



Mermaid's Wish (Dark Sea Academy 3)

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: Every other princess prepares to rule her kingdom after her father's death. Me? I have to get ready to rule all underwater kingdoms—after killing my father.

I already fulfilled the prophecy once. Kind of. I have no interest in killing again.

But no one asked what I want.

It's this stupid Queen Sirena prophecy. My father—my real, biological father—is obsessed. And he's the king, so he gets what he wants. Namely me, embracing a destiny I fear.

As I come to terms with my new reality, I find myself alone, cut off from my best friend and boyfriend and unable to convince my parents this is all a terrible idea.

My father, the king, wants me to kill him. He's set plans in motion to make it happen.

I'm too weak to refuse. And hopefully too strong to succeed.

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Chapter 1

Cheering and applause breaks out all around me. I don't join in because I have nothing to celebrate. It's the end-of-term assembly, and everyone else is leaving campus to enjoy their week off. Me? I'm sticking around to study and take my exams—the ones the other students just finished—while they're off partying and having fun.

Not that I want to party or have fun. I'm still processing, well, everything. My life has changed so drastically since arriving at Valora. And that's putting it mildly. I have far more questions than answers.

"You coming, Marra?" Bash asks.

I pull myself from my thoughts and realize everyone is clearing the auditorium. "Oh, yeah. Right."

He helps me up. "Everything okay?"

"Sure." I haven't told him or Halen the latest news. It's too much. I hardly believe it myself, but it's true. Not only are my mom and Tiberias planning on getting married, Tiberias is actually my father. I thought I killed my dad, but it turns out Drake Ayers was my uncle. So, if I'm going to be forced to fulfill the Queen Sirena legend, now I have to kill Tiberias—the kind and loving twin. The king everyone adores.

That entire mess isn't something I can bring to words. Not even to those closest to me. Maybe it's because I was given the news at my dad's funeral. I mean, my

uncle's.

Why is this my life?

Couldn't I have been born to boring parents? Being invisible was so much better than this.

Bash puts an arm around me as we exit. "You've been quiet lately. Anything you want to share?"

I shake my head no.

He kisses my cheek. "I lost my parents too, remember. If anyone knows how you feel, it's me."

If only. "Thanks."

"It takes a while to process, but it does help to talk about it. Don't keep it in too long. That's what I did, and it wasn't good."

"Wasn't good how?" I meet his gaze.

"That was the beginning of me getting in trouble all the time. I was carrying around so much hurt and anger, I blew up at the smallest offense. Let it out now. Don't become me."

The corners of my mouth twitch as I take in his ridiculously good looks—his intense blue eyes and jet black hair, his sculpted features, and that crooked grin that always gets me.

"Would that really be so bad?" I ask. "Becoming you?"

“I’m not sure Valora could handle two of me.” He chuckles.

“It wouldn’t be so bad, but I really should study. I have to take all three of my tests by Friday.”

“That gives you a full week. Why not blow off some steam now? If anyone needs that, it’s you.”

“I don’t know.”

He gives me a sideways grin. “We could sing karaoke again.”

My stomach knots. “I don’t ever want to sing again.”

Bash stops and stares at me. “What? Is that why you haven’t been practicing with the band?”

“Don’t you remember what happened last time we sang? Every guy in the bar passed out because of my voice.”

“Because you sound like a siren. That’s what they do.”

I frown. “How would that help the band if half your fans lose consciousness?”

“With practice, you’d get it under control. You’d only make mermen pass out when you wanted to.”

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“How do you know so much?”

“History class.”

I should’ve known. “Why don’t you ever pass out at the sound of my voice?”

He shrugs. “Because we’re singing together?”

“Maybe I should study sirens before joining you guys. I don’t know what I don’t know. You know?”

Bash snickers. “I wouldn’t worry about it too much. Maybe it just had something to do with the alcohol consumed—either by you or the guys in question.”

“Maybe.”

Rudder comes over to us. “There’s a party over at Earwyn’s tonight. Want to join us?”

My stomach knots.

Bash looks at me. “What do you think?”

“Earwyn and her dogfish are the last people I want to see on spring break.”

“Her parties are always the best,” Rudder says. “Think about it.”

I take a deep breath. “I still have exams to study for.”

Rudder smirks. “I could practice one of my new spells on them. Make them be nice to you. Or they could grow an extra head. It’s a new spell, and could go either way at this point.”

I laugh. “I wouldn’t mind seeing them grow extra heads. That could actually be entertaining.”

“Let me know.” He swims away.

Bash cups my chin. “You’d actually consider going?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “But then after that, I have to study. The last thing I need is to have to repeat the first year.”

“Even if you do, Earwyn, Cove, and Vanya are all graduating. You’ll be free of them.”

“I’m sure someone would rise in their place. There are plenty of people who resent me.”

He rakes his fingers through my hair. “You forget that your uncle gave the edict for everyone to treat you as if they were dealing with him personally. Any harsh word to you is taken as a direct insult to him, and everyone loves him.”

I sigh. “I wish people would just see me as me. They hated me from the start because of Drake. Now they’re being forced to be nice to me because of Tiberias.”

He kisses my palm. “The only way they’re going to form opinions of you is if they spend time with you—like at the party tonight. If you keep hiding away from

everyone, they're going to keep believing you think you're better than them."

"That's what everybody thinks?"

He doesn't deny it.

"Awesome."

Bash pulls me close and stares into my eyes, sending a shiver down my spine. "You'll win them over. Once they get to know the real you, they'll have no other choice but to love you. Just like you won me over despite my preconceived notion that you were like your dad."

"That's what you thought of me?"

He looks away for a moment before meeting my gaze and nodding. "Yes, and once people figure out how amazing you are, I'll have to beat other guys off with a stick. Actually, maybe I should keep you to myself. Let's not go to the party."

I smile. "Stop!"

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He winks. “You’ll go?”

“Fine.” I sigh dramatically.

“You will? You won’t regret it!”

“That’s yet to be seen,” I mumble.

“Let’s change out of these uniforms, then I’ll meet you in the dorm lounge. Tell Halen to join us.”

“Can’t. Her parents picked her up before the assembly. They’re vacationing somewhere in the Atlantic and wanted to get an early start.”

“Then it’s just you and me. We’ll take my motorcycle.”

I snuggle close to him. “I like that idea.”

He laces his fingers through mine. “I’m so glad you’re feeling better. I was really starting to worry about you.”

“I appreciate that. And you’re right. It’s time to stop moping and start enjoying life. And really, what’s not to enjoy? I’ve got you as my boyfriend, and Earwyn will be out of my hair for a whole week.”

He snorts. “Except we’re heading over to her house.”

“I hope Rudder gives her a second head. Although that would be two mouths instead of one.” I shudder. “Maybe that wouldn’t be such a good idea.”

Bash chuckles. “Probably not. But the good news is her parents’ place is enormous. We should easily be able to avoid her and her crew.”

A sting of jealousy pokes me. I shove it aside. “You’ve been to her house?”

“Are you kidding? That girl loves throwing parties. Anyone who grew up in Valora has been there multiple times.”

I frown. “I’ve missed so much.”

“Yeah, but you’ve also experienced things most of us never will up there. Things we couldn’t even imagine, from the sounds of it. Even though most people could go to the surface, how many actually ever will?”

“True. That reminds me, I still want to reverse the spell keeping you from shifting your tail into legs. I want you to see the things most merpeople never will.”

He flips his hair back. “Meh, I’m not worried about it.”

“I’d love to show you around up there, even if we don’t stay.”

We go up the dorm stairs and stop on my level. He kisses me deeply and gives me a dazed look before speaking. “And I love you for that. For now, let’s just focus on the party. Nothing else matters but making sure you have fun.”

“Sounds good to me.” Nothing better than forgetting legends about having to kill someone I love.

After another kiss, Bash heads up the stairs to his room and I make my way to my suite. Part of me still feels bad about having it—it's meant for fourth-years. I honestly believe the only reason I got it is because Middlebrooks wanted to cause trouble for me, not because I'm the daughter of the king like I was originally told.

The room feels so empty with Halen gone, but it's only for a week. And besides, she was so excited about the trip. I can't remember the name of the city her family is visiting, but it sounded romantic, like the underwater version of Paris.

I take off my uniform and stare at my clothing options. There are all kinds of choices for parties—everything from casual to formal. It's hard to know what to expect from Earwyn. I could see her going all out and expecting people to dress formally, but this is also the end of the quarter and everyone is going to be eager to blow off steam and not be stuck in uncomfortable clothes.

I'm overthinking this. I grab a cute shimmery teal dress that's both attractive and comfortable, and can also be dressed up or down. After fixing my hair, I add a strand of pearls that I can stuff into my pocket if everyone is casual.

Knock, knock!

I thought Bash was going to meet me in the lounge. Guess he couldn't wait. I open the door with my best smile.

Middlebrooks is there.

My heart sinks and my face burns. "What's going on?"

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“I’m passing along a message.” She looks me up and down.

“What?”

“The king requests your presence at the castle, but it looks like you have other plans.”

“Actually, I do. You can relay the message to him. And also let him know I have to study this weekend and the coming week. The whole week.”

“I don’t think he’s going to be happy to hear that.”

“I’m sure he’ll get over it. Maybe if I had a shell phone, I could tell him myself.”

“First years aren’t allowed phones.”

“Then you’ll have to tell him. Excuse me.” I squeeze past her and close the door.

She looks like she wants to say more but doesn’t. I almost feel bad for her. She lost someone too. Not only that, but she was planning on becoming queen. Now she’s back, stuck being the dean of mermaids.

But it’s hard to feel bad for someone who almost single-handedly was behind the majority of my misery here at school.

I head for the lounge.

“You didn’t have to kill him, you know.”

I spin around and study her. She hasn't lost an ounce of her arrogance. "He didn't leave me any other choice."

"He could've defeated Tiberias. He'd done it before."

"But he couldn't defeat me. And I wasn't going to let him get away with torturing my friends." I narrow my eyes. "I won't let anyone get away with that."

Color drains from her face.

Maybe the end of this school term is also the end of me being the victim of circumstance and bullies. I hold my head high as I continue staring her down and come to a decision.

It is the end of that era.

Chapter 2

Bash parks his bike by a bunch of other ones and removes his helmet before helping me off. I hand him mine and shake out my hair, then take in the sight before me. Earwyn's house is enormous. Obviously, it doesn't compare to the castle or the academy, but it's a mansion. Way bigger than the house I lived in on land. The perfectly manicured front yard is bigger than our entire property had been.

"Over the top, isn't it?" Bash puts our helmets away. "But it does make for good parties."

"Let's see." I hurry toward the building.

Bash takes my hand. "Did I tell you how amazing you look?"

I fight a smile. "Only about five times since we met in the lounge."

He pulls me close and kisses me deeply. "I haven't said it enough then."

When we pull apart, I'm dazed. He whistles.

I have no idea how he whistles underwater. I've tried but only manage to blow bubbles.

Halfway to the house, I hear music and laughter from inside. Then glass shattering.

"The party's already started." Bash laughs.

I reach for the doorbell, but he opens the door and holds it for me. We enter, and it takes my ears a few moments to adjust to the noise. Conversation sounds from not far away. More glass shatters, followed by laughter. It still amazes me that glass can break like that underwater.

“Where do you want to go first?” Bash asks.

“What are the choices?”

“There’s usually something for everyone. A few movies going, dancing all night, some singing, eating, games. That sort of thing.”

“Sounds like you’ve been to a lot of these.”

He shrugs. “Never been one to turn down a good party.”

“Let’s check out the dancing.”

“This way.” He puts his hand around my waist and leads me down the hall, through a living room where people are ignoring a movie on the large screen and laughing about something, then we go down another hall until we come to a huge room where the music is clearly coming from. My first instinct is to cover my ears, but I don’t want to look like an idiot, so I don’t. Bright colorful lights flash over the dancers.

Bash pulls me to the middle and starts dancing. He’s so mouthwatering, I could just watch him and be perfectly happy. But I came here to have a good time, and that’s what I intend to do. So I join him and quickly find myself moving to the beat.

Idira makes her way over to me with some guy from the magic arts school. “Glad you made it!”

I can barely hear her over the song.

“Wouldn’t miss it! Too bad Halen can’t be here!”

“Right? But she’s having the time of her life in the Atlantic!”

She moves on with her dance partner, and Bash and I keep going until I’m sure I’ll collapse. “You said there’s food here?”

“Lots of it.” He loops his arm through mine and leads me to a gigantic kitchen. Food lines the counters and three long tables. It’s so much quieter in here, my ears ring.

“You weren’t kidding.” My stomach rumbles, then I grab a sandwich and take a bite.

He picks up a drink and guzzles it down. “Glad you came?”

“Yes!” Especially considering I could be at the castle, worrying about my destiny. Right now, I don’t want to think about anything other than what’s in front of me—and at the moment, that’s Bash.

I scarf down more food, and we talk to others who pass through the kitchen.

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“What’s outside?” I glance out the windows, but can’t see anything because it’s already dark.

He sets down his second drink and looks over. “The guest house, a ball court, yard games, and even more food.”

“More food?”

Bash gives me his crooked smirk. “Yeah. You want even more?”

I shove him. “Are you trying to say I’m eating too much?”

“I’d never say any such thing.”

“Right.” I grab his arm and drag him outside. Small lights line the house and fence, giving everything a magical glow. A group of people are in the ball court, tossing a green ball and roaring with laughter each time someone fails to catch it. Several long tables are filled with finger foods and drinks. On the lawn, a group is playing some kind of ball game that seems familiar but I can’t remember why. Probably something I knew as a kid.

I seriously hate that I can’t remember so much stuff. Why didn’t Mom fight to stay here? She knew Tiberias was actually my dad. Hades, he knew it too. But he still let me go. I had to grow up on land, hiding my true nature and feeling like a freak.

My parents suck. Who does that to their own daughter? Drake may have been a jerk and a workaholic, but at least he didn’t lie to me. Except about seeing Middlebrooks.

And kidnapping Bash and Halen.

Fine, he sucked too.

“You okay?” Bash is staring at my hands.

They’re glowing green, that’s how angry I am. “Yeah, fine.” I let go of him and head toward the tables. Instead of grabbing something to eat, I take a drink. I don’t even care what it is. I just down it, not wanting to think about any of my parents or a legendary queen I may or may not be turning into.

“Easy there.” Bash lifts a brow.

I ignore the bitter taste and the burning down my throat as I empty the bottle. “I’m fine.”

“That’s what you keep saying. Are you sure, though? I mean, you haven’t talked about the fact that you killed your dad.”

I glare at him and grab another bottle.

He takes it from me. “Maybe we should do something else. Want to go back to dancing?”

“I’d rather go back in time,” I mumble.

“What was that?” He leans closer.

“Nothing.” I snatch the drink and down it faster than the first. It does take the edge off. Kind of.

He frowns. “Maybe coming here wasn’t the best idea.”

“It was your idea.”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing.” I glance around, my gaze landing on a group of people circled up off to the side of the guest house, then head over.

Bash catches up. “Maybe we should talk.”

I turn to him. “You bring me to a party and you want to talk?”

“Seems like you might need to.”

“Nope.” I plop into an empty seat with people on either side. Bash sits across from me and won’t take his eyes off me. I ignore him and focus on the guy telling a scary story. All that’s needed is a campfire, but obviously that wouldn’t work in the water. Part of me wants to try.

I can feel Bash staring me down, but I focus all the harder on the ghost story. The guy suddenly claps his hands, I jump. So do half the people gathered around listening. From the corner of my eye, I can see Bash is still watching me. I continue ignoring him.

A girl starts telling a story. I think she’s one of Earwyn’s friends, but I’m not entirely sure. And I definitely don’t care. Just want to get lost in another tale.

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After the third one, a guy who's rumored to be on his third time as a fourth-year reaches into his pocket and pulls out a bag of something purple and shimmery. "I brought the good stuff."

Bash catches my eye and nods his head toward the house.

Intrigued, I turn my attention back to the shimmery stuff. "What's that?"

A few people chuckle and giggle.

"I grew up on land, remember?" I cross my arms. "I'm sure there's plenty I know that you don't."

The dude shrugs. "It's tristle."

Bash gestures toward the house again. "Come on, Marra."

One girl leans closer to the baggie. "How'd you get so much?"

"I have my ways." He turns to me. "Want to try some, land princess?"

"I'm not princess of the land."

"Whatever. Want it or not?"

"What does it do?"

He smirks. “It’ll make you forget all your problems.”

“Hand it over.” I reach for it.

Bash rises. “Sorry, but we’re leaving.”

“Doesn’t look like she wants to,” someone says.

I lean closer to the bag.

“Marra, you don’t know what that stuff does.” Bash pulls me from my seat.

“I know it’ll make me forget all of my problems. That’s enough for me.”

His nostrils flare. “If you trust me at all, you’ll come with me. Tristle isn’t something you want to mess with.”

Someone snickers. “You’d know, Bash.”

Laughter moves around the circle.

“Come with me.” His mouth forms a straight line. “We can find other ways to make you forget your troubles.”

A guy whistles and waves his hands in the empty space between all the chairs. “There’s plenty of room here for that.”

Bash doesn’t break our eye contact. “You don’t want to do this.”

“You gonna let him tell you what to do?” a girl asks.

A guy laughs.

“Is he your new parent?”

Bash’s eyes narrow.

“It’s good enough for you, but you won’t let your girlfriend give it a try?”

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I move closer to him and put my hands on my hips. “You’ve tried it?”

“How do you think I know how bad it is? Trust me.”

“It’s my turn for some wild living. After everything I’ve been through, I think I deserve it.”

His expression shifts, his eyes plead. “Not like this.”

I straighten my back. “Yes, like this.” Then I move around him and hold my palm out to the guy with the bag. He pours a little on. “That’s it?”

“You won’t need more, believe me.”

Everyone watches me. Bash shakes his head, his jaw clearly clenched.

I turn back to the other guy. “What do I do with it?”

“Just let it melt on your tongue, and everything else will melt away.”

“Sounds great.” I bring my palm to my mouth, and the powder trickles down onto my tongue. It doesn’t melt in the water, but does as soon as it touches my tongue. It’s salty, and in a matter of moments all my anger is gone. I don’t care that my parents lied to me and forced me to live on land. Or that my birth father gave me up so easily to be raised by the brother who tried to kill him. Or that I’m doomed to relive the ancient legend of a long-dead queen.

None of it matters. And it feels great.

Bash is still looking at me with that judgy look of his. I don't know what makes him think he can judge me. He's done so much bad stuff, he's just one wrong move from being expelled from the academy. And he can't shift into human form. I never do anything wrong. And after everything I've been through, I deserve a little time to let loose.

Someone says something, but I can't make much sense of it. I push my way out of the group and head for the house.

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Chapter 3

Earwyn and her dogfish are laughing in the kitchen. They stop as soon as they see me. She arches a brow at me. “Look who’s here.”

“Yes, I am. What’s it to you?”

Cove and Vanya giggle while Earwyn straightens her back. “Pardon me?”

“I said, what’s it to you? You going to kick me out? Rub it in my face that you got what you wanted with my dad’s death? At my own hand, nonetheless.” I try to glare at her, but I’m not sure it works.

She waves me off. “You’re high.”

I ignore the comment and move closer to her. “Everyone knows you have a problem with me. But here’s the thing—I didn’t do anything against you. Ever. All the slights you feel, they weren’t my fault. I didn’t ask for the suite! I had no clue my dad tried to kill Tiberias. He set all his decrees on his own. None of it had anything to do with me! You should just give me a break. All I’m trying to do is make the best of the situation. You think it’s easy to adjust to life in Valora after living on land most of my life?”

She starts to say something, but I cut her off.

“It’s not! Everything’s different! Well, don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of snooty mean girls up there. But aside from that, it’s been the challenge of a lifetime. And I

didn't want any of it. I tried to stay on land, and I'm sure nothing would've made you happier, but my dad was so controlling and wouldn't have any of it. So, if you choose to keep picking on me, just know you're attacking someone who's already down. And if you think that makes you better, you're wrong. Dead wrong."

She starts to say something again, but I push past her. "I don't want to hear it."

I storm out of the room and down a hall. There are groups of people making out, and I hurry past them. Everything seems to spin around me until I come to a staircase. Then the house hits me.

No. Actually, I think I slam into the wall. Not sure how I managed that. I rub the side of my head and plop down on a stair. At least I'm away from everyone judging me. I'm away from everyone.

I'm not sure why I felt the need to tell off Earwyn. I thought that powder was supposed to make me not care about anything. Maybe it was the after-effects of saying all that in front of her friends that I didn't care about.

I'll probably care later. Or maybe I won't. I don't care now, and that's all that matters.

A few minutes later, everything stops spinning and my head doesn't hurt anymore. Unless I press on the sore spot. Ow.

I get up then follow the stairs. Laughter sounds and I follow it until I come to a group playing cards.

"Hey, Marra!" says one girl. I really should know her name. She's in one of my classes. "Wanna join us?"

“I probably don’t know how. Loser who grew up on land, remember?” I laugh at myself.

They laugh too, but at least it doesn’t bother me.

The girl smiles. “It’s easy, and we could use a sixth player. Works so much better with an even number of players.”

I shrug. “Sure.”

As I sit and collect cards, they explain the rules. Seems simple enough. I lose the first round spectacularly but then manage to win the second one. Everybody congratulates me, and we begin a new round. We’re all laughing and having fun, and it nearly feels like we’re friends. Like some of these people weren’t protesting for my dad’s death not long ago. Except that he wasn’t actually my dad, and I killed him.

People should love me. More than Earwyn, even. What has she ever done for anyone other than stick her nose up at them and throw decent parties?

After a few more rounds, everyone heads downstairs. I tag along, and they don’t seem to mind.

In the room where everyone is dancing, there’s a karaoke dance competition. A third-year from the Magic Arts School is facing off with a first year from the royals. Everyone is cheering so loudly, I can’t hear the music.

Once the third-year is declared the winner, they set the mics down. Then a popular fourth-year from the Performing Arts School takes one and looks around. “Who dares to try and beat me?” Her gaze lands on me. “Marra Ayers. What do you say?”

I swallow. Why me? I’ve only ever sung with Bash.

“Do it,” urges one of the mermaids I played cards with. “Beat Ashlyn!”

“Marra!” others agree.

Why not? What do I have to lose? It’s not like anyone could like me any less than most of them already do.

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I make my way through the crowd and take the other mic. “Challenge accepted.”

Some people call out my name while others root for Ashlyn. She turns to me and lifts a perfectly-manicured brow. “Ready?”

“Bring it on.”

Music plays, and I don’t know the song. I really didn’t think this through. Oh well, I’m already here. My opponent starts dancing, so I bust out some moves as well. If I’m not going to be able to sing along, I’m going to at least impress everyone with my dancing.

If only my body would cooperate. I managed to pull myself together after injuring myself near the stairs, but now my arm isn’t doing what I want.

“Sure you want to do this?” Ashlyn teases.

“I’m just trying to give you a head start.”

“Right.” Then she belts out some lyrics.

I stumble into a table. Hard. It’s going to leave a mark. But I keep dancing. Someone hands me a song sheet. It has words on it. The letters look jumbled together but I manage to find where to jump in. I crash into a lamp and knock it over. At least it doesn’t break. The crowd roars with laughter but it doesn’t bother me. I find where we are again and sing out the lyrics. My words slur together though I do manage to stay in tune, even as I knock a few more things over.

Finally, the music stops. Not surprisingly, Ashlyn is declared the winner. I congratulate her and pick up the stuff I crashed into.

I'm about to place the mic back on its stand when Earwyn takes the other one from Ashlyn. She stares me down. "I challenge you, first-year."

"Shouldn't you pick the winner?"

She shakes her head slowly. "My house, my rules."

"Nice." I straighten my back. "But I choose the song."

Earwyn smirks and gestures toward the songbook. "Have at it."

"Great." I flip through it and stop at one I've sung with the band several times. "This one."

She takes a quick glance. "Fine by me."

At least I stand a chance this time. If I can manage to keep from breaking anything.

Earwyn nods to someone, then a moment later the first notes play. Immediately, I relax. I'm familiar with this song. I've got this. A warmth spreads through me as I ready myself for the first line. I'm going to nail it.

Screech!

Everyone covers their ears as my mic wails.

Earwyn somehow manages to laugh while still singing.

I won't be put off that easily. Determined, I grab the mic and pick up where the song is. Earwyn and I sing in sync, both perfectly blending with the song. People call out both our names.

She narrows her eyes and sings louder. I do the same, determined to show her. Maybe I'll even get her off my back if I can do this right. She sings louder again, and so do I. We repeat the process until we're both basically yelling and singing at the same time. Something that should be impossible, but somehow isn't. The audience is also cheering louder.

Another warmth spreads through me, massaging my insides. I find myself singing softer, and Earwyn follows suit. She's actually following my lead! As we grow quieter, so do the cheers. I stop dancing and close my eyes, focused on nothing other than the words.

After a few moments, I realize the only sound in the room is my voice along with the instrumentals. Not even Earwyn is singing with me.

Gasps sound around the room.

I open my eyes. All the guys are unconscious and the mermaids are swimming around them or just staring in shock.

Earwyn glowers at me. "What have you done?"

"Me? You're blaming me?"

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Her nostrils flare and her face reddens. “Who else? You’re the one who knocked out a bar full of mermen!”

I open my mouth but don’t say anything. She has a point. But I didn’t do any of it on purpose. I glare at her. “You’re the one who insisted I sing with you! The only person you have to blame is yourself!”

“Get out!” She raises a fist at me.

“I didn’t do this on purpose!”

“Like I care! Just go!” She points toward the front door.

“I didn’t want this to happen.”

“Leave!”

Without another word, I replace the mic on its stand and head out, apologizing to everyone along the way. Nobody seems to care, and none of the guys are even stirring.

I hope I didn’t kill anyone. My stomach knots. What if I did? I don’t know anything about any of these siren-like powers. The creatures are just as shrouded in mystery as the pink-haired queen herself.

And nobody wants an out-of-control siren freak like me.

Not like I asked for any of this.

Once outside, I close the door behind me and take a deep breath. Bash's bike catches my attention. He's still inside and I'm out here, not allowed back inside.

I didn't want anything handed to me. None of it. I'd been happily living my life, eager to head off to college soon when my dad—I mean my not-dad—moved me away to Valora.

Would I still have started to become the second Queen Sirena if I'd stayed on land? Not likely, considering all this began after I used her trident.

I should've fought harder. Done more to avoid coming back here.

Not that I could've foreseen any of this. But there's no point dwelling on the past. I'm definitely not going back in time, nor am I returning to land. Mom's back here and in love with Tiberias, who actually fathered me.

I make my way over to Bash's bike and lean against it. After a few minutes, I slink to the ground and rest my forehead on my tail, where my knees used to be. Where they would be if I were to go back to land. Not that I ever will. I'm stuck here for life.

My mind wanders, mulling over every possible outcome until I start to doze off. A slamming door startles me and I sit up. It was the front door.

Bash. His arms are crossed and his mouth curved down. And his expression doesn't change when he sees me.

Regret washes through me as he holds my gaze from afar. The powder must be wearing off because I actually care. I'm tempted to flee, but that would only make things worse.

Neither of us moves. Is he waiting for me to come to him? Or does he want me to move so he can leave on his bike without me?

I should get up and let him go. No sense in further angering him. I do just that. Not sure how I'll get back to the academy, but I'm sure I can figure something out. I've managed to survive everything else thrown at me.

Bash makes his way over, which means I was right. He wants to leave without me. Not that I can blame him.

Only he doesn't go to his motorcycle. He stops in front of me and clenches his jaw. Moves his mouth around like he's debating what to say.

I should probably say something, but I don't. I'll just make things worse, the way things are going. Maybe I should apologize for the way I treated him.

"Bash, I'm sorry."

His brows furrow. "For what? Knocking out half the guests in there? Or for—"

"For the way I treated you. I was just—well, I wasn't thinking straight. It had nothing to do with you. I'm trying to process everything, and I'm not doing a very good job of it."

He shakes his head. "No, you're not. And I'm still furious. I don't want to say something I'll later regret, so I'm going to take you back to the academy. We'll talk later. I need to cool off."

"I understand. Don't worry about driving me back. I'll figure something out."

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“Like what? You don’t have a shell phone to call anyone.”

He has a point. “I could borrow yours before you leave.”

“No. I want to make sure you get there safely.”

“Even though you’re pissed at me?”

“I still care about you!” His face tightens, and he takes out the helmets and hands me one. “Let’s go.”

I don’t argue. Just put it on and climb on after him. It feels nice to wrap my arms around him, but he’s tense. Obviously, he doesn’t like it nearly as much as I do. He starts the ignition and drives to the road too fast. I rest my head against him as best I can with the helmet. I love being wrapped around him, and everything slowly starts to feel better.

Except the fact that he’s angry at me, and rightly so. That sucks.

When we get to the academy, he doesn’t cut the engine. Helps me off and puts my helmet away. Keeps his on.

I meet his gaze. “You’re not staying?”

He shakes his head. “I’m crashing at Rudder’s for the week.”

My heart sinks. “Oh.”

