

I swim toward the building and go through the creaky gate.

The coast is clear. Nobody in sight. I'm even near an entrance. I head for the door with a renewed burst of energy. I'm so close!

"Marra?"

My heart sinks at the sound of the familiar male voice.

I stop and spin around. "Bash."

His eyes widen as he looks me over. "What did you do to find trouble already?"

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“Doesn’t matter. I just need to get cleaned up.”

He swims closer and his smug expression softens slightly. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

My face flames. “So what?”

His intense blue eyes brighten. “Did someone do this to you?”

I shake my head. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Who did this?”

“I said, don’t concern yourself with me.” I straighten my back. “Do you happen to know how long until the first class?”

“It started half an hour ago.”

“What? Are you kidding me?”

“No.” He stares at my arm. “That’s quite a gash.”

I shrug. “I’ll live.”

Bash holds my gaze and rubs his scruff. “We should get you to the infirmary.”

“No.”

“Why not?” His eyes narrow.

“Because I want to take care of this myself.”

“I’m supposed to help you out, remember?”

I pull away from him. “Right. I’m your punishment. Don’t worry about me. You’re officially fired.” Then I spin around before he can see my inflamed face.

“Marra!”

“Leave me alone!” I race for the door and swim inside, slamming it behind me.

The hallway is dark and goes to the right and the left. I have no idea which way the Royal dorms are, so I choose the right. Go as fast as I can, then take the first turn I come to. The last thing I need is for Bash to follow me. It’s bad enough that he saw me like that. Beat up, weak, exhausted. He has to think even worse of me now than before.

Not that I care. I don’t need him, and I’m not staying in Valora long, anyway. Just enough so that I can put those three mean girls in their place. Then I’m out of here, and my parents won’t be able to convince me to return. Ever. I’ve had more than my fill of Valora and the academy.

I race through the hallways, hoping to find my way to the Royal dorms before I run into anyone. With my luck, I’ll smack right into Mrs. Middlebrooks. Or worse, the three stooges.

After a few minutes, I round a corner.

Dorms!

But then I see a sign. The Magical Arts School.

Wrong school, wrong dorms. One down, three to go. I can do this. Maybe even in time to make it to my second class. If I hurry. Or I could just sleep and deal with the consequences of skipping later. They'll just give me a warning, right? Didn't Halen say they gave warnings before punishments?

Makes me wonder what Bash did to get himself banished, and how he got back in. Do his parents have pull? Or was the banishment—?

Why am I thinking about him? Or the extent of punishments, for that matter. None of it affects me. Not when I'm going to return to land and live the rest of my life there.

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“Marra!” comes a feminine voice.

My stomach knots. I spin around. Prepare myself for the worst.

Halen.

If I had pants, I’d pee them. Relief washes through me.

She rushes over. “What happened?”

“Earwig and her followers.”

“Earwig? Oh! Earwyn did this to you?” Her brows furrow. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Tell me on the way.”

It’s embarrassing, but I tell her what happened in as little detail as possible as we make our way to the suite.

Halen brings me to the bathroom and starts washing the blood off my face. “There’s no initiation like that. The fourth-years made us serve them for a day, and as annoying as that was, it was nothing like this.”

“Ow! Not so hard.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Hey, why aren’t you in class?”

“I was worried about you.” She moves to my arm.

“You didn’t think I just went to class early?”

“With your key on the nightstand?” Halen shakes her head. “I knew something was up. Plus, I remember you always slept in as a kid. Can’t imagine you’d become a morning person.”

“Definitely not.” I yawn.

“Did you get any sleep last night?”

“None.”

Her nostrils flare. “We have to get them back!”

I shake my head. “I don’t even want to think about that right now. All I want is to climb into bed.”

“Let’s grab some coffee. You can’t miss classes.”

“Even after what I’ve been through?”

“You can’t snitch. They’ll make life even worse for you.”

I sigh. “Life on land was so much easier.”

Halen squeezes out the wash cloth and works on my other arm. “What was that like? Are humans really as bad as everyone says?”

“They aren’t that much different. Some are mean, others are nice.”

“Any cute guys?”

“Yeah, plenty.”

She grins. “You’ll have to bring me sometime. Did you have a boyfriend?”

“No. I’m more into track and keeping my grades up for college. But there is this one guy—”

“Track? College?” Halen lifts a brow.

“Track’s a sport. Running. And college is kind of like academy, but you don’t start until you’re eighteen.”

“Interesting. So, who’s the guy you were just about to tell me about?”

I tell her about Roman and the pool party I was thinking about going to. “But since I had to leave without a word to anyone other than one friend, everyone probably thinks I’m a jerk.”

“Then they obviously don’t know you.” She moves back and looks me over. “Did I miss anything?”

I look at all my wounds in the mirror. “I think that’s everything. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. We may have been separated for most of our lives, but we’re still besties, right?”

I throw my arms around her, never so grateful for anyone in my life. “Of course we are.”

“We’d better get going before we get in trouble for missing another class.”

“Wait. You’re going to get in trouble because of me. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. I told my teacher that I had to go to the bathroom. Said it was a girl issue,

and he got all squeamish.” Halen giggles. “I’ll pop in before the next class starts.”

“Thanks for looking out for me.”

She gives me a playful shove. “I told you not to thank me. Let’s get you into a uniform and have a look at your class schedule.”

Five minutes later, we’re heading for the classrooms. I’m wearing a fresh shirt and have brushed my hair. I’m ready to conquer the world. Or at least my history of magic class.

We round a corner and nearly bump into Mrs. Middlebrooks.

She crosses her arms and glares at me. “Where have you been? You missed your government class.”

“Look at me.” I point to a gash in my arm. “Do I look like I’ve been lazing around?”

Her eyes narrow. “You don’t miss my class without consequences. Come to my office after your last class.”

Halen moves in front of me. “But Mrs. Middlebrooks, she—”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’ll deal with the consequences.”

Halen looks at me like I’m crazy.

“See you in a few hours,” Mrs. Middlebrooks says. “Don’t be late.”

“I can’t believe her.” Halen throws her arms above her head. “Or you! You have to tell her what happened, even if you don’t mention names. It’s not your fault you

missed the class.”

The thought of Mrs. Middlebrooks’s glare makes my blood run cold. “She doesn’t like me. I don’t think it’d matter.”

“Why wouldn’t she like you?”

“Probably the same reason nobody else does.”

“Because they want to impress Earwyn?”

I give Halen a double-take. “That’s why the students don’t like me? I thought it was because of my dad.”

“Kings change, but nothing else really does. We still go to classes, do homework, have our extra-curricular activities. Nothing’s going to change that.”

“Then she’s only mad at me because of the suite?”

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“That and the fact that you could become more popular than she is.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t think Earwig has anything to worry about. But this just feels bigger than a popularity contest to me. Everyone seems to hate my dad here, and she even brought him up last night. Called him a murderer.”

Halen’s eyes widen. “I can’t guess what that psycho is thinking, but you’d better stop calling her Earwig. What if you accidentally call her that to her face?”

I snicker at the thought.

“It’s not funny. Look what she’s already done to you.”

“Next time, I’ll be ready for her. And besides, we’re going to make her pay, remember? She won’t mess with me after that.”

“Who are we making pay?” comes a male voice from behind.

I spin around and come face to face with Bash.

He grins, and my insides melt. “Paybacks are my specialty. Especially if we’re talking about Earwyn and her two dogfish.”

“Dogfish?” I ask.

Bash gives a little nod. “Those two are worse than the real thing. So, what’s the plan?”

Halen is giving me a funny look.

My face flames. “We haven’t decided yet. I have to get to class.”

I grab Halen and race away.

Chapter 12

My hand shakes as I knock on Mrs. Middlebrooks's door.

"Come in." Her tone sounds chipper. She must've forgotten I was supposed to stop by. Maybe I should leave. "Is it locked, Marra?"

So much for her forgetting about me.

I open the door, and nearly pass out when I see who's inside with her. I just stare.

"Come on in." My father waves toward himself.

"And close the door." Mrs. Middlebrooks smiles sweetly.

No wonder she's being nice to me. The king is sitting across from her.

I close the door. "Hi, Dad."

He frowns.

Great.

"Sit, Marra."

I do, but scoot the chair away from him.

“In trouble already?” He picks up his trident and taps it on the floor.

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“Whose, then?” His dark eyes stare me down. At least they aren’t turning yellow.

I clear my throat. “I’d rather not get anyone in trouble. Some students thought they’d give me an initiation.”

“Is that why you have cuts?” He studies my arms.

Mrs. Middlebrooks leans over her desk. “I assure you we don’t allow such behaviors. I’ll get to the bottom of this immediately.”

My dad looks me over. “You won’t say who did this?”

I shake my head.

“Then I can’t help you.”

My mouth drops open. “What?”

“You heard me.”

I just stare at him. He can’t be serious.

He turns to Mrs. Middlebrooks. “If she won’t say who did this, we have to assume it’s all her fault that she’s gotten herself into trouble. Punish her as you would any other student.”

She glances at me, an evil shine in her eye, then quickly smiles at my dad. “Are you

sure? It is her first day.”

Can't he see through her?

Dad rises. “You're in charge here. She's a student. You don't need to bring me in for this.” He waves dismissively and heads for the door.

“Dad!” I rise. “Students beat me up! Don't you care?”

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He spins around. “I can’t help you if you don’t help yourself.”

“But—”

His thick brows furrow. “Who did this?”

I bite my tongue and silently curse the three stooges. If they wouldn’t make my life infinitely worse, I’d gladly say their names.

Dad shrugs. “You’d better pull yourself together. Academy is tougher than high school.”

“Like you’d know.”

“Excuse me?” His eyes flash yellow.

I back up.

Mrs. Middlebrooks makes a giddy noise. She’s as bad as the mean girls. Worse, even. She’s supposed to be in charge.

Dad slowly nears me, his eyes growing yellower. “You will respect me as your king. Do you understand?”

I gulp.

“Do you understand?”

I nod.

“You’d do good to remember that. Follow the rules. I expect you to do better than the other students. Being new is nothing more than an excuse. I have enough to deal with at the castle without having to worry about you. Get your act together, or you’ll regret it.”

“Regret it?”

He taps his trident on the ground and the whole floor shakes. Then he turns to Mrs. Middlebrooks. “You won’t have any more problems with her.”

She purses her lips and bats her eyes. “I’m sure we won’t, your highness.”

Dad glares at me before leaving.

Mrs. Middlebrooks turns to me. “You really should bow to him. He’s the king, even if he is also your father.”

I clench my jaw and bite my tongue so I don’t tell her what she can do to herself. That’s when I realize she didn’t bow to him either. She was all goofy and weird, not acting at all like anyone else has toward him.

Maybe she’s just weird. Thinks she’s king of the academy. I don’t know, and I don’t care. I just want out of the office. “What’s my punishment?”

“Over the weekend, you’re going to scrub the gym floors. Make them shine.”

“My back aches, and you’re going to make me do that?”

She rests her chin on her palm. “Unless you want to tell me who supposedly beat you

up in the name of initiation?”

Supposedly? Anger rises in my gut and nearly explodes out of my chest. It takes every last bit of my self-control to keep from yelling at her. The woman has lost her mind. “Never mind. I’ll just clean the gym floor.”

“Your choice.” She shrugs and turns back to her paperwork.

Green electricity buzzes around my hands. I release them and hide them behind my back.

She glances up and lifts a brow.

I want to ask why she was acting so strange toward my dad, but I’d rather leave. I have homework, anyway. And I can’t wait to get to bed. Barely made it through the rest of my classes, going without any sleep.

“I’ll check with the custodian to make sure you did a thorough job,” she says.

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“I’m sure you will.” I leave, slamming the door behind me. Probably going to get in more trouble for that, but I don’t care. All I want is to get some sleep before dinner. I’m glad it’s Friday, because that gives me the weekend before I have to finish my homework. I can sleep tonight.

“Marra!”

I spin around. Bash is headed my way. He’s out of his school uniform and wearing a fitted black V-neck. It shows off every muscle.

And I can’t stop staring. Look at his face. Look at his face.

He gives me a crooked smile and his eyes shine brightly.

I lean against the wall and struggle to breathe normally. The only way to do that is to look away from him. I stare at a spot on the wall behind him.

“I’ve been thinking about our plot against Earwyn and the dogfish.”

“Yeah?”

“What are you looking at?” He glances behind him then back to me.

Crap. Now I’m going to have to look at him. Not that it’s so bad, but I won’t be able to think straight. Or at all.

I get lost in those blue eyes. He’s talking, but I have no idea about what. Focus!

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

He tilts his head and wrinkles his forehead.

The look sucks the water straight from my lungs. “Huh?”

Bash shakes his head. “I forgot you’re sleep-deprived. Why don’t you take a nap? And I’ll figure out the details. We’ll meet up before dinner. Sound good?”

“Uh, sure.” I wish I knew what he was talking about. Maybe my brain will be able to process it once he’s out of my sight. And not wearing that shirt. I need to picture him in something else. A garbage bag. I imagine him in an ugly black bag. Nope. Still gorgeous.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Sorry.”

“Get some sleep. Do you need anything?”

“Like what?”

He shrugs. Even that simple move makes my heart skip a beat. “Painkiller or something?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Meet me before dinner.”

“Okay.”

Somehow I manage to make it to the suite without getting lost. A few upper-year students turn their noses up at me. I smile sweetly. If they’re going to be jerks, I may as well make them feel bad about it. Or at least question their allegiance to a first-class medusa.

Once in my room, I collapse onto the bed and fall asleep as soon as my face hits the pillow.

Someone shakes me.

“Let me sleep.” I pull the pillow over my face.

The shaker yanks it away. “Time for dinner!” Halen’s chipper voice has never been more annoying.

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“Hurry up! Your boyfriend has a brilliant idea about how we can get back at Earwyn, Cove, and Vanya.”

I sit up. “My boyfriend?”

She plops down next to me. “I saw the way you were looking at him.”

My face burns. “I wasn’t looking at him like anything.”

“Liar.” She whacks me with the pillow. “Change out of that uniform. We need to meet him.”

I glance down at my shirt. It has about a hundred wrinkles from sleeping in it. “Bash isn’t my boyfriend.” Then I pull a different uniform from my closet.

“It’s the weekend. You don’t have to wear that.”

“I don’t?”

She takes it from me and hangs it back up. Then she grabs a shimmery teal shirt. “Wear this. It’ll bring out your eyes.”

I hold it up to me. “And I want to bring out my eyes, why?”

Halen throws me an exasperated glance. “Because we’re meeting your boyfriend.”

“Stop calling him that.”

“Okay. We’re meeting your future boyfriend.”

“Don’t call him that either.”

She kisses my cheek. “I’m only speaking the truth. Hurry up.” She goes over to her vanity and fusses with her hair.

I pull off the uniform and replace it with the teal shirt. It’s tighter and lower cut than I’m used to. I look in the mirror and frown. People are definitely going to notice me in this. I dig through the closet, looking for a hoodie I can cover it with. No such luck. Everything is shimmery and tailored to my fit. Ugh.

“Let’s see.” Halen taps my shoulder.

I spin around and frown. “I’m not sure this is the right choice.”

She covers her mouth. “It’s perfect! Look at you!”

“That’s the problem.”

“We just need to do something with your hair.” She pulls it back with her fingers. “Just like this.”

I groan. “Really, I’m not trying to impress anyone. Not that I could with all these wounds.”

“Oh, please.” She releases my hair and drags me over to my vanity. “Sit.”

“I thought we had to hurry.”

“We have time for this.” In a blur of activity, she pulls my hair back and secures it

with sparkling clips before using makeup to cover my scratches and bruises. “There. Not only are you beautiful, but you’ll infuriate Earwyn. Act like last night doesn’t bother you and you’ll be golden.”

“Gladly, if it’ll piss her off.”

Halen glances at the clock and drags me out of the room. “We better hurry.”

“What did Bash come up with?”

“The best plan ever.” She beams. “I seriously take back anything bad I’ve ever said about him. The merman is brilliant.”

“What is it?”

“You know that dance tonight?”

“Um, what?”

“The dance in the gym.”

My stomach clenches. No wonder Middlebrooks wants me to clean the gym. It’s going to be a disaster after a party. “Haven’t heard anything about it.”

“It’s no big deal, really. We have them all the time. But Earwyn and her dogfish—”

“That’s what Bash calls them.”

“And it’s perfect. Anyway, they always try to be the center of attention. Make the whole event about them.”

“What? Are we going to initiate them? Beat them up?”

Halen shakes her head. “Better.”

My stomach knots so tightly I’ll never be able to eat dinner. “What?”

“We’re going to lock them up! They won’t even be able to go.”

I freeze in place. “They’re going to be out for blood! My blood. They’ll tell Middlebrooks, and I’ll get in worse trouble than I’m already in.”

She shakes her head. “Not after what they did to you. You can threaten to snitch if they get you in trouble. It’s perfect.”

“They’ll give me another initiation.”

“With both Bash’s band and my friends helping us, they’ll be afraid to go up against so many people.”

“Except that they’ll only want to go after me.”

“You worry too much. Oh good. There’s Bash.”

I glance in the direction she’s looking. He’s out of the V-neck and now in a shirt and tie, but the top few buttons are undone and the tie is loose.

My heart explodes, and my stomach turns to liquid. He’s going to kill me with his good looks. And there’s no way I’m going to be able to pay attention to a word he says. It’s a good thing Halen filled me in, or I’d have no idea what’s going on.

Bash makes his way over. I try to smile at him but I notice another tattoo peeking out on his chest.

He’s going to kill me, for sure. It’s not the three stooges I have to worry about.

Chapter 13

Goose bumps form on my skin as I glance down the table to where Bash is sitting with his band. He winks at me as he takes a bite. My insides melt again. I try to wink back but my face won't cooperate. I just stare like an idiot. He has to be used to that by now. All I do is act like a fool when he's around. I must be the ultimate ego boost. Not that it stops me from staring.

He turns back to that girl he sings with and her face lights up as she speaks to him. They have to be a couple. They'd actually be cute together if it weren't for the fact that the thought makes my skin break out in hives.

"Right, Marra?"

I turn to Halen. "What?"

She glances over at where I was just looking, then she grins at me.

I've been caught staring. My face flames again.

Halen leans closer. "Earwyn won't be able to prove you had anything to do with it, because it'll all be us" —she waves around at her friends— "and the band."

"What am I going to do?"

One of Halen's friends gives me a sheepish look. I think her name's Lumen. "You're the bait."

I whip my attention back to Halen. “Bait?”

“You haven’t heard a word of anything, have you?”

“I, uh ...” I need to think of something to save face! But then Bash catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. He’s waving his arms around like he’s telling a wild story. I’d rather hear that than how I’m going to be used as bait.

Giggling brings me back to the conversation I’m part of. Halen’s grinning and glancing down the table. “I think I know why you’re so distracted.”

All her friends are staring at me.

“Because I got no sleep thanks to Earwyn and her group? Exactly.”

Halen gives me a knowing look but drops it. “Do you want to hear how you’re going to be bait?”

“Lay it on me.” I start eating—I’m going to need the sustenance to get through the night.

Halen and her friends explain the plan and I do my best to take in every detail. I even turn my shoulders so I can’t see Bash and his band. It’s better that way because I’m having a hard time fighting my attraction to him. Having a harder time wanting to fight it. Even though I’m sure the only reason he’s helping us out is because he can’t stand Earwig and her dogfish.

“Think you can manage that?” Halen asks.

I look up just as I spill sauce down my face. You’d think that’d be impossible underwater, but it’s not. At least not when I’m involved. I wipe my mess with a

napkin. “I just have to start an argument with them. Sounds easy enough.”

Pearl leans forward. “You have to lead them toward the janitor’s closet while you’re arguing.”

“Where’s the janitor’s closet?”

“Down toward the dean’s office.”

“Middlebrooks.”

They all nod.

“I know right where her office is.”

Halen puts a hand on my arm. “Just get them there, then storm off like you're mad.”

“Doubt that’ll be hard.”

Lumen looks at me. “You sure you can pull the whole thing off?”

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I crumple my napkin. “I have more than a few things to say to them. It won’t be a problem.”

Halen glances over at the mean girls. “Be ready to leave when they do.”

That awful horn blares, but somehow it doesn’t seem as offensive as it did at first. It’s not painful enough to cover my ears. I scarf down the rest of my food, knowing Earwig will be leaving soon. They always seem to exit right after the announcements.

Mrs. Middlebrooks gives the first set of announcements, discussing the big dance. I do my best to pay attention but all I can think about is how I’m going to lure those three to the closet. We need a back-up plan.

I start to whisper to Halen but she shushes me. “We don’t ever talk during announcements.”

“Great.” I sigh and force myself to listen.

The woman goes on and on. I think she just likes the attention, and she has everyone’s.

Finally, she stops. Then a really old guy gets up and talks about some competition. Two more faculty share, but I can’t focus. As soon as we’re excused, I have to get to work.

The last teacher dismisses us.

My heart jumps into my throat. Earwig rises, quickly followed by her two dogfish. Halen nudges me.

I swallow and stand. Bash gives a little nod with that crooked grin of his. He could get me to do anything with that smile.

The three stooges take their time exiting, like their princesses in a parade. Everyone has to see them, and they slow to talk to some of the more popular students. They completely ignore our group.

Halen pokes me. "Go!"

"I am, I am." I scurry out of the chair and follow them.

As I pass Bash, he reaches out and brushes his hand on my arm. "You've got this." He does this thing with his eyes that make my heart nearly explode. His hand is still on my arm.

I'm going to die. I'm really going to die.

"Hurry!"

"Right." I pull my attention away from him and race after Earwig. She and her friends are already out in the hallway. I race over and glare at her. "Looks like your plan failed."

She scowls. "Out of my way, you cod."

I straighten my back and shake my head. "I made it through your initiation, so now I want you to leave me alone."

Earwyn sizes me up. “How’d you get out?”

I shrug. “Does it matter?” Then I head in the direction of the closet.

Vanya catches up to me. “You can’t talk to Earwyn like that.”

“Really? Because it looks like I just did.” I don’t stop, but I do slow, giving everyone else time to get in their places to lock these three in that closet.

“How did you get out?” Cove demands.

I sigh dramatically. “It wasn’t really all that difficult.”

Earwig narrows her eyes and looks me over. “I can still see your cuts and bruises despite your awful makeup job.”