“Go on.” He nods toward the entrance. “I’ll go once I see you’re inside.”

I hesitate before going to the door.

“Oh, and Marra.”

“Yes?” I whip around, hoping he’s changed his mind.

“They don’t have bells during the vacations, but meals are still served at the same time. Don’t be late, or you might miss the food.”

So much for him changing his mind. “Thanks.”

He nods, climbs onto his bike, and revs the engine.

I turn back around and open the door, then glance back at him. He motions for me to go inside. I do, and as soon as I close the door, I hear his motorcycle drive away.

Chapter 4

The suite door flings open. Halen drops a load of suitcases and sighs dramatically. She swims over the pile and throws her arms around me. “I missed you! Did you have fun? I’ve got to fill you in on everything that happened!”

I return the embrace but don’t answer her question. I don’t want to talk about anything. The longest spring break of my life is finally over. I spent the majority of my waking hours studying before taking my exams. I’m not sure what the results are, but I sailed through each test.

Bash didn’t call or stop by once. Not that I have a shell phone, but he could’ve left a message or asked me to take the call from the office.

Halen doesn’t seem to notice my mood and goes on to tell me about her trip to the Atlantic. They explored a city and she met a cute guy who promised to keep in touch.

She plops onto my bed breathless and smiles. “Now tell me all about your break. Tell me you didn’t study the whole time!”

“That’s about it, really.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” She tilts her head and studies me. “What happened?”

I groan.

Her mouth drops open. “I knew something had happened! Did Middlebrooks give

you a hard time? She had nothing better to do, so she picked on you all week?"

"No. I barely saw her."

Halen frowns. "What is it? Earwyn?"

I start to answer, but then she looks around. "Wait a minute. Where's Bash? I'd think you two would've been inseparable without having to worry about classes."

"He spent the week with one of the guys."

"Not you?"

"Nope."

She covers her mouth. "Did you two have your first lovers' spat?"

"I wish it was just a spat."

"What?" she exclaims. "You two had an actual argument?"

I draw a deep breath and tell her the entire painful story of Earwyn's party. As much as I can remember anyway. Some of it is pretty blurry, especially right after I took the powder.

"You took tristle?" Her eyes widen.

"Yep."

"You didn't even care how dangerous that stuff is?"

I frown. “Now you’re sounding like Bash.”

“Good. I’m glad he at least tried to talk sense into you. Why would you consider going near that stuff?”

“I know nothing about it! How would I?”

“Oh, right. I didn’t think about that. Well, now you know all about it.”

“Yep.”

She studies me. “You seem okay, though. No long-lasting effects?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

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“Good. Next time, listen to your boyfriend!” She gives me a little shove. “He knows what he’s talking about.”

“If he ever talks to me again, I’ll be sure to pay attention.”

“You think he’s still mad?” she asks.

“You don’t?” I sigh. “He’s avoided me the whole break. I’ve never seen him this mad.”

“He probably just needed the time to cool off. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see you today.”

I lift a brow.

“He will.” She drags her luggage over to her bed and starts unpacking.

“Tell me about the guy from the Atlantic.” I plop down at my vanity and stare at my dull skin—the effects of worry and not taking care of myself for a week—and fix it with makeup just in case Bash actually is happy to see me.

Halen sighs dramatically. “His name is Frost, and it’s perfect. He’s got these intense eyes, like he could freeze someone if he really wanted.” She talks about him so fast I can hardly keep up. I try though, because if this ends up being someone important I’ll have to remember all of this.

Once my makeup is done, I move on to my hair and ask Halen a few more questions

about Frost. I don't think I've ever heard her so excited about anything.

"Is he going to come to Valora? I'd love to meet him."

Silence.

I glance around my vanity and meet her gaze. "What is it? You don't want me meeting him?"

"It's not that." She plays with a curl. "He can't leave the Atlantic."

"Why not?"

"Well, it would appear we both go after the same type of guy."

"Meaning?" I arch a brow.

"He's gotten into some trouble—not enough to lose his ability to shift into human form, but enough that he's restricted to the one ocean."

"Sounds pretty serious to me. What'd he do?"

"He was involved with a gang for a short time. That's behind him now. Won't go near those thugs for anything. If he keeps that up, the restriction could be lifted."

"Maybe I could talk to my parents."

She gives me the saddest look ever. Then I realize I just vocalized several things I haven't told anyone yet—the fact that my mom is with Tiberias and the even bigger surprise about him being my father. Halen probably thinks I've forgotten about killing my dad and about my mom being banished. She must think I'm a total idiot.

“I mean Tiberias,” I say quickly. “He’s been so supportive of me since he returned. It’s like he’s more than an uncle to me.”

Her expression softens a little. “I appreciate the offer, but I doubt he could do much. I don’t know how much you ever knew about the underwater laws, but no king from the Pacific has any pull over anything in the other oceans. It’s just the way it is.”

“Everyone loves him,” I point out. “He might know someone who owes him a favor or something. I’m just saying it might be worth looking into.”

Halen shrugs. “I’m sure King Tiberias is too busy to worry himself over my love life.” She glances at the time. “We’d better get to the dining hall. I don’t want to miss breakfast.”

“Me neither.” I grab my bag and make sure my new class schedule is in there. The only one I remember off the top of my head is my weapons class. Now it’s the first one of the day instead of last. At least getting sweaty isn’t an issue in the water.

Halen and I talk with others as we make our way to the dining hall. I’m glad for the distraction, because I don’t want to think about anything to do with my parents or Bash. The thought of him makes my stomach flip-flop. It’ll kill me if I get to the table and he’s still angry with me. Not that I could blame him. I’d be mad at me too.

When we get there, Bahari is the only one from the band seated.

“No Bash?” I ask.

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He shakes his head and swallows. “He and Rudder stayed at Gill’s house last night. They’re having breakfast there.”

“You didn’t join them?”

“No. I had to do something here.”

“Okay. See you around.”

He nods before going back to his food, then I sit next to Halen. She gives me a questioning glance, and I shake my head no before digging in. It’s a good thing I don’t have much of an appetite, because with weapons class first I don’t want too full of a stomach in case Mr. Brant makes us spar.

Whose bright idea was it to have that class right after breakfast?

Earwyn and her dogfish arrive, laughing loudly. They each glare at me before sitting and talking with their friends.

Lumen turns to me. “Did you see that?”

I grab a roll. “I think everyone did.”

Halen glances over at them. “I wish I could’ve been there for the party.”

“Me too,” I mumble. Maybe she could’ve talked some sense into me.

Luckily, the conversation quickly moves away from Earwyn's party. Everybody discusses the rest of their spring break. I was the only one studying the whole time, so I don't have anything to add. Just peek over at Bash's empty seat every so often.

Soon the bell rings, and members of the faculty give more announcements than usual because of it being the first day of the new term. Most of it seems like stuff we should all know—and that's saying something since I'm still the academy's newest student.

Finally, they let us go. I head for the weapons room and can't help but notice Earwyn is also heading in the same direction. I silently plead she's heading for the secret library for the fourth-year students.

Nope.

She and her dogfish all go into the weapons room. All three of them are in the class?

This is not shaping up to be a fun quarter. What's next? A class with Middlebrooks?

"Have a seat," Mr. Brant waves toward the mat, away from the weapons.

I groan and look around. Everyone else is a fourth-year. I'm the only first-year.

Why would someone do this to me?

I sit and everybody else sits away from me, leaving a full six-foot gap between me and the nearest student.

So much for my uncle's expectation for people to be nice to me. Or is everyone upset with me because of the party? Maybe I did this to myself.

Mr. Brant paces in front of the group and talks about the upcoming sparring

competition. He mentions that no magic will be allowed, and he looks right at me when he says that part. A few people snicker.

My face warms but otherwise, I don't react. He reads off the list of competitions, and I'm still paired with Zayn Landon, the toughest fourth-year in all the academies. He's never lost one of these competitions. He's also never killed a king.

It should be an interesting match.

Mr. Brant rambles on about what else we'll be doing in the class for the rest of the term, and he hands out papers that have the same information in case we forget.

"Time to spar!" he announces.

My stomach knots. I shouldn't have eaten so much. At least Mr. Brant rambled on long enough that my food should be partially digested.

He lists off sparring partners, matching me with Earwyn. No surprise there.

We gather our weapons. My trident warms and sends a heatwave through me.

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Where have you been?

“Spring break,” I whisper.

I sensed you on campus.

“I didn’t sense you.”

You wouldn’t.

I ignore the jab and march over near Earwyn, who’s giggling with Cove and Vanya.

That wasn’t a jab. Just a fact.

“Were you really Queen Sirena’s trident?”

Why would I lie about that?

“Can you tell me more about her? I’ve been researching ancient books and can’t find much.”

We should focus on your arch nemesis.

“But you probably have all the answers to my questions.”

Prove yourself.

Before I can respond, Earwyn turns to me and narrows her eyes. “You’re not allowed at any of my parties ever again.”

She must be especially upset—she didn’t even bother to call me a first-year.

I shrug. “Okay.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What do you want? An apology?”

Her nostrils flare. “You should! You knocked half my guests unconscious.”

“I wasn’t trying to,” I snap. “It was the tristle.”

Or the fact that you’re a siren.

I nearly drop my trident but manage to keep my hold.

Earwyn’s brows furrow. “You brought tristle to my house?”

“No. Someone there gave it to me.”

“Who?” She inches closer.

“Some guy.”

“That’s convenient. Some guy.”

“It wasn’t me,” I insist. “I’d never even heard of the stuff before then.”

She rolls her eyes. “Liar. Everyone knows what it is.”

“Not me. I grew up on land.”

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“Whatever.”

Want me to zap her dead?

“No!”

Everyone turns and stares at me. Earwyn looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. I probably have. Any sane person would’ve said yes.

So, you want me to?

I shake my head no.

Earwyn holds up her blade and rushes at me, her eyes full of fury. I block the move, and my trident sparks. She swings at me around the side. I block that move too.

Mr. Brant blows his whistle. “I haven’t called for you to begin!”

Earwyn swings at me again. I move out of the way and aim my weapon at her. It heats up even more.

I can still zap her. Don’t have to kill her.

“Let me do this.” I lunge for her, slam into her, and pin her against the wall, holding the trident with all my strength. She struggles then swipes her blade against me, cutting my arm. I cry out and back up, covering my wound. My trident glows and tiny bolts of lightning spark from the tips. They band together and something tells me

they're going straight for my opponent. I pull the weapon to the side just before they do, and the electricity misses her head by an inch.

The whistle blows again. "Both of you—put your weapons away and go to the dean's office. Now!"

Earwyn glares at me.

I glower right back at her.

We return our weapons to the cabinets, gather our bags, and head out into the hall.

She shoves me. "You'd better watch your back. You just declared war on me, and I don't care who your uncle is!"

Chapter 5

I shove my class schedule back into my bag and sulk toward my next class. Middlebrooks has given me cleaning duty again, and given the spark in her eyes, I'm certain she enjoyed it. And why not? I killed her fiancé. She didn't give Earwyn a single punishment.

Absentmindedly, I rub my stitches. When I reach the classroom, it's empty. I check the number on the door. It's the right one. Unless I remembered it wrong. I yank out the paper. It's correct. Yet nobody is here, and the bell is going to ring in less than a minute.

"Oh, good. You're here."

I whip around, and my mouth falls open in surprise. "Uncle Tiberias? What are you doing here?"

A flicker of disappointment crosses his face, probably because I didn't call him Dad. We're definitely not there yet. Not sure we ever will be. He clears his throat. "I'll be teaching you magic this term."

I lift a brow and glance back at my paper. The class says Magic, but nothing else. No teacher is listed. "Why?"

"Because you need to learn the Ayers power more than anything else. And I'm the only one qualified to teach you."

So much for avoiding my parents. “We’re going to work on it every day?”

He nods.

“What about basic magic? Don’t I need to know that?”

“I can hire you a tutor if you really want one. But trust me when I say that with our power, normal magic isn’t necessary. It can come in handy, sure. However, nothing comes close to the Ayers power. And not everyone in our bloodline gets it.”

Awesome.

“And you say Drake didn’t teach you anything about it?”

I take a seat. “Nope. I knew nothing about it until we returned. He didn’t tell me anything beyond the fact that it’s called the Ayers power, and he seemed pleased.”

“Probably because it tends to follow those who are in line for king or queen. The fact that you possessed it made him think he would have a good run as king—that killing me had gotten the job done.”

“So again, it was all about him.”

He frowns. “Unfortunately. That was the way he worked. And eventually what got him killed.”

Not the Queen Sirena curse.

Tiberias studies me. “Is something the matter?”

I’m not going to tell him about that. It’s all too much to take in, and I’m done killing

people. I've already killed two mermen since arriving to Valora. Both were necessary, but I don't want this to become a regular thing. And besides, I still have to process the fact that my uncle is actually my dad. A week wasn't enough time.

I get up from the seat. "Everything's fine. Let's work on the power, shall we? Am I going to be graded?"

"Yes, in order to meet your magic requirement, but don't worry about that. As long as you're trying to grow it and improve, you'll get high marks."

"Sounds good to me. So, it's controlled by anger?"

He frowns. "Is that what Drake told you?"

I try to recall if he said anything about how it works. "Just seems to be when it activates."

"We can use it whenever we want. It's our servant."

My mind flashes back to the incident with trying to remove the fish's teeth with a spell in my remedial magic class. "It seems to be the other way around. I don't really have any control over it."

"You don't?" He sits on the desk next to me and studies my hands. "Show me."

"Right now?"

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He nods like it's no big deal.

I clench my fists and hope to see some green.

Nothing.

I tighten them until my knuckles turn white. Still no magic, nothing out of the ordinary. I relax my hands. "I can't do this."

"Yes, you can."

"Did you just see me try?"

He holds my gaze. "You have the power. That means you can use it for your will."

"Maybe you have me confused with someone else."

"You and I are the only ones who have the power right now. Show me what you can do."

Irritation runs through me. "I'm telling you, I can't!"

He glances down. "You just did."

Sure enough, my hands are glowing green. "I'm annoyed."

"You need to learn to use it regardless of your mood."

“Good luck with that.” I sit on the desk across from him in resignation.

He looks deep in thought for a moment. “Did you only ever see my brother use it when he was upset?”

“Was he ever not upset?”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “Hardly seemed like it. I have an idea. Why don’t you relax and think about the power? Try to draw it out in a non-emotional setting?”

“Non-emotional?” I don’t bother hiding my surprise. “How is this not emotional? I’m sitting here with my uncle, who’s really my father, just a week after I killed the man who raised me!”

Tiberias takes a deep breath. “Maybe we need to work through this before jumping into the power.”

“You think? All of this was thrown at me during my dad’s funeral—and I’m not going to apologize for calling him that, regardless of how horrible he was. He was the one who was there for me all those years, even if he was distant and harsh.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to apologize for that. He was your father in almost every sense of the word.”

“Except for genetics.” My hands glow green. “And nobody ever bothered to tell me.”

“Or him,” Tiberias points out. “He died not knowing the truth.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes. I mull over everything, coming up with more questions with each passing moment. I look at him—my father and the merman my mom has always truly loved. His dark eyes are identical to my dad’s, but they’re full

of kindness even though I'm not giving him his way. I know he wants me to embrace him as my dad, but I just can't. Not yet. Maybe not ever, even though he's clearly the better choice for a father figure.

"Is there something you want to say, Marra?"

"So much. Why couldn't you marry Mom if you loved her so much? Couldn't you have stopped the wedding, especially since she was carrying your child? Why let us go to the land? Why not fight for us? And what about—?"

"I think your mother and I should answer these questions together."

"You can't give me anything?"

His eyes fill with sadness. "Just know I've always loved you with my whole heart. Every time I saw you, I wanted to tell you the truth."

"Why didn't you?"

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He flinches. “The truth could’ve gotten your mother killed.”

“What? Why?”

“How do you think my brother would have reacted to such news if he found out?”

“Surely he wouldn’t have killed her over it!”

Tiberias just arches a brow.

“He’s a hypocrite! He got engaged while still married to Mom. He’d have had no leg to stand on in that argument.”

“Yes, he was full of double standards. But given the royal decrees of Valora, he’d have the right to have her executed.”

“That’s so backward!” My hands glow green and spark with the electricity.

Tiberias glances down but doesn’t say anything about it. He looks back up at me.

“We’re running out of time for now, but I have an idea. Tomorrow, I’ll bring Emery with me, and we’ll answer whatever questions you bring us.”

“My homework is to make a list of questions?”

“Exactly.”

“That should be easy enough.”

He nods. “But after that, we’ll need to focus on the power. If you aren’t taking your magic classes, you do need to work on this.”

“Okay.”

Tiberias gets up and wraps his arms around me. “I really am sorry for the way everything has worked out. If I could go back in time, there’s so much I’d change. I’ve done wrong by both you and your mother. I do hope you can forgive me and that we’ll finally be able to be the family we were meant to be.”

I just nod. I should wrap my arms around him but I can’t bring myself to.

The bell rings, and I back up. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He holds my gaze, seeming to want to say more. “We’ll both be here.”

I grab my bag. “Okay, bye.” Then I race out of the room.

And nearly crash into my boyfriend. I stop just in time.

Bash gives me a double-take. “Marra? What are you doing down this hall?”

I readjust my bag. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He frowns, the intensity of his eyes boring into me.

“Look, I know I’m the last person you want to see right now, so I’ll get out of your hair. I’m going to be late for my next class, anyway.”

“We need to talk.” His expression is so rigid, it makes my stomach twist.

“I can’t be late the first day.” I dig into my bag to check my schedule. “My next class is clear across the building. Gotta bolt.”

He opens his mouth, but I hurry away. I can’t deal with anything else, and if Bash has decided we’re through, that news is going to have to wait.

I can’t take any more changes in my life—especially not something like that. I need him now more than ever, but I’ve pushed him away. Possibly forever.

Chapter 6

Halen sets her fork down and looks me in the eyes. “Are you okay?”

I’m anything other than okay, but I can’t talk about that in the middle of a meal surrounded by all the students in the academy.

“Marra?”

I move my fork around the plate. “Let’s talk later.”

“Right after the meal?”

“Sure.” I turn my head just enough to be able to see the band at the end of the table. Bash is turned toward them, so I can’t see anything other than the back of his head. If only I could see his face, I could gage how he’s feeling. Does he want to work through things or break up with me?

Tears blur my vision. I realize Halen’s speaking, so I turn back to her. She’s talking with Lumen, which is a relief. I don’t think I can pull myself together enough to hold down a conversation. There isn’t anything I want to talk about anyway. Not my parents, not Bash, not the fact that I’ve angered Earwyn again. When she and her friends arrived at the table, they each made a point to glare at me before sitting.

I should talk with Mrs. Middlebrooks about letting me switch out of the weapons class. There’s no reason for me to be in there with all those upper-years. No reason for me to be in the sparring competition, either. Maybe I can talk some sense into her

now that my dad is no longer a part of the picture.

Once the announcements are done, I hurry over to her.

She curls her lips in obvious displeasure. “Yes, Marra?”

“Can I talk with you in your office, please?”

“I usually schedule meetings.”

“Since when?”

She throws her head back. “Fine. Make it quick.”

I follow her to her office. As I pass Halen, she gives me a questioning glance. I mouth to her, “I’ll meet you in the suite.”

“Okay.”

When we get to the office, Middlebrooks unlocks it and motions for me to go in and sit, her face twisted into a scowl. “What’s so important that it couldn’t wait?”

I sit. “I want to be in a weapons class with other first-years.”

She sits and yawns. “Good for you.”

“Why am I with the upper-years?”

She sighs dramatically. “Because that’s where you are. All the classes are filled, and there’s nothing I can do. If that’s all you wanted, you can leave.”

“You can’t do anything, or you won’t?”

Middlebrooks taps her desk with her long nails. “Is there anything else you need?”

“I want to be in a new class.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes no sense that I’m there! I should be in remedial weapons, just like I was in remedial magic—because I don’t know anything about that stuff. They don’t teach it to human students on land!”

She leans forward and holds my gaze. “Listen up, and listen good because I’m only saying this once. You are no longer the king’s daughter, so you don’t get special privileges. Don’t ask for any again. Your classes are sticking.”

“But—”

“If you wanted special consideration, you shouldn’t have killed the king. You’re lucky you aren’t in prison or worse.”

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“I’m still heir to the throne! Tiberias said as much.”

She snorts. “Naive thing, aren’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re only heir until he comes up with a legitimate one.”

I bite my tongue. She sure isn’t the first person I want to tell the news about my birth to. “Well, for the time being I am the heir. I’m sure Tiberias would be happy to tell you himself—although he won’t give you the same benefits my dad did!”

Middlebrooks smirks. “We’ll see about that.”

My mouth falls open in shock. Not that I believe her. Tiberias would never do that to my mom.

“Oh, relax.” She waves her hand at me. “There are rumors about him seeing someone, anyway.”

I give her a double-take. People already know?

“Surprised?” A slow smile spreads across her face. “That’s what I was just talking about. Your days as heir are numbered, no matter how much uncle dearest adores you now. You’d better get used to it.”

I get up from the chair. “If you won’t change my schedule, I’ll speak with my uncle.”

“You do that. In the meantime, don’t forget to sign up for practice sparring sessions. The academy needs you to win against Zayn Landon.”

“Is that what this is about? That’s why you won’t let me switch?”

“You are our best chance at finally winning the championship again. It’s been far too long.”

“Expect to hear from the king.” I storm out of the office before she can say another word. Part of me wishes I had just told her I actually am the king’s daughter, but I’m not ready to say those words out loud.

My mom and Uncle Tiberias have been in love longer than I’ve been alive. It still doesn’t seem possible. Hopefully talking about it with Halen will help. If anyone can help make sense of this, it would be her. She’ll be shocked, but she’ll also know what to make of it, as someone who’s lived in Valora her entire life.

I make my way to the dorm, lost in thought. If Tiberias won’t help me switch classes, then I’m stuck in the class with Earwyn and her dogfish. Stuck facing off with the reigning sparring champion. Granted, he won’t be stronger than my dad was, but I also won’t be allowed to use the Ayers power which was how I overcame my dad. I do have Queen Sirena’s trident, though.

As I go up the stairs, I bump into someone. “Sorry.”

She spins around. Earwyn. Her eyes narrow and her face reddens. “Watch out, first-year.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“And I don’t care.” She shoves me against the wall.

“Can we just call a truce or something? I really don’t want to argue.”

Earwyn bursts out laughing. “A truce? Are you serious?”

“Why not? Neither of us needs the stress in our lives. Am I correct?”

She grabs my collar. “We passed the point of no return long ago.”

I gag and shove her fist away. My top button pops off. “What if I can get out of the weapons class? Would that help?”

“Nope. I have plans for you.”

My stomach flip-flops but I keep my expression stoic. “You really want to have an enemy when you could have a truce?”

Earwyn shoves me again. “After what you’ve done? You’d better believe it.”

I move away from her. “What about the king’s edict to treat me as you’d treat him? Would you shove and threaten him?”

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“If he pulled the stunts you have, you’d better believe it!”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Her nostrils flare. “That’s because you’ve underestimated me from the beginning, you slimy little eel.”

I ignore the dig. “You think you haven’t underestimated me? I have the Ayers power, and I’ve killed a king! You really want to test me?”

“I managed to get you out to the woods your first night. That was just the beginning of what I can do!”

Anger swirls around me. “Did you happen to notice I got away?”

“Took you all night. That’s hardly impressive.”

My hands heat as the green glow brightens and a ball forms between my palms.

“You think that scares me?”

“It should!” The ball grows and casts an emerald light on us and the walls.

People have gathered on the stairs watching us from above and below. Hushed whispers run through the onlookers.

“Why would that scare me?” Earwyn demands.

I turn my attention back to her. “Maybe because I’ve killed a king with it!”

She pretends to yawn. “You keep bringing that up like it’s supposed to mean something. Like I’m supposed to care. You’re nothing more than an entitled first-year who gets everything handed to her! You think you’re better than the rest of us, but you’re not. Not even close!”

“It’s dangerous! And I’m not trying to brag. Do you think I’m proud about what I did?”

Earwyn hesitates. “You’re not?”

“He was my dad!”

“And he was also a horrible king. Not just that—a rotten merman. He deserved to die!”

“It’s because of people like you that he’s dead!” Without thinking, I throw the ball at her ugly face.

She moves out of the way, and the ball barely misses her. Crashes into the wall, cracking it. Leaving a hole in its stead. Earwyn’s eyes are wide and her face pale. She gasps. “You just threw that at me!”

“And you’re surprised?” I clench my fists, and they glow green again.

She straightens her back. “I’m going straight to Middlebrooks!”

“I can go to the king!” Everything around us takes on an emerald hue.

“Oh, stop bragging! Just wait until he has kids. After that, you’re going to be

displaced.” She gets in my face. “You’ll be nothing.”

I hold another glowing ball between us. “Sure you want to go with that narrative?”

“Yeah, because you’re completely replaceable. And Tiberias will forget all about you once he has a true heir!”

Anger pulsates through me. All I can think about is how I want to show her. To shut her up for good. “He won’t replace me!”

“You’re just a niece. Get over it! You killed your chance at being queen someday. You might wish you were the next Queen Sirena.” She laughs cruelly. “Pathetic! That’s all you are. Except nobody feels sorry for you.”

“I’m Tiberias’s daughter! The true heir to the throne! If he has more kids, they’ll be my siblings.” Suddenly, I realize what I’ve said. That I blurted out the truth to my enemy in front of all these onlookers—and I haven’t told Bash or Halen yet.

“Is that true?” Earwyn’s voice is so quiet, I almost can’t hear her.

I cover my mouth. Glance around. Everyone else looks as shocked as she does. The stairwell seems to be closing in on me. What have I done?

“I need to go.” I push past the students above us and onto my floor.

Bash and Halen are right there.

They heard everything. Halen’s expression is hurt and Bash’s is full of disappointment because I kept the secret from them until blurting it out to our whole dorm.

I've betrayed my real dad and hurt my friends in one moment.

I swim away as fast as I can.

Chapter 7

Isqueeze the side of the bench and take deep breaths. Though I'm tucked away in the garden, I can hear a commotion somewhere not far away. I've made waves yet again, and now surely everyone is talking about me being Tiberias's daughter.

That was not how I wanted anyone to find out, especially not Halen and Bash. I'll never forget the looks on their faces—not even if I live as long as Queen Sirena. I may as well have aimed my power ball at them.

“I knew I'd find you here!”

My heart sinks as I turn to face Bash. I open my mouth to speak, but no words come. There's so much I need to say, but none of it comes close to making up for everything I've done to him. And to apologize would only be an insult on top of injury.

He sits next to me. “Are you okay?”

I stare at my tail. “I should be asking if Earwyn is okay.”

“She's fine. Loves the drama. Is it true?”

I sigh. “About Tiberias?”

“What else?”

“Yeah.”

He mumbles something I can't make out. "How long have you known?"

"They dropped the bomb at my dad's funeral."

"Bomb? Is that another land reference?"

I just nod.

"Why didn't you tell me? Is that why you've been tied in knots and acting weird?"

"Pretty much. I wanted to tell you, but I needed to process the news first. I didn't really have time because I was studying all week."

"So, you've been dealing with the fact that you killed your dad and the news that he wasn't even your dad to begin with?"

"He was my dad. Just not genetically."

Bash puts his arm around me and pulls me close. "I'm so sorry. I wish I'd known."

Tears sting my eyes, and I try to fight them, but they win. I shake and struggle to breathe normally.

He rubs circles on my back and kisses the top of my head. "Is there anything I can do?"

I shake my head no.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"What's there to discuss? My mom's been in love with him this whole time. Makes

me wonder if my dad knew, though. Is that why he killed his brother, or did he really just want to be king? He might've felt like Tiberias got everything he wanted—including the love of his wife."

"It's a possibility. It'd also explain that whole surprise engagement to Middlebrooks. It did seem like a relational attack on your mom."

"He probably did know." I cling to Bash. "My family is such a mess. I'm such a mess. If I were you, I'd run. I mean, flee, as fast as you can."

"Never." He threads his fingers through mine and kisses the back of my hand. "At least you have a family to be screwed up. I'd take that over nothing. And I'm more than happy to put up with whatever you throw my way."

I meet his gaze, and his intense blue eyes make my breath hitch. "You weren't very happy last week."

"I was upset because you were pushing me away, and I didn't want to lose my temper. The last thing I wanted was to say or do something I'd later regret. Obviously, I'd have rather spent every moment with you, but I needed to cool off. And you needed to study."

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“You weren’t avoiding me because I didn’t do what you told me to do?”

He studies me. “Do you really take me for that kind of guy?”

“No.”

“Good, because I want you to have a mind of your own. Yeah, I’d like to think you value my opinion enough to consider it, but that wasn’t what bothered me.”

“I wasn’t trying to push you away. It was too much for me to process, and I couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud. Do you know what it was like to be at my dad’s funeral after killing him, to have my mom and uncle make their grand entrance like two lovebirds? I didn’t even know she was back in Valora! I guess she was too busy making out with her lover to tell me.”

“Or maybe she just arrived moments earlier, and they just wanted to surprise you.”