I ignore the jab and stop. “Mrs. Middlebrooks wanted me to tell her who did that to me. Turns out your initiation wasn’t an academy-approved event.”

The three of them exchange a glance before Earwig shoots me a death glare. “Did you tell her?”

I cross my arms. “What do you think? Have you gotten in trouble for trying to kill me?”

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Cove's mouth drops open. "We weren't trying to kill you!"

"Don't say that so loud!" Vanya shoves her. "Do you want Mrs. Middlebrooks to hear you?"

Earwig glares at them. "Both of you shut it!" She turns to me. "Why didn't you tell her?"

I hold her gaze for a moment before answering. "Who says I won't?"

Her nostrils flare.

"As long as you don't give me reason to." I flip my hair. "Are you going to?"

Earwig's face reddens.

I shrug again and hurry toward the closet. "I'm happy to let bygones be bygones. What do you think?"

"Why are you going to her office?" Earwig catches up with me.

"Who?" I give her my most innocent expression.

"Mrs. Middlebrooks!"

"Oh, I'm not going to her office. I told you, bygones and all that."

“What’s your deal?” Vanya glares at me.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do!”

“You worry too much. I haven’t told her it was you guys. You’re the ones making a big deal about it. I thought it was kind of funny, actually.”

Earwig’s expression tightens. “Funny?”

“Wasn’t it meant to be? I mean, if you were trying to be mean—to actually hurt me—that would just be cruel. Something the faculty should know about, right?”

They all exchange glances. Halen pokes out around a corner and gives me thumbs-up.

It’s time for me to make my exit.

A hair clip on the floor catches my attention. I pick it up and turn to Earwig. “Here’s what I came for. I’ll see you around.”

“You can’t just leave!” Cove scowls at me. “Are you going to turn us in?”

“I already told you I’m not. You were just playing around. No harm in that.” I smile sweetly and race away before they can drag me into more of a conversation.

Once the hallway curves, I stop and peek around. A hand rests on my shoulder.

I spin to see Bash.

He flicks his head, moving hair from his beautiful eyes. “Go to your room and get

ready for the dance. It's best you don't see this."

"What? Why?"

"In case they try to blame you. If you don't know anything, they can't get you in trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"Just go. I don't want you to get into more trouble than you're already in." His eyes are kind, like he means it. Or maybe I just want him to care.

No! I don't. I'm going back to the land and living my life there. This is all just a bad vacation.

He rests his hand on my arm. My skin warms at his touch. My breathing hitches.

"Hurry. I'll see you at the dance."

I nod, unable to speak, then I race down the hallway.

Chapter 14

I pull out the fiftieth item from my closet. What am I supposed to wear for the dance? Something formal? Cute? Casual? I have no idea, and I can't think straight. Not after my run-in with Bash. I can't stop over-analyzing everything he said. He'll see me at the dance. He didn't want me to get in trouble.

Could he care? Like me, even?

No! He's obviously seeing that one girl. The chick who can sing so well their voices blend together like a choir of angels. I'm just a punishment.

Or am I? Nobody's forcing him to help me get back at Earwig and her followers. But he can't stand them, so this is probably just an excuse to get them back for something. It sounds like they've slighted everyone in the school. Given everyone a reason to lock them in a janitor's closet.

Click, click. Creak.

The door opens a crack and Halen peeks in. "Are you dressed?"

"It's safe."

"Bash is here."

My stomach flip-flops. I shove all the clothes into my closet and slam the door shut.

"It's fine."

It's anything but fine.

Halen comes in followed by her friends and Bash along with his band.

Bash is in my room. My room.

I glare at Halen, but she doesn't see me. She just flops onto her bed. "I can't believe it!"

"What happened?" I demand. "Did you get them locked in there?"

Bash turns to me and gives me a high-five. "We pulled it off!"

Everyone in the room high-fives each other or exchanges fist bumps.

If I had legs, they'd give out. As it is, the water keeps me up. "They're actually in the closet?"

Bash laughs. "And hollering like crazy. By the time they get out, they might be willing to offer you an apology."

I frown. "Unless they end up wanting to initiate me again."

"They'd be stupid to. Earwyn's losing her power over this school." He holds my gaze. "Thanks to you."

My heart flutters. "I didn't do anything."

"You showed up. You've done everything."

My face flames. I turn around to Halen. "We should probably get ready for the dance.

Don't you think?"

She hops up from her bed. "Marra's right. Out with you all! We'll see you there!"

Everyone makes their way out, and Bash holds my gaze until Halen closes the door between us.

I collapse onto my bed. What was that? Why was he looking at me like that?

Halen plunks down next to me. "I really can't believe we pulled that off! You did great."

"I didn't do anything."

"You got them there."

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“But you guys got them into that closet. How’d you manage that?”

Halen bites her lip. “It’s best that you don’t know.”

“Seriously? You won’t tell me?”

“It’s like your boyfriend said, you’re better off not knowing—in case they try to throw you under the manatee.”

“Throw me under—? Never mind.” I jump up. “What do people wear to these dances? Is it formal? Casual? Semi-casual?”

She opens my closet. “Dresses for the girls, ties for the guys. Let’s see what you’ve got.” She spins around. “Who threw your clothes on the floor?”

“Me.”

“Why?” She throws me an incredulous look.

“It’s best that you don’t know.”

Halen snickers. “Nice. Let’s get them off the ground.”

We hang them back up and pick through the dresses. She holds up a ruffly red dress that looks tight enough to cut off circulation all over my body. “You should wear this.”

I shake my head. “Not a chance.”

“It’s so cute!”

“Then you wear it.”

Her mouth falls open. “Really?”

I pull out a loose dress with a high neckline. “I’ll wear this.”

Halen wrinkles her nose. “That thing looks like a tent.” She grabs a black dress just as revealing as the one she’s going to wear. “This will really catch Bash’s eye.”

I hold the tent up to myself. “Who said I wanted to?”

“Oh, puh-lease. The romantic tension between you is so thick I could cut it and eat it for dessert.”

My cheeks burn.

“See? You’re blushing.” She takes the tent from me and hangs it back up.

I yank it off the hanger. “He’s seeing that one girl, anyway.”

“What one girl?”

“Short black hair, tattoos. Sings with him.”

“Neva?” Her eyes widen. “No way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Neva Perry has been best friends with Bash since forever. They’re like siblings. Not a chance under the sea that they’re together.”

“Seriously?”

“Definitely, girl. If he kissed her, it’d be like kissing his sister.”

Relief washes through me. And I hate myself for being so happy about that. I’m supposed to be gushing over Roman Lewis at the pool party right now.

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Halen reaches into the closet. “How about this one? It’s eye-catching but not too revealing.” She holds up a multicolored dress with the right cut.

“It’s perfect.” I take it from her.

“I can really wear the other one?” she asks.

“Of course. I never will, but if I wanted to, you still could.”

“You’re the best!” She kisses my cheek then we get dressed and fix each other’s hair.

Halen rubs on some lip color. “Just in time. You ready to impress a certain guitarist?”

I don’t answer.

A slow smile spreads across her face. “You know, you two would actually make a cute couple.”

“Stop.”

“I’m serious! I mean, no, I wouldn’t have thought so at first. You two are complete opposites, but I think that’s what makes it work. He’s dark and brooding and you’re cute and sweet. I think you bring out something in each other.”

I look in the mirror. “I’m just cute?”

She laughs. “You know what I mean.”

“Actually, I don’t.”

“You’re the face of the Royal School.”

I frown at my reflection and feather out my strawberry-blonde hair. Maybe I need to do something different—something edgy and unexpected.

Halen pulls me away from my vanity. “You’re going to be the most beautiful girl there. Let’s go.”

I look her over. She looks amazing in the dress. It’s nowhere near as revealing as I thought it’d be. Maybe she’s right about me being just cute. I’m probably a prude to boot. “No. You’ll be the prettiest one out there.”

She bats her eyelashes. “Let’s hope you’re right. I need a boyfriend.”

“You don’t need a boyfriend.”

“Duh!” She laughs. “What I mean is, I need someone so we can go on double dates.”

“If anything happens with Bash.”

“It will. Trust me.” Halen drags me out of the room. Everyone is dressed up as we all head for the dance. A few people even smile at me. One girl tells me she loves my dress.

When we reach the dance hall, it’s decorated beyond recognition. It’s not a theme I recognize, so I figure it’s some underwater thing I’ve missed while living on land.

Halen nudges me. “There he is.”

I swallow and look in the direction she's staring. Sure enough, Bash is already here. He's laughing with that girl. Neva. His best friend. The one he wouldn't kiss because it would be like kissing his sister.

Halen leans even closer. "Hades, I never noticed how hot he is before. You'd better go talk to him before I do."

I shove her. "Oh, stop."

She gives me a hug. "Go get him. I won't be stalking you or anything."

I chuckle, but then my heart races at the thought of approaching him.

Halen gives me a little push, and I go with it. Head straight for Bash. He's laughing still and it makes my stomach flip-flop. He really looks good when he's happy.

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As I near him, I hear some girls asking about Earwig. I shouldn't be surprised that people notice her group's absence, but it does make me nervous. What if someone goes looking for them?

I don't have time to worry about that because Neva nudges Bash, who looks my way. He smiles slowly, giving me that breathtaking crooked smile of his. Part of me wants to run. I hate what he does to me. Actually, it's starting to grow on me. He's starting to grow on me.

I hope I'm not going to regret this. My heart threatens to explode out of my chest, but I press on and give him my biggest smile. "Hi, Bash."

"The mermaid of the hour!" He holds up a hand for a high-five.

A high-five. Disappointment washes through me. But seriously, what was I expecting? A kiss?

I don't let my emotions show, and I give him a high-five. The rest of his band also gives me high-fives, including Neva.

Bash introduces me to his band—Rudder, Gill, Bahari, and of course Neva. They all talk over each other, discussing how great it is to not have to worry about those three showing up and acting like we don't belong.

Neva leans close. "I'm so thrilled, you're my new best friend."

"Hey!" Bash gives her a mock over-exaggerated hurt look.

She rolls her eyes. “You know nobody could ever replace you, you goober. I’m going to get some punch. You want some?”

He shakes his head.

Neva looks at the other guys. “Come with me to get the drinks.”

“I’m not thirsty.” Rudder gives her a funny glance.

“Come on.” She nods toward Bash then me.

“Oh, right. Yeah, I could use some punch.”

The three other guys follow her away, leaving Bash and me alone.

And my mind goes completely blank. I stare at him for inspiration. Get lost in those eyes.

He rubs his scruff and leans against the wall. “It was fun locking those three in the closet.”

“You guys did great.”

“Couldn’t have done it without you.”

I shrug. “I didn’t really do much.”

“You made the whole thing possible.”

I try to think of something to say. Anything. Nothing comes, so I look away.

Smooth.

“How are your cuts?” He comes closer and examines my face, runs his finger along my jawline.

I can’t breathe. He smells so good. Looks even better.

He tilts his head, concern filling his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Everything’s healing great.”

“You’ve got to be the toughest person I’ve ever met.”

“Me?”

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“I’ve seen plenty of people with the crap beat out of them, but you had it the worst. And you just continued on with your day like it was nobody’s business.”

“I couldn’t let Earwyn think she won, could I?”

The right side of his mouth curves up. “You’re not at all what I expected. Want to dance?”

It takes me a moment to realize what he asked. He wants to dance with me. Me. “Uh, um ... I guess. I mean, yeah. Okay.”

So smooth. Could I possibly be any more awkward?

Bash holds out his hand, and I take it. He leads me to the dance floor, which is already full of couples spinning around, having a great time.

People are staring. Whispering. Pointing.

No matter what I do, everyone notices. Lucky me, heir to the throne. Celebrity of the Dark Sea Academy.

I can’t change it, so I look away from the gawkers and focus on Bash. My insides melt as he loosens his tie and does that eye thing again.

I’m so glad I don’t have legs. No way I’d be able to get around him.

He pulls me close as a slow song starts. I can feel every muscle. His scent envelops

me. He leans closer. “You have really beautiful eyes, you know that?”

“I ... I ...” My mind races for something to say. Anything. He’s going to think I’m a total loser before long. “I prefer yours.”

Bash tilts his head. “Really?”

My heart jumps into my throat. I nod. “They’re so ...” Deep. Mysterious. Enchanting. Sexy. “... blue.”

He laughs. “That wasn’t what I expected.”

My face flames. “I—it’s just that they’re indescribable. Words fail me. That’s how amazing they are.”

Why did I just admit that?

His expression softens. “I didn’t expect that either.”

“I’m not like most people think.”

“Apparently not.”

The music changes to a fast song. I breathe a sigh of relief as he pulls back and we move to the new beat. We exchange smiles as we spin around, but my mind is racing.

I’m dancing with Bash, and he seems to be genuinely enjoying himself. I’m having the time of my life despite the stares and whispers I’m trying to ignore. Every time I look into his eyes, I get lost. Forget about everything else.

It makes me want to stay here forever.

Chapter 15

The beat from the music echoes down the hallway. Bash hands me his punch, and I take a sip. As much fun as it was to dance, we both quickly grew tired of the whispers and came out for some air. I mean, water.

“Why isn’t your band playing?” I hand him back the cup.

He gives me an incredulous look. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. You guys are better than that one.”

“Nobody wants us playing.”

“Why not?”

He lifts a brow. “The real question is, how do you know what we sound like?”

“I’ve heard you practicing.”

“Have you?”

“That’s what I just said.” I take the cup and finish off the drink.

“Good thing I didn’t want any more.” The corners of his mouth twitch. “When have you heard us?”

“I stumbled on you guys by complete accident. I heard the music and followed it.”

“Everyone hates our music.”

“That’s crazy. You know that, right?”

He shrugs and flicks his hair back.

“I’m serious! On land, you guys would be famous.”

“Stop.”

“No, I’m serious. You’re that good.”

He leans his head against the wall. “Too bad we’re not playing up there.”

“What’s stopping you from going to the land?”

His brows draw together. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Other than the fact that it’s so far away?”

“It’s not impossible. I’ve made the trek twice. It wasn’t so bad. Well, other than my dad nearly losing an arm.”

He gives me a double-take. “No, that’s not bad at all.”

I chuckle. “Okay, it sounds bad, but he still has his arm.”

“Even so, I can’t go.”

“Why? Are you scared?” I tease.

Bash frowns. “I’ve been stripped of my ability to form legs if I go to the surface.”

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I stare at him. “What? For real?”

He gives a slight nod. “That’s what happens when you get in as much trouble as I’ve gotten into. Which is why the princess shouldn’t be hanging out with me.”

“I’m not going to rule Valora, and I told you not to call me that.”

He sits up straighter. “I didn’t. Just said that’s what you are.”

“I don’t care about any of that. Why can’t you go to the surface?”

Bash closes his eyes for a moment before looking at me. “I can go. It’s that I won’t lose my tail, which is obviously problematic.”

“What did you do to get that punishment?”

He draws in a deep breath. “You don’t want to know.”

“I just asked.”

“Trust me.” He frowns then mutters something.

“What was that?”

He holds my gaze for a moment. “You’d never look at me the same.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“Why? Did you kill someone?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Definitely not.”

“Then just tell me.”

“I’d rather not.”

I study him. His expression is tense and stress lines crease around his forehead and eyes. I put my hand on his. “If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to.”

His face relaxes. “Thanks. Maybe someday.”

“Don’t worry about it. We all have a right to secrets.”

Bash tilts his head. “Do you have secrets?”

“Everybody does.”

“Now I’m curious.”

“Maybe someday.” I fight a smile from forming.

He scoots closer, my hand still on his. “What kind of a secret does a princess who grew up on land have?”

I pretend to zip my lips.

Bash looks me over. “Now you’re even more mysterious than before.”

“I’m mysterious?”

“Are you kidding? Your family was banished to live on land and now you’re back amid rumors of your father killing his brother.”

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Irritation runs through me. I scoot away and take my hand from his. “My dad would never kill anyone, much less his own flesh and blood!”

“Hey, I didn’t mean to upset you. I didn’t say I believe the rumors. For all we know, that sea cow who tried to kill you started them.”

I hold his gaze, getting lost in the depths of his eyes. I look away, not wanting to forgive so easily.

Bash moves closer, then wraps his arm around me, pulling me against him. He’s warm. His embrace, comforting. I want to shove him away, but find myself leaning into him. Taking him in. Accepting his... I don’t even know what. It’s hard to think with him so freaking close. I don’t even know why I was annoyed with him.

“We have more in common than you might think, princess.”

I don’t bother to tell him not to call me that. “Like what?”

“Everyone talks about us. They distrust us. Don’t know what we’ll do.”

He has a point. “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”

I nudge him. “I’m serious.”

“Ask away, but I won’t tell you about how I lost my ability to shift.”

“I wasn’t going to ask about that.”

“What, then?”

“How are you in the Royal school? Is your family in the royal line?”

He nods. “Of course. But I won’t play by the rules.”

“Why not?”

“Because politics are a joke. I want nothing to do with them.”

“Isn’t that what the academy is training you for?”

“Sure, but that’s not what I’m going to do once I’m free.”

“You’re going to go pro with your band?”

Bash leans his head on mine. “That’s the plan. Nobody appreciates us here, but when we perform in town, we sell out every time.”

“See? I told you that you guys are good.”

“Never denied it.”

“Didn’t you?”

He laughs.

I move so that I can look at him. I love the way the skin around his eyes crinkles when he genuinely smiles. His eyes seem even brighter.

He stops laughing and meets my gaze. Tilts his head. Draws in a deep breath.

I lean closer and put my hand back on his. He flips it over and threads his fingers through mine. Leans closer. Our noses nearly touch.

“We’re completely wrong for each other.” His voice is gruff, sends a ripple of excitement through me. Makes goose bumps form on my skin.

I clear my throat. “I know.”

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Bash closes the distance between us. His nose brushes against mine. Our mouths almost touch. His gaze intensifies. “I could end up hurting you.”

My heart races. “I don’t care.”

“But I do.” He takes a deep breath. “And that scares me.”

I can’t take it a moment longer. I press my lips on his. They’re soft, and he tastes of punch and mint gum. The scent of his cologne envelops me. His hand tightens around mine. He cups my chin.

This isn’t my first kiss, but it may as well be. I’ve never experienced anything like this. An energy runs through me. I can’t get enough. Need to have more of him. To know him fully, his secrets and everything. He’s a mystery I want to unravel.

He pulls back, breathing as heavily as I am. His eyes are darker, like a brewing storm. “This was a mistake.”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t have—I’m sorry.” He leaps up.

“Bash!”

He flees down the hallway and is out of sight before I realize what just happened.

“Wait!” I race after him, but he’s nowhere to be seen.

I search for him down several halls before giving up.

What happened? We were connecting, weren't we? And that kiss ... it was beyond unbelievable. It was magical.

I lean against the nearest wall and close my eyes. Go over our conversation in excruciating detail.

Could he really be scared of hurting me? Or does he regret kissing me?

Or maybe he's right about us being completely wrong for each other. The only reason we met was because it was a punishment. It wouldn't even surprise me if Mrs. Middlebrooks did that on purpose—thinking we would hate being forced together. If she had any idea how mind-melting that kiss would be, would she still have put us together?

“There you are!”

I turn to Halen. “I needed some space.”

She looks around. “Where's Bash? I thought you two might be together.”

Tears threaten. Stupid, weak tears. I blink them away. “Nope.”

Concern fills her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn't I be?” I loop my arm through hers. “Let's go in there and dance the night away.”

She gives me a funny look, like she doesn't quite believe me, but she nods. “Sounds good to me.”

We head back to the dance hall, but I glance back hoping Bash has changed his mind and come back.

He hasn't.

Chapter 16

Clack, clack.

I roll over and pull the covers over my head. The noise continues. I don't want to get out of bed. Not only do I have a raging headache, but I can't bear to think about running into Bash after I kissed him and he ran off, full of regret.

Clack, clack!

I sit up and glare at Halen. "Why are you being so noisy?"

She glances over at me, wide-eyed. "What am I doing?"

"You're clacking. It's louder than a jackhammer."

"A what?"

I close my eyes and rub my temples. "Something loud on the land."

"I was just rearranging my makeup. It's barely making any noise. Are you okay?"

"My head is killing me."

She arches a brow. "From what?"

"I don't know." I think back. "Did someone spike the punch?"

“Nope. I feel fine. Nobody else mentioned anything either when I went out there.”
She nods toward the door.

Then I remember drinking from Bash’s cup. Maybe he slipped something in his punch and didn’t tell me.

He’s so frustrating.

“You’d better get dressed. It’s almost time to be at the dining hall.”

I groan.

“Maybe I have something for a headache. Let me look.”

“Don’t bother. I don’t want to take anything on an empty stomach. I’m going back to sleep.” I fall against my pillow.

“You don’t want lunch?”

I bolt upright. “It’s not breakfast?”

“Not at noon.” She lifts a brow. “I know you’re still catching up from sleep lost out in the woods, but you really should eat. Come back and take a nap if you want.”

I force myself out of bed. Why is the light so loud? “Did you see Bash at breakfast?”

“No. You gonna tell me what happened between you two?”

“We had some fun dancing before he left.”

She lifts a brow. “You’re leaving out some serious details, girl.”

“I kissed him.”

Her mouth drops open. “You didn’t!”

“I did.” I open my closet and dig around for a hoodie.

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Halen rushes over. “Is he a good kisser?”

“The best. Which is why it sucks that he ran off, saying he never should’ve done that.”

“Oh, Marra. Really?”

I find a hoodie way in the back and yank it off the hanger. “His loss.”

She hugs me. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not. It was fun, but I’m not looking for anything serious. I’m heading back to land, so I don’t need anything holding me in Valora.”

Halen stares at me. “You’re leaving?”

“That’s my plan.”

Her expression falls. “But you just got here.”

“My parents dragged me here against my will. My life is up there.”

She frowns. “I see. What’s so great about life on the land? What do they have that we don’t?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Well, I don’t want to keep you here if you don’t want to be here. I’d better plan on moving back into my old dorm room. Earwyn and her dogfish will be moving back in the moment you leave.” She spins around.

“Halen...” I want to say so much, but my headache is pounding even worse now.

“No, I get it. This isn’t your life.” She glances back at me. “You’ve been gone since we were kids. I stupidly thought it was like you were away at boarding school, and that when you returned, it’d be for good. My bad for getting my hopes up. Thinking my best friend was going to stick around once it was your choice.”

“It’s not like I’m choosing my friends up there over you. You could come with me!”

“To the land?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

She takes a deep breath. “My home is here. Valora is my future.”

“That’s how I feel about life up there.”

“But you’re a mermaid, Marra! Your father is king. Even more than me, you’re meant to be here.”

I take her hand. “I’m not trying to hurt you. In fact, you were the only one I was looking forward to seeing when I came here. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have come at all.”

She crosses her arms. “I thought your parents forced you to come.”

“I was thinking about running away where they couldn’t find me.”

Halen snickers. “Your father could find you anywhere. He gets whatever he wants.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She holds my gaze for a moment. “It’s always been that way. Even when we were little.”

“So, he wanted to be banished for over ten years? That’s why I grew up on land?”

“It didn’t stop him from coming back as king.”

“Don’t tell me you think he killed Tiberias too! I thought you were the one person who would always be on my side.”

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Her eyes narrow. “I didn’t say I thought he killed your uncle.”

“You aren’t denying it.”

Halen’s mouth forms a straight line.

“So, you do think it!”

“I didn’t say that.” Her tone is terse.

“Then deny it.”

“I don’t know what happened. Nobody does! King Tiberias’s death is shrouded in mystery. I’m just glad you’re back. I’ve missed you so much all these years.”

“And I’ve missed you too. But just because I want my life back doesn’t mean I want to leave you. You’re my best friend, Halen. You’ve proven that every moment since I’ve been back.”

“Then why not stay? Give it a chance, at least? Forget about leaving and just see how everything goes? You might actually like it here.”

“I do like the idea of spending more time with you.”

“What’s the but?”

Sighing, I sit on my bed. “If I don’t finish high school, I won’t get into college. I’ll

lose my place on the track team.”

“Are you going to be a princess up there?”

“I don’t want any part in government—anywhere. You know what it’s like. Power struggles, politics, and everything that goes with all of that.”

“Yeah, but you get benefits like this suite.” She looks around the room. “Your father just had to say the word, and we got this right out from under Earwyn and the dogfish.”

A thought strikes me. “And if I leave, they win.”

Halen nods. “They go back to terrorizing everyone and thinking they’re better than everybody.”

I rub my temples. “You make it hard to leave, you know that?”

“Good. My best friend is finally back, and I want her to stay.” Halen sits next to me. “What else do I need to do to convince you to stay?”

“How long do you want me to stick around?”

“Forever.”

I close my eyes and keep rubbing my head. Coming to Valora was a mistake. I’m glad I reconnected with Halen, but everything else has been a bust. Why didn’t I go to Ivy’s house and make myself at home in her closet? I could’ve waited my parents out. Dad wouldn’t have searched for me forever—he was too eager to get back here and rule. I don’t even know why he insisted on me joining them. It’s not like I’ve spent any time with them since we returned, except for me getting in trouble.

Knock, knock!

“You two coming to lunch?” Lumen calls from the other side of the door.

Halen puts a hand on my arm. “You coming?”

“Yeah.” If nothing else, I need to nurse my headache with some coffee.

Halen jumps up. “Just a second!” She rummages through my closet then throws a cute lacy top at me. “Hurry up and put this on!”

I’d rather wear a hoodie and try to be invisible, but I do what she says. Too achy to argue about it.

“You’re going to stay?” She pleads with her eyes.

I pull my hair up into a messy twist. “Yeah.”

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“For at least the rest of the school year? Give it that much.”

“I don’t want to make any promises.”

Her expression falls. “Not even for me?”

“Only for you am I staying at all.”

Halen’s brows draw together. “If you leave, I’m going to be furious with you. Just know that.”

“The only place I’m going right now is the dining hall.”

“Good.” She flings open the door and greets her friends.

I wait until they’re in the hallway before leaving the room.

Pearl wraps her arms around me. “Thank you for letting us help put Earwyn in that closet last night! I’ve been wanting to do that forever.”

“I didn’t really do anything.”

“Are you kidding?” She pulls back and her eyes widen. “Everything has changed since you got here! Those three are really being put in their place.”

“Glad I could help, but really, I haven’t done anything.”

Halen throws me an I-told-you-so look.

The others jump and share their excitement about Earwig being knocked down a notch or three. We head for the stairs, and a fourth-year girl stops me. “You’re the best!”

“For what?”

“Earwyn, Vanya, and Cove!” She hugs me and heads downstairs.

On our way to the dining hall, four other people I’ve never talked to before stop to thank me.

A warmth spreads through me. Maybe being here isn’t so bad, after all. By standing up to that queen bee, I’ve actually helped others. I don’t know how, but clearly Earwig has spread her hate far and wide. And in some small way, I’ve helped to offset that.

In the dining hall, upper-year students crowd around, vying for my attention as they talk about how grateful they are.

It’s surreal. I’m tempted to pinch myself.

Finally, everyone clears some space and I have a seat. I pour myself a big mug of black coffee and gulp it down, though my headache is already getting better without the caffeine. I fill up on sandwiches and return thumbs-up to students I don’t know.

I notice three empty chairs where Earwig and the dogfish usually sit. “Did someone let them out? If not, we’d better—”

“No worries.” Halen grins. “Someone left the janitor an anonymous note after the

dance. Word is, he let them out early this morning. Given what they did to you, I'd say the punishment fits the crime."

The horrible horn sounds, but I think I'm getting used to it. Even with my lingering headache, it isn't nearly as bad as it was the first day.

My magic arts teacher gives some announcements for the weekend, then he dismisses us.

Halen turns to me. "I'm going to the library to study for that government test. Want to join me?"

"Will you still be there in a couple of hours?"

She nods. "You better believe it. Middlebrooks's tests are killer. She always asks the most obscure questions."

"I'll definitely join you. I have to take care of my punishment first."

Her eyes widen. "That's right. You have to clean the gym. I'll help."

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I shake my head. “No. I need to show Middlebrooks that I can take care of it on my own.”

“You’ve always been a stubborn thing. I don’t think she’ll care.”

“Trust me. I want this as ammo. She’s punishing me for being hazed on my first day here.”

“Ammo for what?”

“My dad’s king. This could be used to my advantage at some point.”

Halen nudges me. “Good thinking! Not only taking down Earwyn, but the dean too!”

We head our separate ways, though it takes me longer to leave the dining hall because more students stop to talk to me about Earwig.

I’ve gone from public enemy number one to favorite student. I like this turn of events.

The crowd clears as I head toward the gym and I make my way down the hallway alone. Just before I turn the corner to the gym, music filters down my way. Not just music, but that rich, heart-melting voice.

I stop in place and take in the sounds. It’s a softer tune and massages my headache. I really should ignore it and get to work on the post-dance mess, but I want to hear more.

No. It would only torture me.

I glance down the hallway toward the music, then down toward the gym. Then I decide to torture myself some more.

Chapter 17

I creep into the practice room and take my spot behind the plant. The soft song is still playing, though there are no vocals at the moment. Bash is focused on a guitar solo, and everyone else is entranced. Or maybe that's just me.

He's totally in his element, clearly not bothered at all about kissing and running from the new girl. Maybe he just wanted to be able to say he kissed the king's daughter.

Heat floods my face, and my ears burn. I'm so stupid. That's exactly what happened. I fell for the bad boy, one of the only people who didn't throw hatred at me. And all I was to him was a trophy. The other guys in the band probably cheered him on and think he's the man now.

And here I am, still spying on him. Melting at his music. Adoring that face and those eyes. Everything about him is perfect, despite what he's done.

Well, I came out the winner. Everyone in the Royal School is thrilled with me—everyone except the three stooges.

Bash looks up from his guitar and nears the mic. He belts out the most romantic lyrics I've ever heard, and they're even more so with his voice. I'd let him kiss me and brag about it all over again just to keep hearing this. It's like his own brand of enchantment.

Then Neva joins him, sharing the same mic. Once again, her voice melds with his, blending perfectly. Like they were made for each other. They turn to each other and

smile as the love-filled song flows from their lips.

Halen has to be wrong about them. There isn't anything sibling-like about them. Not while they're singing about an unsinkable romance.

Neva has to be why Bash fled like he did. He got what he wanted—bragging rights about kissing the princess—but he knew he needed to get back to the one he really loves.

I really am the idiot. Especially since I'm spying on them now. I can't let go, and he clearly never held on. I imagined the kiss was special. Foolishly thought we had something.

What I need is to move on myself. If I'm going to stay, I can find a nice guy. Someone who doesn't get in trouble so often that he's skirting expulsion.

I push aside a leaf and watch them. The melody intensifies then Bash and Neva lean so close together, their faces rub against one another's. My heart constricts, recalling my hands on his.

I'm such a fool! Look at those two. I knew something was going on between them and I ignored my instincts. Listened to Halen. What does she know about them? She doesn't even like them.

The song ends, and I know exactly what I need to do. Then I do it. Leave the practice room and push the ocean's most gorgeous guy from my mind. Who needs brawn and heart-stopping good looks combined with a voice straight from heaven? Not me. Not when that merman is nothing but trouble.

"There you are!" Mrs. Middlebrooks's voice cuts through my thoughts.

My breath catches in my throat. “I’m heading for the gym right now.”

She grabs my arm. “Oh, you’ll clean it. But not now.”

“What’s going on?”

“Save it.” The dean drags me down the hall, squeezing hard enough to leave bruises. Not that I could prove she did it when my arm is already covered in bruises from the hazing.

Mrs. Middlebrooks practically throws me inside her office before slamming the door.

I crash into a chair, and its arm digs into my tail. “What’s going on?”

She glares at me. “I said, save it.”

“For what, exactly?”

“Your father!” She picks up a shell phone and dials. “This is Daphne Middlebrooks from the Dark Sea Academy. I need to speak with the king right away.”

My headache kicks in again. This has to be about locking the stooges in the closet. Despite me not ratting them out, they clearly ratted me out.

I can’t help but smirk. They must be furious that the other students aren’t scared of them anymore. I’ve displaced them from the suite, now this. Maybe Earwig even has a secret crush on Bash and found out that I kissed him.

Mrs. Middlebrooks gives me a death glare.

“I’m not smirking at you.”

She holds her palm out toward me then speaks into the phone. “Drake, you need to come down here right away.”

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Why does she keep calling my dad by his first name when everyone else calls him by his title? The woman is so full of herself it makes me want to punch the smug look right off her face.

She nods, but says nothing. Makes me wonder what my dad's telling her. I picture him telling her off for being disrespectful, but then she smiles. "Wonderful, Drake. We'll be in the gymnasium. You remember where that is, right? Still where it was when we were students here." Her grin widens. "Perfect. Buh-bye."

I hold back an eye roll.

She puts the shell phone down. "You get your wish. We're going to the gym and you can start cleaning up. Your father will meet us there."

"Still won't tell me what's going on?" I narrow my eyes.

"You really don't know?"

"Not if you don't tell me."

"We'll discuss it when your father gets here." She mutters something I can't make out, then she grabs my other arm and squeezes it.

I try to pull away. "That hurts. You won't get away with this."

"There may be laws against corporal punishment where you grew up, but I assure you there are no such luxuries here." She digs her fingers deeper, making me cry out. "I'd

be on your best behavior if I were you.”

“You really think my dad is going to be happy about you punishing me for being hazed? Once I explain to him what’s really going on—”

“No more talking. Unless you want to add to your punishment.”

“Aren’t you already adding to it now? Bringing my dad in to discuss something you won’t even tell me about.”

“You just earned yourself cleaning up after next week’s dance. Want to make it the following one, as well?”

I bite my tongue. This woman has lost her mind. She must be related to Earwig. That’s the only explanation. Actually, it’s not. She’s so disrespectful toward my dad, she probably thinks he killed his brother. She probably hates me and my parents—and lucky me. I get to take the brunt of her vitriol.

We reach the gym, and she shoves me inside. “Get to work.”

I gasp at the sight. Food and drinks have been spilled everywhere. Stains of something green line the walls. Part of the decorations? Not only that, but the place has been trashed. It would take ten people all day to get the gym cleaned.

“I didn’t say to stare. Start cleaning!” Mrs. Middlebrooks pinches my arm.

I spin around and glare at her. “Stop doing that!”

She lifts a brow. “Don’t test me. Your father is already going to be furious when he arrives. This is the second time he has to leave his post to deal with your antics.”

Maybe I should just slap her across the face. I'm already in enough trouble. What's a little more?

She leans against the wall. "Tick, tock."

I'll wait to hit her until after my dad leaves. Maybe he'll set her straight and I won't have to, but if he doesn't, then I'll do it myself.

In the meantime, I make my way around the gym and collect empty cups and plates. It's like nobody knows where the garbage cans are located.

Mrs. Middlebrooks hums. When I glare at her, she smiles.

I'm definitely going to smack that woman.

Before long, she spins around and looks out into the hallway. "Oh, hello, Drake."

My stomach knots. He's probably going to side with her. That's what he did last time. I'm going to have to be more convincing.

Dad comes into the room, and Mrs. Middlebrooks moves right next to him. I half-expect her to squeeze his arms. Of course, she doesn't.

"What did you do this time, Marra?" my father bellows.

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I give him my most innocent expression. “Nothing, Dad.”

Mrs. Middlebrooks snorts.

He turns to her. “What did she do?”

“She locked three girls in a closet.”

“I had nothing to do with that!”

Dad glares at me, his eyes flashing yellow. The water in the room electrifies. Bumps run down my bruised arms. “Are you accusing your dean of lying?”

My mouth falls open. He’s not even considering my point of view. “Those girls are lying. They’re out to get me! They’re the ones who tied me up in the—”

“See what a troublemaker she is, Drake?” Mrs. Middlebrooks moves even closer to my dad. “Hasn’t given me a moment of rest since she arrived.”

“It’s not my fault! Dad, you have to believe me!”

His nostrils flare and his eyes glow brighter yellow than I’ve ever seen them. “Believe you? How can I do that when we both know full well you didn’t want to return to Valora? All of this is a ploy for me to send you back to land!”

I shake my head. “It’s not. I’m having fun with Halen, and—”

“Silence!”

The lights flicker. The tables shake.

I swallow and move away from him.

Mrs. Middlebrooks gives him a big smile. “If you’ll excuse me, Drake. I have some business to attend. If you need to find me, I’ll be in my office. You remember where that is, right? Where you went last time she got in trouble?”

He doesn't respond. Just keeps his angry, yellow eyes focused on me.

“Okay, then. I’ll talk to you soon.” She leaves.

My dad swims near me, the ground shaking underneath him.

I start to back up, but then think better of it. “Dad—”

“Why do you keep getting into trouble?” His eyes flicker.

My pulse drums in my ears. “It’s not my fault. There’s this group of mean girls, and they hate me. They tied—”

“You think people hate you? People hate me.” Some of the yellow drains from his irises, and he comes nearer. “I just found out there’s a movement to have me removed from office.”

“You mean to banish you again?”

His eyes return to brown and he moves closer, whispering. “No. They want to kill me. Tiberias’s followers are still loyal to him, and there’s a whole section of people

who are claiming that I killed him. They want me dead.”

“But doesn’t every king have a group of haters?”

“Yes, but this group is especially large. Emotions are high, and the entire political atmosphere is on fire. The one thing most groups have in common is their disdain for me being in office. My entire staff is focused on looking into this. I don’t have time for anything that doesn’t involve protecting my life, yet here I am.”

“Next time, send Mom.”

“No.”

“Why not? Do you even care that the political hatred is also focused on me? Those mean girls tied me up in the middle of the woods, leaving me to be fish food.”

His brows draw together. “How’d you get away?”

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“I’m more resourceful than they gave me credit for.”

“Good.” He holds his head high. “Keep that spirit. But do it without getting into more trouble. I can’t keep coming to the academy with my life on the line like it is.”

My heart sinks at the realization that he’s more worried about his life than mine.

He creeps even closer, speaking even quieter. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Go back to land?”

His eyes flicker yellow. “Don’t even think about it. No, I need you to keep an ear out. You’re in the same school as the kids of the most influential people in Valora. Listen to what they’re saying. If you hear anything suspicious, let me know. You might be able to figure out who the mastermind behind this is easier than I can.”

I hesitate. Earwig is an obvious hater, and she did throw me under the bus with Middlebrooks. But she would make my life even worse here if she found out I told the king about this. On the other hand, my dad’s life is on the line.

“What?” Dad demands. “Do you know something?”

I swallow. “I do know one girl, but she’ll make my life miserable if I say anything.”

He inches closer. “Nobody will ever know. Ever.”

I take a deep breath. “Okay. Her name is Earwyn.”

“Last name?”

“I don’t know. She’s a fourth-year student in the Royal School. There aren’t any other Earwyns.”

His mouth forms a straight line. “It’ll be easy enough for me to find out what I need, and I assure you that it won’t come back to you.”

“Thank you.” Relief washes through me.

“Find out anything else you can. Ask dumb questions in your government class to make it look like you’re clueless. Given that we spent so many years on land, it’ll be believable. It’s a matter of life and death. Someone else in this academy has to know the truth, and that person is most likely in your school.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Perfect. But don’t call me. I don’t think the lines are secure. I’ll send my people to check on you. If any castle servants arrive to drop off gifts, give them updates.”

“Don’t send gifts!”

“You don’t want them?” He gives me a double-take.

“No! That’ll make kids jealous of me, and that’s the last thing I need. Send the servants under some other guise. Just nothing that will make me look worse.”

“I’ll think of something. But you’ll do that for me?”

“Of course, Dad.”

He kisses the top of my head. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

I’m never going to see land again at this rate.

Chapter 18

I finish scrubbing the floor and look around the gym. It probably didn't shine like this when it was new. There are no more remnants of the dance. It's ready for classes on Monday.

Now I can get started on my homework.

The bell rings. Time for dinner.

My stomach rumbles. Homework will definitely have to wait. I've worked up a ravenous appetite.

When I arrive at the Royal's table, Halen wrinkles her nose at me. "You didn't meet me in the library."

"It took me all this time to get the gym clean!" I sink into the chair next to her. "Not only that, but Middlebrooks brought my dad here again."

"Seriously? For what?"

I arch a brow.

She sits taller. "They told her that you locked them up?"

I pile food on my plate. "Yep. Even though I never ratted them out for trying to kill me. No good deed goes unpunished."

“Did you tell Middlebrooks what they did?”

“I told my dad.”

Her mouth drops open. “What did he say?”

I want to tell my best friend about the threat on his life, but I’m supposed to keep this to myself. “He said he’d look into it.”

She frowns. “Well, hopefully now those three will leave you alone. If they do, I can’t see why you’d get in any more trouble.”

“Except for the fact that Middlebrooks seems to enjoy doling out consequences.”

Halen pours herself coffee. “She’s as jealous of you as those three codfish.”

I give her a double-take. “You think so?”

“Heck, yeah. Do you see the way she looks at you? The woman is drowning in envy.” She turns and joins her friends in a discussion about a swim coach I don’t know.

I think over all the comments and conversations I’ve heard about my dad since arriving. Nothing sounded threatening. Just seemed like typical political angst, like anything I’d have seen on land. People get so worked up over politics but I’ve never cared much. Either because of being surrounded by it as a child in the castle or because I figured there was nothing I could do, anyway. My focus was always better spent on track. For all the good that did. Now I can’t even run. I’m stuck under water with a tail.

The meal ends, and I assure Halen I’ll meet her at the library this time. I just have to go to the room and get my books. Every muscle aches after spending so much time

on the gym.

I take a detour on the way to the dorms to look at the gym again. I have to give it a double-take because I can't believe my eyes. Trash is spread all across the floor.

Earwig and her dogfish.

Anger surges through me so strongly that everything takes on a yellow hue.

"Marra!" comes a familiar feminine voice.

My stomach clenches, imagining Mrs. Middlebrooks behind me. It takes me a moment to register that it's another familiar voice speaking. My Mom.

"What are you doing here?"

"We have to talk."

"This isn't a good time." I glance back at the gym. Garbage is still spread all over.

“What happened in there?”

“I have an arch enemy who wants to get me in trouble.”

Mom gives me a funny look then moves past me. She whispers something in a foreign language and waves a hand toward the mess.

It cleans itself.

I stare in disbelief. “How’d you do that?”

She turns to me, fixing her hair. “You’ll learn it in your studies here. Where can we speak privately?”

“I was heading for my room.”

“That’ll do.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

Mom glances around. “I don’t want to talk about it here.”

“Okay. So, how are things going in the castle for you? I know Dad’s stressed.”

She licks her lower lip and looks around again. “He’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“The threat on his life?”

“No. Come on. I want to see your dorm room.”

We head for the Royals dormitory, and she heads up the stairs past my level. “I’m here.”

“But this floor is for the upper-year students.”

I snort. “You don’t need to tell me.”

The farther down the hall we go, the more incredulous my mom’s expression grows. “You’re not in the suite, are you?”

“You didn’t know?”

She shakes her head. “No, but that explains why you’re getting grief from the upper-years.”

“Grief?” I exclaim. “You call leaving me to die in the forest grief?”

“What?”

“Dad didn’t tell you?”

“There’s a lot he isn’t telling me,” she mutters.

I unlock my door. “What do you mean?”

Mom gestures inside. We go in, and I close the door behind us. She looks around. “I can’t believe you have the suite as a first-year. Is Halen your roommate?”

“Thankfully.”

“You know this room is designed for three?”

“So I’ve been told.” I gather my books. “What is it you need to talk about? I really have to study if I’m not going to fall behind.”

She speaks in the foreign language again, then wiggles her fingers toward my head. My brain tingles.

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“What was that?”

“You’ll retain everything you study perfectly for the next few days. Now, sit.”

I plop on my bed, massaging my temples. “Will the tingling stop?”

“Eventually.” She sits and tucks her tail neatly underneath her. “If I tell you something, I need your word that you won’t tell anyone.”

“Okay.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. You have my word.” I pretend to zip my lips.

“This is serious.”

I nod for her to continue. My brain is tingling even more now.

She scoots closer. “I think your father is seeing someone.”

“What?” I exclaim.

“I know it sounds crazy, but he’s been acting really strange. He’s hiding something.”

“Did he tell you about the threat on his life?”

Mom nods. “But this goes beyond that.”