I chew on my lower lip before responding. “No. I’m certain they wanted to stick it to my dad and Middlebrooks. That’s what it was about. I’ll bet if Tiberias couldn’t have done that, he wouldn’t have allowed the funeral. He says it was for my sake, but I have to wonder. Traitors don’t get funerals, and why else was Middlebrooks one of the only nine people allowed there?”

“That is a good question.” He squeezes my hand. “Did Tiberias share anything at the service?”

“Yeah. He talked about their childhood.”

“Maybe he wanted to honor the brother he once got along with but also wanted to stick it to the one who betrayed him. He could be as conflicted as you are.”

I study him for a moment. “You’re surprisingly insightful.”

“Surprisingly?” He cocks a brow.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do?”

“Never mind.” I take a deep breath and lean against him.

He chuckles and kisses my palm. “I’m only teasing. I have a reputation, and it sure isn’t for my intelligence.”

“I didn’t mean you’re not smart.”

“It’s fine. I know what you meant. Are you feeling better now?”

I shrug. “I guess, but it doesn’t change anything. I’m probably going to get in trouble for property damage and for attacking Earwyn—even though she had it coming. Everyone’ll side with her. They always do.”

“I won’t.” He wraps his arm around me. “I’ve got to get to the practice room. You want to sing with the band?”

“And put everyone to sleep?” I frown. “No thanks.”

“Didn’t we already have this discussion? You don’t always do that. People were inebriated when that happened. That’s the connection.”

“Or the fact that I was under the influence.” I shake my head. “Not that it matters, I’m done singing. It’s mortifying to have people look at me like I’m some kind of freak. Besides, I need to study. I’d like to actually get ahead this term. I was behind from the start last time.”

He rubs his chin. “Can’t argue with that logic. But think about singing with us again?”

I frown.

“For me?” He bats his lashes and gives me an over-exaggerated pout.

I burst out laughing. “I can’t say no to that. If I can get ahead of my studies, I’ll join you guys.”

“Please do. We really need female vocals.”

“Yours are just fine.” I trace my finger along his lip, and a chill runs through me. Bash kisses my fingertip then leans closer and takes possession of my mouth. He tastes of cherries and vanilla, and he smells heavenly. I lean against him and forget about all my troubles, relieved everything is good between us again. That’s all I really need anyway.

He pulls away all too soon. “As much as I’d like to continue this, the guys are going to be furious with me if I’m late again.”

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I grab his collar and pull him close. “What are they going to do? Kick you out? They’re nothing without your voice.” I push him back against the bench and kiss him deeply.

He responds with equal passion before pulling away abruptly. “You have no idea how hard it is to say no to you, but the guys are already upset with me for bailing on them so much lately.”

“Is that my fault?” Guilt stings. He should be the one being the bad influence on me, but maybe it’s actually the other way around.

“Never. Well, maybe.” The corners of his mouth twitch. “You’re the best thing to happen to me, Marra. Things have been crazy since you showed up, but I wouldn’t change a thing.” He pauses. “Other than you pushing me away. Can you promise me you’ll tell me when something’s bothering you? It’s fine if you can’t talk about it right away, but just keep me in the loop. That’s all I ask.”

“I promise. Although, I really hope nothing like this ever happens again.”

“Hopefully, you don’t find out someone else is actually your father.”

I frown. “At least now I know why I didn’t come into my full powers.”

A flicker of realization crosses his face before his eyes widen. “Wait just a minute. You think you have to kill Tiberias now?”

“I don’t want to!”

“You don’t have to!” He holds my gaze. “This whole thing is ridiculous. You’re not Queen Sirena, and there’s no reason for you to do the things she did.”

“That’s not the way it seems to be working. I didn’t want to kill my dad, yet look what happened.”

“Because you thought you had to! And he wasn’t even your dad, so that just proves it was all in your head.”

I scoot away. “All in my head?”

“You know what I mean.”

“That I’m mental?”

He narrows his eyes. “That’s not it, so don’t even go there.”

“It’s not in my head—it’s on my head!” I hold out some of my pink hair. “I never even heard of the legendary queen until this happened. Until her trident chose me.”

Bash tilts his head. “Her trident?”

“That’s what it tells me.”

“What else haven’t you told me?” He scoots farther away from me.

My heart sinks. “I don’t want to argue. We just made up!”

He sits taller. “What else haven’t you told me?”

“Nothing! I haven’t intentionally left one thing out. If there’s anything I haven’t told

you, it's because I've been so distracted by everything else that it slipped my mind. And that's the truth. If you don't believe me, you can just—"

"I believe you." He scoots closer and wraps his arms around me. "You're right—let's not fight. We need each other now more than ever."

I lean against him. "Thank you."

He kisses the top of my head. "Let's get going. I have to get to the band, and you need to study."

We rise, he puts his arm around my waist, then we make our way out of the garden and into the building.

An upper-year student from the School of Magic Arts stops me. "Is it true? You're Tiberias's daughter?"

I swim away, only to have other students question me about Tiberias.

"Come this way." Bash wraps an arm around me and leads me down a hallway. We turn down another until all sounds of conversation are gone. "I think we've lost them."

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“For now.” I frown. “I really messed up.”

He doesn’t deny it.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“Lay low until people forget.”

“You think they’re just going to forget?”

“There you are!” Middlebrooks appears around the corner, her hands on her hips.

I groan. “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” She swims over. “You left a hole in the dorm after trying to kill a student!”

“I wasn’t trying to kill her.”

“What were you trying to do?” she demands.

“Shut her up.”

Middlebrooks scowls. “That doesn’t help your cause.”

“She was trying to get me to react! I fell right into her trap.”

“You’re saying she wanted you to kill her? I suppose next you’re going to tell me that’s what your father wanted too?”

That last part is like a punch to the gut. I can’t respond.

She glowers at me. “Not that it matters. If the rumors are true, your real father wants you at the castle immediately. There’s a car waiting for you out front.”

My stomach drops to the floor.

He already knows that I spilled the beans?

Chapter 8

My heart nearly explodes out of my chest as I wait for my mom and Tiberias—my parents. I should probably get used to thinking of them that way. And they're going to lay down the law. How bad is my punishment going to be? What's a suitable consequence for something like this, anyway? This is all new territory for me.

A servant appears before me, pulling me from my thoughts, and bows. "The king is ready to see you, your highness."

I can't find my voice, so I just nod. I've ruined everything. Exposed their secret love affair. Everything they've been hiding all these years. Could Tiberias lose the throne because of having a child out of wedlock?

It's a shame I don't know more about our kingdom. At least I'd know what to expect. For now, I can only imagine the worst.

The servant leads me to the throne room. My mom and uncle sit in the king's and queen's places. At first when I see Tiberias, I think he's my dad. I mean, he is my dad. But I think he's his brother—the dad who raised me.

Could my life be any more messed up?

I'm about to find out.

Tiberias rises from his seat and embraces me. "How are you, my child?"

I wish he wouldn't call me that, but I don't want to hurt his feelings so I keep quiet on the matter. "I'm okay."

Mom comes over and also wraps her arms around me. "I'm so glad to see you, sweetheart."

If only I could say the same. "What's my punishment?"

No sense in beating around the bush.

"Punishment?" They both pull back and look confused.

"For breaking the news like that. For supposedly trying to kill another student."

"Did you try to kill her?" Mom asks.

"No! She was egging me on. It was like she wanted me to do that."

Tiberias puts a hand on my shoulder. "I heard she didn't have a scratch on her. Sounds like she had it coming."

"What about the wall?" I ask.

"I'll send one of my servants to fix it." He shrugs. "Problem solved."

"But Middlebrooks wants me to get in trouble for that."

Mom rolls her eyes dramatically. "Oh, I'm sure she does."

I glance back and forth between them. "I'm not getting in trouble at all?"

Tiberias shakes his head and takes my mom's hand in his, showing off a diamond engagement ring fit for a queen. It's at least twice the size of her other ring.

My mouth drops open. "You're already engaged?"

They exchange a lovey-dovey look, then Mom turns to me. "Already? We've been waiting a lifetime for this."

Tiberias smiles. "A lifetime? I know you look twenty, but I'm certainly not that young anymore."

Her face flushes and she giggles. "Oh, Tiberias. You're too much."

"No. You're too much." His eyes twinkle as he leans over and kisses her.

I should turn away to give them privacy, but they're so cute I can't bring myself to move.

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They turn back to me and Tiberias speaks. “We’re going to announce our engagement to Valora, and we’d like you to be with us. I’ll confirm the rumors so everyone can calm down and focus on the wedding instead. I know you don’t want to be in the spotlight.”

Relief washes through me. Not only am I not getting in trouble for my incident, but everyone’s gossip will be focused on the upcoming wedding rather than me. “That sounds great.”

“Perfect.” Tiberias grins. “Would you like to change into a gown?”

I give him a double-take. “You’re going to do the announcement now?”

“As soon as you’re ready.”

“But I have to get back to the academy and study.”

“I’ll excuse you from your assignments. One of the benefits of being king.” He winks.

Before I can reply, someone bows in front of me. It’s the same servant who helped me the first day I arrived. The one I called Sally because she wouldn’t tell me her actual name. “To your room, my lady.”

I don’t bother telling her to call me by my name. I suppose I’ve re-acclimated myself to royal living. I’m not sure that’s such a good thing. Not that I can fight it now, as I’m about to be dressed for the announcement of my parents’ engagement.

We go to my room. I pick out a sleeveless burgundy dress and Sally fixes my hair.

“How did you get flower petals in your hair, my lady?” She holds out a dainty yellow one.

“I was sitting in the garden at the academy.”

She plucks out another, this one pink. “That sounds nice. Are you enjoying it?”

“The garden?”

“The Dark Sea Academy.”

I consider my wording. “It’s been somewhat of a mixed experience.”

“I’m sure it has.” She holds up another petal. “I think that’s the last one.” She quickly styles it into a braid that wraps around my head and tops it off with a tiara that matches my dress. I look more like Queen Sirena than ever.

Sally leads me through the castle to a room I don’t recognize. She opens the door and gestures me in. It’s a giant bedroom, close to the size of the throne room, and fit for a king. It’s probably Tiberias’s.

I turn to her. “Why are we here?”

She motions to the left. “Your parents are on the deck. That’s where they will make the announcement.”

“On a deck.”

“Hurry.” She bows.

I don't know why I bother questioning anything anymore.

My mom pokes her head out from the doorway. "Marra, over here."

I swim over and join her and Tiberias. A thick privacy curtain blocks me from seeing most of the deck.

He glances up at me. "Perfect timing, and you look beautiful."

"Thanks."

"We'll go through the curtain and over to the ledge. First, we'll wave and smile without speaking. A large number of Valoran merpeople have gathered for our announcement. They'll first just want to see us. Then we'll share the joyous news."

My heart races at the thought of all the people watching us. I'd prefer cameras to this.

Mom rests a hand on my arm. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

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I nod and force a smile. “Great.”

“The people are going to be so thrilled. They’ve been wanting their beloved king to get married since the day he took office.” She fixes his collar. “Now they not only have him back from the grave, but they’ll get the royal wedding they’ve been wanting for so long.”

“And you two have really been in love that entire time?”

Tiberias takes my mom’s hand in his and stares at her lovingly. “Longer. Personally, I fell for Emery when we were children. I was determined I’d marry her one day. Of course, I never expected it to take so long, but at last the time has arrived.”

She smiles, and they share another kiss.

A servant clears his throat. “Are you ready, sire?”

Still holding her hand, he turns to him. “We are.” He glances at me. “Are you, Marra?”

I nod, my pulse racing. Hopefully, I won’t have to say anything to the crowd. Smiling and waving is about all I can take at this point.

Two servants pull aside the curtain, and my parents stroll through, beaming.

I just thought of them as ‘my parents’. Probably a good thing. I’m going to have to get used to it, but it’s still so weird.

Sally motions for me to follow them. I pull myself together and join them, grinning and waving to the sea of faces below. They seem to go on forever. My stomach knots, but I keep on smiling.

Down on the ground, people shout and cheer. Some wave signs. It's surreal.

It takes a few minutes, but they finally quiet down. Once they do, a servant hands Tiberias a mic. He greets the people, and his voice comes out through speakers down on the ground.

More cheering and sign-waving, but they settle down faster this time.

“Thank you all so much for coming out on such short notice,” he continues. “We have an announcement, and I know you are all especially curious because of the rumors going around.”

The crowd calls out and grows louder until Tiberias raises a hand. They go silent.

He holds up his right hand along with Mom's left, the one with the huge ring. “Emery and I are going to marry.” A mixture of gasps and cheers run through the audience. “I've loved her since I was a boy, and despite my father's decision to have Drake marry her, my feelings never once wavered. I've always pushed away everyone else because in my mind and heart, it was Emery or no one. And that has paid off at long last because she has agreed to marry me. I couldn't be happier about this. We'll finally be a family—Me, Emery, and our beautiful daughter, Marra.”

More gasps ripple through the crowd, but they're quickly overpowered by applause and cheering. It grows louder until the king raises his hand again. He clears his throat. “And I want to address a few things before more rumors begin. First, like I just said, Emery is the only merwoman I've ever loved, and Marra is our daughter, conceived shortly before her wedding to Drake. She was completely faithful to my brother for

the entirety of their marriage, and there is no woman with more integrity than her. We should all be honored to have her as our queen. She loves you all as much as I do, and we will fight for you just as I always have every day of my reign. I'm actively working to undo the messes my brother made in the short time he was in power. You can expect all his decrees to be fully reversed within the month."

Cheering and applause break out so loud it makes my ears hurt, but I continue smiling as I was told.

My uncle—father—raises his hand again, but this time it takes longer for the people to settle down. Once they finally do, he continues. "I want to address another rumor that has been floating around. This one is in regard to my daughter."

I jolt at the mention of me. He didn't mention anything about this. And it wasn't bad enough that he had to discuss my conception in front of the entire kingdom? What could possibly be next?

Mom leans closer to me and whispers, "Keep smiling, sweetheart."

"I hadn't realized I'd stopped." Then I plaster it back on, doing my best to look genuine despite my nerves and concern.

Tiberias lowers his hand and continues. "I'm aware of the whispers regarding the similarities between Marra and Queen Sirena."

He's going there. He's really going there.

"I have a confession to make about that," he says.

I turn to Mom, wide-eyed. She looks as confused as I feel.

“I’ve always been drawn to the legend of Queen Sirena,” Tiberias says. “Since I was a boy, I’ve gathered what books I could get my hands on. Read and learned everything I could about her. At first, it was the mystery that intrigued me. Why was so little known about her, though she was never forgotten in any of the oceans? The more I learned, the more I wanted to know about how she managed to reign with so much peace. How the entire underwater world could have been a unified utopia under her rule.” He clears his throat again and taps the railing. “While everyone was distracted with my brother’s wedding, I attempted to bring the legendary queen back to life.”

Mom stiffens next to me, but she keeps her expression cheery.

“I wanted to speak with her,” Tiberias continues. “With my father’s health declining, I knew my time to reign was upon me, and I was desperate to know how I could be the best king possible. I never managed to resurrect Queen Sirena, though I must have done something—given the fact that my daughter has so much in common with her. Ever since I learned of Marra’s hair change, I’ve been researching. I don’t know what it means, although I suspect I’ve transferred the ancient powers to my daughter somehow. I have learned one thing of importance, however.”

My stomach knots. Why is he doing this? He couldn’t have given me a heads-up? Is that a king thing? Or a twin thing he shares with his brother?

“I’ve come across a manuscript detailing a series of trials Queen Sirena went through before reaching her full powers.”

I nearly pass out. Grab onto the railing for support. Does he know about the father curse? Is he going to tell everyone about it now? No, that can’t be. He wouldn’t go along with something that crazy.

“My daughter will go through Queen Sirena’s trials. Once she’s come out

victorious—which she will—we may have a piece of the legendary queen in our midst. An underwater utopia could be something we get to experience in our lifetime. Can you imagine?”

My mind spins out of control.

What kind of trials does he think he’s going to put me through?

Chapter 9

As soon as the curtain closes behind us, I glare at my father. Now that he's pulled this ridiculous stunt, it's not difficult to think of him as a dad. "Why did you do that?"

"Tell you about the trials in front of everyone?"

"What else?"

He glances at the servants in the room and waves them out before turning to me. "I thought you'd be excited. You aren't?"

I stare at him, trying to find the words. "You thought I'd be excited?"

"We were discussing the Queen Sirena link before I brought your mother back from land. It sounded like you were on board. Has that changed?"

My heart pounds like a jackhammer. "About going through a set of trials?"

"This is good news."

"How?"

He puts a hand on my shoulder and looks into my eyes. "You can come into Sirena's full powers."

I take a deep breath. "How much do you know about how she got those?"

“Like I said, I’ve gathered every book I could find on the topic—and it wasn’t easy. Some of them were from opposing kingdoms in secret libraries and even in vaults.”

“You read the one in the academy?”

His eyes flicker. “I looked when I was a student there. Not even the fourth-year library has anything. Not that I’d expect there to be anything on her at the academy.”

That means he hasn’t read the ones I have. They have to be new acquisitions. Ones he wasn’t familiar with—that explains why he doesn’t know anything about the father curse.

Unless ...

He raises a brow. “What are you thinking?”

What if he planted those books, hoping I’d find them? Wanting me to kill my dad so he wouldn’t have to? Could it all have been a set-up so he could have his family together without having to worry about his brother?

“Marra?” Concern fills his eyes.

I inch away from him. Is he capable of such a thing? Could he be more like my dad than anyone has ever given him credit for? Or is he truly that out of touch that he hasn’t looked in the secret libraries at the academy or the general public one?

Mom moves between us. “What’s going on?”

I turn to her. “This doesn’t upset you? He just told everyone I’m going through some mysterious ancient trials! They sound dangerous, don’t you think?”

Her expression softens. “Your father wouldn’t put you in harm’s way.”

I study him. “What do they involve?”

“I can’t tell you. You have to go in unprepared.”

“Even better! I can’t believe you wouldn’t ask my opinion on this first.”

He rubs his chin. “I’m honestly surprised you aren’t looking forward to it.”

I look to my mom for help.

She turns to him. “They aren’t dangerous, are they?”

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“For a normal mermaid, yes. Not for her.”

My stomach knots. “What’s the final trial?”

He frowns. “You can’t know any of them.”

I study him, trying to tell if he realizes it’s probably me having to kill him. As annoyed as I am about the trials, that’s still the last thing I want to do.

Now it’s even more urgent that I find a way around the father curse.

Unless the trials are my loophole. Especially if he did plant those other books for me to find, so I’d be open to removing his brother from the entire equation.

My stomach lurches at the thought.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Mom asks.

“I want to go back to the academy.”

Tiberias nods. “I’ll see you in the morning. We can talk then.”

Another thing he didn’t tell me—him being my magic teacher. Maybe it isn’t such a bad thing. If I ask the right questions, I can figure out what’s really going on. Now isn’t the time. Not with my head swimming.

I say a quick goodbye to them before changing back into my uniform and riding back

to the academy. My mind races, trying to make sense of everything. Was Tiberias capable of planting those books for me to find? If so, he isn't the great and wonderful king everyone thinks he is. On the other hand, if he isn't behind it, that means those books he would've wanted to see made it into the libraries without his detection. Is that possible? Maybe so, if he hadn't been looking into it in a long time. He could've lost interest or gotten sidetracked over the years, especially since he hadn't been able to bring her back to life and he didn't realize her powers had transferred to me, or whatever actually happened. Nobody seems to know, least of all me.

As soon as the driver opens my door, I hurry inside. With any luck, I can get to my suite without running into anyone.

"Look! It's the secret love child!"

Laughter. Five students are staring at me.

I should've known better than to hope for luck. Even being the favored king's daughter doesn't help anyone like me any more than they did before. My instinct is to turn the other way, but I resist. Instead, I straighten my back and look each person in the eye. "Do you have something you want to say to me directly?"

None of them responds until a guy with a man-bun says, "Let's go." He leaves in the opposite direction and the others follow.

Before I make it to my room, I have three more similar run-ins. I'm just glad everybody is willing to back off once I show them I won't be pushed around.

When I get to my room, it's empty. Disappointment washes through me. I really wanted to talk to Halen after everything, but it's just as well. I need to study, and I don't want special privileges getting me out of it. That would just add fuel to the fire.

I spend a few minutes organizing, then I sit down with my books. It takes three tries for me to comprehend the first paragraph.

Focus.

I take a deep breath and try again. Make it a few paragraphs this time before my mind starts to wander.

Maybe I should take advantage of special privileges. It's not like anyone will like me less for it. No, I need to do this. I'm at the academy to learn, and more than anyone, I need all the education I can get thanks to my real dad sending me away with my fake dad to live on land.

I sigh and look around, hoping Halen has magically showed up. The suite is so empty without my best friend, which is all the more reason to read. We're going to talk as soon as she gets back.

I manage another paragraph before slamming my book shut. This is pointless. What I need to do is get my tail back to the fourth-year library and re-read what I can about Queen Sirena. Figure out why, if Tiberias knows so much about her, he hasn't heard about the dad curse. I've seen it in two different books!

That's what I'm going to do. And if I can't get myself into the library, I'll get my trident and demand answers from her. Or him? All I know is the weapon doesn't want to be called an it. All that matters is getting answers, and who better than the trident?

And I just referred to my weapon as a who. It's time to get answers so I can return to as close to a normal life as possible. Even though any hopes of true normalcy are out the window at this point. I'd be happy simply not entering some ancient trials. And not having to kill anyone else.

I'm so flustered, I'm halfway to the library before realizing I can't just go in. No, I have to find Rudder and have him cloak me with invisibility first. It's possible I could do it myself with the Ayers power, but I don't have the time to try and figure it out. The scope of my ability at this point is throwing electrical balls at people who infuriate me.

I spin around and head for the band room—the only place I can think Rudder might be. If he's not, then I'm going to demand answers from a spiked piece of metal. Nothing crazy about that.

Luckily for me, the guitarist is in there, strumming some tunes. I clear my throat.

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He glances up. “Oh. Hey, Marra. Bash isn’t here, but I guess you can see that.”

“That’s okay. I’m here to see you.”

Rudder sets his guitar down. “Why’s that?”

“You know that cloaking spell?”

He groans. “I can’t keep doing that.”

“It’s just one more time.” I clasp my hands together. “Please.”

“For what?” He frowns.

“Same thing. I just need to look at a certain book in the library.”

Rudder glances around. “Last time, I could do it because I needed to practice the spell for a class. Now, I’m just breaking the rules.”

My heart sinks. “There’s nothing you can do?”

“What’s so important about this book?”

“It’s a long story, but it can help me figure out this Queen Sirena stuff.”

His eyes widen. “So crazy about your uncle—I mean dad.”

“Tell me about it. That’s why I need answers. And it gets weirder, but I can’t really get into it right now. I have to find out what that book says.”

He taps his finger on the guitar. “So, it’s kind of a matter of life and death?”

“It definitely is.”

Rudder jumps up. “Okay, I’ll do it. But let’s not make this a habit. I don’t want to get kicked out.”

“I’ll make sure you don’t,” I promise. “And I’ll find a way to make this up to you.”

“What? Like royal treasure?”

I shrug. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Let me see if I have the right textbook with me. Otherwise, I’ll have to grab it from my room.”

“Whatever you need to do.” My pulse drums in my ears as he digs through his bag. I wish Bash were here to go into the library with me like last time, but it’s probably for the best with him still being one wrong move from expulsion. I don’t want to do anything to put him at risk, especially since now the crown is paying his tuition—the one good thing my dad did.

“Got it! You’re in luck.” Rudder comes over, sets the book down, then flips through the pages. When he finds what he’s looking for, he turns toward me. “I’ve also learned a sort of timer spell I can add onto others like this one. If you want, I can put a time on it to wear off. If not, you can find me when you’re done again.”

“How long will it last?” The last thing I want is for it to wear off before I leave the

library.

“I’m still pretty new at the timer. I can set it for an hour only. Talk to me in a week, and I can probably offer more variance.”

“You are practicing a spell,” I point out.

He shrugs. “If I do the timer. Will an hour be long enough?”

“If I can get into the library right away. Last time, we had to wait.”

“It’s up to you.” He glances at the spell.

I think about Bash and me going up. It felt like it took forever, but probably because I was so nervous. The whole thing probably lasted about an hour. “Let’s do the timer. That way, you’re still practicing and not just doing magic outside of class.”

“You sure it’s enough time?”

“I’ll make it work.”

Chapter 10

I make my way to the library. It's such a relief not having to deal with anyone since they can't see me. Too bad I can't be invisible all the time.

The door to the private library is closed. My breath hitches. Why did I agree to have Rudder add the timer? I could be waiting an hour before anyone enters or exits.

Conversation sounds down the hallway. I press myself against the wall. Could I be in luck?

Earwyn and her dogfish make their way over.

I'm definitely not in luck. But maybe they're going in.

They come right up to me, whispering to each other. I'm close enough they could hear me breathe. If I move, they might notice, even if they can't see me. I hold my breath and wait.

"Can you believe Tiberias wants to turn her into Queen Sirena?" Earwyn rolls her eyes. "I think that whole family is crazy."

Vanya's eyes widen. "You can't talk about the king that way."

"Why not? I've yet to get in trouble for talking to his daughter how I want."

Cove sighs. "I wish I was his daughter. Did you see that dress she was wearing?"

Seriously the most gorgeous one I've ever seen."

Earwyn scowls. "Don't let her hear you say that. It'll go straight to her head."

I bite my tongue to keep myself from giving her a sharp comeback.

Vanya glances at the library door. "Let's just get inside. I need to get back to the room and start my nightly beauty routine."

"Whatever." Earwyn throws her an expression like she's put out, then she turns to Cove. "Marra's dress might've been nice, but did you see that smug look on her face? She totally thinks she's better than everyone else. I'd love to personally wipe that right off."

If only she had feet, I'd trip her right now. I picture her friends laughing at her, and I snicker.

I realize my mistake and cover my mouth.

Earwyn whips around, glancing all over. "What was that?"

"What?" Cove asks.

"I heard someone laughing."

"Now you're hearing things?" Vanya laughs.

Earwyn glares at her. "Don't make fun of me. I heard it."

"Sure, okay. Whatever." Vanya looks around. "Nobody's here, in case you didn't notice."

Cove giggles.

Earwyn's face reddens. "I'm not imagining anything! Come on." She hurries toward the door.

That was fun even though I didn't get to trip her.

I follow, leaving only a little space between us. Once they go inside, I slip my hand in the space between the door and the wall and watch them through the crack until they're out of my line of vision. I look behind me then inside the library, slowly opening the door. After I slide inside, I hurry over to the section where the book is and check the time. I've already wasted half an hour, but with any luck, I'll find what I'm looking for right away and make my escape with plenty of time to spare.

I scan the shelf but don't see the book immediately. Actually, I don't see it at all. I run my fingertip along the spines and study the titles carefully. Am I misremembering the title? Picturing the wrong color? Where have I gone wrong?

Just to make sure nobody moved it to the wrong spot, I scan more of the shelf. Look higher, lower, to the right and to the left.

It still isn't in sight. It wouldn't have gotten checked out, would it? I try to remember if I heard anything about the books needing to stay in the library. I'm not sure.

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I take a few deep breaths before looking over the titles again. Expand the breadth of my search. Double-check that I'm at the right row. Look up and down adjoining aisles.

Nothing. The book isn't here.

Why in Hades is it gone? My heart pounds like a jackhammer, making it even harder to think. I check the time. I'm down to ten minutes before the spell wears off and I have to be out of here. Heir of the throne or not, I'm not a fourth-year. I can't be seen here.

I race up and down each aisle, scanning the books. Look at the tables to see if anyone brought it out and left it.

Still nothing. It's nowhere.

Am I imagining having found it in the first place? No, that's not possible. Bash was here with me, and he was insistent that I wouldn't have to kill my dad. He saw the book too. It's not something I made up.

I glance at the clock. Three minutes. And that's assuming the spell will last exactly one hour. It could wear off two minutes early or five minutes late. I have no idea, and Rudder didn't tell me either way. And I promised him I wouldn't ask for this favor again.

Frustration builds in my chest, and I want to punch something—or someone. Preferably whoever moved the book.

Earwyn and her dogfish swim by, whispering to each other.

I'd love to take my frustration out on her, but that wouldn't be right. I glance at the books in their arms. Nothing I have any interest in.

Ninety seconds.

Everything spins around me. I race toward the door. My skin starts to glow, flickering like a candle flame. I'm going to be visible before I know it.

I swim faster and nearly crash into a guy from my weapons class. He stares at me, his eyes wide. I don't know what he can see, but I'm not about to wait around and find out. With any luck, he thinks I'm a ghost and that he's losing his mind.

Please be thinking that.

I hurry around him and throw open the door. Rush out into the hallway. Lean against a wall and slide to the ground. Struggle to breathe normally. My skin flickers again, then stops. Everything is back to normal. I'm probably visible again.

Mr. Brant rounds a corner and stares at me.

The spell has definitely timed out.

"Are you here to spar?" he asks.