“What makes you think he’s seeing someone?”

“Secret shell phone calls. Won’t come to bed with me. Won’t—”

“TMI, Mom! TMI.” I shake my head.

“My point is, he’s acting like he has something to hide.”

“Maybe it’s royal business.”

“He shouldn’t hide things from me. I’m the queen. His wife of twenty-two years. We always tell each other everything.”

“I’ve heard it said that a little mystery is good in a relationship.”

“Not like this. I know your father more than I know anyone else. He’s seeing someone.”

I take a deep breath. “Mom, we just arrived in Valora. Everything is crazy. Let life settle into a routine, and I’m sure you’ll see it’s not as bad as you think. I think we all have to adjust to being so far under sea level. We’re used to fresh air, which is miles above now.”

“It’s not that.”

“Maybe it’s the saltwater.”

Her expression tenses. “If you aren’t going to take me seriously, I’ll leave.”

“Mom, I’m here for you. I swear. I just think maybe you should have more proof before making such a serious accusation.”

“I’m not accusing him.”

“He’s been here twice to see me. Maybe that’s the mixed signal you’re picking up on. I’ve had trouble with some mean girls.”

“See, I think that’s a cover. Can you keep an eye out for me? Next time he visits, see where else he goes. Find out who exactly he visits with while here.”

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Great. Now I'm spying for both my parents. When am I going to have any time for my studies?

"Will you, Marra? It'd mean the world to me."

"Sure, Mom. I'll even listen for anything people are talking about that could be related."

She wraps her arms around me. "You're the best. I knew I could count on you. Just don't tell your dad I was here."

"Why not? You can't visit your daughter?"

"He said he wants me to give you space. Doesn't want me here at the academy."

"That's crazy."

"My point exactly." She kisses my cheek then rises. "I'll be in touch soon."

"Okay, but I'm sure I won't find anything."

"You're a lot more likely to find something than I am. I'm sure of it." With that, she leaves.

I stare at the closed door for a moment before stuffing my books into a bag. My head is still tingly, and I hope her enchantment works because there's no way I'm going to be able to focus on my studies otherwise. Not with the bombs my parents have both

dropped on me within a matter of hours of each other.

Loud music plays from down the hall and laughter sounds nearby. Everyone else must be done with their studying. Lucky me, I haven't even begun.

As I make my way to the stairs, several students wave and call out hello. At least I'm not hated anymore, at least by most people. The three stooges obviously still have it out for me, as does Middlebrooks, but everyone else seems to like me now. At least staying in Valora will be manageable. But my invisible life on land feels more inviting now than before. My 'problems' were so miniscule. I wish I'd appreciated everything more.

Downstairs, I have to check a map for the library. I remember passing it a few times, but have no idea how to get there from here.

I think I'm about halfway there, when I hear Bash speaking down a dark hallway. If I was smart, I'd ignore him. Keep going. Get to the library like I promised Halen. Study like I need to.

But I don't. I creep down the dim hallway, holding my breath and staying close to the wall.

Bash's voice grows louder. I can't tell who he's speaking with—it sounds one-sided. Maybe he's on a shell phone.

I come to a classroom. He's pacing inside, his back to me. I move away from the doorway and press myself against the wall.

Really, I should leave. Respect his privacy. Study for the upcoming test. But my parents did request that I listen to people and find out if anyone knows anything—either about a possible threat on my dad's life or a possible affair. Maybe

Bash knows about those.

Right. Like I'm dumb enough to believe that. I'm just a love-struck princess stalking the local bad boy. And I don't care. Maybe I'll find out what's really going on with him. Why did he run off after kissing me? Is Neva his girlfriend or a sister-like bestie? That's why I'm here.

"Would you get off my back?" Bash exclaims.

Oh, maybe he's arguing with Neva. This could be my lucky day. I lean closer to the doorway.

I'm a horrible person.

"I've gotten my grades up and I haven't been in trouble for anything since I got back. Doesn't that mean anything?"

My heart sinks. Definitely not arguing with Neva. Why would she care about any of that?

"No, I'm not trying to make a mockery of you. What kind of question is that?"

He has to be talking with one of his parents. I recognize that tone. I've used it a million times myself.

"My personal life is none of your business. I'm passing my classes and staying out of trouble. That's all you need to worry about." He pauses. Sounds like he's tapping something. "I realize you're paying for my education. That's why I told you I'm working on my grades." Another pause. "Yes, I'm happy with passing marks! I don't need to be on the honor list to be in a band."

I really should give the guy his privacy. No reason for me to listen to him talking about his classes or career aspirations. I spin around and head down the hallway.

“So what if I danced with Marra? Who cares?”

I freeze in place. Now it sounds interesting.

Chapter 19

I press myself against the wall as close to the doorjamb as possible. Bash hasn't said a word in almost a full minute. His mom or dad must be going on a tirade. About me? Are they upset that he danced with me? What if they're involved in the plot against my dad?

My stomach knots. No, that's ridiculous. They're probably just Tiberias supporters. Annoyed by my family being in charge now. Just like everyone else.

"Look," Bash finally continues. "Not that it's any of your concern, but one of the faculty made me show her around. It was a punishment. I'm still paying for my latest banishment."

I slink down to sitting. Nothing like having that pointed out again. He was forced to spend time with me. That's how horrible I am.

Leaving Valora is looking better by the moment. But I can't leave my parents, not even if their fears are imagined. Plus, Halen really wants me to stay. Not to mention the fact that I don't know how to get to the surface. I couldn't even find the library without a map.

I'm stuck here, enamored with a guy who can't stand me and wary of a potential plot against my entire family while my father could be seeing someone behind my mom's back.

What happened to being worried about track, college, and pool parties? If only I

could go back in time and stay there. Make it so that none of this ever happened. Well, my parents could live without me. Maybe that would be enough to keep them together.

That's a good idea! If I fled back to land, to our empty and paid-for home, my parents might band together and work things out. I would not only be doing myself a favor but them too. I'd have to find a way to make it up to Halen, but surely she'd understand.

"How long have you been there?"

My stomach lurches. I glance up to see Bash staring at me, his face red and his eyes narrowed.

Crap. I've been caught eavesdropping.

"It's not what you think." I jump up. "I swear."

His nostrils flare. "Really? You weren't just listening to my conversation?"

"Um, well, maybe it's kind of like it looks." My mind races, trying to think of something brilliant to say. Something that will wipe that furious look off his face. The tingling in my brain is making it difficult.

"Why?" His brows draw together.

"I didn't mean to."

"You didn't mean to sit down and listen?"

"I was heading for the library and—"

“The library? It’s halfway across the school!”

I glare at him. “If you’re going to interrupt me, I have nothing to say to you.”

“How much did you overhear?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“Yes, it does! What did you hear?”

“Hardly anything, but like I said, it doesn't matter because I’m going back to the surface. And I’m staying there!”

His face pales. “Wait, what? Why?”

“Does it matter?”

“That’s why I just asked.” He moved forward. “Why are you going to the surface?”

“Because that’s where my life is. It’s not here. Not where everyone hates me.” I glare at him, daring him to deny it. Hoping he will. Hating myself for caring.

“People love you now that you’ve put Earwyn in her place.”

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“And how long will that last? I’m still daughter of the king nobody wants in power.”

He frowns.

“See? You can’t deny it.”

“People will adjust. There’s always a calming down period after a new leader takes power.” His hands fall to his side. “What’s your life like on land?”

“What do you care?”

He looks away, his eyes seeming to storm with conflict.

“What?” I inch closer.

Bash glances back at me. “I’m just curious. I’ve never been there, and as you know, I’ll never get to go.”

“Most in Valora won’t ever leave. That doesn’t make you special.”

He arches a brow. “Does it make you special?”

“I don’t want to leave because I think I’m better than everyone, if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

“Just asking a question.”

I hold his gaze while trying to decide how to answer—or if I’m going to reply at all. He isn’t being forthcoming about anything, so why should I?

“Is life better on land?”

“I don’t know about better. It’s different, but kind of the same. I have a best friend named Ivy up there and there’s this guy Roman ...” I let my voice trail off, waiting for his reaction.

His expression tenses, but it’s barely noticeable. Could just be my imagination. Maybe I just want to see him show some kind of emotion.

“What about him?” Bash crosses his arms, but his expression makes me think he doesn’t care.

“I was supposed to meet him at a pool party. Clearly, that didn’t happen.”

“So, it wasn’t serious?”

“Do you care?”

“Just asking.” He shrugs.

Bash has got to be the most frustrating person alive.

“What are you going to do if you go back?”

“If? I already told you I’m going.” I can’t think straight around him at all. All the more reason to go to the library. Halen probably already thinks I’ve stood her up again. “It doesn’t matter. I need to get to the library.”

“Why do you have to study if you’re leaving anyway?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Doesn’t make much sense, does it?”

“I still have classes on the surface! Falling out of the habit of studying wouldn’t do me any good, now would it?”

“Fine, go. Everyone always does.” He spins around and storms away.

My mouth drops open and I stare in disbelief. What is his deal? And what did he mean by everyone always leaves?

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I consider going after him but shove the thought aside. He's a closed book, and I'm nothing more than an annoyance to him. I pick up my bag and head for the library.

Halen waves when she sees me. She turns to Lumen. "I told you she was coming."

"Are you going to be ready for the test?" Lumen asks.

My brain starts tingling at the mention of the test. "I'll be fine."

She scrunches her face. "I've been at the books all day, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to fail."

I sit down and pull out my books. "I'd have been studying, but I had to clean the gym, then some other stuff came up."

"Other stuff?" Halen gives me a double-take. "Like what? Are you okay? You look stressed."

"It's nothing." I give her a look to let her know I'll fill in the details later. In our room, where we don't have a hundred other people sitting around us. Not that I'm sure how much I can actually tell her. How much can I actually tell her about my parents' problems?

Life on land would be so much easier. I haven't forgotten it has its own issues, but they weren't anything like this. I still had to study and worry about boys, but at least nobody cared what I did.

Now as I'm looking at my textbook, out of the corner of my eye, I can see at least five different people watching me. Am I really that interesting? I don't think so.

I pull my thoughts from everything else and focus on the reading. It sounds vaguely familiar. Mrs. Middlebrooks talked about some of it in class, but the rest may as well be a foreign language. The government here is nothing like the democracy I'm used to. And it isn't even like the sovereignly-ruled countries I've read about in my studies on land. Valora has a whole set of rules all its own.

My brain tingles more as I read about it, and everything makes sense. Not just what I'm to be tested on, but my dad's worries. Even my mom's fears. My dad could easily be overthrown at this point in the game. The people should be waiting for him to prove himself, but they're not even giving him the chance. Most merpeople are upset he hasn't actually lived here recently. New kings have been overthrown for less. And as far as my mom's worries, kings are allowed to take on as many wives as they want. They can only have one queen, but a plethora of wives. And according to the book, the more they take on, the stronger their reign.

My dad needs whatever he can take to secure his place in power.

I shudder at the thought. What if my dad takes on extra wives? Would it be a political move? Or could he actually be seeing someone else because he wants to?

"You okay?" Halen asks.

"Yeah. Just have some stuff on my mind."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not here." I glance at the study guide and realize I've already read through everything in the book.

“Can you quiz me, then?”

“Me too.” Lumen looks up.

“Sure.” I ask questions based off the study guide, and find I know the answers before they reply. I’ll have to ask my mom what kind of a spell she cast on me. Maybe after finding out that it worked, she’ll tell me.

Lumen closes her book. “I’m done. My brain feels like it’s boiling from all the pressure. Anyone up for cake?”

“Cake?” I ask.

“It’s always time for dessert.” Lumen beams. “Come on.”

I glance at Halen. She nods and stuffs her books into her bag. I’m not about to argue about sweets.

Lumen leads us past the dining hall and through several corridors.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Lumen’s eyes sparkle.

It seems odd that they won’t tell me, but again, I’m not going to question cake. We round several corners before coming to a set of nondescript doors.

“Almost there.” Lumen pushes one of the doors and motions for us to go in. The first thing I notice is the heat, then the loud machinery. Conversation sounds not far away. Huge ovens line the walls, all with food in them.

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“What are we doing in the kitchen?” I ask. “Are we supposed to be here?”

The last thing I need is to get into more trouble.

“You’ll see,” Lumen promises.

What’s the worst that could happen?

I struggle to breathe in the sweltering heat. We go past a row of cooks, all busy with their own stoves. Nobody looks our way, but I can’t help worrying about what’ll happen if someone does.

I’d hate to think about what Mrs. Middlebrooks would make me clean next. Could there be something worse than the gym after the dance? I really don’t want to find out.

I’m about to tell Halen and Lumen I’ll see them later when we round a corner and face a wall of cakes. They’re in every color of the rainbow, and they smell sweeter than any dessert I’ve ever smelled—or at least can recall from living on land.

Lumen grins. “Which one do you girls want?”

I look around. “We aren’t going to get in trouble, are we?”

An older woman comes into the room.

My stomach twists. Busted.

“We got lost,” I spit out. “We’re looking for the exercise room.”

Halen snorts.

I glare at her.

The older woman wraps her arms around Lumen. “So good to see you, my dear. I have several extra treats today.”

I catch my breath. “Okay, what’s going on?”

The lady kisses Lumen’s cheek. “Pleasure to meet you, Marra. I’m Sandy, Lumen’s auntie—on her father’s side. That’s why I’m working here. And I always make extras for her and her friends.”

“Oh.” I glare at my friends who could’ve let me in on the secret before scaring me half to death. “Thanks. It’s nice to meet you too.”

Sandy smiles then holds up a lavender cake. “This is my latest creation. My favorite so far. Would you girls like to test it before I present the recipe to the head cook?”

“We sure would.” Lumen beams. “Thanks so much, Auntie.”

Sandy cuts three enormous pieces and gives us each one. “What do you think?”

It melts in my mouth and sends an explosion of flavor over my tongue. I swallow and add more to my fork. “I’ve never tasted anything so good.”

She beams. “You don’t know what that means to me, your highness.”

“Call me Marra. I’m just another student. Really.”

We finish off the entire cake between the four of us. I'm so full, I don't think I'll be able to eat for a month.

The meal bell rings.

I give my friends a confused look. "Didn't we already have dinner? Or am I losing it?"

Halen laughs. "Many times on the weekends, we have an evening snack."

"Oh, I see." And that means both Bash and Earwig will be at the table. Awesome.

Chapter 20

I push my plate away from me, tired of pretending to eat since I'm stuffed from cake. If I was invisible, it wouldn't have mattered. But here everyone keeps looking my way. At least most people smile—except the three stooges. They send me death glares every chance they get. No surprise there.

I've been avoiding Bash's end of the table. He's the last person I want to think about. I'd take Earwig over him at this point. Kissing me then telling me to go back to the surface. Like I need that kind of negativity in my life.

But curiosity finally gets the best of me, and I peek over.

He's looking right at me.

I'm caught.

Or is he the one caught?

I hold his gaze.

He doesn't look away, and I'm not going to be the first to. He was staring before me.

But why? The jerk clearly doesn't give a ripple about me. He'd probably be thrilled if I left. And why not? He basically said as much before storming away.

I narrow my eyes, trying to silently ask what his deal is.

The hideous horn sounds. They seriously have more announcements? At least I can get out of here after that. I still have other classes to study for. As much as Middlebrooks would love to think her class is the only one in existence, I have other quizzes and essays to worry about.

The dean gets up and repeats some announcements already given, then two other teachers get up and repeat some more. My eyes are growing heavier by the moment.

Finally, we're excused. I whisper a quick goodbye to my roommate. The only thing I want is to get back to the suite and study there. I don't get what the big deal is about the library. Sure, there are an endless row of books to use as reference if I have questions, but it's so hard to concentrate with everyone watching me.

Halfway to the dorms, music sounds down a hall toward Bash's band's practice room. Relief washes through me. If he's busy singing his heart out with Neva, that means I won't run into him.

Good. I'm done watching them from behind a plant, done torturing myself wondering if he and Neva are together or not. I don't care about any of it. He can regret kissing me and personally send me away from Valora for all I care.

Because I don't. Care, that is. Not about him, his music, or Neva. None of it.

I round a corner, almost to the dorms. Almost to peace. Solitude.

There stands Bash. He's right in front of the stairs. Blocking them.

I'd rather go somewhere else than deal with him, so I spin around and head in the other direction.

"Wait," he calls.

“Can’t. I have important places to go.”

He swims over and stops in front of me. “If you have to be somewhere else, why were you heading this way?”

“I was going to get something from my suite but changed my mind. Excuse me.”

“We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.” I move around him, but he blocks me again.

“Actually, we do.” He does that eye thing again, and my stomach tingles.

I look away before he can talk me out of leaving. “Sorry.”

“Why are you so eager to leave Valora?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why do you care?”

“I’m curious.”

“That’s not a good enough reason for me to pour my heart out to you. Excuse me.”

“Maybe we should talk about last night.”

“What about it? Is there something unresolved?” I put my hands on my hips, er, the top of my tail. I really need to go back to land. I’ll never stop thinking like an air-breathing human with legs.

He gives me a sheepish grin. “I get why you’re mad. That’s why I want to talk.”

“Ugh. Would you take a clue? Go away.”

“I don’t think you really want me to do that.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

He leans closer, barely leaving any water between us. I can smell his rugged cologne, or aftershave, or whatever the heck it is. “I know you’re a good kisser.”

My face burns. What is it about being under water that makes me blush constantly? I was never like this before. “Yeah? Well, that ship sailed. Now every time you think about that, you can wallow in regret. Just think of what you could’ve had.” I twirl around and race away.

Somehow he manages to block my path again.

I try to move by him. Fail.

“Has anyone ever told you how annoying you are?”

He doesn't budge. “Once or twice.”

“Or all the time, is more likely.” I turn back around, but you guessed it, he blocks me again. “You're seriously exasperating.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.” He smirks.

Hades, he is full of himself. And yet I want to kiss him again. No, I don't.

Yes, I do.

“Come on.” He nods down the hallway.

“No, I don't.”

His forehead wrinkles. “Huh?”

Crap, I said that out loud. “Nothing. I need to study.”

“I can help. I've been through all the first-year classes.”

“Did you fail them?”

“Ouch.” He puts his hand to his chest like he's pulling out an arrow.

I roll my eyes.

He takes my hand and before I can yank it away, he threads his fingers through mine and leads me down a hallway to a door that looks vaguely familiar. Once outside, I recognize it as the area behind the academy where he brought me after I escaped the woods.

Hardly the place I care to return.

“Why are we here?”

“Because it’s quiet. Peaceful, don’t you think?”

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“Reminds me of an event I’d rather forget.”

He squeezes my hand. “We can build new memories here.”

“New memories? Are you high?”

Bash chuckles. “I deserve that.”

We make our way around the building in silence, and as we round the corner, we come to an enormous garden. It has bright flowers, unlike anything I’m used to. I probably saw these as a child, but the land holds nothing that compares to these plants.

He stops just before a path leading inside the garden. “I worked on this a lot the last two years.”

“Why? A punishment?”

“You know me too well, but would you believe I actually grew to like it?”

I arch a brow. “You enjoy gardening?”

“It’s relaxing. Not in the same way music is, but I miss it.”

I study him. “Why bring me here?”

“Because it’s so peaceful.” He leads me down the path. After a while, we stop at a

bench. With his fingers still laced through mine, we sit. Some fish scatter, hiding among the flowers.

It actually is nice out here, not that I'm going to admit that to him.

"Why were you eavesdropping on my conversation?" he asks after a few minutes.

I shrug.

"There has to be a reason."

"I've always been curious."

He tilts his head. "That's it? Curiosity?"

I take a deep breath. "Fine. I wanted to know why you bolted after we kissed. Everything was going great. We were connecting, then that kiss ..." I sigh, hating to admit how much I want more. "And you run off without an explanation. What am I supposed to think?"

He frowns. "It's like I said after my conversation with my aunt. Everyone leaves me."

"What do you mean?"

Bash closes his eyes and draws in a deep breath. His expression tenses before he opens his eyes. "My parents died when I was young. I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle, and they wanted nothing to do with me. No matter what I did, there was no pleasing them. Then they sent me to boarding school. Only ever brought me home when the school closed. Spent most of my holidays alone. Friends came and went, mostly went."

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. The last thing I want is anyone’s pity.”

“Everyone leaves you?”

He nods. “Eventually. There’s no point in getting attached.”

“What about Neva?”

“The band has been close, but it’s business.”

I clear my throat. “But you and her seem close.”

“I guess. I mean, we’re friends and everything, but not even she knows any of what I just told you.”

“You haven’t told Neva about any of that?”

“I haven’t told anyone.”

Guilt stings. “Why me?”

He holds my gaze for a moment. “You’re different from everyone else.”

I frown. “I’m just as displaced as you are. I miss my old life.”

“True, we have that in common.”

“Plus, I’ve also experienced loss.”

“You have?” His eyes soften.

I squeeze his hand without meaning to. “I never talk about it. I try not to think about it, even. I think I picked that up from my parents.”

“Who’d you lose?”

“My sister.” My voice cracks and tears threaten. It’s hard to breathe. This is why I don’t like thinking about her death.

“What happened?”

“It’s really complicated.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

Silence rests between us, the only sounds being of the fish swimming by the flowers. “I’m sorry you lost your parents. I can’t imagine how hard that was, especially being young.”

“I’m sure it’s not easy at any age.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I ask, glad to stop thinking about my sister.

He shakes his head. “That made everything all the harder. I always thought it’d have been easier if I’d had someone to go through it all with. Instead, I was left to deal with it all on my own.”

“It probably felt like nobody wanted you. I’m sorry.”

“Hades, yeah, it felt that way. Because nobody did.”

I squeeze his hand again. “I’m sure your parents did. They couldn’t have wanted to die and leave you. If I have kids, I want to be there for them until their kids have kids.”

Bash’s mouth curves up slightly. “I guess.”

I take a deep breath. “I’m probably not going to the surface, after all.”

He gives me a double-take. “Why not?”

“My parents have some issues, and I can’t just up and disappear when they’re dealing with those.”

“Even though they yanked you from your life and friends?”

“They’re still my parents. The only family I have left. I can’t abandon them.”

He nods. “How long are you staying?”

I shrug. “It might be interesting to stick around and see what I can do. There weren’t any enchantments up there—at least that I knew about. But down here, magic is the basis for everything. We couldn’t even see without it under water.”

He scratches his chin. “If there isn’t magic, how do people see?”

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The corners of my mouth twitch. “The sun.”

“The what?”

“It’s the source of light and heat on land.” I don’t want to say more, because then I’ll have to explain space and it being a ball of gases millions of miles away, and I’ll probably get half the details wrong.

“You’ll have to tell me more about that later.”

“Maybe sometime I can take you.”

He tilts his head. “I’d like that, but I’m stuck with this.” He flips his tail back and forth.

“I’m sure there’s a way around that. Besides, what if you were only told you couldn’t shift on land? Have you tried?”

“No. Not that it matters. I can’t see myself ever going up there.”

“I’ll take you one day.”

“That’s a nice idea, but I don’t have access to the magic to lift the spell. It’s fine. I don’t have any aspirations to see the surface and all its dirty cities.”

“It isn’t all like that. They have their own types of forests and creatures you wouldn’t believe.”

“I would enjoy seeing it with you.” He holds my gaze. “Can we try that kiss over again?”

“Only if you promise not to run off.”

Bash gives a slight nod before letting go of my hand and cupping my face. His gaze intensifies for a moment before he leans closer, inching his lips nearing mine. Time seems to stand still. I want to close the gap but wait for him. His lips finally press on mine. He tastes of chocolate cake and berries. A warmth spreads through me and I scoot closer. I press my palms on his arms, feel his muscles as he flexes.

After he pulls away, he wraps an arm around me and kisses my forehead. “I could get used to this.”

“So could I.” I smile and lean against him.

“Does that mean you’re staying?”

“I am.”

Chapter 21

I float up the stairs toward my suite, still in disbelief over the whole conversation with Bash. Everything makes sense now—why he ran off, why he’s so guarded and pushing me away, why he gets into so much trouble. Anybody would be jaded after going through as much as he has. But even so, he wants to risk his heart on me.

My heart soars at the thought. He really does like me, and as crazy as our being together seems on the surface, it’s perfect. Neither of us really fits in with the Royal School for our different reasons.

When I enter the room, Halen looks up from a table full of textbooks and papers. “Where have you been? And why do you look so happy?”

I close the door and lean against it, unable to find the words. “Things are turning around for me.”

“How so?” Her eyes widen with obvious curiosity.

“Things.”

She rushes over to me. “You can’t leave me hanging like that! Did you make up with Bash? Is that what’s going on?”

I take a deep breath. “Am I that obvious?”

Halen twirls a lock of my hair around her finger. “I can read you like a book. Don’t

forget, I've known you forever." She tilts her head. "Did you kiss him? Tell me everything!"

My heart thunders at the memory. I grin like a fool, but don't care.

"Oh, this sounds good!" She drags me over to the couch. "Tell me everything, and don't leave out a single detail."

I close my eyes and see his gorgeous face looking back at me with the backdrop of the garden. "He took me to a garden, and he told me his heart-wrenching past." I look at Halen, who's staring at me with wide-eyed wonder. "It's not my story to tell, but it all makes sense. Why he's so standoffish, and why he gets into so much trouble. He's a tormented soul, and it explains his music. Nobody could sing with that much emotion and angst without having suffered." I press my hand on my heart. "His lyrics really hit you here, you know?"

"Really? I'll have to give them another listen. Now I want to know what he's been through."

"Don't get your hopes up. He's never even told Neva or any of the other band members."

She grabs my shoulders. "And he told you?"

I nod.

"Like, his whole life story?"

"Not every detail, but basically."

She leans back and clutches her heart. "That is the most romantic thing I've ever

heard! The tortured artist and the displaced princess—it's better than the movies!"

"I really wish people would stop calling me princess."

"That's what you are." She studies me. "The king's daughter."

"I'm just a first-year student. That's it. I don't want any special attention. Back home, I was invisible, and it was fantastic."

Halen laughs. "I'd rather be a princess."

"Until you have to live it."

"Yeah, but who else has managed to put Earwyn and her dogfish in their place?" She lifts a brow. "Just this girl. The princess."

"Oh, stop." I glance at her class notes. "We'd better study."

"Like you need to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You picked up more government facts in a half hour than the rest of us did with a full day of studying plus having been here all semester."

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My head tingles, reminding me of Mom's spell. "My mom—"

Knock, knock!

"Come in!" Halen hollers.

The door opens and Oceana, the PA, pokes her head in and looks at me. "Oh, good. You're here. Mr. Brant wants you to meet him in the weapons room stat."

"Weapons room?"

Halen grins. "It's like the gym but way cooler." She turns to Oceana. "I'll show her where it is."

"Thanks. Be sure to hurry. Mr. Brant sounded rushed." Oceana gives a nod before leaving.

"You might want to change into a tighter-fitting top." Halen gestures toward my loose-fitting shirt.

I groan. "Do I really have to go?"

"I'll go with you. You don't want to piss off Mr. Brant."

"Why me? Why now?" I force myself up and dig through my closet.

"Testing out the weapons was something we did during initiation week. Makes sense

he'd call you before your second week of school."

"I'm a princess. Aren't I supposed to just sit around and look pretty?"

Halen snickers. "Now you want to be a princess?"

"I just want to rest. This has been the most exhausting week ever, and don't forget I spent most of today cleaning the gym."

"It's not like you're going to have to fight a tournament." She moves past me and looks through my clothes before handing me a tank top and thin hoodie. "You just have to try out the weapons. See which one is best suited for you. That'll be the one you learn."

I get dressed. "Which weapon are you using?"

"A mace. It's pretty cool. The more we bond, the more I can do with it."

"You bond with your weapon?" I give her a double-take.

She nods. "The more you use it, the stronger the bond. That's why the upper-year students can do so much more with their weapons."

"If that's the case, I wonder why Earwig didn't use hers against me when they took me into the woods. She just had a knife."

"You really shouldn't call her that." Halen giggles. "But we only use our weapons in class. We can finally take them home after graduation."

"I wonder which weapon I'll get."

Her eyes light up. “Maybe you’ll get the trident! Everyone in the Royal school wants it, but almost nobody ever gets it. In fact, there are rumors that the trident in the cabinet has been sitting there for like twenty or thirty years. Maybe longer.”

Since my parents would’ve been students. “Do only heirs to the throne get the tridents?”

“Anyone in the royal class can get one, but not many do. Aqua swords are popular, as are spears and bows and arrows.”

“So, the mace is rare?”

“Somewhat. I was one of only two kids in our year to get one.”

“Nice.”

She shrugs. “Let’s go. Like I said, we don’t want to keep Mr. Brant waiting.”

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We travel to the far end of the academy, and I turn to Halen. “What’s down here? I noticed it’s not even on the maps.”

“We first-years don’t know much. We’re only allowed to go to the weapons room.”

Curiosity burns. “Really?”

“Yeah. We got a whole spiel during orientation. Don’t go snooping, don’t ask questions, blah, blah, blah. Basically, we’ll find out when they want us to.”

“Now I really want to know.”

“Right?”

We come to a large door made of dark stone with carvings of various weapons lining the entire thing. “This must be it.”

“How could you tell?” Halen chuckles then pushes it open.

It’s about twice the size of the gym and basically looks the same except for the padded walls on one side and dark cabinets on the other.

We enter, and I look around for the teacher. He’s nowhere to be seen. I lean closer to Halen and whisper, “Hopefully this isn’t a joke. I don’t want to get in trouble for being here.”

Before she can respond, a merman appears from behind one of the enormous

cabinets. He's tall and muscular and wears a form-fitting shirt that matches his shiny indigo tail perfectly. It looks like it's all one piece. He wipes his brow and comes over. "You must be Marra."

"Yes, and you must be Mr. Brant." I hold out my hand.

He doesn't shake it. "I don't have a lot of time. We need to figure out which weapon chooses you."

"Chooses me?"

"That's how it works." Mr. Brant sighs like I'm putting him out. "Follow me."

At least this should be interesting.

He yanks open a cabinet, revealing a plethora of killing machines.

I can't help but wonder how many lives these things have taken. "What do I do?"

"Are any of them calling to you?"

I bite my tongue. How in Hades would I know if a weapon is calling to me?

Mr. Brant taps his foot. Halen nudges me.

I inch toward the cabinet, staring at the weapons—swords, knives, darts, maces, bows, spears, daggers, and even a scythe. Despite my apprehension, I have to admit this stuff is really cool.

"Well?" Mr. Brant asks.

“Um, how do I know if one calls to me?”

“You’ll know.”

Wow, that’s super helpful. I move closer and reach for the scythe. Nothing. I hold my palm out toward a spear. Again, nothing.

“Try a dart.” He sounds so annoyed.

I swim closer and reach for a dart, then a sword. Nothing. Then I try a mace. Maybe my best friend and I will have the same weapon.

Nope.

“Well?” Mr. Brant crosses his arms.

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“I’m not getting anything.”

“This rarely happens.” He frowns. “Let’s try the next cabinet. It holds the rarer ones.”

Halen gives me a thumbs-up.

Mr. Brant pulls out a key and unlocks the next cabinet. The first thing I notice is a golden trident in the middle of the other weapons. It’s so bright it seems to glow. I can’t pull my attention away from it to look at the others.

“Anything this time?” The teacher sounds far away.

“Maybe.” I move closer. The trident glows brighter, seems to be buzzing. Or maybe that’s left over from my mom’s spell. “Can I touch it?”

“Please do.”

“Be careful!” Halen warns.

I’d ask her why, but I can’t stop staring at the beautiful glowing object. I just want to hold it in my hands. See what it feels like, what kind of power it yields.

I quickly touch it with one fingertip, half afraid it’ll zap me. A warmth spreads through my hand.

That’s interesting. I press all of my fingertips on it, and the warmth radiates up my arm. Definitely interesting.

It sounds like Mr. Brant and Halen are talking, but I can't make out a word. I kind of don't care. Not when the trident is sharing its enchantment with me.

I wrap my hand around the middle. Heat runs through my entire body. A strength urges me to pull it from the cabinet. I do. The hot waves make me break out into a sweat, not that it's noticeable in the water. I gasp, taking in the power, and wrap my other hand around the pole.

Halen covers her mouth. Turns to Mr. Brant and says something. He nods, then he reaches for the trident.

A bolt of electricity creates a whirlwind. The weapons teacher flies back and crashes into the wall and falls to the ground. It's a good thing the walls are padded.

Halen's mouth moves, but I can't hear anything.

I glance back to the weapon. It's buzzing energy runs through me, feeling strongest in my palms and on my scalp.

Halen jumps up and down in the background. She points to the cabinet.

Mr. Brant gets up and dusts himself off, then he makes his way over and gestures toward the cabinet.

I don't want to put it down, but I also don't want to get in trouble. If I wanted, I could fight him. I don't know how, but I can't shake the feeling that I totally could. I resist the urge to keep holding it, and I place it in its spot. Some of its energy continues running through me.

Halen stares at me, her mouth gaping.

I pull some hair away from my face. “What?”

“Your hair!”

Confused, I rake my fingers through it and hold it out. My body goes cold when I see it.

It’s changed color. Gone is the strawberry blonde I’ve had my whole life. Now it’s a pinkish-purple. I lace my fingers through more of my hair. It’s all the pink color. Not only that, but it’s longer. Halfway down my back.

I turn to Mr. Brant. “Is that supposed to happen?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Halen cups some of my hair in her palm. “It’s like the myth of Queen Sirena.”

Mr. Brant’s face pales. “I’d wager now it’s no myth.”

“Who’s Queen Sirena?” I wrack my mind trying to remember a story I might’ve heard as a child.

Halen moves away from me. “The most powerful and dangerous queen any of the oceans have ever seen.”

My pulse drums in my ears. They’re comparing me to her? Why is that?

Mr. Brant locks the cabinet and turns to Halen. “Keep her here. I’ll be right back.” He races out of the room.

I stare at my best friend. “What in Hades is going on?”

She backs up even more, her hands shaking. “I have no idea.”

Chapter 22

By the time Mr. Brant returns, Halen has inched clear across the room, staring at me like I've grown a second head. Or I should say longer, pink hair.

Mr. Brant stays in the doorway, pressing his palms on the frame. "You need to practice using the trident."

That's awesome. The weapon not only altered my appearance but made my best friend and an intimidating teacher scared of me.

He eyes me before pulling out the cabinet key and making his way to the cabinet. Doesn't pull his gaze from me.

My heart thumps in my chest, threatening to explode out. Escaping to the surface doesn't sound so bad again. Crazy hair colors are even in style. Nobody would give me a second look. I'd have to explain my absence, but with my parents gone, I could say it was a family emergency. It'd be doable. I just need to be able to find land and get myself home.

"Pick it up." Mr. Brant's voice brings me back to the present. "I'm not touching the trident."

I take a deep breath and make my way over, my pulse racing throughout my body. I study it for a moment before reaching for it, then I pause and turn to the teacher. "What am I going to do with it?"

“You’re going to get familiar with it.” He glances over at the door.

I peek back and see several faculty poking their heads in. Great. I’m a spectacle. Even more awesome than I first thought. I stare down the weapon that chose me and changed my hair. I half expect it to speak to me, but that would be ridiculous. Not that the rest of this isn’t.

“We don’t have all day,” Mr. Brant says.

“Of course not.” I reach for the weapon before I can talk myself out of it. Not that I could try to leave with the doorway blocked.

My fingers wrap around the metal. A warmth runs through me, but it isn’t as overpowering as the first time. Strength builds in me, waves of enchanted power buzz around me, making the water vibrate.

I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do, so I move toward the middle of the room. The longer I hold it, the more I adjust to it. Or maybe the power is calming down. I have no idea. None of this makes any sense.

“How does it feel now?” Mr. Brant asks.

I move it from one hand to the other. “Warm.”

“Manageable?”

I pull my gaze from the golden weapon and look at him. “More than before.”

“Good.” He stays next to the cabinet. “Do you know how to use a trident?”

“No. It’s not like they have classes on it up on the surface.”

“It’s most unfortunate that you grew up there. You’re going to have to learn a lot in a short amount of time.”

“Like I hadn’t already figured that out.”

“Watch your mouth.”

I take a deep breath. “Blame it on the trident. I can usually keep my thoughts to myself.”

“You’re going to have to learn self-control.”

“You have no idea how much I already use.” I narrow my eyes.

His face pales. “Okay, okay. Just something to be aware of. Swing it around and get a feel for how it works. I’ll guide you if you need it.”

I hold it up as high as I can and more power runs through me. Then I grasp it with both hands in front of me and a peace fills me, a sense of protection. I aim it toward Mr. Brant, and he jumps out of the way. The faculty by the door all cry out.

Mr. Brant glares at me. “Don’t aim that at someone unless you intend to use it!”

I press the base on the ground and study the pointy tips. “Is it like a gun?”

“A what?”

“Is it loaded and dangerous?”

“In your hands, yes.”

I give him a double-take. “Only in my hands?”

“It’s your weapon.”

“Why didn’t I get a lesson on weapons before all this?”

“That’s basic, pre-academy stuff.”

I frown. “Unless it was taught in preschool, I probably didn’t learn it!”

“Noted.” His expression tenses.

“Can I put it back now, and pick up a textbook instead?”

He shakes his head. “No, you need to bond with it and spend some time practicing.”

“Then how about you fill me in on what I missed as I bond with this piece of metal?”

A zap runs down my arm.

“Ow!” I jump back but the trident doesn’t leave my hand.

Someone snickers.

Mr. Brant inches closer. “You’ll want to respect your weapon. I don’t think it likes being called a piece of metal.”

I move the trident to my other hand and rub my sore one on my side. “So I noticed.”

“Practice—but don’t aim it at anyone. It’s not a toy.”

“I figured that out already.” I study the weapon and move around the room, holding it in different positions. It feels like it belongs in my hands, and when I hold it in front of me, a strange energy runs through it, different from when I aim it at the walls. Not that anything actually happens when I aim it at the walls. Seems like everyone’s freaking out over nothing, if you ask me.

After what has to be a half hour, I turn back to Mr. Brant. “Is that enough for the day?”

“How do you feel?”

“Fine.”

“I mean, are you ready to spar?”

My stomach drops. “You mean like a match? Actual fighting?”

He nods. “Precisely.”

“If that’s what it’ll take for you to let me go back to my dorm.”

“Yes, you’ll be free to go after you spar.”

“Bring it on. Who am I fighting?”

He glances toward the doorway. The group watching has tripled in size, and they move apart, leaving a path.

My mind races. Is he making me challenge the toughest teacher? Someone bigger than him?

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In comes Earwig, followed by her two dogfish. I know who'll they'll be cheering against. Me.

Earwig flashes me a smile then marches over to a cabinet. Mr. Brant unlocks it.

Wait. No.

I'm fighting her?

"You're making me fight an upper-year? One who hates me?"

She spins around and smirks at me. "Still don't have self-control over your mouth, do you? Don't worry, it happens to all of us—before we've mastered our weapons."

My throat closes up.

Earwig turns back around and grabs a spear.

The trident shakes in my hand. I cling to it with both.

"You can do this." Halen puts a hand on my shoulder.

"You're not scared of me anymore?"

"I'm still a little freaked out by seeing your hair change like that, but I'm sure it's fine. My best friend is today's equivalent to Queen Sirena. No big deal."

“You’re going to have to fill me in on her story.”

“Later. You’ve got to beat Earwyn.”

“Is this normal? Mr. Brant making first-years fight upper-years on their first day with a weapon?”

Halen shakes her head. “I’ve never heard of it, but I’ve also never seen anything like this.” She plays with my hair. “It’s so cool—I’ve just never seen anything like it.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I glance over at Earwig, who’s huddled with Mr. Brant. “It feels like them against me.”

“She’s one of his favorites.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Don’t focus on them.” Halen moves between them and me. “You have a connection with your weapon unlike anything anyone’s ever seen. That’s why everybody’s gathering to see. It’s also why Mr. Brant called for his star student.” She leans closer and whispers, “You scare him.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m not, and you really need to get control of what you say when you hold it.”

“I’ve hardly had any time to get used to it! An hour ago, I’d never even seen this thing.”

Zap!

I jump back and shake my arm. The trident floats in the water. I swear its glaring at me.

“You have to respect your weapon,” Halen says. “That’s the first rule of weaponry. It isn’t a piece of metal or a thing. Each weapon has its own enchantment and personality. If you respect it, it’ll respect you.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“There isn’t any room for trying. You have to get it through your head.”

I take a deep breath. “Should I apologize to it?”

“Probably wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

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“I was being sarcastic.” I reach for the trident, but pause before touching it. “I’m sorry.” Then I grab it, expecting it to shock me.

It doesn’t.

Earwig swishes over, holding her spear like a warrior. She glares at Halen. “Move aside, unless you want this in your chest.”

Anger surges through me. The trident vibrates and a rainbow of colors runs up and down it, starting at my palms. “Don’t threaten her.”

Earwig’s brows draw together. “Then she better get out of our arena!”

“This gym is now an arena?”

She moves her head from side to side. “You’d better believe it.”

Halen whispers to me, “Your trident is more powerful than her spear. Remember that.” Then she joins the others by the doorway.

Mr. Brant stands between us. “I’m going to count to three, then the sparring begins. All rules of engagement must be followed. Understood?”

My mouth falls open. “I don’t even know what the rules of engagement are!”

Earwig’s mouth twists. “Isn’t that too bad?”

I turn to Mr. Brant. “Mind going over the rules for me?”

“Can’t. That’s one of the rules.”

“Fine.” I grit my teeth. What’s the worst that could happen?

Mr. Brant raises a hand. “One ...”

I grip the trident so tight it hurts.

“Two ...”

I hold my breath. Earwig narrows her eyes.

“Three!” Mr. Brant scurries away to the wall.

Earwig charges at me, her spear aiming right for my chest.

I’m so not ready for this. I jump to the side, and she barrels past me.

She would have actually jammed that thing into me! She’d have killed me! If I had any doubts about her trying to kill me that first night, they’re gone now. She was definitely trying to kill me then—and now.

The trident vibrates in my grasp. I spin around just as my enemy nearly rams in to me, and I leap out of the way again.

Earwig sneers. “You call this sparring? You’re avoiding. Running. Scared.” She lunges for me.

By instinct, I bring the trident in front of me. Her spear crashes into it. She jolts

backward. Her face reddens and her mouth forms a straight line. She lunges for me again.

I move forward toward her, the trident at my side. Everything seems to move in slow motion. As she nears, I lower the prongs so they're aiming for her.

She doesn't leap out of the way as I'd expect. Not like Mr. Brant had. It doesn't faze her. She keeps rushing at me. Her weapon digs into my arm. Searing pain shoots out from it, running up and down. I gasp, and she slices through the skin on my other arm. Shoves me down.

The trident flies from my grasp, going clear across the gym. Earwig pins me against the wall. "I win. I'll always win. Don't forget that."

Anger runs through me, burning in my gut. Trident or no trident, I'm not done with her. She isn't going to beat me. She didn't win when she left me for dead, and she isn't going to overpower me now either. I wrap my fingers around her wrists and shove her away.

"That's what you think!" I race over to my weapon.

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Sharp pain runs through my back. I gasp, cry out. The pain sears, shooting up and down.

How can this kind of fighting even be sanctioned by the academy?

I bite my tongue and press on toward my weapon. Agony envelops my body, tearing through both arms and my back.

My parents are going to hear about this when this is over. How dare the academy allow this when I have no training? No preparation whatsoever?

Something slams into my back.

“You think you stand a chance against me?” Earwig yanks on my hair. “Think again!”

“You’re the one who needs to think again!” I spin around and shove her.

“Can’t attack without a weapon.” She pins my arms behind my back, digging them against my wound. “Mr. Brant, doesn’t that mean I win? She hit me with her hands!”

“Penalty against Marra!”

“Just a penalty?” Earwig scowls.

“You hit her in the back when she had no weapon.”

Earwig's brows draw together. "You're going down—and everyone's going to hear about it!" She thrusts more force on my arms, enough that my shoulders feel like they could snap. Then she forces me to the ground. Presses her spear against my neck.

I struggle against her, but it's useless. One wrong move and her weapon will slice me.

"One ... two ... three!" Earwig holds her spear in the air and swims away. "I win! I beat the princess!"

People crowd around her, congratulating her.