I leap up. "Yeah, exactly. I forgot to sign up for a time and hoped someone would be here."

He waves toward the weapons room. "You're in luck. Koda just canceled on me. You'll be sparring me today."

“It’s my lucky day.” I force a smile and follow him in.

He rambles on about something, but I can’t pay attention. My heart is still racing from my close call. And my mind won’t shut up, trying to figure out what happened to the book about Queen Sirena. Did someone plant it there for me to find? Or did they take it away to mess with me? That’s more likely. There’s no way anybody would put a book in the fourth-year library, expecting me to find it. That’s actually pretty ridiculous. But then again, so is taking it so I can’t get to it. Unless the mystery person knew I was in there and read it.

But who? Only Rudder and Bash knew about that. Neither one of them would be behind it.

“You ready?” Mr. Brant’s question brings me back to the present.

“Yeah.” I grab the trident, then it warms and brightens at my touch.

“I still can’t get over that,” Mr. Brant says.

I turn to him, surprised. “You can’t?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve been working with weapons for nearly a century.”

That throws me off for a moment. It’s easy to forget merpeople live longer than humans. He looks like he’s in his late thirties or early forties. “It’s odd for me too. Especially when you consider I grew up in a place without magic.”

His expression softens. “I’ve been waiting for so long, hoping one of my students would finally be chosen by the trident. I never imagined it would change your hair and glow like that.”

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“Me neither.” It’s hard to say more than that because I’m taken aback by him talking to me like an equal rather than barking orders and acting like I’m a nuisance.

He holds up his spear. “Ready?”

The trident warms in my grasp, and I raise it. “You know it.”

I wish the trident would talk to me. Some timing to be silent.

It doesn’t respond.

Dang it. I wish this hunk of metal would say something.

Still nothing. This is not my day.

Mr. Brant swings the spear at me, and I block it. He nods. “Nice one.” He whips it around on the other side. I barely block it. Actually, that wasn’t me. The trident swung on its own.

It’s active, just not speaking to me.

I’m not an it, and you know it.

I dart out of Mr. Brant’s way and aim the trident for his arm. He moves and blocks my attack with such force it jolts me. I straighten my back and try again. He blocks me.

“Harder without magic, isn’t it?” He aims the spear at my neck.

I force the trident against his spear and shove it back. “I didn’t ask for any of this—not the magic, the hair, my dad. None of it!”

He spins around and throws his weapon at me. I hold out the trident and stop it just in time. He swims over, grabs it, and chucks it at me, barely giving me time to move.

“Nice reflexes.” He nods in approval before racing over for the spear.

We aim and avoid, throw and dart, moving around like it’s a dance rather than a sparring practice. I breathe heavily—he’s giving me more of a workout than any of the students ever do. And he looks like he’s just getting started.

I throw the trident at him before I realize he’s stopped. He moves to the side slightly. “You’re going to need to work on those reflexes.”

“You’re getting tired.” He studies me. “I’m going to recommend you practice three times daily outside of regular class time.”

My mouth drops open. “For real?”

“Of course. You’re going up against Zayn Landon, or did you forget?”

“No.”

“We can’t afford this loss. And on top of the three practices, I want you to start lifting weights.”

“You do realize I have two other classes?”

Mr. Brant moves some hair away from his face. “Not to mention the mysterious trials your father wants you to go through. All the more reason to be in the best shape possible. Fill out the form for three sessions daily then familiarize yourself with the weight room.” He turns around and puts his spear in the cabinet.

I stare at him dumbfounded. The merman has lost his mind. Three practices a day plus weight training?

He’s right, you know.

“Now you choose to speak.” I mutter quiet enough to make sure my teacher won’t hear.

Sirena would’ve done better in her trials if she’d have prepared better.

“Are you going to give me any pointers or let me flail around until I figure it out on my own?”

We’ll see.

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“Did she really have to kill her dad? Or did I get bad information?”

Oh, she most definitely killed the merman.

I sigh.

Mr. Brant turns around. “What are you waiting for? Put that thing away now.”

The trident flies out of my hands and straight for his head.

I gasp. “That wasn’t me! I swear!”

He moves, barely missing, and glowers at me. “Make that four sessions for tomorrow. And that’s no recommendation.”

“It wasn’t me!”

The anger in his eyes tells me not to press the issue.

“Don’t try that again, or you will regret it. I don’t care whose daughter you are or if you are heir to the throne.”

I just nod then pick up my weapon. “Thanks for that.”

He had it coming.

“Well, I didn’t. I don’t feel like getting in trouble.”

“Put it away now, princess,” Mr. Brant snaps.

I hurry over to the cabinet and place it in its spot. “We’re not done here.”

I know. Just wait until you hear what I have to tell you. It glows then fades.

“Now, Ayers.” Mr. Brant sounds more pissed by the moment.

I close the cabinet and curse my life.

Chapter 11

My alarm wails, and I swear it's louder than normal. Either that or I have a massive headache. My bet is on the latter.

A pillow hits me in the face.

"Turn that thing off!" Halen mutters.

"Sorry." I fumble around until I find it.

"Where were you last night?" she asks.

"Ask Mr. Brant."

"Sparring?"

I sit up and rub my eyes. "The jerk gave me three times the homework I had before."

"Ugh, really? Because of that thing with Earwyn?"

"No. I almost forgot about that. And he's making me start to lift weights too."

"What'd you ever do to him?"

"It wasn't me, it was the trident."

She lifts a brow.

“Never mind.” I fling off the covers and grab a uniform from my closet.

Halen sits on my bed. “How are you doing?”

“Busy.” I pull on the shirt.

“No, I mean how are you really? Finding out that Tiberias is actually your dad, and now he’s marrying your mom. And he’s the reason you’re turning into Queen Sirena and why you have to do the trials. And—”

“I’m not turning into Queen Sirena. I’m me, and I’m staying me. I just happen to have similarities with her.”

“Tiberias was trying to resurrect her at the same time you were conceived.”

“Do you have any idea how weird it is that everyone is talking about my conception?” I shudder, not wanting to think about my parents in that way.

“That’s hardly the strangest thing about all of this.”

“It’s the most awkward.” I plop down at my vanity and fuss with my hair, not that it matters since my first class is weapons. I’m also going to spar five times today—four practice sessions plus my class. And that’s not counting lifting weights. I’m going to have to thank the trident for that.

“Not really. It’s part of life.”

“Let’s talk about something else. Is there another dance coming up?”

Halen's expression lights up. "I heard there's going to be an announcement today! I wonder if they're going to tell us at breakfast. Too bad Frost can't come. I already miss him."

"It's that serious?" I'm so glad to have distracted her.

She sighs dramatically. "I'm already trying to figure out how I'm going to get over there on my own this summer."

"Fun. Maybe we can brainstorm ideas later."

"Perfect!" She leaps up and grabs her uniform.

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Ten minutes later, we're entering the dining hall.

Bash glances up from his seat and melts me with his eyes. I turn to Halen. "Mind if I sit with Bash this time?"

"Not at all. Go get him, tiger fish." She nudges me toward him and swims away.

Before I reach him, he leaps up and wraps his arms around me, squeezing tightly. I take in the warmth of his embrace and his rugged scent. If only I could stay here for all time and not have to deal with anything else. Unfortunately, he pulls away all too soon. But he does hold out a chair for me.

I take the seat and greet the rest of the band. Rudder throws me a curious look, clearly wanting to know how the timing spell worked with the cloaking one. I give him a nod. My mission may have been less than successful, but the spells did what they were supposed to.

Bash sits and offers me a donut. I take it, eager for the sugar fix after everything I've been through, and scarf it down while everyone else discusses an upcoming concert.

"You going to join us?" Bahari asks me.

I swallow my food. "And put half the audience to sleep? Pass."

He frowns. "You and Bash sound so good together. There has to be away around that siren thing."

And the queen thing, and the trials thing, and the sparring thing, and nearly every thing else in my life. I shrug. “If I find anything, you guys’ll be the first to know.”

All too soon, the meal ends. Nobody mentions the dance during announcements.

Bash helps me up. “Everything okay? You seem quiet today.”

“I’ll have to fill you in later—if I can find any time.”

“I can go with you to your first class.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want you being late for yours.”

“Tell me fast.” He takes my hand and pulls me out into the hall. “What’s bothering you?”

“You know that queen book we found?”

“Up near” —he lowers his voice— “the weapons room?”

“Exactly. I went back and the book is gone.”

His brows knit together. “Are you sure about that? It didn’t just get moved?”

“I looked.”

“We should try again.”

I rake my hands through my hair. “You’re going to have to ask a fourth-year, because I promised Rudder no more spells. We’re putting him at risk.”

“You’re right.” He brushes his lips across mine. “We’d better get to our classes if we’re serious about not being late.”

“One more thing.”

He cocks a brow and does that eye thing of his.

My stomach somersaults. “Um, there’s another secret library I want to check out. You want to go with me this afternoon if I can fit it in between all my sparring practices?”

Bash squeezes my hand. “Let’s talk at lunch.”

We part ways, and I barely make it to my weapons class in time. The bell rings just as I go through the door. Mr. Brant throws me the most annoyed glance but says nothing. I sit on the ground, giving plenty of space between me and the other students. He gives some sparring tips then tells us to pair off.

Before I’m picked last, he makes eye contact with me. “We’ll partner up today, Ayers.”

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“Awesome.” I leap up and race over to the cabinet for my trident. Even my weapon won’t talk to me.

Mr. Brant goes hard on me, pinning me to walls more times than I can count. The determination in his eyes tells me this is personal. Other students stop sparring to watch us. Earwyn and her dogfish are full of snide comments.

He doesn’t give me two seconds to recover and hope to attempt to gain the advantage. By the time the class is over, every muscle in my body aches and burns.

“Did you sign up for your four sessions?” Mr. Brant asks. I swear he’s mocking me.

I hold my head high. “Did it last night.”

“Good. Don’t be late.”

“You either.” That was a lame comeback but at least it was something.

I get to my next class a few moments after the bell rings. The teacher—my father—doesn’t seem to notice. He’s talking on the phone. I collapse onto a chair and close my eyes. Hope his call takes the entire hour. I’d love to sleep the whole time.

“Sorry about that,” he says. “Your mother couldn’t make it because a dignitary from the Indian Ocean showed up unexpectedly.”

I struggle to open my eyes. “It’s fine.”

“I’m working to get the trials in order.”

“Seriously?” I groan.

“Why wouldn’t I be serious?”

“Because I already have enough on my plate, without adding this to my long list of things I need to do.”

“Like what?” He sits next to me.

“The sparring competition, for one. I’m facing off with the reigning champ, and the academy is depending on me—a girl who grew up on land! Mr. Brant is making me practice four times daily plus lift weights.”

“That competition is a big deal. Those in line for the throne routinely spar all four years. Drake and I battled each year.”

I notice he’s referring to his brother by his first name to me but I don’t react. “Who won?”

“I was the champion each year, and Drake came in second. It drove him crazy, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“I’m sure it did.”

“You’ll win too.”

I look at him like he’s crazy—because he clearly is. “I’m getting my butt kicked in the practices! I can’t keep up. How am I supposed to beat Zayn Landon?”

He puts his hand on top of mine. “I’ll speak with your teacher and let him know I’ll take over your practice sessions. He need only worry about class time.”

Relief washes through me. “You’d do that?”

“You’re my daughter, Marra. I’d give my life for you. This is nothing.”

My mouth drops open. Where has this father been my entire life?

“I’ll just need you to come to the castle for the sessions. Is that doable with your schedule?”

I nod, unable to find words.

He pulls out his phone and makes a note before turning to me. “One of my top servants is on his way to speak with your teacher right now.”

Mr. Brant will probably be angry with me in class tomorrow, but I don’t care. “Thank you. When should I be there to spar with you?”

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“Whenever suits you. If I’m not immediately available, one of the mermen I practice with will be available. They keep me at the top of my game and are the best of the best. Either way, you’ll receive the top training possible.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Anything for you. I’m just glad I can finally treat you like a daughter. It’s been painful holding back my true emotions.” He clears his throat. “Anyway, we’re here to work on the Ayers power. The first thing I want to tackle is using it for good, something I’m sure is a foreign concept given all you know is from Drake.”

“And my own experience,” I say quickly, surprising myself with the defensiveness I feel for the man who raised me. “Mostly that.”

My father nods.

I jolt with the realization that I just thought of him as my father.

He leans closer. “Is something the matter?”

“No. Sorry.”

“Okay. Our power can be a volatile thing, can’t it? However, it’s extremely powerful when used for good.”

“How does that work?”

He leans forward. “Healing, for example. We can use it to heal ourselves and others. And no fancy ancient language is required.”

“Are you referring to my failed fish teeth lesson?”

“Possibly.” He smiles. “I had issues with regular magic, myself. But once your grandfather taught me how to harness our family power, I had access to more spells than the professors of the School of Magic Arts—as a first-year student.”

I give him a double-take. “Seriously?”

“Of course. The Ayers power is far stronger than any magic system.”

“Why is that?”

He shrugs. “Good question. And also not one I have the answer to, not that we need it. All that really matters is learning to harness it.”

“So, we can do things like cloaking spells?”

“What do you need to be invisible for?” He chuckles.

I can hardly tell him I’m searching for a book I don’t want him to know about. “Just curious. A third-year was talking about a spell like that.” Guilt stings me for being dishonest, but I need answers before I tell him about the books or the dad curse. I change the subject. “How much do you know about Queen Sirena?”

He taps the table. “Haven’t we been over this?”

We both know the answer to that. “Yes, but there’s so much more to discuss.”

“That’s true. And I know you’re curious about the trials.”

I nod, though curious isn’t the word I’d use.

“We’ll discuss this at the castle.” He glances at the time. “We need to focus on the Ayers power for classroom time.”

My heart sinks, but at least I won’t have to deal with four practices plus weight training.

After the last class period of the day, Bash and I can head over to the secret library under the public one and see if they still have the Queen Sirena books.

Chapter 12

I hurry out of my last class, eager to leave campus, and nearly crash into Earwyn and her dogfish. Are they everywhere?

“Sorry,” I mumble.

“Don’t apologize to us.” Earwyn brings her hand to her chest and bows. “All hail Queen Sirena.”

The dogfish both bow. “All hail Queen Sirena!”

Other students stop and giggle. Some bow and repeat the line.

My face heats up. “I’m not Queen Sirena!”

Earwyn twirls a strand of my pink hair. “You sure?”

Snickers sound all around.

I move back, forcing her to let go of my hair. “I’m Marra, plain and simple. Leave me alone!”

Earwyn smiles slowly. “You sure are plain and simple. Utterly boring, in fact.” She fakes a yawn.

Anger surges through me. I clench my jaw and my fists glow.

Vanya tilts her head and moves between Earwyn and me. “Are you going to destroy another wall? Then have Daddy clean up your mess for you?”

“Or try to kill Earwyn again?” Cove laughs.

I glare at them one by one. “I thought you liked King Tiberias. You can’t even be nice to me now that you know I’m his daughter?”

Earwyn smirks. “You’ll always be Drake the snake’s daughter to me. He did raise you. His influence runs through every part of you. King Tiberias? Not so much.”

“What about his edict to treat me well? Making fun of me is making fun of him.”

She narrows her eyes. “Nobody likes you. What’s he going to do? Punish the entire academy? And you know what’s going to happen if he does—we’ll make your life even more miserable. Trust me, you don’t want that.”

I consider my wording carefully before speaking. “Do what you want. I don’t really care. The fact of the matter is, one day I’ll be your queen. And do you know what? I’ll remember everything. All of this. Keep that in mind.”

I spin around and swim away. My heart races so fast, I’m shaking. But at least she and her dogfish can’t see that.

By the time I find Bash in the band room, I’ve calmed down.

He wraps his arms around me. “Are you okay?”

Maybe I haven’t calmed down that much. “Just had a run-in with Earwyn and the dogfish. It’s nothing.”

“At least they’re graduating after this term.”

“I sure hope so.”

He snickers. “You don’t think they will?”

“It’d be my luck that they have to stay for another year. Then she’d be even more miserable than usual.”

“She may be a snot, but she’s always on the honor roll. She’s going to graduate with high marks, and we’ll be able to forget all about her.”

“I just have to get through a few more months.”

“Exactly.” He gives me a quick kiss. “So, are you ready to fill me in on what we talked about earlier, or do you need to spar?”

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“My” —I struggle to say the word out loud— “father got me out of it. But that means I’m going to spar the king for practice. Did you know he was reigning champion of the competition?”

“You just called him your father.”

“I know. I’m trying to get used to the reality, even though my dad will always be my dad.”

“So, King Tiberias is Father and Drake is Dad?”

“That’s where I’m at. They’re both my dads. Just in different ways.”

“At least you have a chance to have a good one.”

We say goodbye to the band and head for the parking lot.

Bash leans against his bike. “Now that we’re alone, fill me in. I’m dying of curiosity.”

I sigh dramatically and tell him all about my failed mission in the fourth-year library. He laughs at the part about Earwyn hearing me but her friends thinking she was crazy. “Now I want to see if I can find those other books. If the public library doesn’t have the ones I found before, I’ll know something is up.”

“But why would someone go to all that trouble?”

“Do you know how many people wanted my dad dead? People were screaming for his blood.”

He crosses his arms. “Fair enough, but it still seems like a long-shot. How would somebody even know you’d find those books? You wouldn’t be allowed in the academy library for another three years, and you didn’t know about the underground public library.”

I hold his gaze. “Unless it was someone close enough to me to know I’d get in. Maybe someone even planted ideas in my mind without me realizing it.”

“That would definitely be interesting. But who would do that?”

“Isn’t that the big question? Maybe my father?”

His eyes widen. “You think the king would be behind this?”

“Why not? My dad tried to kill him and then took over his place as king.”

“Tiberias isn’t murderous.”

“No?” I ask. “He’s the one who declared the battle to the death.”

“But that’s different.”

“Having the idea planted in my mind was to his benefit.”

Bash doesn’t look convinced. “But he’d have to get the book into both libraries unseen—while everyone thought he was dead. That’s not very likely. Who else would be behind it?”

“Unfortunately, he’s the only one I can think of specifically. We know it wasn’t my dad or Middlebrooks.”

“That’s true.” He grabs the helmets. “Let’s get going.”

I lean against Bash and let my mind wander until we get to the library. As much as I don’t like the idea of my father being behind this, it’s the only thing that makes sense. Who else would it have been? My mom was on land, and I can’t think of a single person who could’ve been behind something so elaborate.

Bash parks the bike, and we head inside. “You think they’ll let me in?”

“I think it’s open to all members of the royal class, but if not, I’ll use the princess card to get you in.”

“Maybe we shoulda brought Rudder.”

I shake my head. “I already told you, we’re done using him. I’d hate for him to get in trouble. I’ll figure out how to use the Ayers power for such things.”

He stops in place. “You can do that?”

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“Not yet, but it’s something I’m going to learn. And thankfully, I have my father teaching me now. He either knows things my dad didn’t, or he’s willing to teach me what Dad didn’t want to.”

“So, your power is as effective as the Magic Arts students learn?”

“More.”

His eyes widen.

I grab his hand. “Come on.”

The same librarian who let me in before is behind the counter. “Back for more?”

“Yes, and this time I brought a friend.”

“Friend?” Bash mumbles.

The corners of my mouth twitch.

“Name?” The librarian scowls at Bash and stares at a tattoo sticking out from his sleeve.

He stares her down. “Sebastian Marlowe.”

She hesitates. “Related to Shane and Coral Marlowe?”

“My aunt and uncle. They raised me.”

“We’ll see about that.” The librarian types quickly on the keyboard, then her frown deepens even more. “Apparently, you’re telling the truth.” She sighs like I’ve asked her to perform the worst task ever. “Follow me.”

Bash lifts a brow, and I just shrug. At least she’s not denying him entrance.

I barely offer her a thanks after she opens the door. We enter the dim area and descend the stairs.

He turns to me. “This place is creepier than the other one.”

“Tell me about it.” Although I don’t mention the even more chilling one in the castle—the one I could never find on my own. I freeze in place.

Bash bumps into me. “Why’d you stop?”

I don’t answer him, too lost in thought. Why hadn’t I put two and two together? The book in the other library had said Queen Sirena had been raised by someone other than her parents, away from them.

Tiberias wanted me to be raised by his brother. It wasn’t that he just allowed it, or because the Valora laws wouldn’t allow me to stay.

This makes it all the more likely he was behind me finding the dad curse books.

“Marra?”

I grab Bash’s hand and drag him to the area where I found the other books before.

And they're gone.

"Would you talk to me?" Bash demands. "What's going on?"

I gesture toward the bookcase. "The books aren't here."

"Let's look harder. Maybe they moved."

"And maybe the ones in the other library did too. Right."

"Humor me." He leans closer and scans the spines.

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“Fine.” I look them over too, but don’t find anything.

We go up and down the aisle and several adjoining ones, as well. Nothing. Like that’s a big shock. Bash insists we keep searching, so we spend more time than seems necessary looking. And finding nothing.

Exhausted, I turn to him. “They aren’t here. Can we give up now?”

“That’s really what you want?”

I nod. “I have my answer.”

“Which is?”

“They aren’t here.”

He tilts his head. “Who do you think is behind it?”

There are too many people around for me to say that out loud. I inch closer and whisper, “You know.”

“You really think so?”

“Who else? It all points to him.”

He frowns. “It just seems unlikely.”

“Why? Why wouldn’t he want exactly this? It solved all of his problems.”

“But he could’ve done it himself. And it isn’t like he added that info in himself. Those were clearly ancient books—at least the one I saw.”

I nod. “The others are like that one, but with some different information.”

“Maybe he didn’t have a clue about any of this. The books could be checked out.”

“All of them? From both libraries? Really?”

Bash shrugs. “It’s possible.”

“So, you’re saying it has to be someone from the academy?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Or you-know-who wanted to make sure I got the information because he really wants me to come into my full powers. I don’t see how he can’t be behind it.”

Bash pulls me close and kisses my cheek. “You’re too used to having an untrustworthy dad. Relax and enjoy the fact that your real dad is a kind-hearted guy everyone in Valora loves.”

I can’t deny he has a point. Even though my dad’s true nature didn’t come out until he became king, he was still never father of the year material with his long work hours and never being home with Mom and me. And now that I think about it, his “business trips” on land were most likely visits to Valora, working out his plan to kill his brother. Could he have already been seeing Middlebrooks? What if he knew or suspected his brother was my biological father and his wife still loved him? That would’ve given him more reason to seek revenge.

“You know I’m right.” Bash kisses me again. “Why don’t we head back to the academy? You have your answer—the books are gone here too.”

“I’m going to have to ask him about this.”

“You want to tell him about the father curse?”

“It looks like he already knows.”

“Are you sure, though?” Bash plays with a lock of my hair. “If he knew all along that you’re his daughter, he’d have to know killing Drake would do no good.”

“Unless he hoped it would work. My dad was my dad, even if not genetically. Even if he was a horrible person.”

“Maybe he’s right about the trials. That could be what you need to do rather than following the curse.”

“Either way, I hate it! I didn’t ask for any of this.” Anger pulsates through me. My hands glow green.

Bash takes one of my hands and kisses it. “You don’t have to deal with any of this right now. Let’s get back to the academy and study. Try to start off the term on the right fin.”

I hate it when he’s right. “Okay. Let’s go.”

But I’m far from done looking into this.

Chapter 13

“Are you listening to me, Marra?”

I glance up at my father. “Sorry, what did you say?”

He sits in the seat next to me and rests a hand on mine. “What’s on your mind?”

Like I want to tell him.

“Is it the trials?”

“Kind of.”

He frowns. “I was too eager and didn’t tell you at a good time.”

“It’s not that.” I shake my head. “I just ... it’s a lot to take in.”

“I understand.” He squeezes my hand. “But you’re going to come out victorious! Not only that, but you’ll come into your full powers.”

“Why is that so important?”

He lifts a brow. “Aside from the fact that they could kill you if you don’t?”

“We don’t know that for sure.”

“It’s in two books. Just being in one would be enough to convince me. Two of them more than confirms it.”

“I haven’t read about it in any books I’ve seen.”

“How much reading have you done?”

And here it comes—the moment of truth. Do I tell him that I know? What if he actually doesn’t know?

He rubs his chin, and his eyes are full of concern. “You don’t want to tell me?”

My stomach knots. What if he doesn’t have a clue? I can’t tell him that his beloved legend requires me to kill him. I take the coward’s way out. “Not much. It’s hard to find books on her.”

“That it is. Where did you manage to find them?”

My heart nearly explodes out of my chest. My hands shake, and I quickly hide them. “There were some at the secret library in town.”

He looks deep in thought. “Must be new additions. I haven’t looked there in some time.”

I just nod, unable to trust my voice. If my heart thunders any louder, he’s going to hear it and know how nervous I am—if he can’t see it in my eyes already.

“I never meant to make you nervous about the trials.” He gets up and rubs my shoulders. “I wasn’t thinking about your feelings, and for that I apologize. Why don’t you come to the castle this evening for dinner, and we can go over the books? I’ll show you what I’ve read about the event. It’ll ease your worries.”

“I’d like that, but I should eat here. The other students won’t be happy if I miss. They’ll think I’m getting special treatment.”

“You are heir to the throne. Not only that, but you have Queen Sirena’s powers.” He stops rubbing my shoulders and sits again.

“That’s the problem. People either resent me for being the princess or think it’s a joke that the ancient legend is coming to life again.”

He frowns. “I’m beginning to think my edict is being ignored.”

“Please, no more edicts. I don’t want anyone being nice to me because you made it a law.”

“I understand. And I’m still working through the mess of undoing my brother’s ridiculous edicts.” He shakes his head. “Would you believe the beard tax is one of the hardest to get rid of?”

“Why?”

“He tangled it in with some other laws ...” His voice trails off. “Never mind. We need to work on the Ayers power. Come midterm, we need to prove significant progress or you’ll have to return to magic class.”

“What?” I give him a double-take. “That’s not happening.”

“Let’s work on a simple healing.” He whips out a knife and slices his palm.

I gasp. “What are you doing?”

“Heal me.” He holds the bloody wound toward me.

My pulse drums in my ears. “I don’t know how.”

“Heal me,” he repeats.

He has got to be kidding. That thing is really bleeding, and he’s waiting on me?

“You wouldn’t let your father bleed out, would you?” He grins like this is some kind of joke.

“I grew up on land!”

“Time to stop using that excuse, love.”

My heart feels like it's going to explode. It's hard to think. But I have to. There's no other choice but to figure this out. "There's no textbook I can study?"

He shakes his head. "So few of us have it, it would be pointless."

That's just perfect.

I study his wound, which is now gushing out more blood than before. The water between us is becoming pink. Soon that's what I'll be breathing, but that's the least of my worries. If he loses enough blood ...

I squeeze my fists, trying to draw the power there. When I'm mad, that's the first place it goes.

Nothing happens now.

I look up at him. His face is paling. "Heal yourself! I can't do this!"

He shakes his head. "I have faith in you."

"You shouldn't!"

My father holds his palm closer to me. The water is turning a darker pink. His skin is continuing to lose color.

A lump forms in my throat. I struggle to breathe. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"High emotions activate the power." His voice wobbles a little. "This is what you need."

"What about what you need? Like not dying!"

“You can do this.” He leans on the desk.

I shake my head no. “Please, stop.”

“Do this.” His tone tells me he won’t intervene.

My heart pounds so loudly I can’t hear anything else. The bloody water is starting to blur my vision. I take a deep breath and focus on the wound. Try to take control of my fear. To get my arms to stop shaking.

I reach for him with both hands. Though trembling, they glow a faint green.

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They're glowing! The power is starting to work.

Nothing happens. The wound doesn't heal, doesn't stop bleeding.

Think!

Out of instinct, I take his hand in between both of mine and cover the cut. Press my palm on his. The green becomes a little brighter.

He closes his eyes. Is he going to pass out?

My heart thunders harder. "Dad!"

His eyes fly open. "You called me Dad." Some color returns to his face.

I let go of his hand and glance down. The wound is gone. Looks like he was never cut.

He pulls me into his arms. "You did it! I knew you could do it."

My body goes limp. I can't believe I just healed him. And I can't believe he let it go that long. I gather enough strength to pull away and glare at him. "Don't do that again."

"You needed that. Don't you see?"

I draw in a deep breath. "What I need is a textbook."

He chuckles and glances at the time. “Try that again?”

“No!”

“Tomorrow, then.”

I glare at him.

He ruffles my hair. “Now you know you can use the Ayers power for healing.”

“Now we know. We can move on to the next lesson.”

“Let’s call it a day.” He kisses the top of my head. “Would you prefer to come to the castle before or after dinner?”

“You’re letting me pick?”

“Why not?” He leans back in the chair and adjusts his crown.

Because his brother never would’ve let me choose. But I don’t say that. I just shrug.

“How about after?” All I want is a nap after what he just put me through.

“Perfect. And I know your mother will be thrilled to see you too.”

We make small talk until the bell rings, then part ways. After my last class, I bolt to the suite and fall asleep as soon as I make contact with the pillow.

“You coming to dinner?” Halen’s voice wakes me from a deep sleep.