I sit up and rub my arms, trying to figure out what just happened. Fury burns in my chest. My face flames with embarrassment.

Halen comes over and helps me up. "You better get your trident."

"Did that really just happen?"

"Yeah. We'd better get you to the infirmary."

"The only thing I want to get is her."

"One thing at a time."

"And him! That teacher is going down. How dare he do that?"

"Hurry," she urges.

"They're both going to regret this." I storm over to my trident and pick it up. A warmth radiates from it, going up and down my arm. Yet it does nothing to help my wound. "Some good you are."

Power surges out from it and throws me across the gym. I crash into a wall.

Earwig laughs so hard she drops her spear.

Chapter 23

Halen presses an ice bag to my forehead. “Hold this there.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Is that why you have a lump bigger than any fish egg I’ve ever seen?”

Grimacing, I rub my forehead. Sure enough, I have a bump. “She’s going down.”

“Let’s just focus on getting you out of the infirmary.”

Knock, knock!

“Come in!” Halen calls.

I glare at her. “I don’t want to see anyone.”

“Not even me?” Bash comes inside, gorgeous as ever.

My heart skips a beat. “Not when I look like this.”

“You’re still beautiful.” He sits on the bed next to me and holds the ice bag for me.

“What in Hades happened in the last couple of hours since I saw you?”

I scowl. “Earwig and Mr. Brant happened.”

His eyes widen. “That jerk had you fight an upper-year?”

“Not just any upper-year. The one who tried to kill me when I first arrived.”

He puts his arm around me. “I can’t believe him.”

I shrug. “Seems to just be the way it is for me.”

“It shouldn’t be!”

“What can I do about it?” I sigh, and realize my ribs are sore. “People don’t like my dad. They don’t want me here.”

Bash’s eyes grow intense. “Fight her again.”

“Did you see what Earwyn did to her?” Halen exclaims.

He turns to her. “Exactly why she needs to put that dogfish in her place.”

“Again?” I rub my temples.

“Do you want us to let you rest?” Halen asks.

I shake my head no. “Can you see if the nurse will let me go? I just want to get out of this infirmary.”

“Yeah.” Halen disappears.

Bash cups my chin, and I get lost in the deep sea of his eyes. He presses his lips on mine and kisses me deeply. My heart thunders against my sore chest. He tastes sweet, like cherries. All my aches and pains fade away and I get lost in the kiss.

“How’s the patient? Feeling better, I see.”

I turn to the nurse, my face on fire. “It does help to have friends here.”

“Friends, huh?” He turns to Bash, giving a little nod. “I need to ask you to leave while I check over the patient.”

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Bash kisses my cheek. "I'll be right out there."

"Thanks."

"You too." The nurse nods at Halen and gestures for the door.

They both leave, then the nurse looks over my cuts and bruises. "They're already improving. How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"That's what you said before." He arches a brow.

"Great. I feel great." I force a smile. "Now can I go?"

He snickers. "Do you want anything for the pain? I can't give you anything too strong unless you're going home instead of to your dorm."

"I'll take whatever you can give me."

"Thought you were doing great?"

"Great for someone who just got beat up with a spear."

"Ah, I see. If you need to come back for any reason, don't hesitate. Some symptoms like showing up later."

Ten minutes later, I leave with Valora's equivalent of ibuprofen, and it's already taking the bite out of my cuts.

Bash puts his arm around me again. "It's almost time for breakfast. Do you want to go there or rest?"

The aches in my back and arm make me want to climb into bed, but my stomach is also growling.

"I don't know what I want."

"You need rest," Halen says. "I'll sneak you up some food."

"She needs to show that bottom feeder she won't be pushed down so easily." Bash pulls me closer.

"You two are making my headache worse."

"Then come rest," Halen says. "That's what you need."

"No. Bash is right. I'm better off showing Earwig that her win barely affected me."

Halen frowns. "I'm not really worried about her right now."

I straighten my back. "I am. She probably thinks she's gained the upper hand. I need to show her. Then I can rest all day."

Bash kisses my forehead. "That's the spirit. Then when you're up for it, we'll practice with you until you're ready to face off with her for real. Not the first day you handle one of the most powerful weapons known to merpeople."

I start to say something, but a group of girls heading toward us stop and talk over each other about my hair.

“Is it true a trident changed it?”

“It’s so pretty!”

“Is it going to stay that color?”

“I wish my hair would grow that fast!”

Bash pulls me away from them. “She isn’t feeling well. Let’s give the girl some space.”

“Are you okay?”

“Is it true Mr. Brant made you fight Earwyn?”

“What’s it like to hold a trident?”

I pull away from Bash and hold each of their gazes, one by one. “It’s an amazing weapon. Once I’m ready, I’ll have a real battle with her, and everyone can come and watch.”

A blonde girl widens her eyes. “You’re going to challenge her to a rematch?”

“You’d better believe it!”

They scamper off, whispering excitedly.

“Sure you want to announce your plans?” Bash gives me a questioning look.

“I don’t care if she knows. Let her practice. It isn’t like she has a trident. Once I figure that thing—uh, I mean that weapon—out I’ll be unstoppable, right?”

“Don’t get too confident.” Halen frowns. “It didn’t help out your uncle much.”

“Whoever killed him probably struck when Tiberias didn’t have his trident.”

“Maybe. But keep in mind he might’ve had it, and he’d been using it for many years.”

“I’m not worried. I’ll keep showing that girl as many times as I need to until she backs down.”

Halen and Bash exchange a worried glance.

“It’s not a big deal. What are the rules, anyway?”

“Check the back of your textbook,” Halen says. “You’ll want to memorize them.”

“You can’t just tell me?”

“Can’t discuss them.”

I drop the subject. Valora has some weird rules.

Once we make it to the dining hall, it’s already time to eat because so many people stopped to talk about my hair, the trident, or getting my butt kicked by Earwyn.

Gossip sure travels fast. In so many ways, humans and merpeople really aren’t different.

“Who are you going to sit with?” Halen asks.

I look back and forth between her and Bash. He gives me puppy-dog eyes, which simultaneously make me want to laugh and kiss him. “I should sit where I normally do.”

He pouts, making me want to change my mind.

“I’ll be closer to Earwig, and I want her to see how well I’m doing.” Thanks to the painkillers, nearly everything has stopped hurting. “But you can join us.”

Bash looks over at where his band is sitting, and they're all waving him over. He turns to me and frowns. "It's not going to go over well if I don't sit with them."

"Are they going to kick you out? They'd be stupid to, you know. They're nothing without your voice."

He beams and gives me a quick kiss. "I appreciate that, but what I mean is the other students won't take well to me moving seats. It's all about the pecking order. Notice how Earwyn and her dogfish sit so close to the platform?"

I nod. "And Halen and our friends are near the middle."

"Right. The troublemakers get the back, by the door."

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“Are you serious?” I exclaim. “That’s what it’s all about?”

He nods. “And now that I think about it, you’re right. You should sit where you have been all along.”

A fire burns in the pit of my stomach. “Now I want to sit with you more than ever.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He kisses me, then nudges me toward Halen, who’s already at the table with our friends.

I take my seat, and answer a slew of questions. All basically the same as I’ve already answered in the hallways. I sit as tall as possible and glance over at Earwig every so often, and each time she’s scowling. For whatever reason, knowing that the whole academy has heard about her defeating me isn’t enough. Maybe she’s actually irritated that I’m here eating, looking like I’m in no pain. Or perhaps she’s jealous—either that I have a trident or about my hair.

I twist some around my hand, not at all used to the new length or the color. Totally in love with it, but not used to it.

Once the meal ends, Halen leans over. “Ready to go to the suite?”

“I feel too good to rest. Do you want to practice sparring with me?”

Her eyes widen. “You do realize that you only feel good because of the medicine, right?”

“May as well take advantage of it.”

“You need to study. Tomorrow is Middlebrooks’s quiz.”

“It seems so insignificant now.”

“Let your body recover. We can see about practicing this afternoon.”

“I’m up for it.”

“Have you seen your wounds?” she exclaims. “I hate to be rude, but they look horrible.”

I straighten my shoulders. “I don’t feel like resting or studying.”

“You really feel like making academy life as hard as possible for yourself, don’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I narrow my eyes.

“It means that you don’t know anything about the quizzes or how classes run. You haven’t even been back for a week. Settle in and take my advice—I know what I’m talking about, and I want the best for you.”

I give her a hug. “And I love you for that, but I need to find my own way. I won’t make a good queen if I just follow all the rules, will I?” I freeze, realizing what I just said. Am I beginning to accept my fate as the future queen?

Halen frowns. “I suppose not. But think about it before you do anything crazy. Even if you don’t go back to the dorm and sleep it off, don’t go back to the trident. Let me go with you later. We’ll read up on it, then practice with your new knowledge. That’s

what's going to give you the advantage over her.”

“I’ll take it easy for now. I promise.”

Bash comes over and wraps his arms around me. “My band is going to jam, but Neva has a family emergency and can’t join us. Do you want to stand in for her?”

“Me? I don’t sing.”

He kisses my cheek. “You’ll be fine.”

Halen arches an eyebrow. “This I have to see.”

“I thought you needed to rest.”

“I can spare another hour.”

“Perfect.” Bash gives a thumbs-up to his friends.

I glance at Halen, who looks giddy. She waves our friends over.

What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter 24

Bash kisses my cheek. “You’re going to do great. The lyrics are all here.” He flips through some sheets on a stand. “We’re starting with this one. You’ve heard it before, right?”

I glance over the words. “Once.”

My heart leaps to my throat when I glance at the audience that keeps growing bigger. Why did Halen think this was a good idea? Is this payback for not taking her advice to rest? I don’t sing, period. Ever. Not even in the shower. Well, not that I’ve ever been able to shower because of my tail, but I don’t. I could shatter glass.

I turn back to Bash. “This was a bad idea. I really shouldn’t do this.”

He squeezes my hand. “You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“And you give me too much.”

“Want to turn that into a wager?” He gives me a crooked smile.

I take a deep breath. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Bahari starts a soft beat on the drums. Then the others join in, blending all the instruments perfectly. My hands shake. If only I had something to play to distract myself.

Bash belts out some lyrics, his voice soothing me. I start to relax until I remember that I have to sing in a few moments. I glance at the sheet. My first line is coming closer, closer.

He nudges me. My stomach lurches. I'm going to lose my breakfast all over the stage—and maybe on him.

Bash nudges me again. I swallow, then sing my first line. At least his voice and the music drown me out. Nobody'll hear how awful I am.

He pulls the mic up to my mouth. So much for no one hearing me.

Halen covers her mouth, her eyes wide.

I'm that bad? Not even my best friend can muster some fake enthusiasm?

Thankfully a vocal break comes quickly. Bash whispers, "You're doing fantastic!"

At least he's willing to tell me what I need to hear, even though before long the entire academy will be talking about how I sound like a mortally-sick sea lion. Maybe that'll be better than everyone talking about my sparring match with Earwig.

I take another deep breath and prepare for my next line. Halen still has her hands over her mouth. I'm mortifying her, not to mention myself.

Bash is singing like a star, and I'm ruining it. At least this is only a practice, not a concert where people actually paid money.

My next line is coming. Three ... two ... one. Shaking, I sing it out. He wanted me to take Neva's place, so I may as well give it my all. If nothing else, at least he'll never ask me to do this again. May as well enjoy it now.

He turns to me, holding my gaze, and seeming to smile though singing. He pulls me close and we belt out the lyrics into the same mic. Thankfully, he sounds so good it seems to be covering up for how terrible I sound. The music and our voices intensify until the song ends.

Everyone watching leaps up from the floor, applauding. Some whistle. At least I didn't totally ruin it.

Bash leans toward my ear. I brace myself for his offer to let me watch for the rest of the songs.

He whispers, "Are you trying to replace Neva? You've been holding out on me!"

I give him a double-take. "What?"

"Your voice ... it's like the mythological sirens."

"Are you sure you don't mean an emergency siren?"

He presses his lips on mine, then turns to the audience and lifts my hand high into the air. "Ladies and gents, I give you the amazing singing princess, Marra Ayers!"

The clapping and whistling grow louder.

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I turn to him. “What in Hades is going on?”

“I’ve never heard a voice like yours, and I don’t think anyone else has either.”

The other band members crowd around me, talking over each other, all sounding excited. It sounds like they want me to join them permanently. Neva is going to hate me. Just what I need—another enemy.

I shake my head and back away. “Maybe I should sit the next one out. It’s you guys they want to hear.”

Bash pulls me close and spins me in a circle. “It’s your name they’re chanting, you goof.”

“What?” I turn toward the crowd that has again doubled in size.

Sure enough, they’re calling out, “Marra!”

Bash kisses my cheek. “Do you want to try a love song? I had you in mind when I wrote the lyrics.”

My mouth gapes. No words come. Everything is surreal.

“Come on. You’ll pick it up right away with your skill level.”

He and everyone else has me confused with somebody else. Seriously. I don’t know what’s going on.

Bash pulls out some papers and flips through them before handing them to me. “Here they are. Look these over for a moment and tell me what you think.”

I stare at the sheet but it takes my eyes a moment to make out the words. They nearly knock the air out of my lungs. He feels that way about me?

My heart was as dark as the ocean depths

But you’ve given me light

Shining in the darkest night

Pain is all I’ve known

You’ve shown me another way

Another way

Heartache isn’t the path I have to take

There’s more to this life now

You’ve shown me how

My eyes blur with tears, making it so that I can’t read any more.

“What do you think?” he asks.

I still can’t find my voice, so I wrap my arms around him and kiss him passionately.

He grins. “I take it you like it. What do you think about the melody?”

“I can’t read music.” I glance at the sheet.

“You’ve really had no training?”

“None.”

He shakes his head in obvious disbelief. “I don’t know how that’s possible. Must be a natural gift.”

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“I guess.” Though I still don’t believe it myself. I’m still waiting for someone with hidden cameras to jump out and tell me I’ve been had, and I actually sound worse than a dying donkey.

Bash guides me back over to the mic and sets the papers on the stand. The audience quiets and the music starts—it’s almost as beautiful as his lyrics. He starts the song off, singing the words to me, staring into my eyes with an intense gaze that nearly knocks me to the floor. I manage to stay up and jump in when my part comes.

The crowd goes wild. It takes all my effort to stay focused on the song. I keep waiting for someone to tell me I’ve been had, but it doesn’t happen. We sing song after song until Bash announces we’re done.

“More!”

“Just one more song!”

Everyone watching calls out for us to keep going.

This would be the perfect timing for those hidden cameras. Instead, Bash tells them to come back the next day, same time. The band starts putting away their things, and the room clears slowly.

Halen catches my attention. “See you in the room!”

“Definitely!”

She gives me a thumbs-up as she leaves with our friends.

I help the band, then after a few minutes a shell phone rings. Bash turns to me, hefting a box. “That’s mine. Can you grab it? It’s in my coat over there.” He nods toward a pile of jackets.

“Sure. I really need to get myself one of those.”

“You can’t.”

“Why not? Because I’m a princess?”

He laughs. “Because you’re a first-year.”

“Being a first-year bites.” I make my way over to the coats and find his. It smells like his cologne, and I breathe it in deeply before digging through the pockets for his phone.

I pull it out to give it to him, but I accidentally see the text notification on the screen. It’s from someone called AC. And it makes me stop in my tracks. My heart skips a beat and my breath hitches.

AC: Everything is in place. Ayers going down.

What on earth does that mean? Does he have a plan to take me down? Or one of my parents? Another of my dad’s relatives?

“What’s the matter?”

I move away from him, my pulse racing. “Has this all been a big joke to you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“‘Ayers is going down.’”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“This text!” I shove the phone at him.

He stares at it.

“Who are you plotting with? Middlebrooks?”

His eyes darken. “Are you kidding me? How could you think that?”

“Did you read the text?” I move even farther away from him.

“It’s from my Aunt Coral. I don’t know what she’s talking about.” He fidgets with his phone. “She left that text, but it doesn’t make any sense.”

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“Sure, it does.” I fight back tears. “Everything makes sense now. Your disdain toward me from the moment you laid eyes on me. I was a punishment, but you made the most of it, didn’t you! Are you plotting against me or my dad? Or both of us?”

He holds my gaze. “Neither of you. I meant every word in that song. You’ve turned my world upside down. I can’t get over you.”

Tears escape, but they just disappear in the water. “Then you have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Remember everything I told you about my aunt and uncle? The bastards sent me away to boarding school while I was dealing with the loss of my parents at such a young age! They don’t care about me, much less tell me anything. I have no idea what she’s talking about.”

“Then why would she text you that?”

“I couldn’t tell you. All I know is that I’m as in the dark as you are. I’ll prove it to you right now. Watch me text my aunt to find out what she’s talking about.” He waves me over.

I don’t budge.

He comes over to me and taps out a text.

Bash: What’s in place? What do you mean Ayers is going down?

Bash looks at me. “I swear to everything holy and honest, I’m as confused as you are.”

I clench my jaw, refusing to say anything until I see her response. It comes in pretty quickly.

AC: Ignore the text. Accidentally sent it to the wrong person.

Bash lifts his brows. “See?”

I fold my arms. “Press her for more.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Press her for more.”

“Okay.” He composes another text.

Bash: Are you talking about the king?

AC: I said ignore it.

Bash: You can’t tell me to ignore that.

AC: I can tell you to ignore anything I want. Ignore it!

Bash: No.

He glances up at me while we wait for the next one to come in. I don’t show him the relief that I’m starting to feel. His aunt obviously doesn’t want him to know, but that still means she’s planning something against me or one of my relatives—probably my

dad. And from everything I understand about her, she's an influential socialite.

AC: Look, kid. It's a joke between your uncle and me. Let it go.

Bash: What kind of joke?

AC: The kind you don't have to concern yourself with. Go study and get your grades up. We aren't happy with your latest report card.

He rolls his eyes. "She's a master at changing the subject. Do you believe me now?"

I nod. "Sorry I doubted you, but you have to admit it looked bad. Really bad."

"I get it." He puts his arm around me. "Can you do me a favor, though?"

"What?"

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“Next time something looks bad like this, can you give me the benefit of the doubt? I know our relationship has moved quickly, but my feelings are real. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

I chew on my lower lip. “I will. But what are we going to do now? It sounds like your aunt is plotting against my dad.”

“It definitely doesn’t look good. And I don’t believe for a moment it’s an inside joke.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I could call her. She’d have a harder time pushing me away over the phone than text.”

I think about it. “Okay, but maybe wait.”

“You want me to wait? Isn’t this urgent?”

“It is, but she’ll be ready with excuses if you call now. Give it a few days or at least until the evening, and you’ll catch her off guard.”

He kisses my cheek. “Good thinking. Meanwhile, I can try hacking into their emails.”

“You know how to hack?”

Bash presses his finger to my lips. “Let me take you to your room. You’re looking a

little pale.”

“I am tired.” All at once, my wounds start hurting again. “Must be the stress.”

As we make our way to the dorms, my mind races. How serious are the threats to my dad’s life? Do I need to call him and warn him? How can I do that without a phone? I can’t ask to use Bash’s because his aunt and uncle probably keep tabs on his calls.

Chapter 25

The next few weeks go by in an uneventful bliss other than the kisses Bash and I keep stealing. Earwyn even leaves me alone—yes, I called her Earwyn—aside from throwing me scowls and glares. I wouldn't expect anything less. All my wounds heal and I regain my strength. I glide through my classes, easily learning and catching up on what I've missed over the years. I don't know why my parents never bothered to teach me what I'd need to know since we could've returned despite the banishment, but my mom's spell on me has more than made up for their oversight.

I've spent every free moment either practicing with my trident or singing with the band. Much to my relief, Neva doesn't hate me for singing with them. I also haven't tried replacing her. She's even taken me under her wing—I mean, fins—and taught me how to read music.

Aside from wanting to call Ivy and tell her all about my new life in Valora, I don't even miss the surface all that much. I wish I could bring my friends down for a visit or a lifetime, but obviously I can't have both worlds. And it's crazy that everything has changed so quickly.

Halen puts her mace back in the cabinet. "You ready for the weekend?"

"You know it." I return my trident to its spot. I wish I could say that I've mastered it, but I honestly haven't made that much progress. There's a reason everyone says it's such a difficult weapon. Either that, or there's something wrong with me. Maybe I'm too distracted by my new boyfriend or the band. I love singing with them, and so far, no hidden cameras have popped out. I think I legitimately have a decent voice.

Despite all the good things, I still have to get to the bottom of the plot against my dad. Bash wasn't able to hack into his aunt and uncle's accounts. But at least my dad has easily a hundred guards around him at all times. I haven't let it bother me too much. It's not like he's exposed and vulnerable. Plus, I could never forget the power he yields when his eyes turn yellow.

At least I know Bash isn't involved. That's a relief, especially since I'm falling in love with him. I'd spent every waking moment with him if I could.

"Are you bummed that your weapon is still giving you trouble?" Halen's voice brings me back to the present.

We wave to Mr. Brant—the jerk who keeps pairing me with upper-years—as we leave. If it weren't for Halen and me looking up information on how to use it, I'd be sunk. The "teacher" hasn't helped me learn one thing other than to avoid getting the tar beat out of me by older, more advanced students.

I've had no time to look into Queen Sirena, who some have whispered I'm the reincarnation of. I don't believe in any of that, but my hair is still long and pink, and the new roots are just as pink as the rest of it. I'm dying to know the link we share.

"Ocean to Marra!" Halen waves her hand in front of my face.

"Sorry. What did you ask?"

"Are you upset about not mastering the trident?"

"Oh, that. No, because the books say it can take years."

Her eyes light up. "I have an idea!"

“What?”

“You should have your father train you! I’ll bet Mr. Brant hasn’t done anything for you because he doesn’t know. The trident has been in the cabinet longer than he’s been on faculty. People have been wondering who it would choose for decades! Your father is the only living person I know of who uses one.”

“He’s too busy.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s the king, Halen.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t say? But he’s also your father! Does he even know the trident picked you?”

I think back. “No, I haven’t seen him since then.”

“You should get a weekend pass and go to the castle! Tell him. It’d be the perfect father-daughter bonding experience.”

“Or I could just spend the weekend with Bash. That sounds like a lot more fun.”

“Yes, but he can’t help you with the trident.”

“Do I really need to master it this weekend?”

“The sooner, the better. You can finally face off with Earwyn again.”

“I don’t want to set off the beast again. She’s left me alone since she kicked my butt.”

“Yeah, but—”

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Mrs. Middlebrooks appears around the corner. “There you are!”

I look around. “Me?”

“Yes! Hurry!”

“What’s wrong?”

She grabs my arm and pulls me down the hallway, but doesn’t hold tight enough to bruise this time. “There isn’t time to explain.”

“Should I come?” Halen asks.

“No!” Mrs. Middlebrooks yanks me around a corner.

“What did I do this time?”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with you. Stop being so self-important!”

My mouth drops open. “I’m not—”

“Not another word until we reach my office!”

“Is something wrong? Did somebody get hurt? Is Bash okay?”

“Do you know the meaning of ‘not another word’?”

I glare at her and try to pull out of her grasp. It doesn't work.

We finally make it to her office, and she lets go. I rub my arm. "Would you tell me what's going on now?"

She locks the door and lowers her voice. "Your father is missing!"

The room seems to shrink around me. "What? How do you know?"

Her mouth curves down. "That doesn't matter. Do you have any idea who might've taken him?"

Bash's aunt.

Mrs. Middlebrooks's eyes narrow. "Who?"

"Shouldn't I be speaking with my dad's people? Why aren't they here?"

"They will be, but first, tell me what you know!"

"I think I should wait for them."

"There isn't time!" Her eyes are wild. "Tell me what you know!"

"Why is it so important to you?" I reach for the door.

She blocks me. "He's the king!"

"You seem more invested in this than because of political concern."

My mom's words ring through my mind—she's worried that he's seeing someone.

I inch toward her. “Are you involved with my dad romantically?”

The thought makes my stomach turn.

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Her mouth curls. “What kind of question is that?”

“One that you need to answer.”

“Your father is missing—that’s what’s important here!”

I move closer. “Are you seeing him behind my mom’s back? Behind the queen’s back?”

“You have no right to speak to me like this! I’m your dean. If you have questions about your father’s love life, then you need to ask him.”

“He’s missing!”

Her mouth forms a straight line. “Do you want to arrange an exchange of information? Tell me what you know, and I’ll answer your question.”

My heart sinks, then breaks for my mom. “You just did.”

She starts to say something, but I take advantage of her distraction and race out of the room. My head spins as I make my way through the hallways. I can’t believe my mom was right. How could my dad do that to her? They’ve been together forever!

If the power of the throne could make him do this, what else is he capable of? My stomach knots at the thought.

What if the rumors are true? Could he have killed his own brother to become king?

Or is that too big of a leap from adultery to murder?

Yes! Of course, it's too big of a leap. Both options sear my heart, but killing someone, especially family, is too huge. My dad wouldn't have done that. I don't want to think about him going out on my mom either, but it isn't in the same league as murder.

Somehow I've made it to my room, lost in thought. I hurry inside and slam the door behind me.

Halen looks up at me from the couch with a wide smile, which fades immediately. "What's wrong?"

I can't bring myself to say the words.

She rushes over and puts an arm around me. "What is it?"

"My dad ..."

Her face pales. "Oh, no! Is he hurt?"

I shake my head.

"Dying?"

"No."

"What happened?"

I throw myself on my bed. "Mrs. Middlebrooks says he's missing."

“How is that even possible? The king always has like fifty guards around him at all times.”

“Are you sure about that? Tiberias ended up killed, and nobody knows who did it. Does that sound like fifty guards surrounding him? Now my dad is missing.”

“Have you talked with your mom? Is she okay?”

I shake my head. “I don’t have a phone.”

“But there’s one in Mrs. Middlebrooks’s office.”

“I think she’s seeing my dad.”

“Her?” Halen’s eyes could pop out of her head they’re so huge.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Because she told you that your dad’s missing?”

I fill her in on all of my theory, including Middlebrooks possibly being involved with my dad, but leaving out my insane thoughts about my dad being capable of murder. Just because he’s the most powerful man in Valora and has a temper doesn’t mean he killed his brother. He’d have had to leave the land and come here, which would’ve taken not only a lot of time but also much planning and covering up. He sure did look happy to take the king’s throne, though.

I seriously need to stop thinking like this. He’s my dad, not a killer.

“What are you going to do?” Halen asks.

“I don’t know. It’s not like I know where he is.”

“I have an idea!” She sits up straight.

“That look has always gotten me into trouble.” I groan.

“You need to get the trident and demand answers until you find him.”

I give her a double-take. “You think I should take a weapon that I have almost no control over to help find my dad? How’s that supposed to work, assuming I could even get it out of the gym?”

“Everyone fears tridents. Just point it at people—like Middlebrooks—and demand answers. You’ll get them.”

“And I’ll get myself expelled in the process.”

“If she’s involved with him, she could have something to do with his disappearance, right? It makes sense. Maybe they had a spat.”

I shake my head. “Middlebrooks is as worried as I am.”

“She’s definitely seeing him,” Halen mutters.

I frown.

“Sorry, but it’s the truth.” She pauses. “We need your trident!”

“How am I going to get it? And who am I supposed to use it against?”

But before Halen answers, I know exactly who.

Chapter 26

Halen and I are almost to the weapons room when someone grabs my arm. I spin around, hoping it's my dad, even though I know that could never happen.

It's Bash. I throw myself into his arms. He holds me tightly. "What's going on?"

"My dad's missing, and I need to talk to your aunt."

His body tenses, pressing me even tighter against him.

My heart sinks. He isn't having second thoughts and putting family over this?

He kisses the top of my head. "I hope you don't hate me for being related to her. I'm really sorry you're dealing with this. I'll do whatever I can to help you."

I look into his eyes, relief flooding through me. "It's not your fault. And besides, it's obvious how horrible they are."

Halen clears her throat. "As sweet as this is, we need to get moving."

My heart thunders at the thought of breaking into the weapon cabinet. Hopefully the fact that I'm trying to save the king will work in my favor. I may have to clean up after another dance, but at least hopefully my dad will be safe and I won't be expelled.

"What exactly is the plan?" Bash asks.

“We’ll explain it on the way.” Halen races toward the stairs.

When we reach the weapons room, the doors are shut. Probably locked. Either that, or Mr. Brant is inside. This is a bad idea, but it’s the best I have.

I reach for the door.

Bash pulls out a multitool from his pocket. “I know how to pick a lock.”

“Put that away.” I turn to him. “The last thing I want is for you to get into trouble again. Especially over me. Didn’t you say that one more time will lead to a permanent banishment?”

He nods. “But you’re worth it.”

Halen groans. “You two pick the strangest times to get sappy.” She pushes on the doors, and they open.

I stare in disbelief. “That was almost too easy.”

“Don’t speak until you have the trident in your hand.”

I peek inside, expecting the hateful Mr. Brant to be there. He’s not. Nobody is. So I race over to the cabinet and stare at it. I’m about to break and enter. To steal. But is it really theft if the weapon is mine?

“Hurry,” Halen urges.

“I can unlock it,” Bash offers.

“No. I need to do this.” Heart pounding, I move toward the cabinet and reach for the

knob. Will an alarm go off? Will it shock me? I take a deep breath. It's probably just locked.

I pull on the handle. It doesn't budge. I try again.

Maybe I do need Bash's help. But I don't want him getting in trouble.

"I can get it open in under a minute."

"I'm sure you can, but let me try."

"We don't have a lot of time," Halen says. "Mr. Brant probably has a hidden security system in place, and he could be headed here right now."

My stomach knots. I yank on the knob again. Nothing.

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Bash says something. I shake my head, trying to think of another way. Something that keeps him out of it. If he doesn't break in, I can tell people that he and Halen were trying to stop me.

I press my palm on the door itself. It warms immediately then lights up in the shape of a trident.

Halen nudges me. "Do you see that?"

"I can feel it."

"Take it!"

"Do you want my multitool?" Bash holds it out.

I shake my head. "I need to do this myself."

Halen rushes for the door. "I'm going to make sure nobody's coming."

The door is growing warmer by the moment. I can hardly think. My hand seems to act on its own, feeling around the door until it reaches the lock. My palm rests on it, and the heat intensifies.

"Hurry!" Halen calls. "I hear someone coming!"

I turn to Bash. "If someone comes, pretend to try and stop me."

“What? No! I’m not letting you take the fall. Not when my aunt and uncle are behind this.”

My hand glows the same color as the trident behind the door. Yellow sparks surround my skin, but they don’t hurt like I’d expect.

Click!

I stare at Bash, wide-eyed. “Did I just unlock that?”

“Open it!”

Shaking, I pull my hand away then reach for the knob. Before I touch it, the cabinet door opens. The trident is still glowing.

This is really happening.

“Take it.” Bash moves back.

I stare at it for a moment before reaching for it. In the last week, I’ve barely learned anything about handling it, yet now I’m going to face off with the people I think are holding my dad? This is the craziest thing that’s happened since I’ve come to Valora.

I shove the rest of my thoughts aside and reach for it. Its warm power runs through me stronger than usual. Not as wild as the first time, but it’s like the weapon knows this is serious.

Halen spins around. “Hide! He’s almost here!”

She and Bash bolt, ducking in the shadows of the cabinets and mats. There’s no way I can hide the bright glow of the trident. I remain in the middle of the room, holding it

high.

Mr. Brant enters, and his eyes widen then narrow as soon as he sees me. “What do you think you’re doing, Marra?”

I clench the rod and move closer to him. “I’m dealing with a life-or-death situation, and you’re going to let me leave with it.”

“You know I can’t do that. Not until you graduate.”

I point it at him. “You’re going to let me.”

He moves out of my way and nods. “Bring it back when you’re done.”

“And you aren’t going to get me or my friends in any trouble, are you?”

Mr. Brant shakes his head. “Not at all.”

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I move the points closer to him. “Good. Don’t forget.” Then I wave Halen and Bash out, and we leave without another word.

Halen gasps. “I can’t believe you stood up to him like that! And he listened!”

“It’s the trident.” I turn to Bash. “Where would your aunt take the king as a hostage?”

“There’s a question I never thought I’d be asked.”

“Where?”

“I’m guessing their cabin. The mansion would be too obvious.”

“Let’s go.” I head for the main part of the academy.

“We should head out the back.” Bash nods toward the other way. “Where people won’t see you carrying the glowing trident.”

“Right.”

He leads us down a dark hallway until we come to a nondescript door. It leads to a parking lot for underwater cars, which are surprisingly similar to the ones on the ground. “This way.”

We stop at a motorcycle.

“Are we going to steal it?” I ask.

“It’s mine.” He unlocks a storage box and pulls out two helmets.

Halen frowns. “I take it I’m staying here.”

I look at the motorcycle. There’s no way all three of us will fit. “It’s actually for the best. I need you to talk to my mom. We need to find out if my dad’s actually missing.”

“You think Middlebrooks is lying?” she exclaims.

“No, but my mom might know more. What if he faked it because he didn’t want to see her anymore? Or what if my mom knows something we don’t? She’ll tell you, especially if I’m headed for danger.”

Halen nods. “Okay, but how am I supposed to let you know what I find out?”

“Call my shell phone.” Bash digs into his pocket and hands her a business card. “I’ll make sure the ringer’s on.”

She looks at it, then me with worry shining in her eyes. “Be safe, okay?”

“Of course. I’ve got Bash and the trident. What could go wrong?”

“Famous last words.” She wraps her arms around me then races away.

Bash helps me get the helmet on before we climb on the motorcycle. It couldn’t be more awkward with the trident. Finally, I put the weapon in front of his stomach and cling to it that way, pressed against him.

“This night is full of things I never thought I’d see or hear.” He starts the ignition, and the engine roars to life.

The ride seems to go on forever. We travel through the outskirts of Valora, managing not to cross anyone. Then we enter a forest. My stomach knots, as it probably always will thanks to Earwyn and her dogfish leaving me for dead.

We pull up to a long driveway. Bash stops the bike then cuts the engine. We're a decent swim away from a cabin that's at least twice the size of my house on land.

I glance at my glowing weapon. "What's the plan?"

He helps me off the motorcycle and takes off his helmet. "I'll go to the door and talk to them. You stay hidden, and I'll draw them out."

My entire body shakes at the thought of the confrontation, but it has to be done. "Has Halen left any messages?"

Bash looks at his phone. "No. Follow me."

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We head toward the cabin, and I struggle to keep the trident behind me. Its glowing will catch the attention of anyone looking out a window, and the building has a ton of them. We use plants for cover.

When we reach the stairs, Bash gestures toward a bush. “Hide back there until I bring them out.”

“I’m coming out if it looks like you’re in danger.”

“I can handle them.”

“Hang onto this.” He shoves his phone in my hands.

I hold his gaze for a moment before squatting behind the bush. The trident is too long, and glowing, but I manage to keep it low and have the part sticking out where they won’t be able to see from the porch. The weapon warms in my grasp. Waves of strength and energy make their way through me. Confidence builds until I’m sure I can do this.

After pushing aside some leaves, I tilt my head to the side to get a view of Bash on the porch. The front door is open, but I can’t see anyone else. He’s talking, so somebody must be there.

My pulse drums in my ears, but the waves from the trident grow stronger, soothing my nerves.

I strain to hear what Bash is saying and who he’s talking to, but I can’t make anything

out. Can't even tell if he's speaking with a merman or merwoman. Not that it matters. The only thing I need to focus on is saving my dad.

Bash's phone buzzes. He has a text.

Unknown: This is Halen. M's mom says he's missing. The castle is keeping it a secret while they search, so riots don't break out. Don't tell anyone.

I draw in a deep breath, having to let go of the shred of hope that my dad is actually safe at the castle. Then I reply to her text.

Bash: This is Marra. We're at the location. He's talking to you know who.

Unknown: Good. Keep me updated.

Bash: You too.

I shove the phone into my pocket and look back over at the porch. Bash is arguing with a woman who has long chestnut hair and moves with the grace of any member of the royal class. I glance down at the trident. "You ready?"

It vibrates and warms.

My eyes widen. I hadn't expected a reply!

It vibrates again and turns in the direction of the cabin. I peek through the leaves.

Bash gestures for me to join him.

Chapter 27

Irise, and hold the trident close. Its warmth builds my confidence. I keep my back as straight as possible as I make my way over to the cabin.

Bash's aunt stares at me with wide eyes. "Marra."

I've never heard my name spoken with such disdain, not even by Earwyn or any of her followers.

I stand next to Bash. "You're supposed to bow to royalty."

She doesn't budge. "You're just a child."

"I'm the heir to the throne. If you harm my dad, it's my wrath you'll face."

The woman bursts out laughing.

I hold the trident between us. It lights up even brighter and sends out a wave in all directions. Only Coral flies backward into a wall.

She glares at me as she dusts herself off. "Am I supposed to fear a girl who just received her trident? Those take years to master."

Without a word, I aim the points at her mouth.

She flattens against the wall and grunts. "Mere parlor tricks."

“Do you really believe that?” I imagine her tied to the wall.

Electric cuffs appear around her wrists, neck and waist. She cries out and gasps for air. “What are you doing?”

I swim closer and jam my weapon into the wall just an inch from her head. “Where’s my dad?”

“I’ll never tell you.”

“No?” I yank it free and shove it into the wall so close to her head that the prongs dig through her hair.

“Shane!” she screams.

Bash gets in her face. “You said Uncle Shane isn’t here.”

She spits in his face. “Shane! Get out here!”

I pull out the trident and slice her across the face. “Where’s the king?”

“Shane!”

I cut her again, then when she doesn’t answer I head inside. The interior is decorated more like a mansion than a cabin in the woods. Bright lights shine, making it feel like noon on a summer day. I listen, hoping to hear either my dad calling for help or some sign of life.

Bash appears at my side.

“Where would they put a prisoner?”

“The attic? The champagne cellar?”

“The basement seems like the more likely choice. I’ll go there, you check the attic, just in case.”

“Sure you want to split up?”

I hold up the trident. “This seems to be working pretty well for me.”

“Just be careful. My uncle can be really mean.”

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“He’ll regret coming between me and my dad.” Everything starts to take on a golden hue.

Bash’s brows draw together. “I’m sure he will. Just keep a level head.”

“Hurry.” I head toward a staircase going down. Halfway there, I catch my reflection in a mirror. My eyes are glowing yellow like my dad’s. If I have half the strength he does when his eyes look like this, Shane will have no idea what hit him once I find him.

I race down the staircase. It takes me two levels below. There’s yet another staircase going down. That has to lead to the basement. “Please let my dad be there.”

The trident glows brighter, warmer.

I stare at it for a moment before heading down what I hope is the last staircase.

Thump!

“Dad?”

A man with wild blond hair rounds a corner. “No, but I assume you’re Marra?”

I aim the trident at him. “And you’re Shane.”

A slow smile spreads across his face. “I’m glad my reputation precedes me.”

I shove the points in front of his eyes. “The only reason I know is because your wife was crying out for you.”

His face pales. “What did you do to her?”

“Hand over my dad, and I’ll tell you.”

He bursts out laughing. “That’ll never happen!”

I glance around the dark, cold entry. It only has a few doors. “There are only so many places he can be.”

Shane snorts. “That’s what you think.”

“What do you mean?” I aim the trident at him.

“Put that away. You and I both know you can’t use it properly.”

I move closer. “What makes you say that?”

“Other than the fact that you just arrived in Valora, it takes years to master any weapon—much less this beauty.”

Anger surges through me. “You want it?”

He eyes it. “Who doesn’t?”

I back up to strike him with it, and it starts glowing.

He gives me a double-take. “You got one of the ancient ones? It chose you?”

“Shut up!” I scrape him with the longest tip. It’s just a warning. “Take me to my dad!”

“It isn’t going to be that easy.”

“How’d you get him? He has a trident.”

“What? You think this is a Scooby-Doo episode and now that you’ve found me, I’m going to spill all my secrets?”

He knows about human entertainment?

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I give him another double-take. Much more of this and I'll get whiplash.

"Your pop isn't the only one who likes to travel back and forth between the two worlds."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

His brows knit together. "You know exactly what I mean."

"He's not a killer!" I press the points to his neck.

"You don't know him very well, do you?"

"I know him better than you do!" I push harder, this time drawing blood.

Something sounds behind me. "I knew I'd find you here," says a feminine voice. Coral.

"Take another step and I'll—I mean, don't move an inch or I'll kill your husband!"

"You'd kill your sweetheart's uncle? I thought you cared about him."

"I care more about him than you do!" Then a horrible thought strikes me. "Where is Bash? What did you do to him? How'd you get free?"

She giggles. "So many questions. Let my husband go, and perhaps we'll talk."

I dig the points further into his neck. Finally, some fear shows in his eyes. He grasps for the rod but yanks his hands away as if shocked.

Good trident.

It glows brighter.

Something hits the side of my head and I lose my grip. My weapon falls from Shane's neck. Fingers squeeze my neck. Shane pulls out a sword and holds it over his head. I struggle to breathe. To free myself from the chokehold. I kick my tail toward Shane, but I do little more than make the water wave and push my trident away from me. He reaches for it, but lets go right away again.

Still struggling to breathe, I reach back and try to pull Coral's hands away. Her grip tightens. I twist, turn, and fight to push my weight against her. I manage to force her against a wall, but she digs her nails into my skin.

Stars dance before my eyes. Everything is taking on a white hue. I'm going to pass out soon. Shane lunges at me, his sword aimed right for my chest. Everything seems to move in slow motion. I try to move to the right so he'll stab Coral instead. Can't get enough momentum.

The blade is coming closer. Closer. Almost to my shirt.

Something slams into Shane, forcing him and his weapon in the other direction. No, not something. Someone.

Bash.

He's alive. And he just saved my life.

“Marra!”

I turn in his direction.

He tosses the trident to me. That’s when I notice he’s bleeding and bruised. His eyes, nose, and mouth are all swollen.

The shock jolts me, and I nearly miss my weapon. I grab it, and a blast of energy surges through me. I pull away from Coral’s hold and gasp, struggling to breathe. I aim the weapon at her, ready to end her.

She cries out, “Bash!”

I freeze, terror gripping me.

Chapter 28

My stomach knots and I spin around. Bash and his uncle are in a fistfight—the last thing he needs given all his swelling. The good thing is that Shane’s sword is nowhere in sight.

Something strikes me on the back of my head. I whip around and shove the trident’s tips to Coral’s throat.

“You going to tie me up with it again?”

“I’m going to kill you with it, you heartless sea urchin!”

“How do you think I got free?”

“I don’t really care.” I focus all my energy on the weapon, which warms instantly.

“Bash let me go.” She smirks, though obviously in pain from the tips.

“You expect me to believe that?” I slice her from her ear to her mouth. “Try again!”

She gasps and reaches for her wound. “What have you done?”

“Shut up and take me to my dad!”

“Bash did free me. Family first. He just met you. What do you really expect? Especially given you’re only the heir to the throne because of murder. You should be

on the surface still, leaving us all alone!”

Bash cries out behind me. I turn around. Shane has his sword again, and he has it pressed against Bash’s throat. The water around it is red. Blood. Bash’s blood.

In a blind fury, I surge toward Shane and shove the trident into his middle, not aiming for anywhere in particular. Just need to get him away from Bash before the psycho kills him. The points dig into Shane, spraying blood in every direction. He drops the sword and lets go of Bash, who rushes past me. Coral cries out, right next to me.

I yank the trident from Shane and his eyes roll back. He slowly floats down to the ground. The water all around him is red, and his skin is quickly paling.

Gasping and gurgling sounds pull my attention away from him. Bash now has his aunt in a chokehold. “This is for Marra!”

I aim my trident for her chest. “Watch out, Bash!”

“Wait!” Coral pulls one of Bash’s hands off her neck. “Let me live, and I’ll take you to your father!”

“I’m done playing nice.” I shove the tips toward her.

“You’ll never find him without me!”

I freeze, the points almost touching her. “Are you telling the truth?”

She nods. “Not even Bash knows about the shed.”

“Shed?” Bash asks.

“See?” She struggles against his other hand, which is still around her neck. “You need me.”

I clench my fists. If she’s lying, we can still kill her. And even if she isn’t, she’ll likely be executed for treason. She’ll pay for all of this one way or another. “Where’s the shed?”

Coral glares at Bash. “You’ll have to let go of me first.”

He glances at me, and I nod. Then he lets go, but his nostrils flare. “One wrong move, and you’re going to end up like Uncle Shane.”