I roll over and rub my eyes. “It’s time already?”

“Yep.” She plops onto the bed. “Better brush out those tangles.”

“Do I have to?” I pull the pillow over my face. Sleep sounds so much better than dinner.

She yanks it from my grasp. “You don’t want Bash seeing you like this, do you?”

I push through my sleepiness and get up. The mirror reveals my hair sticking out in every direction. “Did Queen Sirena have bad hair days?”

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“Every merwoman does.” Halen hands me my brush. “Hurry up.”

Yawning, I try to brush through the snarls, but I give up and pull it into a messy bun. Probably not castle-worthy, but I can fix it on the ride over.

Dinner goes by quickly. When I head out, Bash grabs me, pulls me onto his lap, and gives me a quick kiss. “I’ve missed you. Where were you earlier?”

“Oh no! We were supposed to meet in the garden. I’m so sorry. My dad was working with me on the Ayers power and it sapped all my energy. I ended up taking a long nap.”

“Your dad? He’s not Father any longer?”

I shrug. “Guess I’m getting used to it.”

“I’m sure you are. It’s a transition I wouldn’t mind adjusting to.” He laces his fingers through mine. “So, you want to make up for our missed date now?”

“I wish I could. I’m supposed to meet my parents at the castle after dinner.”

He kisses my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. He whispers in my ear, “I could go with you.”

“I don’t know.”

“They need to get used to us being together because I’m not going anywhere.” He

kisses my ear.

“You make it hard to say no.”

“That’s my plan.”

“Break it up,” Middlebrooks says.

I groan but get up. “We were just leaving, anyway.” I pull Bash up and hurry out of the dining hall before the dean can say anything else.

When we get to the car waiting for us in the parking lot, the driver holds the door open and eyes Bash.

I straighten my back. “He’s coming with me.”

“That wasn’t in my instructions.”

“I’m adding it. By orders of the princess.”

He frowns but doesn’t argue. I guess he figures I can take it up with my parents if they’re unhappy.

Bash helps me into the back before entering. The driver closes the door and a few moments later the car engine roars to life. Bash closes the curtain between us and the driver then wraps his arms around me and nibbles on my ear. “Let’s pick up where we left off.”

Goose bumps run down my neck and back. “I’d love nothing more, but I can’t show up to the castle looking like this.”

He pulls back and looks me over with hungry eyes. “I see nothing wrong with how you look.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “My hair’s a wreck.”

“I can fix that.” He pulls the hair tie out, releasing my knotted locks. He combs his fingers through the length of it, working out some of the tangles.

“I think I saw a brush somewhere.” I open a few drawers until I find it and hold it up for him.

He takes it from me and runs it through the length of my hair, stopping only to work through the knots. I close my eyes and enjoy the pampering as the bristles press against my scalp, then down my back and up again. It nearly lulls me to sleep except the gesture is so romantic, my stomach won’t stop tingling.

“All done.”

I force my eyes open. “Already?”

Bash gives me a quick kiss and holds my gaze. His intense blue eyes take my breath away. “Can’t improve upon perfection.”

My pulse manages to speed up even more. I run my fingers through his hair and pull him closer, pressing my lips on his and deepening the kiss immediately. He tastes of underwater berries and vanilla. His hands rest on my waist, and he breathes deeply. I squeeze his hair between my fingers, climb onto his lap. Undo his top button then the next one.

The car jerks to a stop and I bounce off Bash’s lap.

“Sorry,” the driver says. He doesn’t sound sorry. Does he have cameras on us? Or did he peek around the curtain? “We’ve arrived at the castle.”

Bash picks up the brush and gives me a crooked smile. “Better fix your hair again.”

My entire body goes weak. Maybe bringing him wasn’t the best idea. How am I ever going to pay attention to my parents with him here?

Chapter 14

My heart is still thundering as the servant leads us to my parents' living quarters.

He bows to me before knocking on the door and announcing our arrival.

"Come in," my mom calls from the other side of the door.

The servant twists the knob and ushers us inside.

Mom's eyes widen as she notices Bash.

"I brought Bash," I say, as though she can't see that. "Hope that's okay."

She smiles and gives both of us a hug. "Of course. I was just going over some wedding ideas. What do you think of this dress?" She holds up her shell phone and shows us a picture of an elegant white gown with a train that could easily fill this room.

"Wow." I take it in. "That's gorgeous. You'll look beautiful in it."

The door opens, and my dad enters.

Mom quickly turns off the screen and hides the phone behind her back. "Marra's here, and she brought Bash." Apparently, we both like pointing out the obvious today.

Dad nods. “Good to see you, Sebastian.”

“You can call me Bash, your majesty.”

“I prefer your given name, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, your highness.”

Dad glances at Mom. “Would you like to go over Marra’s dress options? I’d like to have a man-to-man talk with Sebastian. I just had an interesting discussion with one of the drivers.”

Bash’s face pales.

My stomach lurches. “He can help me pick one out, Dad. We don’t need to take up more of your time.”

He puts a hand on Bash’s back but looks at me. “I don’t mind, daughter.”

If my boyfriend’s face gets any whiter, he’s going to pass out on the spot.

Dad turns to Bash. “Button your shirt up all the way and follow me.”

My face burns. I make eye contact with Bash and mouth, “I’m so sorry!”

He just nods, then turns to follow my dad and buttons the two I undid.

Guilt presses on every side, making it hard to breathe. Kissing him in the royal limos has got to stop. “Dad!”

He spins around and arches a brow just before exiting. “Yes?”

My mind races for something brilliant to say. Nothing comes. I try to think of something to keep my boyfriend from getting in trouble with the king. What have I done?

“Marra?” he asks.

“Bash saved my life,” I blurt out.

Dad tilts his head, his eyes full of confusion.

“Yeah. When those mean girls tried to kill me, Bash is the one who found me and made sure I was okay. He insisted I go to the infirmary.”

“I’ll speak to the school about that.”

“Well, I didn’t actually go there. I thought I was fine. You know me, stubborn as a mule.” I laugh nervously. “But he made sure I was okay before leaving me. And that’s not all. When people were rioting against my dad—I mean, your brother—he pulled me away when I wanted to fight them. He brought me to his room and—”

“He took you to his room?”

“Wait! It’s not like that. To study. That’s all. We—”

“I’ve heard more than enough.” He spins around.

“Dad!” I lunge for him, but Mom stops me.

“Let them talk.”

“Can you imagine how that’s going to go? A normal dad-boyfriend talk is bad enough, but he’s the king!”

Mom plays with my hair. “He’s a kind merman, sweetheart. And if anyone knows what it’s like to have love ripped away, it’s him. Your dad is the last person to try and push you two apart.”

She does have a point. “Are you sure?”

Mom gives me a knowing look and nods. “I’m not saying he won’t warn Bash not to

break your heart, but he won't be irrational."

"I hope you're right."

"I am." She leads me over to her phone. "I found some dress ideas you might like. We can also look for some more."

"It doesn't really matter if I like the dress. It's your wedding."

She smiles at me. "I want you to feel beautiful in it."

"But everyone will be looking at you. You'll look amazing."

"Thanks, hon. I appreciate it, but it isn't just about me. We're all going to be a family at long last. It's about all three of us."

I sigh. "Remind me why you couldn't just marry him in the first place."

"Your grandfather wouldn't allow it. As king, he had the final say. For whatever reason, he picked me to marry Drake." Sadness washes over her face.

"And you two didn't even try to change his mind?"

"We did. Your father pleaded with him, but he wouldn't have any of it."

"And Dad never married? Not even after he banished us?"

She shakes her head. "He always held out hope that we would someday end up together."

"Why did you marry his brother?"

“I was in no position to defy the king. He elevated my parents’ position in the royal class, and my entire family benefitted.”

A horrible thought strikes me. “I’m not going to be forced to marry someone I don’t want to, am I?”

“No. I promise.”

“How can you say that? The king has the final say! And he’s in there talking with Bash.” My pulse races. “I need to get in there!”

Mom puts her hand on my shoulder. “Your dad won’t stop anyone from getting married. Not after what we’ve been through. But you don’t need to worry about that right now. You still have three more years of academy. Just enjoy them, and don’t concern yourself with the future. Speaking of school, how are things going?”

I shrug, then take the phone from her and scroll through images of dresses.

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“Everyone resents me.”

“For what?”

“The Queen Sirena thing. And the ones who don’t resent me think it’s a huge joke.”

Her brows draw together. “The students have been warned to treat you well.”

“That’s not the kind of thing you can force. Besides, there’s still lingering feelings from everything Drake did. People still see me as his kid. It’s hard to break past first impressions, you know?”

She frowns and looks deep in thought. “There has to be something we can do.”

“No more edicts. If I never hear that word again, it’ll be too soon.”

“I wish you’d consider it, but I understand. I’m sure most of Valora would be happy never to have another new law placed on them after the uproar Drake caused. Do you think winning the sparring competition would help? I know how excited everyone gets about that, and from what I hear, it’s been years since the Dark Sea Academy had a champion.”

“Maybe. I suppose I have a better chance with Dad training me now.”

She gets a dreamy-eyed look and sighs. “You definitely do. He says nobody has

beaten his score to this day.”

I glance over at the door where he left with Bash. “What do you think they’re doing?”

“Talking.”

My stomach knots at the thought of the conversation. I probably made it a hundred times worse for poor Bash.

“How are you feeling about the Queen Sirena connection?” Mom’s voice brings me back to the room.

“Honestly, I’m trying to make sense of it all. I don’t really get why me.”

“I wish I had answers. People have always been curious about the legend, but your dad has taken it to the extreme.”

“You think?”

She covers a smile, then sits on a couch and pats it for me to sit next to her. “I think it has always been a source of escape for him.”

I plop next to her. “From what? He’s king—he can have anything he wants.”

“Anything?”

“Well, almost anything.”

“His brother tormented him from the moment they were born, his father made every decision for him until his death, and he had to watch his twin marry the woman he loved. Your dad is only now seeing his dreams come to fruition.”

I nod, understanding. “Life isn’t perfect for royalty, either.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t we know it?”

“It’s definitely not like the cartoon princesses I grew up watching.”

“Not even close.” We sit in silence for a few moments before she speaks again. “Do you have any questions about the Queen Sirena link?”

I laugh. “Only about a million.”

She studies me. “Like what?”

“Where do I begin? Hardly anything is known about her. There aren’t any books in the public domain—only in the secret libraries.”

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A flicker of something crosses her expression, but then it disappears as quickly as it showed.

“What?” I lean closer to her.

“In which libraries have you found books?”

“The secret ones.”

She plays with my hair. “That doesn’t tell me much. Do you have any idea how many secret libraries Valora holds?”

“At least three.”

“Try more than twenty.”

My mouth falls open. “What? Where?”

“If I tell you, they wouldn’t be a secret, now would they?”

I scowl at her.

“Which three did you find, sweetheart?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a secret.”

She bursts out laughing. “Fair enough. I—”

“Wait just a minute!” My mind races. “It was you!”

“Come again?”

“You put the books there!”

“What books? Where?”

“Don’t play dumb. It all makes sense. Who would’ve wanted Drake dead more than you?”

Mom takes a deep breath. “I wish I knew what you were talking about.”

“It really wasn’t you?”

“If you tell me what you’re talking about, I’m sure I can explain my innocence.”

I study her, and she does look genuinely confused. “While you were banished, I found some books on Queen Sirena in secret libraries but now they’re gone. I can’t figure out why, other than the fact that someone put them there so I could find them.”

“It wasn’t me. I haven’t been to any of the secret libraries since our return to Valora.”

“You don’t know anything about her father?”

“Queen Sirena’s?”

I nod.

“Not off the top of my head. Why?”

If she doesn't know, I don't want to tell her. She just got the love of her life back, and I'm not going to tell her that if I follow the path of the long-gone queen I'm going to have to kill him.

I'm not going to kill him. It's not happening.

“What about Sirena's father?” Mom asks.

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“Nothing. Let’s just look at dresses.”

“Marra.” Mom’s tone holds a warning.

One I ignore. “Look at this gown.” I hold the phone out to her.

She doesn’t pull her gaze from me. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Laughter sounds, then my dad and Bash enter the room. I give them a double-take, trying to figure out why they’re so happy. I should be glad, but I’m just confused. Bash is in one piece and isn’t pale anymore.

Relief washes through me. I leap up and throw my arms around him, but look at my dad. “Did you guys have a nice talk?”

Dad whacks Bash on the back. “Better than nice. I hope you’ll bring him with you often when you come to the castle.”

I turn to my boyfriend and lift a brow. “What did you talk about?”

He kisses my forehead. “Mostly you.”

Curiosity gets the best of me. “What about? Why were you laughing?”

“He was telling me some stories about your childhood. Sounds like you were a character.”

“Do I even want to know?” I can barely remember my childhood, it was so long ago and so removed from most of the rest of my life.

The corners of Bash’s mouth twitch. “He told me about the time you streaked down a busy hallway when a bunch of dignitaries from another kingdom were visiting.”

My face flames and the heat extends out to the rest of my body. “I don’t remember that. It probably never happened.”

Mom laughs. “I nearly forgot about that!”

I spin around and glower at her. “Not you too.”

“Oh, it was cute,” she says. “You were only two.”

My dad puts a hand on my shoulder. “And you actually helped diffuse a tense situation. We’d just left a meeting that hadn’t ended well. And after that, we had a good laugh and were able to resolve our differences.”

“Can we talk about something else?” I look back and forth between my dad and my boyfriend. “And remind me to keep you two separated in the future.”

They both laugh and exchange a look like they’re sharing a private joke, probably at my expense.

I decide to change the subject. “Shouldn’t we work on my sparring skills?”

Chapter 15

I swing the loaned trident at my dad, and he easily blocks it before pinning me to the wall.

“Match!” calls the servant.

Dad pulls away the trident. “You have a lot of potential, but I can see why the teacher wants you to have more practice sessions.”

I hand the borrowed weapon to the servant. “It’s not the same with that one.”

“I’m sure it’s not.” He wipes a brow. “Next time, bring yours.”

“It can’t leave the academy.”

He arches a brow. “It can if I say it can.”

“Not going to argue with that.”

“Or we can practice there. Either way. I’m already there to work with you on the Ayers power.” He turns to my mom. “Did Marra tell you she healed my hand with the power?”

“No.” She beams at me. “Great work, sweetheart!”

“I had little choice. He was about to bleed out.”

Her eyes widen. “What?”

My dad hands his trident to the servant then kisses Mom. “I wouldn’t let myself bleed out.”

“Good.” She kisses him passionately.

I turn away and meet Bash’s gaze. He’s obviously thinking the same thing I am—awkward. I clear my throat. “I think we’ll head back to the academy. We have to study.”

Thankfully, they pull away. Dad frowns. “I thought we could all have some dessert since you weren’t able to eat dinner with us.”

“Really, we need to hit the books.” Bash puts his arm around me. “We’d love to do dessert another time, though.”

My dad nods and holds Bash’s gaze for a moment. “Think about what I told you.”

I glance back and forth between them, trying to figure out what they’re talking about.

Bash nods. “I will. Thanks again.”

“What?” I ask.

Dad fixes his robe. “I’ll let Sebastian explain it to you.”

Bash groans. I’m not sure if he’s groaning at his full name or having to tell me whatever they discussed.

“Before you go—” Dad looks at me. “Let me get you the textbook I used when

studying the trident.”

“Great, more homework.”

He straightens his back. “It isn’t like that. Not only does the academy need you to win the tournament, but more importantly, you need to master the trident for the trials.”

My stomach twists at the thought. “Really, we don’t need to do the trials.”

“It’s your destiny.”

I shake my head no. “It’s her past, not my future.”

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“You have her powers, her hair. She ruled all four oceans, and so will you.”

“I don’t have to.”

“But you can. Nobody has ever done that before or since her.” His eyes light up with excitement.

“What if I don’t want to?”

Dad’s brows knit together. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“There isn’t anything good about her story! The trials, the—never mind.” I almost said the dad curse.

“The what?” He inches closer. “What?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“You can easily defeat the trials,” he says. “What else has you concerned? I can’t help you if I don’t know what you’re not telling me.”

I turn to Bash for help. He just throws me a questioning glance. So not helpful.

“Daughter, what aren’t you telling me?”

I keep my gaze averted. “Nothing.”

“All I’m trying to do is help you.”

“No.” I turn to him. “You want to turn me into her! That’s what you want.”

“That isn’t it. Not at all. I never expected you to take on her powers.”

“Of course not. You were trying to bring her back to life.”

He nods. “I was, and it was foolish to think I could. I had no idea your mom was carrying you—but it was all meant to be. You’re going to do even better things than she ever did.”

I roll my eyes.

“You don’t believe me?”

“What if I don’t want this?”

He flinches as if I punched him in the gut. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because I want to make my own destiny—not live out someone else’s!”

“You can do that too.”

I shake my head. “I can’t have both.”

“And why not?” He crosses his arms.

“Because I’d have to kill you!” I blurt out. As soon as I realize what I’ve said, I race out of the room. Someone calls after me. I think it’s Bash, but it could be my dad, and I don’t stop. Instead, I dart up and down different hallways, hoping to lose them.

I can't believe I told him that. That was the last thing I wanted, but he'd pushed me. Demanded to know, so I told him.

Maybe he'll get off my case now. Drop all this Queen Sirena business and let me live my life the way I want to. There's no way he'll go along with the dad curse. He can't be that obsessed with it. Enough to lose his life? Nobody's that crazy.

I stop at a random room with several couches and a huge window overlooking the forest. Once inside, I close the door, sit on a sofa, then stare at the woods. All the colors should calm me, but I can hardly breathe. How will my dad react now that I've told him about the curse?

Not that it matters because I'm done with it. I killed the dad who raised me, for all the good that did. The curse probably calls for me to kill my birth dad because with him in power, I can't be the queen even if I wanted to be—which I don't.

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I hate this. All of it. Life would be so much easier if I was still living on the surface. But it wouldn't be the same. Now that I'm in Valora, I can't imagine my life without Bash, Halen, or my real dad. I never in a million years would've guessed him to be my dad, although now that I know, it's obvious.

How did I not see it? My supposed uncle was more doting than my dad. And come to think of it, I can't remember a time that Drake ever referred to me as his daughter. He often said "your daughter" when speaking to my mom. And it wasn't like it was just because he was a jerk. Before my sister died, he adored Aria. I never put much thought into it though, because Mom always gave me so much attention. I just chalked it up to each of them having a favorite. But now it all makes sense. Either Mom preferred me because I was Tiberias's child, or she was making up for the fact that Drake could barely stand me. He played the part of the loving dad only when he needed to.

Crash!

The door flings open and bangs into the wall.

"There you are!" Dad stares at me with wild eyes. Not in anger, but confusion or frustration. "Why did you take off like that?"

"Maybe because I told you I have to kill you!" Tears blur my vision, and I rub them. "I'm not doing that, by the way."

He frowns, sits next to me, and puts his arm around me. "What makes you think you'd have to do that?"

“It’s in three different books!”

“What books?” He scratches his chin. “I’ve never read that in all of my study of the subject.”

“In the academy’s fourth-year library and in the public library—the secret part of it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I read it with my own eyes!” I exclaim. “Three different books!”

“Yet I’ve never seen it once.”

I scoot back from him. “You don’t believe me?”

“I wouldn’t be a very good king if I believed everything I heard, now would I?”

“I’m your daughter. You should take me seriously.”

He hesitates. “I do. Is what you read why you killed my brother?”

“I did that because it needed to be done.”

“Did you know what was in those books when you did it?”

I don’t answer the question. “He had to be stopped!”

“But I was more than prepared to do that myself. I’m the one who called for the battle to the death.”

“He tortured Halen and Bash!”

He holds my gaze for a moment. “Did you know about the books when you did it?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to see those books. Verify their authenticity.”

“How would you do that?”

“It’s complicated, but I can show you if you’d like.”

I nod. “But they’re gone now.”

“The books? Gone? As in stolen or checked out?”

“I didn’t ask.”

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He drills me about the books and the other information in them, and I answer as best I can. I hadn't been paying much attention to the other details. Mostly just the one fact. Finally, he asks me one last question. "Did these books have a symbol with a circle with an 'M' and a merpeople tail?"

"I don't know. What would that mean?"

"That it was verified by our historical society as being accurate. But that isn't the only way to prove a book's truth."

"What now?" I ask. "And like I said, I'm not killing you."

He pats where my knees would be. "And I appreciate that. Let's find your mom and Sebastian. They're both concerned about you."

I frown. "I didn't mean to worry anyone. I also didn't mean to blurt that out."

He helps me up. "I'm glad you did. Now it's off your chest, and we can figure out what it means."

"Sounds pretty clear to me," I mumble.

"If it's accurate. It almost sounds to me like it was planted."

"But nobody could've known I'd go to those libraries! For one, I'm a first-year. I'm not even allowed in the academy's library. And nobody could've predicted I'd go to the other one. I went on a whim."

He scratches his chin. “How did you get into the academy’s library?”

I sigh. “Promise not to tell any of the faculty?”

“I can promise you won’t get into trouble.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

“You have my word none of your friends will get in trouble, either.”

I hesitate before speaking. “A student from the magic school gave us a cloaking spell—he was practicing for a class.”

My dad tilts his head. “Us?”

I close my eyes, realizing I just implicated Bash. “Me. He gave me a cloaking spell.”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “I just got done telling you none of your friends would get into trouble.”

“I’ve already gotten him into enough trouble today.”

He nods. “Our friend Sebastian, I assume.”

“He’d prefer to be called Bash.”

“And I prefer to use people’s given names.” Dad puts his arm around me and heads for the door. “It’s going to take a while for you to get used to having a father you can trust, isn’t it?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“It’s understandable. Just so you know, if I could go back in time and change anything, I’d marry your mom and never allow my brother anywhere near the two of you. I was young and frightened to stand up to my own father. Living with the repercussions of that decision has taught me many things. I didn’t do right by either one of you, and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

“I do,” I say quickly. “I remember Grandfather, and I can’t imagine ever daring to stand up to him.”

He kisses the top of my head. “I think you would have.”

Chapter 16

It's finally the end of the week, and I'm jamming with the band. I told Halen and our friends in case they wanted to come. Halen didn't like them when I first arrived at the academy, but now she can't get enough.

So far, the room is empty other than those of us playing. And that suits me just fine. The last thing I want is to make anyone pass out. I've had more than enough of that to last me a lifetime.

The door creaks open in between songs. I crane my neck to see if it's Halen.

It's Neva. At first, my heart leaps into my throat—a reaction from the days I thought she and Bash were a couple, before I knew they were besties and would probably gag at the thought of kissing each other. At least, I'd like to think that'd be their reaction.

“Neva!” Bash sets his guitar aside. “What are you doing here?”

She throws herself into his arms, and they embrace. “My new academy is on break, so I'm visiting!” Then she hugs the rest of the guys, and even me. “I hear you've been taking care of our boy.” She glances over at Bash and grins.

“I'm trying. Hey, you should sing with us. We're going to have a small audience soon, and I know everyone will be thrilled to see you again.”

“You give me too much credit.” She gives me a playful shove. “But I'd love to. You're not planning to knock anyone unconscious with your voice, are you?”

My face flames. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

“You’re too serious! I’m just playing. Actually, I wish I had that ability. Got a few guys I wouldn’t mind having you sing to back at the new digs.”

Bash comes up to us. “Someone giving you trouble? Need me to punch them for you? Or did you give them a hard time and have it coming?”

“Maybe I should punch you, instead.” She laughs and holds up her fists.

I hold back a grin. Definitely a sibling-like relationship.

Everyone spends a few minutes catching up with Neva, laughing and joking, then we all take our places. This time Neva and I are on either side of Bash. He starts with a complicated guitar solo before belting out the first line. Neva and I join him in unison before the others jump in with their instruments and back-up vocals.

Before the song ends, Halen and our friends have come in with a group of guys. They all applaud at the last note. Other students enter the room, and by the time we start the next song, it’s a packed house. I throw Halen a curious glance. How many people did she invite? She winks, letting me know she invited a lot of people.

We move on to another song, and by the time we’re done, more students have squeezed into the room. They all cheer for more. It’s a rush, and I can’t wait to sing another song. And best of all, everyone is still conscious. Maybe the theory is true, and I have to be inebriated to make the guys pass out.

After a dozen more songs, Bash announces we’re done. Disappointment washes through me. I could go on forever.

The room slowly clears. Neva suggests going to that bar where I made the mermen

pass out.

“Have fun,” I say. “I don’t think I’m welcome there anymore.”

Bash puts an arm around me. “Pretty sure they can’t say no to you, princess.”

I groan. “Even if that’s true, the customers won’t be happy to see me.”

“If they remember that night, which I doubt they will. And they’ll have to go through me if they want to give you trouble.”

I shrug. “I can just tell them I won’t sing. Then we don’t have to worry about my siren-like abilities.”

We head for the parking lot, and everyone gets on their motorcycles. I climb on with Bash, and before I know it, we’re back at that bar. My heart races as I remember fleeing the last time.

A few of the employees glare at me but don’t say anything. Bash tells one of them we aren’t here to sing. We all squish into a booth, and he orders that delicious but weird dish again. Everyone else gets drinks, but I pass just in case I get talked into belting out lyrics.

We laugh and just have a good time until people start filtering out.

Bahari is the first to leave. “Got an early study group tomorrow.”

“At noon?” Neva teases.

“One-thirty.” Bahari waves and leaves.

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Rudder gets up. “Gotta bail. Helping my parents with some home repairs this weekend.”

Everyone else goes, until it’s just Bash, Neva, and me. Neva yawns. “Better get going. I’m staying in town, so I’ll catch you two tomorrow.”

We exchange hugs, then Bash turns to me. “Guess we’d better go too. I don’t want to leave you though.”

I lean my head against his. “I don’t, either.”

He yawns. “But we should. We both need to study tomorrow, and I’m actually doing good in all my classes so far. You’re a good influence on me.”

“It’s all you.” I give him a quick kiss. “You just needed someone to believe in you.”

“You think so?” He brushes his lips across mine before kissing me deeply, not giving me the chance to answer his question. My heart races, and I struggle to breathe normally.

He pulls back. “We’d better go. Can’t have you missing curfew.”

“Sometimes I hate being a first-year. Earliest curfew, no shell phones ...”

“But once this term is over, you’ll be a second-year.”

“And you’ll be a fourth-year.” I frown. “What will I do after you graduate?”

Bash gives me his crooked grin. “You’re already worried about that? It’s more than a year away.”

I run my fingertips along his scruff. “I can’t help hating the thought of not seeing you every day.”

“Maybe I can find a reason to stick around.”

“How?” I rake my fingers through his hair and get lost in his eyes.

He clears his throat. “Um, well ... I can find something. Maybe intern as an assistant to one of the teachers or something. Middlebrooks might want to keep me on after I’m done with my punishment.”

I arch a brow. “You’re still working for her? Are you ever going to tell me what you did?”

“I beat Caisson Armand within an inch of his life.”

I give him a double-take. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. He had it coming.”

“What did he do?”

Bash’s expression storms over. “He was picking on a first-year who rejected his advances. Was really out of line. I had to put him in his place, and he didn’t learn his lesson after the first few punches, so I did what I had to. He hasn’t bothered another mermaid since.”

My heart swells. How anyone could’ve punished Bash for standing up for that is

beyond me. I take possession of his mouth and show him how much I appreciate him, even if nobody else does. He pulls me close, rests his hands on the small of my back, and moans. I place my palms on his chest and feel his heart beating rapidly.

He pulls away and stares at me with a dazed look in his eyes. “We should get outta here.”

I cup his chin and notice the other customers around us.

Bash takes my hand and leads me outside toward his bike, but I pull him off the path and pin him to the wall. “Let’s pick up where we left off now that we have some privacy.” I trail kisses from his ear to his lips. “You look hot.” I undo his top button and reach for the next one.

He moves my hand and scoots away. “We should get back to the dorm before you miss curfew.”

“My dad’s the king. Pretty sure I can get out of any trouble.”

His face pales at the mention of my dad.

“What’s going on?”

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Bash fixes his top button. “Nothing. We should get going.”

“This isn’t nothing. What did my dad say to you?”

He adjusts his collar and gestures toward his bike. “Come on.”

I put my hands on my hips. “What did he tell you? You two came out laughing, so I thought we were cool.”

“You think any dad is cool with me kissing his daughter?”

“Did he threaten you?” Anger churns in my gut. My palms glow green.

“He merely suggested we take things slowly.”

“Ugh! He’s such a hypocrite.”

Bash shrugs. “He’s the king. That’s his right.”

“No, it isn’t! He was telling me that if he could go back in time, he’d do everything differently.”

“Either way, I’m not going against his wishes.”

I scowl at him. “What else did he tell you?”

Bash licks his lower lip and looks away.

My stomach drops. “What?”

He finally makes eye contact with me. “Your father wants to release my aunt from prison.”

Everything spins around me. “What? Why? The woman is pure evil! She took away your funding for the academy even though she’s your legal guardian.”

He frowns. “She may be a jerk, but she isn’t as evil as we initially thought.”

“She tried to kill my dad! I mean, Drake. She and Shane would’ve killed you.”

“Not to mention you.” He grits his teeth. “But the fact of the matter is, they were ring-leaders of a movement devoted to Tiberias. They knew what Drake was like—everyone from Valora did—and they wanted him out of power. His harsh decrees were proof of his true nature, and everyone feared what he was building up to. The tax hikes and wage decreases were only the beginning.”

“What are you saying?”

“Coral has agreed to continue paying for my education if she’s freed.”

“My parents could pay for that.”

Bash doesn’t look convinced. “The king also doesn’t want his supporters in the dungeon. It doesn’t send a good message.”

“And you’re willing to play along with this, despite what she did? The woman would have killed you! Her husband nearly did.”

He says something, but I can’t understand what. No, I can’t hear him. Everything

spins around me. Sharp, horrible pains rip through my stomach. I clutch my belly and cry out.

Fear fills Bash's eyes. "Marra! What's wrong?"

The edges of my vision turn white. Stars dance between Bash and me. The searing pain intensifies. Can't breathe. Can't cry out.

Everything goes black.

Chapter 17

The pounding in my head wakes me. Muffled conversation sounds somewhere. I struggle to open my eyes. Everything is white.

I bolt upright. Have I gone blind?

No. I'm in the infirmary, and I was facing a wall. I recognize the room from when I was here before. Why am I here now?

I struggle to remember. Did it have anything to do with my trying to find the answers about the legend? Something about singing flashes in my mind.

The door opens, and Bash enters. "You're finally awake. You had us worried." He hurries over and wraps me in his embrace. "How do you feel?"

"Confused. How'd I get here?"

"You don't remember?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be confused."

He gives me a quick kiss. "We ate with the band, then after we left, you started crying out in pain."

"Where?"

“Your stomach.”

“No.” I shake my head vigorously, making it hurt. “Where were we?”

“Oh. Outside the restaurant.”

“That doesn’t help.” I frown.

“The bar where we did karaoke.”

“We were there last night?” I struggle to remember.

He nods. “We ate that same dish, talked with everyone until they all left, then we left.”

That sounds vaguely familiar. “Was Neva there?”

“Yes! You remember?”

“Kind of. Still can’t recall anything else. We didn’t sing, did we?”

“Not at the bar. You were worried about—” He looks like he’s struggling to find the right wording. “The results.”

“You mean knocking people unconscious.”

“Basically.”

“So, we went outside and my stomach started hurting?” I strain to remember, but it just seems to make my head pound.

“You were kissing me. I was trying to get you back for curfew.”

Something about that sounds familiar.

He threads his fingers through mine. “How’s your stomach feeling now?”

“Better than my head. I could use some food, actually.”

“It’s almost lunchtime. Wanna eat at the dining hall?”

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“Does everyone still hate me?”

Bash squeezes my hand. “I don’t think anyone hates you.”

“Do they think I’m a joke because of the Queen Sirena thing?”

He doesn’t respond.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Ignore them. They aren’t worth it.”

“It’s hard to ignore relentless teasing and stares.”

Bash kisses my cheek. “Then pay attention to me. I’ll tell you how wonderful you are.”

I can’t help but smile.

He grins and gives me another kiss. “That’s better. Let me see about getting you released in time for lunch.”

I’m alone again. I struggle to remember what happened the night before. I place my hand on my stomach, trying to recall the pain that brought me here. Was it something I ate? Or something else entirely?

Something to do with my curse related to the ancient legend? I’ve been spending

more time with my dad lately, and he's been talking about her powers and those stupid trials. My stomach knots just thinking about that. Maybe I'd been thinking about that, and that's what caused the pain.

Might be enough to get my dad to drop the subject.

Speaking of him, I wonder when my parents are going to visit me. They're probably busy with pressing royal business.

The door opens, and Bash comes in again. "The doctor is glad to hear you're awake. She'll be in quickly, and she'll release you if she's satisfied." He plays with the collar of his V-neck.

A flash of memories fills my mind. "Were we kissing? And I was playing with your buttons?"

He gives me that crooked smile and sits next to me. "You remember. Yeah, I couldn't get you off of me. I'm simply too irresistible."

"Don't forget humble." I give him a little shove.

"That too." He grins.

The door opens again, and this time in comes a lady with a white coat. She seems familiar. Must've met her last time I was here. She gives me a warm smile and shakes my hand. "I'm Dr. Rivers, and it's good to see you awake."

"Thanks. It's good to be awake."

She flips through some notes. "How is your stomach?"

“Fine.” It rumbles loudly. “Hungry.”

“That’s a good sign. Let me check your vitals. If they’re good, you’re free to go.”

“Thanks.” Relief washes through me. “What made my stomach hurt bad enough to make me faint?”

She frowns as she checks the thermometer. “That isn’t something we’ve been able to figure out. Could’ve been something you ate or perhaps a stomach bug. It’s hard to say, but the good news is you’re doing better now.”

“What if it happens again?”

“I’d speak with the doctor at the castle. He’s the best of the best.”

The castle, of course.

Once she’s satisfied with my vitals, she and Bash leave so I can get dressed. When I’m done, my boyfriend puts his arm around me and we head for the dining hall.

“I have a question.”

“Hit me with it.”

“If I passed out in town, why didn’t you take me to a hospital? Why the infirmary?”

He kisses my cheek. “The academy’s closer.”

“You got me here on your bike?”

“No. One of the other customers drove you in her car while I followed.”

“It’s all so weird. What did I say my stomach felt like?”

“You didn’t. But you clutched it and cried out. Then passed out.”

“I’m not talking with the castle doctor about this. In fact, I want to put it completely behind me. We don’t need to discuss it anymore.”

“Put what behind you?” He winks.

“I love you.” I snuggle closer to him.

“I love you more.” He kisses my cheek.

Before I can object, people crowd around us as we enter the dining hall.

Bash glances down our table. “Are you going to sit with the band or your friends?”

“I like to think of the band as my friends too.”

“They are. You know what I mean.”

I glance back and forth between the two groups. “Why can’t we all just sit together? This whole pecking order thing is stupid.”

He shrugs. “It is what it is.”

“It’s still dumb.”

“Then change it, princess.”

“I’m already unpopular enough as it is.” I shake my head. “Save me a seat. I’m going to say hi to Halen. She has to be worried since I didn’t show up in the room last night.”

“Halen knows. She stayed with you for a few hours, insisting I get some sleep.”

“She did? Well, I definitely have to tell her I’m feeling better. Save me that seat.” I hurry over to my best friend.

She squeals and gives me a hug. “You’re up! How are you feeling?”

“Hungry!”

“I was so worried. Here, sit and tell me everything.”

I glance over at Bash. “I promised him I’d sit over there.”

“Boo. Well, you have to tell me everything afterward. Okay?”

“I swear.”

Our other friends all say how happy they are to see me up and about. I thank them before going back over to the band. Bash holds my chair and scoots it in.

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Neva grins at me and throws a teasing glance at him. “Who’d have thought the princess would turn our Bash into a gentleman?”

He chuckles and takes his seat. “Nobody. Least of all me. But I can’t help myself.”

She rests her chin on her hand. “You two are so stinking adorable. I wish I still went here to see you every day.”

“Come back,” Bash says.

“If only. But I like it where we’ve moved. So, there’s that.”

We all dig in, and I stuff my face, not caring what anyone thinks.

“You up for another concert?” Neva asks. “I’d love to sing with you guys tonight, one last time before I have to go back to my new academy.”

I smile. “That’d be fun. Hopefully, I can get through all my studies first.”

“Perfect.” She beams. “I love having another girl to jam with. Too much testosterone, you know what I mean?”

I throw the guys a teasing glance. “Totally. It’s like—” A hot, searing pain radiates in my stomach, shooting around. Can’t breathe.

“Marra?” Bash sounds so far away.

I clutch my stomach. Try to cry out. Can't find my voice. I still can't remember the pain from last night, but this has to be round two. The agony intensifies. I fall from my chair. Bash pulls me close. Says something. Everything is a blur. So many faces surround me. They're all speaking. Some reaching for me.

White shrouds my vision. I struggle to breathe, to stay awake. "Someone call my dad."

Chapter 18

My dad moves hair from my face. “Stay with us.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” The edges of my vision are still white, but I don’t say anything about that.

“What can we do?” Halen asks.

“Nothing.” My dad frowns. “Only she can stop this.”

I give him a double-take. “What do you mean?”

He turns back to me, a sadness in his eyes. “You’re denying your powers.”

A new round of pain overtakes my stomach. I cry out, unable to stay quiet. The white creeps into more of my vision. I struggle to stay awake.

Bash appears in front of me. “We’re here. None of us is going anywhere.”

I hear a door open and close before seeing my mom. “The doctor is on his way.”

“Good.” Relief floods my dad’s face. “Did he say anything?”

She shakes her head then turns to me. “Are you feeling any better?”

“She was just screaming again,” Bash said. “We can’t let this go on!”

Dad looks me in the eyes. “Are you willing to accept Queen Sirena’s powers?”

I shake my head. “I want a different destiny for myself.”

“You might not have another choice.”

“I do. And I’m not following her path.” Blinding pain overtakes me. I don’t even know if I yell out or not. I’m not even sure if I’m still in the castle. It feels like I’ve left the physical world.

When the pain finally subsides, my parents, best friend, and boyfriend are all staring at me.

“I need some space.”

They all back away, and I gasp for air. The pain hasn’t fully gone away, but it’s manageable. I can live with it. Breathe, see, focus.

Until sharp teeth dig into my flesh, tearing apart my internal organs. Set everything else on fire.

I’m going to die. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but it’s going to kill me. And at this point, death would be preferable. I can’t live like this.

Everything goes black, but it isn’t the end. I can still hear my loved ones, their worried tones. I’m still alive, still conscious. Still in unbelievable agony. Only I can’t cry out or clutch my stomach.

Am I in a coma? If so, it’s true what everyone always says—that the patient can hear everything. My parents are talking. I can hear Halen and Bash too. Some other merwoman. A merman. They all sound so far away.

Something cold and round presses on my chest. Then my stomach. More instruments press against my skin. Hushed voices murmur.

The pain intensifies. I want to scream, to do anything to alleviate it just a little. Any relief would help. Would be better than this.

Something sharp digs into my skin. A relaxing warmth spreads throughout my body. The pain goes away. The voices grow quieter, farther away.

The darkness sucks me away from everything else. Especially what's left of the agony.

When I wake, the room is silent, other than a dull beeping every so often. I force my eyes open.

I'm in my bed—the one in the castle. I recognize the dollhouse my dad made me when I was young. How did I never put two and two together? He was always more of a dad to me than Drake ever was.

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I turn over and nearly bump into Mom, who's sleeping next to me. Dad is snoring in a chair on the other side of her. I'm not sure where Halen and Bash are, but it comforts me that my parents are here. No doubt Drake would have taken off for kingly duties if he was still acting as my father. But my actual dad is here with me, sleeping in an uncomfortable-looking position.

I sit up and try not to move the bed. Mom doesn't budge. I hold my breath, slide off the mattress, then head for the bathroom. A wire stuck to my chest prevents me from moving any farther. I yank it off and am free. But as I inch away from the bed, the machine attached to the wire beeps loudly, quickly.

So much for not disturbing anyone.

Mom bolts upright and looks around. "Marra? What are you doing?"

"Going to empty my bladder, if you must know."

Dad opens his eyes and studies me, while rubbing his eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"That won't last long."

"Thanks for the encouragement." I hurry toward the bathroom.

He blocks my path. "I'm serious. The doctor ran every test available. There isn't any medical reason for your stomach pain. It can only mean one thing."

“Because of the Queen Sirena curse.”

“It isn’t a curse.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” I move around him and escape into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. In the mirror, my face is pale and I have dark circles under my eyes. In other words, I look horrible.

I avert my gaze and empty my bladder. There has to be another reason for my stomach issues. Both times the pain attacked, I had just eaten. That could be the cause, even if the doctor doesn’t think so. All I have to do is not eat.

Yeah, that should go over well. How long can I survive without food?

I brush my hair and wash my face. Doesn’t help much, but I do look somewhat better. Maybe enough to convince my parents I’m fine.

As soon as I enter my bedroom, my parents both start speaking.

“You need to use the trident,” my dad says.

“Don’t fight this,” Mom pleads.

I sigh. “It was probably just something I ate. I feel great now.”

Mom frowns. “You don’t look great.”

“It’s probably from whatever the doctor injected into me.”

Dad pulls out an old book. “Queen Sirena got sick when she tried to avoid her powers. It’s right here. She nearly died.” He shoves the book in my face, pointing to a

paragraph halfway down the right page.

I take it from him and read the section slowly. If the script is to be believed, the legendary queen went through the same thing I'm dealing with right now. I hand the book back to Dad. "Why are there so many similarities between her and me?"

"You're destined to rule the oceans like she did."

I draw a long, slow breath. "What if I don't want to?"

He glances at my stomach. "I think you know the answer to that."

"I won't eat. Then my stomach won't bother me. Problem solved."

Mom gasps. "You think not eating will fix this? How long will that last?"

"Until my intestines heal from whatever's going on."

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Her face pales. “You don’t believe your father?”

I chew on my lower lip. “I believe he believes all this.”

“Why don’t you want this?”

“Because I didn’t ask for this. Any of it. My whole life has been a lie. You both kept the truth from me about my paternity. It’s too much, and I want to make my own decisions. Not follow in the path of some ancient chick who used to own my trident.”

My parents exchange a worried glance.

“I’m not the one who tried to resurrect her.” I turn to my dad. “Try again, and maybe this curse will be lifted from me.”

He shakes his head. “Her powers rest on you—and it’s no curse.”

“It sure isn’t a blessing.”

“Please,” Mom begs. “Accept your destiny.”

“Why don’t you take it?”

“I’d take it from you if I could. In a heartbeat.”

I plop onto the bed. “But you can’t.”

She shakes her head.

Dad comes over and places a hand on mine. “I’m truly sorry this is making you miserable. That was never my intention—I never meant for any of this to fall on you. I didn’t even know your mother was pregnant at the time.”

A thought strikes me. “Were you trying to turn her into Queen Sirena?”

They exchange a glance, and neither answers my question. Which directly answers my question.

“You wanted Mom to become Queen Sirena, but instead turned me into her—or transferred her powers onto me or whatever.”

Dad nods, his expression growing wistful. “It seemed like the only way for us to be able to get married. If she was already a queen—and the most powerful one alive, at that—my father would’ve had no recourse. He’d have been forced to go along with Emery’s wishes to marry me. Nobody can stand up against the woman who rules all of the oceans.”

“And now I have to deal with the fallout.”

“I’m sorry, but at the same time, it’s exciting. You hold the potential to rule every kingdom under the seas.”

I rub my temples. “I wish someone would’ve asked me if this was what I wanted.”

“Nobody even knew you existed. I truly am sorry. If anyone knows what it’s like to have another person’s wishes forced upon you, it’s the two of us.”

Mom nods in agreement.

He sits next to my mom but looks at me. “I do have good news that should make you feel better about this whole thing.”

I frown, doubtful. “What?”

His eyes light up with excitement. “I was able to verify your story, and—”

“Which story?” I ask.

“About Queen Sirena having to kill her father.”

My stomach lurches. “You verified it?”

“I did. One of my servants found an ancient manuscript from a library in the Indian Ocean. It’s true, she killed her father and went through the trials. The combination is what brought on her full powers.”

“Awesome.”

Mom turns to him, her eyes wild. “What are you saying, Tiberias?”

He squeezes her hand. “If she kills me, she’ll be relieved of her stomach pains—and she’ll have all of Queen Sirena’s powers.”

Mom shakes her head. “I wish I’d never agreed to let you try to resurrect the ancient queen. I just got you back! I’m not going to let anyone kill you. Do you know the torment I went through when I heard you were dead? I could barely hold myself together!”

He cups her chin. “I’ll come back to life.”

“What?” we both exclaim.

Dad nods. “My brother killed me, and my servants brought me back to life. We’ve already proven it can happen.”

“Once!” Mom glares at him. “That doesn’t mean it’ll happen again.”

I shake my head. “I’m not killing you!”

“Don’t you two see?” He looks back and forth between us. “It’s the perfect solution.”

Mom and I exchange a glance. We have to find a way to change his mind.

Chapter 19

By the time I get out of the shower, my parents are gone, having only left a note for me to rest.

Right. Like that's going to happen. I press my palm on my stomach. No pain. Not even a hint of pain. Probably because I haven't eaten anything. And I need to keep it that way, or it'll come back. Both times it happened was after a meal. At least I remember the second time—that's an improvement.

My stomach growls, but I ignore it. I'm going to have to get used to being hungry because I'm not giving in to the powers.

I sit at my vanity and fix my hair and makeup. My skin is pale, but I ignore that fact and carry on as if nothing's wrong.

A servant appears from behind me and she bows. "My lady, you're supposed to rest, are you not?"

I jump. "Why do you people hide all the time?"

"We're here when you need us. Shall I get you something so you can rest?"

"I'm not going to spar. Just go around the castle. Nothing major. It'll do me some good." And maybe I can find a phone to call Bash. I just want to hear his voice.

"A tutor is coming by to help you with the classes you're missing today."

I give her a double-take. “Isn’t it still the weekend?”

She shakes her head no. “It’s the first day of the week, your majesty.”

It’s hard to believe I slept that long, but I’d believe just about anything at this point. “Okay. I won’t go far, and it’s not like we’ll have to go over too much. My dad is the one helping with two out of three of my classes.”

It almost makes me wonder why I bother with the academy, but I won’t voice that question. Despite my issues there, I love going there. I get to room with my best friend and see Bash multiple times daily even though we don’t have any classes together.

I need to find a way to get back. Don’t need the other students thinking I get special treatment all the time. If only they knew.

Once I finish getting ready, the servant hurries to my side. “I’ll go with you, my lady.”

“I’ll be fine. I am fine. Just getting some air before hitting the books.”

“Hitting the books?”

“Studying with the tutor. I won’t go far, I promise.”

She frowns.

But she doesn’t insist on going with me.

I give her a reassuring glance. “I’ll be back soon. Just need to stretch my tail.” I smile at myself for not using a phrase from land that nobody down here would understand.

The servant nods, her expression pinched. “Yes, your highness.”

“I won’t be long, and I won’t get myself into any trouble.” I hold up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“Pardon?”

So much for not using land expressions. “Never mind. I’m just giving you my word.”

“If you say so.” She bows. “I’ll prepare the room for your tutor’s arrival.”

“Thank you.” I make my escape and take a deep breath once out in the hallway. I’m half-tempted to make a break for it and head to the academy, but I doubt I could find my way in the woods without Sally.

I make my way through several corridors, glad to be by myself—though being with Halen or Bash would beat being alone. But that isn’t going to happen while they’re in class and I’m stuck here.

My stomach starts to cramp, so I stop in a sitting room. An elderly lady is already resting in there. I back up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you.”

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She gives me a sweet smile and pats the cushion next to her on the couch. “Have a seat. I’d love the company.”

So much for the alone time, but she does appear genuinely happy for the company so I sit next to her. “I’m Marra.”

“I know who you are. It’s a pleasure to meet you, young princess. I’m Elaine, the eldest resident of Valora. I remember when your great-great-grandfather was a young prince.”

I give her a double-take. “You remember when my great-great-grandpa’s father ruled?”

She nods. “The idyllic days of my youth. All the girls in the kingdom were in love with your great-grandfather. He was a looker, that one.”

I grin while mentally trying to figure out how old she must be.

“That was a couple of centuries ago, but I remember his golden hair and indigo tail as if he were just here yesterday. I got to meet him on several occasions when my parents came here to the castle.”

“Must have been something.”

She nods, looking lost in thought. “Those were the days, I tell you. People weren’t full of the angst they have now. Everyone was nice to each other because they wanted to be. It’s really a shame that wasn’t able to last.”

“I wish I could’ve seen it.”

She tells me a story, but I quickly get lost in my own thoughts. What if she knows something about Queen Sirena that the rest of us don’t? No, she isn’t ancient, but she is Valora’s oldest resident. She might know something useful that isn’t in any of the manuscripts.

I wait for her to finish her story. “That sounds amazing, Madame Elaine.” I pause and my heart races. “Tell me, do you know anything about the legend of Queen Sirena? Were there whispers in the days of your youth that haven’t been spoken since?”

She glances at my hair. “There were certainly more whispers in those days.”

“About?” I lean closer.

Elaine takes a strand of my pink locks and holds it close before looking at me. “My friends and I often play acted, taking turns pretending to be the mysterious queen of old. It was common for girls our age.”

“I wonder what changed between then and now.”

She looks me square in the eyes. “Your grandfather.”

“What do you mean?”

“He had a temper—we know where the former King Drake got his—and he couldn’t stand the fact that his eldest son, the heir to his throne, was obsessed with the story. Most everyone has had a curiosity about her, but in all my years, I’ve never seen anyone with quite the enthusiasm as your father.”

“Never?”

She shakes her head. “No. He made it his goal to collect every book, every trinket—anything he could get his hands on regarding her.”

“What did my grandfather do?”

“Took it all away. Banished anything to do with her from our kingdom. That’s why people stopped talking and why the books became so hard to find.”

I give her a double-take. “That’s harsh.”

“It was, and I felt bad for the prince. But who would stand up to your grandfather? Yes, he was overall a good and fair king, but when he had his mind made up about something, there was no going back. Not even your grandmother could convince him to change his mind.”

I let her words sink in. “I never knew any of that. Why didn’t my dad just revoke the law banning the mention of Queen Sirena once he came into power?”

Elaine frowns. “Your grandfather enacted a five-century law. Under no circumstances can it be altered in that timeframe.”

“Seriously?” I exclaim. “That’s ridiculous.”

“It is what it is. Your grandfather didn’t want this getting in the way of King Tiberias’s rule.”

I lean back and try to make sense of it. There has to be a way for my dad to get around it. He’s king!

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“Do you have any other questions for me, Princess Marra?” Elaine asks. “I’m afraid I need to take a nap soon.”

I turn to her. “What do you know about Queen Sirena coming into her full powers? I read that she had to kill her dad. That can’t be true, can it? Or was it the trials? What little information there still is about her isn’t clear.”

She puts a hand on my arm. “That’s why her story is a legend. Even what we think we know is still unclear.”

“Do you know anything about her coming into her powers? Is there another way?”

Elaine’s smile fades and she leans closer. “Do you think you need to kill the king to come into your powers?”

“I refuse to do that!”

She nods. “I’m familiar with the trials—like what your father is setting up. I don’t know anything about needing to kill anyone. Perhaps that was something the adults spoke of when the children weren’t in the room, but I never heard about the death.”

Relief washes through me, though my stomach still hurts. “So, it’s possible I can avoid it?”

“I would think so, though I’m hardly an expert. I’d think the king is the one who’d know.” She struggles to rise.

I leap up and help her. “Thank you for humoring my questions.”

She squeezes my hand. “I enjoyed the conversation. Thank you for spending time with an old lady.”

“Would you like me to take you to your room?”

“No thank you. Good luck with everything.”

“You too.”

We part ways, and I head back to my room. My parents are waiting for me.

“You were supposed to rest.” Mom furrows her brows.

“I needed to get out of the room.”

“How are you feeling?” Dad asks.

“Fine.”

“Your stomach?”

Instinctively, I cover it. “A little sore, but it’d be a lot worse if I ate anything. That’s what seems to set it off.”

They exchange a look before Dad turns back to me. “We need to spar—get you ready for the trials.”

I frown. If only Elaine had known of a loophole. The family history was interesting, and it gave me sympathy for my dad who was surrounded by jerks. His own father set

a law he couldn't undo in his lifetime, and his twin brother tried to kill him.

"What's the matter, daughter?" he asks.

"I don't want to do the trials, and I'm definitely not killing you."

"You can't continue denying your true nature. Look at what it's doing to you. It's destroying you from the inside out. Do you really want to find out what will happen if you keep this up?"

"There has to be a loophole!"

"Unfortunately, there isn't."

"How do you know? You didn't even know about the dad curse until I told you! There's probably so much we have no idea about."

He rises, stark determination shining in his eyes. "And there's only one way to find out."

My heart sinks. "What?"

"We're going to the academy, and you'll question the trident while we practice. It was her weapon. All of the legendary queen's secrets are locked away in it."

"Just don't call the trident an it in its hearing," I mumble.

"I wouldn't dream of it. Grab your sparring gear."

I sure hope the trident knows of a loophole.

Chapter 20

I stare at the trident, watching it glow in the cabinet.

“Would you like me to come back tomorrow?” Dad asks.

“Sorry.” I reach for the rod, and am immediately soothed by the warmth it sends through me. Even my stomach stops aching.

“That really is incredible,” Dad says. “I’ve connected with my weapon, but it doesn’t change colors like that.”

“Does yours speak to you?”

“Not in a conversational way.” He holds up his trident.

“Consider yourself lucky,” I mumble.

I heard that.

“Good. We have a lot to talk about.”

So I’ve gathered.

“What do you mean?”

People talk when in here.

“Eavesdropper.”

For your good. Did you know students and staff alike are genuinely worried about you?

I snort. “Right.”

They are. Even the one you call Earwig.

“Now I know you’re pulling my leg.”

Don’t use those land phrases with me.

My dad clears his throat. “Why don’t you discuss this while we practice? Otherwise, there’s no point in me being here.”

“Other than to allow me to be here. Can’t be here without a teacher, remember?”

“True, but let’s do this. You need to be prepared for the trials.”

Trials?

I hold my weapon in the ready position and stare down my dad. “We’re recreating Queen Sirena’s trials so I can come into my full powers.” I swing my arm but the weapon stops with a jolt halfway.

You’re actually recreating the trials?

“My father is,” I grunt and struggle against the trident.

Is he crazy?

“You tell me.” I swing my arm, and this time it moves with more force than I meant and nearly slices my dad’s face in half. “I’m sorry!”

He touches his intact cheek. “Don’t be. That was impressive.”

“What do you know about the trials?” I ask my weapon. “Were you there when she went through them?”

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Of course I was. It was like the Olympics for one contestant. Practically killed her!

I freeze in place, and my dad's trident nearly takes me out.

"Why did you stop?" he demands.

"I can't do this—hold a conversation and spar at the same time. It's not working!"

"How do you feel?"

I press a palm on my stomach as if that'll help. "Better."

"Good. We'll keep this up. It's helping."

"Seriously? I just said I can't do this."

"I'll go easy. Pay attention to what the trident has to say."

My eyelids grow heavy. "Okay, but I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up."

He frowns. "All the more reason to carry on with the trials—especially the big one."

I hold up my weapon so I can stare at it. "Did Queen Sirena have to kill her father to come into her powers?"

She did.

“And she had to go through the trials as well?”

Correct.

“I need more than one- or two-word answers from you!”

Don’t ask yes or no questions.

I groan. “Just help me out. I’m new at this, and I’ve been through a traumatic week. All this stomach pain from the powers apparently trying to come out. Did she deal with this?”

My father holds up his weapon in the ready position.

Just perfect.

Dad aims it at me and lunges for me. I block him.

Sirena went through the trials, but she didn’t do as well as her father wanted. He humiliated her in front of all the people, setting off her anger. The power deep inside her raged out of control. I could feel it radiating through me. I tried to stop her from killing him—I knew she would never do such a thing in her right mind.

My dad and I continue going back and forth, attacking and blocking.

“So, you’re saying when her power is in control, she wasn’t in her right mind?”

Dad arches his brow at that before swinging at me.

Not exactly. Once she came into her full powers, she had control over herself. Though it did take some effort to rein them in.

“Isn’t there a loophole?”

Against killing your father?

“Exactly.”

It’s either you or him, if you’re truly swimming in her path.

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“There’s nothing I can do? Nothing?”

Not unless you find someone to undo the spell your father cast connecting you to the queen.

I skid to a stop. “Is that possible?”

Maybe.

“Maybe? Is it or not?”

How would I know? She came into all of this naturally. You didn’t.

“Who would I talk to?”

Ask the merman who did this to you.

“Do you know anything that will help me?”

The main thing I can do for you is to help you through the trials. If they’re based on Sirena’s, then all the better. I’ve been through those before.

“What will happen to me if I refuse to do any of this?”

The stomach pain will eventually kill you, I imagine.

“You imagine?”

I wouldn't know, now would I? She followed her destiny.

"Is that a jab?"

No. Just pointing out the obvious.

I leap away from my dad and press the trident on the ground. "I'm done."

"Your stomach?"

"Never better."

"What did you find out?"

It warms in my hand. "I don't suppose you're willing to undo this Queen Sirena spell you've cast on me?"

"Undo it?" His eyes nearly pop out of his head. "When we could have a Queen Sirena of our day? When you could be her? Why wouldn't you want to be the most powerful queen of our time—to rule over not just Valora but all water?"

I replace my weapon in the cabinet and turn to face him. "It looks like I have to kill you." I race out of the room.

He chases after me. "But that's what I want. It's what's necessary."

I narrow my eyes. "What if it goes wrong? If we can't bring you back? You'd break not only Mom's heart, but mine and the rest of Valora's. Drake had no intention to keep you alive. What if this backfires? I can't lose another dad so soon!"