She rubs her neck. “Understood.”

I shove her with the trident. “Take me to my dad. Now.”

“You have to grant me immunity.”

“I don’t have that power!”

“Sure you do.”

“You’ve committed treason!”

Coral flips her hair behind her shoulder. “Exactly why I need your word. Once I have it, we’ll free daddy dearest.”

I throw Bash a questioning look, and this time he nods. Then I turn back to his psychotic aunt. “Fine.”

“I want to hear you say it.”

Through gritted teeth I say, “I grant you immunity from execution.”

“Not prison?”

“Don’t press your luck.”

Her mouth twists into a scowl. “We’ll see.”

My stomach knots as I try to imagine what else she has up her sleeve. “Where’s my dad?”

“Out back. You’re going to need that.” She gestures to my trident.

“Why?” Bash demands. “What have you done?”

Coral snickers.

He shakes his head. “You know, I’ve always resented you guys for sending me away to boarding school, but I actually have to thank you. Being raised by you would’ve been a much worse fate.”

Her mouth drops open.

Bash grabs her arm. “Take us to the king.”

“Only if you let me go.”

“Not happening.”

“Fine. We’ll have to go up to the main level and then out back.”

“Great.” He drags her up the stairs.

Before following them, I snatch Shane’s sword to give to Bash. From the sounds of it, he’s going to need a weapon.

We head outside and deep into the woods. Similar howls and growls sound to the ones I heard my first night back in Valora. At least this time, Bash is with me. And we have two weapons. Not only that, but if it comes down to it, we can always throw his aunt to whatever beast attacks. I only promised her immunity from execution, not a mauling.

“Turn down this path,” Coral says after a while.

“Where?” I can’t see a path.

“There.” She points to some bushes.

Bash and I exchange a raised eyebrow before squeezing through them. He forces her to go first. On the other side of the plant life, there actually is a path. Maybe she really is taking us to my dad.

She’d better be.

The path seems to go on forever. I’m certain we’re moving farther and farther away from Valora.

“How much longer?” Bash shoves her. “You aren’t leading us astray, are you?”

“No. It isn’t much farther. You don’t think we’d put him close to the cabin, do you? That’d be plain stupid.”

We go on for what has to be another hour. Maybe two. I swear the sky is getting light beyond the trees. Well, not the sky. Ugh. Will I ever stop thinking like a land-dweller?

Just when I’m ready to throw Coral against a tree and dig my trident into her chest for leading us on a goose chase, we round a corner.

A shed.

Chapter 29

My heart leaps into my throat. “Dad!”

“He can’t hear you, dummy.”

Bash shoves his aunt. “Don’t talk to her that way.”

“Because she’s your girlfriend?” Coral snarls.

“And your princess.”

“She’s not my princess, just like her father isn’t my king.”

He pushes her against the building. “If you want that immunity, you’d better change your tone! She is your princess, and her father is your king.”

“She already granted it to me.” She rolls her eyes like a defiant kid.

“How do we get in here?” I look around, not seeing an entrance.

She pulls away from Bash. “You’ll never know! He’s going to die in there!” Then she races away.

Bash and I both charge after her. I toss him the sword, then he knocks her down and presses the blade between her eyes.

“Immunity!”

“I never promised you anything,” he says.

“Help!” She looks at me.

I hover over her. “You want my help?”

“You swore I’d have immunity.”

“From execution, not retribution.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll show you where the entrance is.”

“Finally.” Bash removes the sword from her head and yanks her up. “Hurry.”

She brushes off her shirt then glares at both of us before turning to the shed. “The entrance is at the base of a stump around back. You have to go down a tunnel which leads to the inside.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” I turn to Bash. “This has to be a trap.”

Bash shrugs. “That’s why she’s going in first.” He turns to her. “Where’s the stump? If it turns out you’re lying about anything, you’re going to join Uncle Shane.”

“You’ve already made that abundantly clear. This way.” She leads us around to the other side of the shed, where three stumps are arranged in a triangle.

“Which one?” Bash glares at her.

“Let go of me.”

“If you run, you’re dead.”

“I fully understand.”

They stare each other down before he lets go of her, shoving her toward the stumps. She regains her balance and stops in front of the farthest one.

I point my trident at her. “Open it.”

Coral pauses.

I move closer to her.

She leans forward and yanks it up, exposing stairs leading to what has to be a tunnel. What is it with the merpeople and their stairs? Seriously, what's the point?

“You first.” Bash holds up the sword.

She hesitates. “Your uncle would be so disappointed in you using his beloved weapon against me.”

“Good. Go!”

She shudders, then heads down the stairs.

“This better actually lead to my dad,” I mutter.

Bash looks at me. “If it doesn't, I'll kill her myself—with her husband's sword.”

He heads down the stairs, then I follow, gripping my trident. It lights up, providing the only light in the vast darkness. The tunnel is short, which is a relief. It probably does lead to the shed.

But it could still be a trap. I still don't trust that woman further than I could throw a truck.

We come to a wooden door above us. Coral fidgets with the latch.

“Don’t try anything stupid.” I nudge the trident against her back.

“I won’t. This thing always sticks.”

I have a hard time believing her, but we have the advantage—at least until that door opens. Anything could be inside the shed. It has no windows or doors, so we have no forewarning. There could be sea monsters waiting to kill us.

Or it could actually be my dad in a prison.

“Would you hurry?” Bash snaps.

“You want to try it?”

He snorts. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Is your plan for the door to swing open and have someone jump out and murder us?”

Bash obviously has the same doubts I do.

The latch comes loose.

“Nobody’s going to kill you, nephew. Sorry to disappoint.” She lets go of the door and it glides open.

My pulse drums in my ears. “Dad!”

“Marra?”

It’s him!

I race past Bash and Coral, practically flying up to the shed. Anything could be up there, but I don't care because now I know where my dad is. Together we can face anything. He'll know how to use my trident. Whatever Coral and Shane cooked up doesn't stand a chance against us.

My weapon glows even brighter to reveal my dad chained to a wall. Thick metal is wrapped around every inch of his body, only leaving his head exposed.

“How did you find me?”

“It's a long story.” I race over and hug him. Well, the chains. “How do I get you out of here?”

“I take it you don't have the key?”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 9:03 am

I spin around and glare at Coral. “Where’s the key?”

“Back at the cabin.” The corners of her mouth twitch.

“That’s convenient.”

Dad struggles against the chains. “Use the trident.”

I pull it close. “I can’t!”

“Why in Hades not?”

“Because I just got it! I’d probably hurt you and not even touch the chains.”

“You need more confidence, kiddo.” He takes a deep breath then stares into my eyes.

“You can do this. You’re Marra Ayers, heir of the throne. Nobody is more equipped to use a trident than you are.”

I look back and forth between him and my weapon. “I’m not so sure.”

“I believe in you.”

“Until I decimate you,” I mumble.

His eyes glow yellow. “I’m going to use my power to protect myself against anything that goes wrong. You need to do this. You can do this.”

I swallow. “Okay.”

Dad’s eyes continue growing brighter. I hold my breath and aim the trident at him. It warms, glows, and vibrates.

“Good,” Dad says. “That’s exactly what it should do.”

Until I blow him to smithereens.

I shove that thought from my mind and focus on destroying the chains. That’s all I have to do. Simple.

Yeah, right.

“Come on, Marra.” Dad holds my gaze and his eyes glow brighter.

I hope he’s strong enough to protect himself against the trident. I really don’t know how to control it.

As I slowly aim it closer to him, a confidence runs through me. I can do this. Not only break him free, but get us out of this shed and back to our homes. Him to the castle and me to the dorm with Halen—where we both belong. I know that now.

“You’ve got this,” Bash says behind me.

“Just don’t turn us to fish food,” Coral mutters.

I focus on the chains. On breaking them up without hurting Dad. I can do this. I have to. Obviously, it’d have been better if I had any real training, but I don’t and it’ll have to do. There isn’t another option.

The trident grows warmer and shakes more. A light forms at each tip and extends out until they meet in the middle. The one thick rod of light buzzes as it moves toward my dad. No, not him. Toward the chains.

It seems to move in slow motion, taking forever. My dad's eyes hold the glow as he watches. The light travels in a straight line until it finally touches a chain. From there, both connecting metal lights up, then ones connected to those, and so on until all the chains surrounding him glow.

My heart races and I struggle to hold the trident still. One wrong move, and this will be a disaster. I have to keep it steady, hold myself together.

Almost there. The chains are nearly as bright as his eyes. One link pops and falls to the ground. Then another. Another. Several more.

He presses his arms out, and links burst out in all directions and fall to the ground. The shed glows brighter until the light fizzles from them all.

I did it. He's actually free. I stare in disbelief for a moment before racing toward him and throwing my arms around him.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 9:03 am

Dad squeezes me tightly. “I never doubted you for a moment.”

“I’m glad one of us didn’t.”

“I know you got used to the idea of living as a commoner on land, but you’re meant for so much more. We’ll live longer lives down here and be able to fulfill our destinies while breathing water rather than air.”

I pull back and study him. “Fulfill our destinies?”

He nods. “We’re meant for so much more than the surface has to offer us. You can feel it now, can’t you?”

“I think so.”

Dad kisses my forehead. “I know so. Let’s get out of here.” He glares at Coral. “You’re under arrest.”

She smirks. “I know, but I have immunity from execution.”

Dad glances back at me. “Did you promise her that?”

“It was the only way to find you! This is the middle of nowhere. You’d have died.”

He opens his mouth, but before he says a sound, I aim my trident at one of the walls. Focusing on its power, I imagine blowing the wall out. The weapon warms and glows before shooting out a thick ray of light. It cracks the wall until a hole forms. It’s large

enough for us to swim out and not have to use the tunnel.

Dad grabs Coral and forces her out, not letting go of his grip.

Bash wraps his arm around me and kisses my cheek. “That was unbelievable!”

“I’m sorry about your aunt and uncle.”

“They had it coming.”

“Do you have anyone left now?”

“You. The band.” He guides me to the hole. “We’d better get out before this place falls apart.”

Once outside, I turn back to him. “You don’t have any other family?”

His mouth twists. “With relatives like that, who needs more of them? I have people who actually care, who have my back.”

“Can’t argue with that logic.”

Coral whips around and narrows her eyes. “Just so you know, nephew, I’m pulling all funding from the Dark Sea Academy. You’ll never graduate or have a future!”

Bash freezes and his face pales. “What?”

“You heard me.” She turns back around.

The worry in his eyes is enough to break me. And the thought of going back without him is enough to destroy me. What will become of him? Of us?

Chapter 30

My heart thunders in my chest and my thoughts race with anticipation.

Halen turns to me, her eyes sparkling. “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’m going to be.”

She sighs dramatically. “You’ve never been more beautiful!”

“You’re coming, right?”

“Of course! I’m going to get ready as soon as you leave.” She swims over to the full-length mirror and pulls off the blanket that has been covering it the whole time she’s been helping me get ready. She waves me over. “Hurry up, would you? I’m dying to see your reaction!”

I try not to glance down at the dress she helped me into, insisting that I close my eyes while she put it on. She also did my hair and makeup, not allowing me to look at any of it. Curiosity burns as I make my way across the room.

“Close your eyes!” She grins widely and her eyes look like they’re going to pop out of her head.

I do as I’m told and she guides me to the mirror. “Ready?”

“You’re driving me crazy!”

“Good. Now open them.”

Finally.

I can hardly believe the reflection staring back at me. The long flowy blue formal dress shimmers brightly with our dorm lighting—I can hardly imagine what it’ll look like in the castle’s dance hall. My still-pink long hair cascades down my back, and my makeup is perfect. I hardly recognize myself.

Knock, knock!

My heart jumps into my throat. Is Bash here already?

Halen beams. “His reaction is going to be even better than yours!”

She nudges me toward the door, and I open it. Bash is wearing a tuxedo, and he looks amazing. And I just realized I’m not breathing.

“Look at you two, gawking at each other. I love it!” She helps me out the door. “I’ll see you at the castle!”

Bash draws in a breath. “You look gorgeous. I can’t believe you’re taking me to the ball at the castle.”

I look him over and run my fingers over his beard. “I can’t believe I get to take you as my date.”

He swallows then holds out a corsage with an exotic flower the same color as my hair. “This is for you.” Then he slides it onto my wrist and threads his fingers through mine. “How are we getting there? I assume not my motorcycle.”

I shake my head. “My dad sent a ride. It should be out front now.”

Bash gives a slight bow. “My lady.”

I can’t help beaming. We make our way through the dorm, and the air is full of excitement. Everyone from our school is going to the ball—it’s a royal ball, and we’re all part of the royal class. People smile, wave, and stop to speak with us. Even Earwyn gives me a genuine smile. Not that I’m going to get my hopes up that we’ll ever be friends. She probably just wants to get on my good side so I’ll introduce her to one of my single cousins.

Once we get outside, the driver lets us into the vehicle. It’s basically an undersea version of a limo, but much fancier. Bash hands me a glass of wine—it’s legal. “To us.”

I tap his glass. “To us.”

We drink, then I snuggle against him. “I’m so glad you’re still at the academy.”

He sighs. “Only through the end of this semester.”

I turn to look into his eyes. “We’ll figure something out. You saved the king’s life. The least he could do is cover the rest of your year at the academy.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 9:03 am

“I appreciate that, but you saved the king.”

“But I couldn’t have done it without you.” I sit taller. “Nobody could disagree with that. And if my dad does try to argue, I’ll threaten to leave the academy.”

Bash snickers. “Somehow, I can’t see your father giving into a threat.”

“You’ve never seen me when I really want something.”

He kisses my cheek. “I love that about you.”

I freeze in place. Did he just say what I think he did? The l-word?

Bash cups my chin, and I get lost in his eyes. He inches closer to my face. “Not only do I love that about you, but I love you. I know it seems quick, but—”

I press my lips on his and kiss him, tasting the wine. He pulls me close and runs his fingers through my hair.

Even if we never make it to the ball, this is already the perfect night.

The limo stops, and Bash pulls away.

I get lost in his eyes again and catch my breath. “I love you too. I don’t care how quickly anyone else thinks this is moving. It’s just right for us.”

He beams and brushes his lips across mine just as the door opens. Bash helps me out,

and we follow a golden path to the main entrance of the castle. A servant bows low once we're inside, and he takes us to the ballroom.

My parents are sitting on their royal throne. They embrace me and both thank Bash for his part in saving my dad's life. We all talk for a few minutes before some of our relatives arrive in order of royalty rank. Then more of the royal class arrives, again by rank. Halen is one of the first to arrive, and she looks amazing in a sparkling yellow dress, arm-in-arm with one of our school's upper-year boys. I race over to her and tell her how beautiful she is.

She grins. "Nowhere near as gorgeous as you. Would you two start dancing? You're the guests of honor, so everyone else has to wait for you."

"Oh, right. I'm not used to being the one honored at these." I take Bash's hand and lead him to the dance floor. We dance to the first song alone, then as soon as the second one begins, others flood the floor.

We spin around the floor and steal as many kisses as we can until the servants bring out the banquet. My parents sit first, then Bash and I join them, followed by close relatives. After we all begin dishing up, the other guests sit based on their ranks.

Bash endears my parents right away, speaking with them as if they were old friends. My mom squeezes my arm and whispers, "I wasn't sure about him at first, but I can certainly see why you like him."

I beam, thrilled to have their approval. If I didn't, they could use their authority to make us break up. Not that I'd give in to their demands, but being able to date out in the open will make life so much easier.

Once the meal is over, Dad returns to his throne and announces a special surprise.

Bash lifts a brow. “What’s this about?”

I shrug. “No idea.”

My mom joins him, and he starts to tell us about the whole ordeal with Shane and Coral. He winds down the story by emphasizing Shane’s death and Coral’s life sentence in prison. Then he invites me up.

I turn to Bash. “Come with me.”

He shakes his head. “He called you up.”

I hate to go up alone, especially since I couldn’t have saved my dad without Bash, but I do anyway.

My mom pulls out a shimmery tiara and hands it to my dad, who places it on my head. “With this crown, you are officially the heir to the throne. Should anything happen to me, Marra will be your queen.”

“Long live Marra,” everyone speaks in unison, then bows.

My entire body shakes. The whole thing is surreal. And all I want is to return to Bash’s arms and dance the night away.

My parents both share stories about me, but I can barely focus. The gist is that they’re proud of me and know I’ll make an excellent leader someday. Then just as I think they’ll finally let me rejoin Bash, Dad gives an announcement that makes my blood run cold.

“Marra and Bash are going to sing us a song. I’ve heard that my daughter’s voice has grown richer in the years since her voice lessons. I can’t wait to listen for myself.”

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I look at him like he's crazy. Beg him with my eyes not to make me do this. I haven't sung for an actual audience before. Just the students watching us practice.

Neva's really going to hate me now. I don't want my boyfriend's best friend to have it out for me.

Dad nudges me.

What if the other night was a fluke? I'm going to humiliate myself in front of everyone.

The entire ballroom is silent as Bash and I make our way over to the band. Not his band, but the stiff royal band with harps, violins, and other fancy instruments. We take our places at the mics. Bash smiles at me and does that eye thing. He believes in me.

I hope I don't let everyone down. It's not like I've had any time to practice singing.

The music starts, and surprisingly, it's one of Bash's songs. The one that he wrote for me.

My heart skips a beat. I lean closer to him. "Are you behind this?"

His eyes twinkle. "It wasn't my idea, but I did go along with it."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

“Your parents wanted it to be a surprise.” He nudges me. “Time for the vocals.”

Awesome.

He starts, his voice sounding like it always does—perfect. I’m supposed to join him, but my voice won’t cooperate. Everyone is staring at me. I look around, trying to find my voice. Make eye contact with Neva.

Crap.

She smiles and gestures for me to sing.

Well, at least she doesn’t hate me. I take a deep breath and manage to find my voice. The first word comes out completely off-key.

That’s what my parents get for throwing this at me like they are.

But the next words flow out naturally. My voice blends with Bash’s.

Everyone’s expressions light up. Neva jumps up and claps. Halen whistles. Earwyn gives me a smirk and fluffs out her hair. Then I turn to Bash and lose myself in the song and in his eyes.

Once the song ends, I collapse against him. Only then do I realize the crowd is going wild. Begging for more. My parents are beaming. Are those tears in their eyes? I have to be imagining that. People get louder with their requests for us to sing another song.

My dad nods, giving his approval for us to sing another one. We end up singing five more.

And they still want more.

Thankfully, Dad says he wants to dance with his daughter. He gushes over me the entire time, then he dances the next song with Mom, and Bash rejoins me. After a few more songs, people start to leave. The room is about half-empty when Mrs. Middlebrooks arrives.

Bash nods toward her. “What’s she doing here?”

“She’s part of the royal class.” Blood drains from my body as I remember my questions. My concerns about her and Dad. Mom’s certainty that he’s been seeing someone.

Middlebrooks makes her way across the ballroom. She appears to be heading straight for my dad.

My heart thunders. It’s all I can hear. I look at my parents. Mom’s wide eyes show the same emotions raging through me. Dad’s expression reveals nothing.

Please don’t do this. Thoughts about the king being allowed multiple wives bounces through my mind. Please don’t do this, Dad. Not here. Not tonight.

I turn back to Bash. “Where’s Mr. Middlebrooks?”

“Dead. She’s been widowed for years but has insisted everyone keep calling her missus anyway.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 9:03 am

My stomach lurches, threatening to expunge everything I ate for dinner.

Middlebrooks makes her way over to the throne. My mom whispers something to Dad. He doesn't respond. His attention is on my dean. And he's looking at her the way he used to look at my mom.

A lump forms in my throat. Hot angry tears threaten. My stomach lurches again.

Mrs. Middlebrooks makes her way to my dad like she owns the place. Passes my mom and completely ignores her. Then she puts her palms on my dad's face and presses her lips on his.

The room spins around me. I struggle to breathe.

Bash pulls me close and keeps me upright.

My dad places his hands on Middlebrooks's waist and clearly returns the kiss.

The world seems to stand still. Whispers weave their way through the room. I want to run, but can't move.

My mom jumps up from her seat. "Drake, stop!"

He continues kissing her for what feels like an eternity before finally pulling away. Then he places a ring on Mrs. Middlebrooks's finger and holds her hand up high. "I hereby announce my engagement to Daphne Middlebrooks and invoke my right to a second wife."

Gasps and more whispers sound around the room.

I'm going to pass out. I'm seriously going to faint.

My mom pushes between them. "I won't allow it!"

He gives her a sad smile. "You can't prevent it. It's a time-honored tradition given to kings throughout the ages."

"But nobody's used it for centuries!"

"Times change, my love."

Her expression tightens. "I'm not your love if you go through with this!"

"You can't divorce me. I'm the king."

"Maybe not, but you can't stop me from leaving. I'll move back to the surface!"

Did I just hear her correctly?

Dad tilts his head. "If you do that, you abandon your right to be my queen. You can't ever come back from that. You might want to think before you make a rash decision."

"If you carry on with this so-called engagement, you leave me no other choice. You're humiliating me in front of our kingdom!"

He shakes his head. "I'm doing no such thing. You're still the queen."

She doesn't say anything for a moment. "So, you're going through with this?"

Dad threads his fingers through Mrs. Middlebrooks's. "I am."

"Then I'm moving back to the surface."

"I'll miss you terribly. But if you leave, you can't ever return. You'll be choosing a permanent banishment. You might want to think about this before deciding."

Mom glares at him. Without a word, she storms off the platform. She's barely two inches off before Mrs. Middlebrooks sits on Mom's seat.

I'm going to lose my dinner.

Mom comes over to me. "Are you coming with me, or staying with that cheater?"

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 9:03 am

“What?” I move away from Bash and stare at her.

“This is your chance to leave. I know you didn’t want to come to Valora. I’m going back, and I’m never returning—ever! Are you coming with me?”

I look back and forth between Bash and my mom, then back over to Dad and his new fiancée.

“Well?” Mom flicks her tail. “I’m leaving right now.”

Bash takes my hand in his. “Stay, Marra. I need you.”

Mom crosses her arms. “You can bring him with you.”

Bash’s expression falls. “I can’t shift into human form.”

My heart sinks. Am I going to say yes to my mom and go to live on land forever? Or do I say yes to Valora and Bash, and discover my destiny, never to see my old life again?