"I understand." He frowns.

“Does that mean you’re willing to reverse the spell?”

“Never. I just mean that I sympathize with how you feel.”

I clench my fists, making them glow. “You’d be willing to risk losing the life ahead of you with Mom?”

“It’ll work.” He straightens his back.

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My fists glow even brighter. “And if it doesn’t, you won’t be here to deal with the fallout. It’ll be Mom and me.”

“I have faith in you.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about! How can you be so sure your servants will be able to bring you back to life?”

“The fact that I’m here today gives me full confidence.”

I rub my temples. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

He nods. “We can talk tomorrow during magic class.”

Whose great idea was it to have him as my teacher? But maybe that’ll give me enough time to find a way out of the spell. “Okay. See you then.”

We part ways, and before I even reach the band practice room, the bell rings for dinner. Already?

The band exits the room, and Bash’s eyes light up when he sees me. We throw our arms around each other, and I kiss him deeply.

He grins. “I could get used to a greeting like this every day.”

I snuggle against him. “Me too. I wish all I had to worry about was school and you.”

“Did something happen today?” He runs his hands through my hair.

“I’ll tell you on the way to the dining hall.” By the time we reach the hall, he’s caught up on the disaster that is my life.

“Do you think the spell can actually be lifted?” He holds out a chair for me.

I sit and wave at my other friends down the table before turning back to him. “The trident seems to think so.” I realize how crazy that sounds and lower my voice. “I don’t know how likely it is. How am I going to find the spell my dad used to create this mess?”

Bash plays with my hair. “I wouldn’t call all of it a mess.”

I sigh. “Have you heard a single thing I’ve said about the trials? The dad curse? And let’s not forget about the stomach pain from trying to avoid all this.”

“I couldn’t forget.” He grimaces. “You’ll be okay to eat dinner?”

“Yeah.” I take a bite of pasta to prove the point. “I was practicing with the trident, so that should keep it at bay.”

“Let’s find someone who can tell us more about that spell.”

“I’m not sure when I’m supposed to find the time. I’m already falling behind in my studies.”

“Would this weekend be too late?” he asks.

We continue discussing plans until the meal ends. As we’re leaving, people I don’t even know stop to say they’re glad I’m doing better. Not one person gives the stink

eye—not even Earwyn and her dogfish. Not to say they smile or anything, but they don't give me any problems.

Bash and I head for the library, then study until I can't keep my eyes open. With any luck, I'll make it the rest of the week without any stomach pain so we can find someone to help with the spell.

Chapter 21

“You ready?” Bash gives me his crooked smile that he could use to get me to do anything.

I pull on my helmet. “Ready as I’m ever going to be.”

We climb onto his bike and head into town. Rudder helped us find a merwoman who is known for her knowledge of rarer spells—and what could be rarer than a spell to bring back the legendary powers of Queen Sirena?

Bash stops in front of a tiny, run-down house. A puff of smoke shoots out one of the windows—surely not an easy feat underwater.

We put away the helmets and cross the yard with all kinds of junk strewn across it.

I turn to him. “I apologize for ever calling your room a mess.”

He chuckles, then knocks on the door once we reach it.

Banging sounds from inside, followed by a scratchy voice. “Hold on!”

Bash and I exchange a curious glance.

The door flings open, and a frazzled grey-haired merwoman stares at us. “What do you want?”

“Pearl Lancaster?” Bash asks.

“Yeah. Who’s askin’?”

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry if we’re bothering you. My name is Marra Ayers, and we just have a few questions for you.”

She adjusts her glasses. “Marra Ayers? The king’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

The merwoman squints. “And yer really King Tiberias’s daughter? Not Drake’s?”

I nod, and can’t help wondering if she’s going to demand proof.

“And you want something from me?” She leans against the doorframe.

Bash puts his arm around me. “We have just a couple quick questions.”

Pearl squints at him. “And you are?”

“Bash Marlowe.”

“Any relation to Shane and Coral?” She purses her lips.

“My aunt and uncle.”

She studies him and moves back. “Come on in. I only have a few minutes, mind you. Plenty of important business to attend to.”

Bash arches an eyebrow as we enter the shack. It’s even more crowded inside with

items stacked along every wall and things spread across the floor.

Pearl stops in a cramped living room and gestures toward a couch full of laundry. I'm not sure it's clean. Neither of us sit.

I clear my throat. "We won't keep you. You're familiar with lesser-known spells?"

She yawns, doesn't cover her mouth. "Many of them, yep. What do you want to hear about?"

I consider how to ask, but Bash jumps in. "Are you familiar with any resurrection spells?"

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Her eyes widen. “I ain’t bringing no one back from the grave! Out with you.”

“That’s not why we’re asking,” I say quickly. “Can you undo one?”

“Just kill the person. Should solve yer problems.”

My heart leaps into my throat. “That’s not quite the solution we’re looking for.”

“What then? Tick-tock.” Pearl taps a cracked watch.

I straighten my back and stare her down. “Someone used a resurrection spell and only managed to bring back the person’s powers. They landed on someone else unintentionally, and now that person wants them removed.”

Pearl tilts her head. “You talkin’ about that Queen Sirena thing King Tiberias mentioned when he said yer his kid?”

“Does it matter?” Bash exclaims.

She glowers at him. “That’s why I asked.”

I chew on my lower lip. “Yes. That’s the one. Can you help or not?”

She frowns. “I probably could. But yer askin’ me to go against the king.”

Bash shakes his head. “We’re asking you to help the princess.”

Pearl looks around. "Yet I ain't seeing the king here, showing his support. I haven't been summoned to the castle. No, just you two showin' up on that motorcycle."

Disappointment washes through me. "You won't help us?"

"I'm not dumb enough to defy the king." She crosses her arms. "Now, out with you!"

"You won't even point us in the right direction?"

"No." She ushers us down the tight hall. "Yer both lucky I don't go to the king and tell him what you two are up to. I still might, should I hear you reversed his spell."

"Won't do much good at that point," I mutter.

"What's that?" she asks.

"Never mind." I exit the cramped house and breathe in the clean water.

Bash turns back to the merwoman. "You'd really just throw out the princess without helping?"

She readjusts her glasses. "You'd better believe it if she's trying to go against the king. Go away and never return. If I see the likes of you two again, trust that I will contact the sovereign. Better accept yer fate, princess."

"Thanks for nothing," Bash mutters as he puts his arm around me. "Got any other ideas?"

"Rudder didn't name anyone else who might be able to help?"

He shakes his head. "Said we were lucky he could find Pearl."

I snort. “Lucky. Right.”

“What do you want to do now?”

“No idea. I’d been hoping I’d leave her place without any link to Queen Sirena. Now I’m stuck forever. I’m going to have to go through with the trials and face off with my dad.”

“We’ll keep looking for a loophole. Rudder isn’t the only one who can help us. There’s an entire school of kids in the magic arts. We’ll go through them one by one if we have to. In fact, I’ll bet we’ll have more luck if we start with the fourth-years.”

I rub my temples. “I don’t want to think about any of this for the rest of the day.”

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He kisses my cheek. “Do you want to head back to the academy?”

“No. I don’t want to see that place or the castle right now. Have any ideas?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Where?”

He hands me my helmet. “You’ll see.”

“Okay.”

We climb on the bike and hit the road, heading to a part of Valora I’m not familiar with, and stopping in front of a graffitied brick building with dark windows.

I pull off my helmet. “You don’t have to try to impress me.”

He laughs. “You might actually end up impressed by the time we’re done.”

For some reason, that makes my heart race. “What do you have planned?”

Bash pulls me close and presses his lips on mine. “You’ll see.” He takes my hand and opens the chipped door. Inside, bright lights shine and loud music plays. Several people greet Bash by name.

It takes me a moment to realize we’re in a tattoo parlor. I glance at him. “Why are we here?”

He squeezes my hand. “You’ll see.”

I stare at some needles on a table and hold my breath. He’d better not be expecting me to get one, unless it’s filled with magic that can remove my link to Queen Sirena. Then I’d let them tattoo every inch of my skin.

Bash speaks with a heavily pierced guy behind the counter, but I can’t hear a word they say over the song blaring through the speakers. Next thing I know, the dude is leading us through the area where people are getting inked.

My heart thunders, threatening to explode out of my chest. What is Bash doing? Does he know an artist who uses magical needles? Or is that wishful thinking?

The guy gestures to an empty seat, and Bash climbs on. Smiles at me before saying something to the artist, who then nods.

I lean closer to my boyfriend. “What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” He kisses my cheek.

“Okay.”

“You’ll like it.” Bash sits up straighter and pulls off his shirt.

My heart pounds like a jackhammer and my pulse drums in my ears. Not only is this the first time he’s removed his shirt in front of me, but he is even more ripped than his tight shirts let on. His abs go on for days. And I just realized I’m staring and practically drooling. I glance up to meet his gaze, and he’s beaming, obviously loving the attention. My face flames.

The artist holds up an enormous needle and red ink. He waves to a plastic chair by the

wall. “Have a seat.”

I do as I’m told, my heart and mind both racing wildly. Curiosity burns. Did Bash just decide to get a new design, or does this have something to do with my predicament? I kind of don’t care either way. This is a distraction I’ll happily take. If only my pulse would calm down.

He leans back and speaks with the artist. The other merman nods and gets to work. Bash winces slightly, but then seems fine. He glances over at me and winks. I try to smile, but I’m not sure my mouth got the message. When he looks away, I try to tell what the artwork is. A spell? An addition to one of his other tats? Something else entirely?

The suspense is going to kill me! I distract myself by staring at his abs again, and can’t help but wonder when he finds the time to work out. From the looks of it, he lifts weights every hour of every day, but I’ve never once seen him head to the gym. Maybe he just doesn’t sleep. That’s the only thing that makes any sense.

When I look back up to his face, he’s watching me. My face flames again. He blows me a kiss and winks. I pretend to catch it and throw him one. He grins, but then winces again and says something to the artist.

I play with a nail to distract myself from his torso and my curiosity. Finally, the artist announces he’s done.

Bash waves me over. “Ready to see it?”

“Sure.” I shrug like I’m not dying to see it.

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He dramatically gestures to his chest, just over his heart. The skin is irritated, but I can tell what the design is. It's a heart with fancy script. It reads Marra.

Everything seems to spin around me. He put my name on his chest in permanent ink? I look at him, my mouth gaping.

Bash sits up and runs his thumb along my lower lip. "You've stolen my heart, and it will always belong to you. You're the only one who's managed to get close, and I don't ever want you to forget what you mean to me. In fact, I want the world to know."

I struggle to find words, but don't need to, because he leans closer and kisses me with a passion matching what I'm feeling but can't express verbally.

Before I know it, we're heading out the door.

"I can't believe you did that."

He turns to me. "You don't like it?"

"I love it! I just can't believe you tattooed my name on your chest."

Bash laces his fingers around mine. "Like I said, you have my heart always. I'm yours as long as I live, because I can't imagine my life without you. I think I got into so much trouble before I met you because I knew something was missing, and I was rebelling against that. Now I'm complete."

I open my mouth to speak, but he presses his lips on mine. “Don’t say anything. I just want to enjoy being with you.”

He takes us back to the academy, and my heart sinks at the thought of having to study and face people. Part of me wants to suggest Bash and I run off together. Permanently. He cups my chin. “Are you okay?”

“Just not too excited about being back. Having to study or face anyone.”

He brushes his lips across mine. “Then we’ll avoid everyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.”

“Another surprise?”

“Don’t you trust me yet?”

The corners of my mouth twitch. “Of course I do.”

“Good.” He leads me around the building until we end up at the garden.

Just the sight of it relaxes me. I squeeze his hand. “You and this garden.”

“I love bringing you here—my favorite place with my favorite mermaid.”

I press myself against him and give him a kiss.

He winces slightly.

I back up. “Did I push on your tattoo?”

“It’s fine.” He adjusts his shirt. “Come on.”

We follow the path to the bench we always seem to end up at. I collapse onto it, then he sits and puts his arm around me. More bushes have flowered since the last time we sat here, and the sight is even more soothing than before. We sit in silence for a few minutes before I turn to him. “Can I see it again?”

He kisses my fingertips. “Of course. It’s for you.”

My heart races as I wait for him.

Bash tilts his head. “You going to look?”

“I can’t see through the shirt.”

“Go for it.” He cocks a brow.

I don’t know why I’m so nervous. But I ignore my shaking hands and pull up on the bottom of his shirt until it comes all the way off. My stomach tingles and I manage to focus my attention on the new tattoo. I run my fingertip around it, careful not to bother the irritated skin. Then I look up at him and swallow. “I love it, but I hope you don’t end up regretting it.”

“Why would I? Should I be worried about something?”

“No. I only ever want to be with you, but—”

“But nothing.” He pulls me close and kisses me.

I lose myself in the moment and run my palms down his perfect arms.

Voices sound down the path. Bash pulls away and puts his shirt back on. Earwyn and her dogfish pass us, but instead of shooting me a glare she stops and gives me a sympathetic glance. “I hope your stomach is better.”

Cove and Vanya nod and voice their agreement.

“Uh, thanks.” I hardly know how to handle them acting nice.

Earwyn glances over at Bash and wrinkles her nose.

“What?” he asks.

The corners of her mouth curve up, then she glances back and forth between us.
“Your shirt’s on inside-out.”

The three of them giggle and make their way down the path without another word.

I turn to Bash. “Think she’s genuine?”

He pulls off his shirt, flips it the right way, and pulls it back on. “Yeah, my shirt was definitely inside-out.”

“No, I meant about them being glad I’m feeling better.”

“Oh, that. It wouldn’t surprise me. Everyone was pretty freaked out when you collapsed like you did.”

“Must have, if even those three felt bad for me.”

His shell phone rings. “It’s your dad.”

I groan. “Does he have a radar for when we kiss?”

“According to the text, he wants to discuss the trials. What are you going to tell him?”

“That I’ll go through with them.”

He gives me a double-take. “Are you serious? You don’t want to try and find another loophole? Or someone else who can undo the spell?”

I shake my head. “I have an idea how to go through the trials and avoid the dad curse.”

Chapter 22

The trident swings at my head, and I block it with my weapon just moments before being decapitated.

My dad wipes hair from his eyes. “Your reaction time has really improved!”

“You could’ve killed me, you know.”

He knew you’d block it, and if you couldn’t, that I’d spring into action.

Dad leans against the wall and answers me. “That’s the point. You think the trials will be easy? They’re going to make that sparring competition look like a swim in the park.”

“Somehow that doesn’t help me feel better.”

“Good.” He whips his trident around and flings it at me.

I gasp and dart out of the way just in time.

“You shouldn’t feel at ease about them. Only one other person in the history of the world has completed them.”

“And she’s long dead.” I aim my weapon at him, but he blocks it easily.

“Of natural causes, many years after the trials.” He thrusts his trident at me.

I block the move. “Are you trying to make me feel better? Thought that went against what you’re trying to do.”

He smirks. “Only pointing out the obvious. You can do this, but it won’t be easy. It’ll likely be the hardest thing you ever do.”

“And you want me to attempt it so soon after returning to Valora?”

“Strike while the iron’s hot.”

I give him a double-take.

“I’ve been to land too, daughter. I know some of their sayings.” He aims for my head again and swings quicker than before.

I barely block him in time.

We continue on for what feels like forever, well past the point where I’m certain I can’t go on. He presses the base of his weapon on the floor. “Ready to call it a day?”

“Yes.” My body aches, and if we were on land, I’d be drenched in sweat and my mouth and throat would be parched. I put my trident away, then he puts an arm around me.

“I know you’re nervous about the last trial—”

“You think?”

“But you needn’t be. My people are ready to bring me back to life. I have the same servants on hand who revived me before, plus a handful of others who are strong in magic arts.”

I just nod, and don't give any indication that I have a workaround—that none of his people will be necessary. They won't have to resurrect him because he won't die in the first place.

“I don't want you spending precious time worrying.”

I turn to him and smile. “Okay.”

“Okay? Really?”

“Yes. I'll just keep focusing on my trident skills. Getting to know my powers and what the weapon can do.”

“You don't know how relieved I am to hear that.”

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“Well, you know what you’re talking about.”

“Any chance of you coming to the castle tonight? Your mom has more wedding stuff she wants to show you. Things I apparently can’t see.”

I stifle a yawn. “It’ll have to wait. I really have to study after dinner. Unfortunately, there’s no getting around it.”

“Do you need me to cast another study spell?”

“Won’t help. I have to actually read the textbook and go over my notes to learn the stuff. Magic can only go so far.”

“You haven’t had time to study for your other class?” Concern fills his eyes.

“Not with everything else going on.”

He nods. “I’ll let your mother know you’d like to visit. You do need to excel at your studies if you’re going to rule the oceans one day. Can’t skimp on your education.”

We discuss the future until we reach the dining hall—just as the bell rings. The other students all stop as they near us and bow to him, and some even praise him. I’m not sure that’s something I’ll ever adjust to.

After I get inside, Bash waves me over. I wrap my arms around him and give him a kiss. “It’s so good to see you, but I was thinking of sitting with Halen this time. I’ve hardly seen her outside of the room lately.”

He pouts and bats his lashes. “You won’t sit with me?”

I give him a playful shove. “You could always sit with us. Like I keep saying.”

“My place is with the band.”

“You’re my boyfriend, and I sing with the band. Why doesn’t that help move you guys up in the pecking order?”

“We’re the troublemakers.” He shrugs. “Just the way it is. Besides, Rudder would never be able to sit where your friends do.”

That gives me pause. “Wait. I never thought about it, but if he’s in the School of Magic Arts, how is it he sits at our table so often?”

“Because we’re at the end of the table. Nobody cares. I could go sit with his school, and nobody would say a thing.”

“And yet you can’t sit with Halen and me?”

“Exactly.”

I give him a quick kiss. “Still seems strange to me.”

“As long as you can sit with me when you want to, I’m not going to fight the rules.”

“I still say they’re dumb.” I make my way over to Halen, who is deep in conversation with the others at the table, and take my seat. “What are you all talking about?”

She turns to me, her eyes wide. “The same thing everyone is.”

“Which is?”

“Your trials!”

My stomach twists. “Everybody’s talking about that?”

“Are you kidding? Of course! They’re so mysterious, and nobody has ever done them since Queen Sirena.” She plays with my hair. “Think your hair will get longer and pinker again?”

I shrug, refusing to say more with so many people around. Given the fact that I’m not going to kill my dad, I’m not making any guesses what will happen. I just hope my plan will actually succeed, and I’ll still come out victorious even if he doesn’t die and get revived. Technically, I’ll still defeat that trial if everything goes according to my plan. “What’s everyone saying about it?”

“The fourth-years have been going through books in their library, trying to find what they can.”

“Oh?”

Lumen and Idira talk over each other, making it impossible to tell what either one says. I’m pretty sure one of them mentioned a sea dragon.

Maybe I won’t even get to the last test if I get swallowed by a monster taller than the academy. Not that the thought makes me feel much better. I want to reach the end of the trials and defeat my dad without killing him. It’s the perfect plan, and I’m sure if the legendary queen had thought of my idea, she’d have done it too.

No reason I have to do everything she did. I can find better ways, less deadly ways to do things. And the final trial is the perfect place to begin. When my plan works,

everyone will be shocked. Most of all, my father. He may even believe I killed him. If nobody is the wiser, all the better.

I just want to get through the events so I can get back to my life. But more than that, I want to be just a normal student. No more competitions, no bad treatment, no special treatment. I only wish to be left alone to live out my academy days like anyone else—worrying about exams and projects while also spending time with my friends and boyfriend. Is that really so much to ask for?

Chapter 23

Ifurrow my brows and stare into the eyes inches from me. They hold the same intensity I feel.

“You ready?” Halen’s chipper voice breaks my concentration.

I pull my attention from my vanity mirror and whip around. “I can’t believe the trials are today.”

“And you’re going to kick some serious tail!” She whacks me on the back.

“That’s the plan.” I grimace, thinking of the final trial. However, I should be more concerned about the other trials—the ones I know nothing about. I have to get through those before facing my dad and surprising him with my plot twist.

“Your stomach hasn’t been bothering you?”

“Not since I’ve been preparing daily for these trials.”

“Good.” Halen runs her hands along one arm of my skin-tight leather fighting suit.

“This thing is so cool. You know what’s going to happen, don’t you?”

“It’ll protect me from a sea dragon bite?”

She bursts out laughing. “No! All the little kids are going to race around in imitation suits, pretending to be you on Halloween.”

I shake my head. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Wanna make a bet?”

“Not really.”

Knock, knock!

My stomach twists. It’s probably the driver to pick me up and take me to the arena in the middle of Valora. I’m so not ready for this. Not that I have a choice.

The day is here.

Halen flings open the door. “Oh, hey!” Her tone holds a song to it.

Curious, I peek around her. Instead of a stuffy castle servant, Bash stands at the door, wearing a suit and tie.

I freeze in place. Seeing him just reminds me of how much I have to lose if things go wrong today. If I end up dragon food, he’s stuck with a tattoo of my name on his chest. He’ll lose the one person he’s ever been able to trust fully.

He looks me over slowly. “You look amazing.”

I swallow. “So do you. What are you doing here?”

He moves past Halen and wraps his arms around me. “I came to give you a good luck kiss.”

“Do you think I’ll need luck?”

His only answer is to press his lips on mine. “Everyone will be rooting for you. Everyone. You’ve got this.”

“Yeah, of course.” My tone reveals my doubt.

“You don’t think so?”

“I don’t know what to expect! This event hasn’t been held for thousands of years.”

“And you’re more ready than Queen Sirena was. You’ve got her trident which has been through all of this before, plus you have her powers. They too have the previous trials under their belt. Plus, I’ve seen you in action. Everything you’ve done has been preparing you for this.”

“Maybe.”

“It has.”

Halen turns to me. “I hate to interrupt, but it looks like your driver is heading this way. Oh, and for what it’s worth, I’m in total agreement with Bash.”

“Thanks.”

He kisses my cheek. “Keep us in mind if things get hard. Picture us in the stands screaming your name.”

I force a smile. “Thanks. But seriously, if things get hard? I’ve heard several people mention a sea dragon.”

Bash gives me his crooked smile. “Those things don’t exist.”

“People used to think the same thing about Queen Sirena until I basically turned into her.”

He runs his fingertips along my jawline and gazes into my eyes. “You didn’t turn into her. You’re Marra Ayers, and you have your own strengths and powers. Did she have the Ayers power? Did she have Halen and me on her side? No, she didn’t. You’re going to be greater than she ever was—so much so that people will forget all about her. Thousands of years in the future, people will whisper rumors about you alone.”

“I think you give me too much credit.”

He starts to say something, but is interrupted by the driver. “The royal car is ready for

you, your highness.”

Halen looks at me with wide eyes. Bash gives me a quick kiss, then pats his shirt over his newest tattoo.

“Can we go with her?” Halen asks.

The driver shakes his head no. “She must travel alone.”

I grab a bag packed with things I’ll need and say goodbye to them before following the driver out to the parking lot. Students wish me good luck as I pass by. They smile, but I can see the worry in their eyes. Even Earwyn has lost her permanent smug expression.

Regardless, I hold my head high and focus on everything I’ve learned about battling with my trident and how to use the Ayers power. I’m going to need every last bit of it to get through today.

The driver opens the door for me. I climb in, hoping my parents will be inside.

They're not. The entire back of the car is empty except for my trident, which is lying on one of the seats. At least I hope it’s mine. I’m in trouble if it’s just some random weapon.

I am yours.

Relief washes through me. I wrap my arms around it but don’t find its warmth as comforting and energizing as usual.

The engine roars to life and gravel crunches under the tires. We’re heading straight for the arena.

My pulse pounds in my ears. I take a deep breath and study the weapon. “You’ve been through this before, right? The old stories are true?”

Yes. Queen Sirena and I beat them together.

“What can I expect?”

To be challenged more than ever before.

“Anything more specific? Am I going to have to face a sea dragon?”

I have no idea what you’re going to face. Your tests may be completely different from hers.

“Did she have to face a sea dragon?”

Yes.

“Wonderful.”

She defeated it.

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“Don’t you mean ‘we’?”

Nope. The creature flung me out of her reach, and she was on her own for that one.

“Double wonderful. What about the—”

Focus on silence. Quiet your thoughts.

“Is meditation supposed to help?”

The trident doesn’t respond. Probably doesn’t want to be the bearer of bad news. Doesn’t want to be the one who chips away at my confidence.

Too late for that.

Just stop thinking. That’s all you have to do.

I hold back a snarky thought and try to not think. It’s a lot harder than my weapon gives me credit for. Thankfully, before long, the car comes to a stop. I hope it’s because we’ve arrived and not just because of traffic or something.

The engine cuts, then my pulse drums in my ears. I’m crazy for agreeing to this. Trials in an arena that I’m not only completely unprepared for but that are based on a legendary queen who nearly nobody knows anything about.

Ahem.

I don't respond, and fortunately the trident doesn't have time to say more because the door opens and the driver appears.

"We have arrived, my lady."

I take a deep breath then exit, weapon in hand. We're on the back side of what looks kind of like a football stadium—but they don't play that sport in Valora.

"Let me show you to your room."

"I have a room here?"

"A dressing room."

I glance down at my outfit. "I'm already dressed."

His only response is to close the door and make his way toward the building.

My heart thunders as we approach. It seems to get louder the closer we come. The driver knocks on a nondescript door, and a moment later, a lock clicks and the door opens. A merwoman with a tight bun and tiny glasses appears and immediately starts speaking a mile a minute, barely allowing me any time to keep up with what she's saying. The driver leaves, and she leads me down a hallway. She opens another door—my dressing room. It has a couch, a rack with several outfits, a table full of refreshments, and a large mirror.

I enter and try to keep up with what she's saying, but it's a fruitless endeavor without a remote to slow her down. She leaves, closing the door behind her. I have no idea what to expect. Do I have five minutes to get ready? Or am I supposed to go somewhere? How does anyone understand her?

I lean the trident against the couch and snack on some underwater fruit. Then I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror—my skin is pale and my eyes are wild. I don't know what else I expected when I'm in such a ridiculous situation. If only someone would tell me something about what I'm about to face. Are there going to be twenty trials? Ten? Will I get breaks? What happens if I don't pass one? I glance at the trident, who offers me no insight.

Knock, knock.

My entire body tenses. "Come in."

The door opens. Instead of the fast talker, it's my mom. She gives me a warm smile. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"How do you think?" I snap. "Sorry. Too nervous for a verbal filter."

She gives me a hug, not that it does much to soothe my nerves. "You're going to do great."

"Do you know anything about these trials?"

"Didn't Shelly explain anything?"

"You mean that lady who spoke too fast to understand?" I arch a brow.

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The merwoman returns and says something that sounds like it's time.

Mom squeezes my hand and gives me a reassuring glance. "You've got this. We're all rooting for you."

"Thanks. Where's Dad?"

"He's preparing for the final trial." Mom closes her eyes for a moment. "I hope he's right about his plan. I've been worried sick."

My stomach lurches. "I don't want this any more than you do." I want to tell her about my secret plan, but I don't dare with someone else in the room. Especially not someone I can't understand.

We part ways, and I follow Shelly down a hall with the trident. We go through another door into a locker room. Cheers from a crowd sound on the other side of another wall.

She turns to me, and I actually understand her. "They're announcing you."

I force a smile. "Great."

"This way." She leads me down another hallway, and the noise from the crowd grows louder.

If I don't pass the trials, everyone in Valora will know. They're expecting me to be successful. And they also have no idea how the final trial is going to go down.

Nobody will, and that's my plan.

Shelly opens the door. "It's time."

I squeeze my weapon so tightly my hands hurt. More than anything, I want to run in the opposite direction. Instead, I inch closer.

Chapter 24

The noise from the crowd presses on me as I make my way to the middle of the field—though that isn't the right word. There isn't any synthetic grass, nothing painted on the ground, or anything else I'd expect to see inside a stadium. Instead, the ground is decorated with jewels, not unlike other places in Valora. A platform stands in the middle, and as I make my way closer, I see my dad is already there.

He leans up to a mic. "And here is the one we've all been waiting for—Marra Ayers!" His voice booms around, then the cheers and clapping overtake all other noise. Once I reach my dad, he holds up a hand. Everyone goes quiet. "Let me explain how this is going to work before we begin."

Finally.

"We have three trials."

Just three? Not ten or twenty?

My father continues. "The first one is a test of intellectual strength. The second will be a test of physical strength. The third and final trial will be a show of magic."

I give him a double-take. He didn't say a battle to the death. Did Mom talk him out of that part? Or does he want me to kill him using magic? My guess is the latter.

There isn't any time to clear up my questions. Four mermen hurry up to the stage and set up a single table, placing items on it that I can't see from where I am.

“There are four parts,” my dad says. “Marra will need to pass each puzzle or game, and they get increasingly harder.”

Awesome. I take a deep breath and think back to the exams I took to get into college when I was living on land. If I was able to score high enough to make ivy league schools a realistic option, I can do this.

I hope.

Dad puts a hand on my shoulder and guides me to the table. “You’ll start with this one, and move up the table until you’ve completed each one. The cameras will show the table to everyone in the audience.” He points up to one huge screen and another.

No pressure.

“Would you like to sit while doing these?”

I nod, and a merman rushes up and sets a chair in front of the first puzzle—a flat stone square like a game board with colorful gems in each corner, each on its own square.

My dad holds up a green one. “Your objective is to move each piece to the other side without blocking the other ones. You have twenty minutes once you move the first gem.”

At least that doesn’t sound so bad.

“Only five known merpeople have ever completed this task.”

I turn to him with wide-eyed shock and hold back from asking him if he’s crazy.

He motions for me to sit.

Reluctantly, I do.

“The timer will begin once you move the first game piece. You can only move one piece from a color, then you must move onto another color, and move each other color before coming back to it. Does that make sense?”

I nod and study the board. It doesn't appear too complicated, but if only five others have won the game, it has to be trickier than it looks. In my mind, I plan out as many moves as I can without losing my concentration. Lines and dots indicate where the pieces have to go. My first mental plan is a bust. The pink ends up blocked and unable to move any further, and I can't continue on without moving one of those pieces. I try a different strategy, and it ends the same way but with the green stuck.

The crowd gets louder. Merpeople are chanting my name, louder each time they say it. I glance up at the two screens. They show the game board—how boring it must be for everyone else.

Before long, people shout for me to move various pieces. Some call for yellow while others call for blue or green.

I try to tune them out and plan a different strategy. Need to find something that'll work. Yet each idea lands me in the same position—unable to win the game. And this is just the first part of the first trial. It's only going to get worse from here. No question about that.

Each new method I imagine ends up the same way. The crowd is growing louder and my father is pacing around the table. He doesn't say anything, but it all makes me feel like I'm taking too long.

I'd like to see any one of these merpeople do better. Only five people have completed this puzzle correctly! And I'm expected to get it right on my first try. On the bright side, if I fail I won't have to worry about killing my dad—or anything else associated with Queen Sirena. I can go back to being just another academy student.

Right. I'm heir to the throne. I'll never be just another anything.

Ever.

The audience gets louder and louder, making it impossible to think. I grab a yellow piece and move it. My stomach knots. I've moved without a solid strategy.

Cheers and applause replace the pleas to move.

My pulse pounds in my ears as I consider my next move. It has to be a green gem. And if I place it on the wrong circle, I lose. In front of everyone.

The viewers grow antsy before long, and without putting any thought into it, I move a green piece. Then a blue one. I barely take the time to breathe before I continue along, going around the board, moving each gem in order. The crowd grows even louder each time I take another turn.

Much to my surprise, I haven't blocked any of the pieces yet. Each one has two possible moves. The noise makes it hard to think, but somehow just moving them without too much thought is actually working. Each color is getting closer to the other side, and I haven't blocked any of them.

Before I know it, the blues are all in their places. My breath hitches. I might actually be able to win this. I continue to follow my instincts, moving each gem, one color at a time.

Now the yellows are all in their places! I only have two more colors, and the board is clear of half the pieces. It's getting closer and closer to the finish.

Next, I place the last green gem in its final home space. Only three pink ones remain on the board, and I quickly move them into place. Though I wait for my dad to say I messed up somehow. That I unknowingly broke a rule and failed the trials already.

Cheers and applause break out, and my dad lifts my arm in victory. “Marra has passed the first part of the first trial!”

Relief washes through me, but it’s short-lived. Dad moves my chair to the next board. It’s a word game. It looks like a mix between Scrabble and a crossword puzzle. He explains the rules. Basically, I have to answer questions and spell them out correctly on the board.

At least I won’t have to rely on strategy with this one. But if I don’t know the answer to even one question, then I’m stuck. And my odds aren’t great considering the majority of my education has come from the surface.

The first questions are about Queen Sirena’s childhood. I answer them quickly thanks to my trips to the secret libraries. She was raised by people who weren’t her parents and she lived away from the castle where her parents ruled. The rest of the questions are all about her and her life, as well. And because our lives are closely tied, I answer based on my own experiences and get them right.

After I complete the last one, the crowd once again erupts in cheers. My dad then congratulates me, then moves me onto the last intellectual challenge. This time, it’s a card game. My father explains it as a game of speed and quick thought.

And he’s my opponent.

I’m not sure why this surprises me, but it makes my insides knot up worse than a bunch of necklaces thrown into a box and shaken up.

He explains the rules and deals the cards. Basically, we have to place a card on top of the discard pile that is either one higher or one lower than what shows on top, and we can't take more than five seconds. We don't have to take turns, just get rid of our cards first to win.

It seems like more of chance than skill, but I don't say anything. I just need to win, and I've just won two nearly impossible games, so I see no reason I can't do this as well. Aside from that, my dad wants me to win these trials. Maybe this one is to give me a break after exhausting my willpower.

Nope. He slams down the first card and then another. And another.

He's three moves ahead of me. What is he doing?

I push past my mental exhaustion and slam down a card, followed by another. He whacks three more almost before I can comprehend it. I grab one and hit the pile, and just as I do, he discards another. Everything becomes a frenzy of cards, and I can barely think. Just react. Ignore the thousands of shouts and cheers all around us.

We're both down to one card. Mine is playable. I hit it onto the pile. But so does my dad at the same time.

"What does that mean?" I gasp.

"It's a draw! Replay!" He gathers the cards, shuffles, and deals.

Every muscle in my body aches from the stress. How am I going to get through all of these mental challenges, plus two more trials?

Chapter 25

“Ready?” Dad glances at me from behind his new hand of cards.

I want to say no, but instead I sit up straighter. “Bring it on.”

So, I lay the first card down, then another. He flips down two in a row. It becomes another frenzy, where I’m reacting more than actually thinking. Barely have time to process the cards and slam them down in time.

Finally, I discard my last one. He has two more in his hand. I think that means I won.

He lets go of his remaining cards, and they float to the table. “We have a winner!”

The crowd erupts into applause, and the noise is deafening. I want to collapse, but before I’m allowed even the luxury of imagining it, my dad moves over to another board game. It looks similar to chess. He explains the game of strategy, and it sounds far more complicated than chess—which I could handle. I’ve been in tournaments before and even won some of them. But this game makes the land game look like child’s play.

He offers me the first move, but I decline. I need to get a feel for this first, and the complicated rules he just laid out are swimming through my mind. He grabs a gold piece shaped like a trident and moves it in a u-shape around some of his other pieces. He glances at me, like it’s clearly my turn.

I grab for a piece shaped like a sea star, but Dad clears his throat. The expression in

his eyes tells me no. Hopefully none of the cameras capture that, as I'm pretty sure that could be construed as cheating, even from the king. I reach for a sea urchin, and Dad relaxes his expression. I move it in a zigzag shape, pretty sure that's what he said to do with those. We continue on, with him clearing his throat or shooting glares at me if I'm about to make a bad move. And he gets away with all of it since the large screens only show the board itself and there are no microphones on us.

Before long, I capture his coral piece. He gives me a look like he's proud of me. I hope that means he knows what a ridiculous position I'm in. Forced to not only play but win four games in a row that I've never even heard of before today—in front of our whole kingdom.

Seriously crazy. Yet here I am.

The game starts to make more sense as we move along. He takes some of my pieces and I get some of his. It's a heated back and forth, but he continues to throw me subtle clues for which I'm grateful. Any other opponent, and I'd be stuck out of luck.

Does that mean I don't deserve to win?

Of course not. Sirena was deeply familiar with these intellectual games.

I glance over at my trident, surprised at the answer but also appreciative. No time to react, I have a game to win, and Dad has two more of my pieces than I have of his. He may be willing to help me, but he isn't making it easy. Not by a long shot.

We carry on, and after what feels like forever, we're both down to one piece. His is a merman and mine a shark. We move the pieces around the board, attacking and avoiding, but neither capturing the game-winning piece. If I didn't know better, I'd think he actually wanted to win. Maybe he's just trying to give Valora's people a good game to watch. He hasn't given me any clues in a while. Perhaps this last leg is

truly about skill. Either way, I'm going to have to give this my all if I want the win. It's clear I'm going to have to earn it, which is the point of the trials anyway.

The back and forth goes on until my eyelids start growing heavy. Until I'd rather sleep than keep going. I don't care about Queen Sirena's powers or these trials.

Yet here I am, and not even one-third of the way through. Almost, but it feels lightyears away at this point. Dad and I dart the pieces around the board for what has to be at least a hundred moves. Probably more. It won't surprise me if he calls a draw and we have to start over again.

Do the zig-zag move on him now.

I give my weapon a double-take before turning my attention to the board. And it's a brilliant move. It'll block him from any of his power moves, then I can take him after that. I do the move, and Dad gasps.

"Didn't even see that. Good work."

If only I could take the credit, but there isn't any rule against working with my trident. In fact, it's expected, and I'm pretty sure that was how Queen Sirena did it—at least in part.

You'd better believe it.

Dad moves his piece diagonally one space. I swoop in with my shark and take his last piece.

The crowd erupts louder than before, and Dad pulls me into a hug, squeezing me tightly. When the noise subsides, he congratulates me for passing the first of the three trials. "Now it's time for a break. I think we're all ready to stretch our tails. We will

return in thirty minutes for the second trial. One that will be even more intense than this first one.”

Dad escorts me to my dressing room. I hope I’m allowed to come back before the third trial. It’s the only way I’ll be able to pull off my plan not to kill him at the end of the third trial. But I don’t have time to think about that yet.

I have the second trial to get through first. However, before that I want a nap. I rest my trident against the wall, collapse onto the couch, and give in to my heavy eyelids. Sleep quickly takes over, and I’m inundated with images of game pieces and playing cards dancing around a fire-breathing sea dragon. Even in my dreams I’m aware that a sea creature wouldn’t be able to produce flames, but that doesn’t make the image any less scary.

“Time for your next trial.” Dad’s voice breaks through the wild images.

I force my eyes open. “I thought I had a half an hour break.”

“You did.” He squeezes my shoulder.

“Doesn't feel like it.” I groan.

“Are you ready?”

“Are you kidding?”

He sits next to me. “You did fantastic! Even though you’ve never played any of those games, you beat them all.”

I rub my eyes. “Am I facing a sea dragon next?”

“You can’t know what you’re facing before you go in.”

“I know what the last trial is.”

“True,” he admits. “But that’s because you were digging around ahead of time. However, you don’t know all the details.”

And neither does he. I have a plan of my own, and he won’t see it coming. “I’ll get to rest again after the next trial?”

“Of course. You’ll have a full half hour, just like this time.”

“Isn’t that nice?” Since I’ll be getting ready for my surprise, I won’t be able to sleep. But that’s a price I’m willing to pay to keep my dad alive. He may trust his servants to bring him back, but I don’t. I’ve hardly had any time to spend with him since he showed up.

He gestures toward my trident. “Let’s head back out.”

“Or we could go back to land.”

“You don’t want to finish the trials?”

“I’m exhausted already.”

“Did you have anything to eat or drink?”

I shake my head, my eyelids growing heavy again. “Only interested in sleep.”

“You’re going to need to be at the top of your game for the upcoming trials.” He piles food onto a plate and hands it to me.

“Aren’t we supposed to head back out?” I take a bite.

“It can hardly begin without you. The people will be fine waiting a few extra minutes.”

“Okay.” I scarf the food down, and feel some energy returning. Not as much as I’d hoped for, but at least it’s something. I still want to nap for a week, but that isn’t going to happen anytime soon. Not when I’m most likely about to face one of the fiercest and rarest underwater creatures known to merpeople.

No big deal.

Dad takes my plate as soon as I finish the food. “Grab your trident.”

I do, and I try not to think about what I’m about to face—or the fact that it could kill me. On the bright side, he has people waiting and ready to revive him, so they could

probably bring me back to life if it came down to that. Maybe. If I'm lucky.

We make our way back to the arena, which now has the platform removed. At least there isn't a sea dragon waiting for me. The only thing is a microphone in the dead center.

I shudder at my choice of words.

The noisy crowd quiets as we make our way to the mic. Dad taps on it and waits for silence. "Marra has made it through the first of Queen Sirena's trials. Now she will use her trident and magic to defeat a rare and dangerous sea creature. Are you ready?"

The audience goes wild.

A set of doors opens on the opposite side from where we came in. Five burly mermen come out, each clinging to a chain. Attached to the metal links is a green-and-blue-finned dragon with two heads, struggling to break free.

Dad turns to me. "Your job is to kill it."

My stomach lurches.

Chapter 26

Dad swims up to the stands, and once he's seated the five mermen all release their chains, race back through the doors, then slam them shut. The screens all focus on the sea dragon—or dragons? I get two in one. Glass walls raise up in front of the onlookers.

I'm now caged in with the monster.

The creature roars, exposing three rows of razor-sharp teeth in each mouth, and rushes toward me. As it does, the chains all break off and sink down to the ground.

Muffled gasps and shouts sound from the crowd.

I hold up the trident. "You've been through this before? She had to battle a two-headed beast?"

Yes. But you'll end up more powerful than any other, and you'll rule all the oceans.

If I survive. And given how angry both heads of the sea dragon look, I'm not willing to bet on my chances. I dart out of the way just before it crashes into me, then it slams into the glass behind me. Its bones crunch, but the thing isn't deterred. It turns around and growls, blood dripping from the sharp rows of teeth.

The crowd grows louder, even through the glass separating us. Merpeople are waving their arms and shouting. The nasty creature lunges for me. I hold out the trident. Its tips sink into the monster's chest, but the creature doesn't even seem to notice. Both

heads reach for me, snapping the rows of teeth. One comes dangerously close to my face.

I yank my weapon free, and blood drips into the water, dissolving from sight almost immediately. I swim away. It chases, gnashing its teeth and grunting hungrily just inches behind me.

Use your magic!

Right. My Ayers power.

Heart thundering, I swim as fast as I can to get away. No way I can use magic with it so close in pursuit. I have to do something to get it to stop, but I'm going to have to fight it first. Building the magic is going to take time—not much, but more than I have.

Its teeth crack together behind me, and it sounds like it's gaining on me. My heart races, and I glance back. It's closer. I whip around and slice the trident through the water, and manage to cut a leg. It howls and keeps coming. I stab it again, this time lower.

The dragon breathes heavily and snarls. All I seem to be doing is angering it, or them, whatever. Both heads go for me simultaneously, growling and biting. I dart back, barely escaping the teeth of the left head. The other one dives toward me, those sharp teeth nearly taking off my arm.

I jab the trident in its face, just barely missing an eye. It screeches in pain, and as it does, the other head comes at me. I swim around the side of the injured one and dig the tips into its side. Again and again.

Both of them scream, the sound piercing.

Now's my chance. I stick my weapon between my side and my arm, and focus my attention on my power. Clench my fists and focus on my anger, my will to survive. My hands flicker a faint green.

The monster turns, still bellowing, and charges at me. Its blood turns the water around it pink. I leap out of the way just before it slams into me, then it crashes into the glass which protects everyone except me. It staggers, shaking one of the heads.

I take advantage of its distraction and ball my fists. Think about how it wants nothing other than to kill me. Let the anger fester, grow. My hands glow green, but before I can harness enough magic, the creature comes after me again. I grab my trident, but not fast enough.

One of the razor-sharp teeth pierces my arm. The pain is searing, like its enamel is made from poison or some type of deadly magic. The tooth glides down my arm, tearing my leather sleeve. I can't move. The pain is too much, and it's getting worse by the moment. I take a deep breath and try to focus.

Too late. One of the massive heads shoves me into the wall. The back of my head hits with a sickening thud. My vision doubles. Sparkling dots dance before my eyes between me and the four heads. One of the mouths opens again.

I have to get away. Kill this thing before it kills me. With shaky hands, I aim the trident at its mouth. Shove it out as far as I can reach. Before it can react, the spikes dig into the roof of its mouth. Poke up through its skin. Its eyes widen, and it hollers loudly enough to make my ears hurt.

I wrench my trident from its snout. Blood clouds my vision. It's everywhere. I hold my breath and swim away, mentally preparing myself for the next attack. After I've put enough distance between us, I lean against my trident and focus on my emotions, my racing heart, and the agonizing pain in my arm and my head. My back aches,

making it hard to catch a full breath. The water feels thicker and tastes of blood, even at this distance from the monster.

It turns around and finally sees me. One head and neck is limp, the other erect, its angry eyes focused on me. It charges for me. My entire body tenses in anticipation. My spasms of pain intensify.

I squeeze my hands and try to conjure the Ayers power. But it isn't working. A thought strikes me. I'm not furious with it. The dragon didn't ask for this battle any more than I did. I feel sorry for it.

And I'll never be able to use my power without a strong emotion—the threat on my life isn't enough. Not when I know the creature is only lashing out because of this horrible situation.

The monster lunges, reaching for me with those massive jaws and teeth. One grazes my good arm, slashing my sleeve but missing my skin. I hold up my trident to protect myself.

My weapon glows before tiny bolts of bright lightning spark from the tips. The sparks meld together into one bright ray which aims straight for the dragon, slamming into the remaining head. Its chin explodes. It gives a final shriek, then slumps to the ground.

The second trial is over.

Now to see if I can beat the third without killing my dad.

Will my plan work?

Chapter 27

My dressing room is bustling with activity. Two doctors are looking me over and both my parents are fussing over me. Mom's worried about my injuries and my dad is giving me tips about the next trial—but I can barely focus on a word he says. I really only want Bash and Halen at this point, but family and servants only. I'm tempted to tell them Bash has my name tattooed on his chest as a promise to me, but I keep my mouth shut.

If the third trial goes as planned, it'll be over in no time—and both my dad and I will swim away from it. Well, he might be unconscious, but he'll be alive, and that's what counts.

One of the doctors turns to me. "Your wounds are sewed up."

"She'll be okay to keep on with the trials?" Dad asks. "I should've just used the Ayers power. I don't know what I was thinking. Suppose I was distracted."

"She'll be fine—just needs to have the sutures looked at in a couple of days."

I press on the stitches, and find the wound barely hurts. Kind of tingles.

The doctor nods. "Magic, your highness."

"Perfect." Dad turns to me. "Are you ready, or will you need another moment before we head back to the arena?"

My stomach knots and I glance at the bag I brought. “Could I have a few minutes alone to give myself a pep talk?”

“I can give you a pep talk like none other.”

“Please?” I force a smile. “I just need some time alone to prepare myself. Then I’ll be able to give it my all.”

Mom turns to him. “It’s only a couple of minutes, Tiberias.”

He glances back and forth between the two of us. “I can’t say no to either one of you.” He kisses the top of my head. “Just two minutes, daughter.”

I nod. “Promise.”

Mom takes his hand, then everyone clears the room.

My heart thunders so hard I shake. I take a deep breath and make my way over to the bag. I look around to make sure nobody’s watching, even though I know I’m alone.

If this doesn’t work, I’m out of luck. I need this to work.

With trembling fingers, I unzip my bag. Look around again. Pull out a bottle of wine I snagged from the castle the last time I was there. I quickly open it and gulp down two glasses.

Enough to give me the buzz I’m going to need to pull this off but not enough to inhibit my thinking. Can’t let anything get in the way of this.

It’s my dad’s life on the line.

And he's not even worried. Didn't act like anything was wrong moments ago.

Knock, knock!

"Time to go, Marra," my father calls from the other side of the door.

I force the cork back into the bottle's mouth and shove it into my bag, then zip it up before opening the door.

Dad smiles. I'm overcome with emotion and throw my arms around him.

Maybe I should've drunk a little less. Can't change that now.

The two of us head back to the arena. He whispers about the plan in place for his servants to revive him.

I don't bother to let him know those plans won't be necessary. I'm going to render him unconscious without taking his life. It's the only way—even if he doesn't see it yet. He will, though. And he'll even commend me for my out-of-the-box thinking.

Everything goes by in a blur as we re-enter the field. It has been cleaned of all blood and any other remnants of the downed monster that had only been trying to fight for its life, to protect itself. Guilt stings for my part in its end.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 9:01 am

I really should've refused to take part in these trials. So barbaric to have to kill anything. Or anyone.

We reach the microphone, and Dad praises my efforts so far. "Clearly, Marra is a worthy modern-day Queen Sirena. I couldn't be prouder of her. She hasn't turned away from any challenge presented to her—and I know this third and final test will be the hardest in many ways."

I smile and nod. I feel bad about going against his instructions on this, but he'll understand. He'll be alive, no chance of death.

He continues on a little longer, sharing his love of Queen Sirena's legendary stories, and asks me if I want to share anything.

I shake my head. "Let's just do this."

Before the wine wears off.

We make our way to the middle of the field, and servants bring us our tridents.

You really going to try and skirt the rules?

"It'll work," I mutter without moving my lips.

He's confident in his servants' abilities.

"I'm not. Just go along with it."

You're the boss.

The servant who handed my dad his weapon raises three fingers. "Three ... two ... one!" He moves out of the way.

Dad holds up his trident and gives a slight nod, clearly wanting me to attack. I lunge for him, giving him a little of what he wants. We spar, each blocking each other's moves. So far, he isn't going easy on me. However, that will likely change as he wants the only end he can see more than anything.

We go back and forth, intensifying the battle but not bringing it to life-threatening levels.

Not yet.

"You trying to keep it exciting for the audience?" Dad asks.

"Sure." I go with that. Then I pick up the pace, and swing my weapon close enough that I nearly nick his skin.

He beams. "Better!"

I want to shake him. How can he be so eager for his own death? Doesn't he realize the guilt he'll leave me with if this goes wrong?

Dad glances at my fists. "Nice."

They're glowing because I'm mad at him.

"You going to use the Ayers power against me?" Now he's taunting me. Probably knows how much I don't want this.

I stop mid-movement, and he crashes into me. His trident flying from his grasp.

“Didn’t see that coming.” He sounds so proud.

My stomach knots as I prepare for what’s coming next. He lifts a brow, clearly confused.

Good.

I open my mouth and take in as much water as I can. Hold onto it and burst out into song. It’s one he sang to me when I was young and thought he was my doting uncle.

He tilts his head and draws his brows together.

Thunks sound in the audience as mermen fall at my voice.

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Dad doesn't budge, doesn't crash down. In fact, he leans on his weapon and straightens his back. "That's lovely, and I couldn't be more pleased with your song choice."

More thunks sound in the background.

I struggle to keep singing. He's trying to distract me, but I'm not going to let it work.

Feminine shrieks and cries sound as the mermen continue crashing down, losing consciousness—like my dad should be doing. But he isn't.

Why not?

My mind races as I start the song over. A thought strikes me—whenever I sang, those with me never passed out.

Dad must be too close to me for this to work. I inch away from him, belting out the lyrics as loudly as possible. He doesn't move, and I finally stop when half the arena separates us.

He rushes toward me, his trident aimed right for me. I hold up mine and block it, forced to stop my song. I grunt and push against him. "Why aren't you passing out?"

"I noticed the missing wine from our room, and when your mother knew nothing about it, I put two and two together—you wanted to use your siren powers on me to keep from having to kill me."

I struggle against him. “How did you figure that out?”

“You’re my daughter.” He presses his bar harder against me. “I know how you think.”

“But how’d you keep from succumbing to the song?”

“Magic.”

“Of course.” Disappointment washes through me. My perfectly laid out plan isn’t going to work.

Or will it? I have to keep trying.

I’m not going to kill him. I’ll find another way around the stomach pains and ancient legends.

Dad comes at me, swinging his trident. “You need to do this.”

“No.”

He thrusts it at me, and I duck out of the way. He strikes again, this time brushing one of the spikes against my stitches. Blinding pain paralyzes me momentarily. Once I recover, I see the tips of his weapon aiming straight for my chest. I move my trident to divert his attack.

My dad is trying to force me to fulfill Sirena’s dad curse, even if it happens through self-defense.

He’s going to be sorely disappointed.

We dart around the arena, him attacking and me deflecting. He moves so quickly, it's almost surreal. I can barely keep up. I gasp for water. Focus my attention on protecting myself without inflicting the slightest injury upon him.

Dad stabs at me from the right. I whip my trident around to intercept.

Move to the left and surprise him. He won't see it coming.

"I'm not going to kill him."

His people are ready to revive him. They've done it before.

"Doesn't mean they can do it again."

My dad darts back and forth, swinging this way and that. His weapon heads straight for my neck. I hold out my trident to prevent myself from being impaled.

Instead of countering my move, he throws himself into the points.

I stare in disbelief. Shock.

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The tines of my trident stick out through his back. The water around us turns bright red before dissipating to pink.

He looks at me, the light fading from his eyes. “I told you this needed to be done. It’s all for you.”

His eyes close.

I scream for help.

His body goes limp.

“Somebody save him!”

Everything around me disappears as a warmth spreads through my body, starting at my hands and radiating out.

Chapter 28

The warmth turns into an excruciating heat. Feels like my skin is burning off my body. Wouldn't have thought that was possible, but if I could open my eyes, I'm sure that's what I'd see. I try to cry out, but everything hurts too much. So. Much. Pain.

I think I'm on the ground. Can't really tell. I know I'm not upright.

Need the pain to stop.

It won't.

I gasp. Struggle to breathe. To open my eyes. Gain control of myself.

After what feels like an eternity, the agony eases. Doesn't go away fully, but it isn't as bad as it was before.

At long last, I finally open my eyes. The sight before drives terror straight to my core.

Mom is sobbing and clings to Dad, who's limp and lifeless.

I knew this would happen! Why did he have to fight against my siren powers? I race over. "Mom!"

She looks up at me, her eyes red. "He was wrong about them reviving him! They can't fix his wounds." She leans against his chest.

“Do something!” I shake one of his servants. “Save him!”

He hangs his head. “We’ve tried everything. Everything!”

“No, you haven’t! Or he’d be alive!”

The servant just shakes his head.

Mom looks back up at me. “Can’t you do something?”

“Like what? You know more magic than I do!”

She wipes her eyes. “I don’t have the Ayers power.”

Can I use that to save his life? To revive him from death?

Mom rises and swims over to me. She holds out my hair. It’s twice as long and bright than before. “You also have Queen Sirena’s powers. His hopes came to life—you’ve come into the full powers. Only you can heal him!”

No pressure.

“Please!” She pleads with her eyes. “He can’t go much longer without breathing!”

I ball my fists. They immediately glow neon green.

That was fast.

“Hurry!” Mom pulls me closer to Dad.

“Everyone out of my way!”

The servants all stare at me with wide eyes, then scamper away.

My hands grow brighter and warmer. The heat is almost too much to bear. Doesn't feel like my skin's going to melt away, but close. I focus on the power and imagine throwing it as I thrust my fists toward my dad.

The green energy leaves me and flies through the water, then clinging to his chest. It pulsates and grows brighter. His wounds disappear.

He doesn't move though.

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I squeeze my hands together and thrust the brightness toward him. This time, it spreads all around him, from head to tail. It sparkles and brightens, moving all over.

Still no response from him.

Mom glances at me desperately, then throws herself on my dad.

He gasps. His eyes open, dart around. He sits up.

“Tiberias!” Mom cries.

My body goes limp with relief. He’s actually alive! I pull myself together and hurry over.

The crowd goes wilder than at any other point before.

“Marra saved you!” Mom squeezes him. “It all worked like you wanted.”

“Wait.” I hesitate. “You wanted me to revive you all along?”

He rubs his chest, where his wound was. “I knew if my servants couldn’t, you’d be able to.”

“And you didn’t think to clue me in on that little detail? Especially when Queen Sirena herself never saved her dad?”

Dad puts a hand on my arm. “I knew you’d find it within yourself.”

I fold my arms. “You’re lucky that’s what happened!”

Merpeople swarm us, and escort us off the field. They take us to my dressing room. The same doctors from before examine us before allowing us to leave.

Dad wraps me in a tight embrace. “How does it feel to have Queen Sirena’s powers?”

“I’ll let you know once I’ve gotten over the shock.”

“Are you ready to rule the oceans yet?”

I give him a double-take. “Seriously?”

He nods. “Of course.”

“Not a chance. I need to get through the academy first. That’s my first goal. I have a lot to catch up on after spending most of my life on land.”

“Your outside perspective will give you an advantage over the rest of us.”

“Time will tell.” I look around for Bash and Halen. They aren’t here.

“Are you ready for the celebration banquet?” Dad asks.

I fall back onto the couch. “Now? All I want to do is sleep for the next week. I just went through all those trials! Killed a two-headed sea dragon, not to mention bringing you back to life. I’m taking a break. Sorry.”

He laughs. “No, I wouldn’t do that to you. Next week would be perfect. I’ve already got half of my staff preparing it.”

“Sounds great.”

We make some more small talk before parting ways. The driver leads me back to the limo and holds open the door for me. I glance around for Bash and Halen, but the crowds on either side of the barricades and security officers show me I'll never find them here. I'm better off trying to find them once we get back to the academy.

The driver motions for me to get inside. Disappointment washes through me. What an end to this entire event—going back to school alone.

You have me.

I ignore my trident and trudge into the car.

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Halen and Bash are sitting inside. I stare in disbelief. Am I imagining the sight?

She squeals, and they both leap up and embrace me.

“I knew you could do it!” Bash gushes.

“You had me so scared!” Halen gasps.

I just cling to them, unable to find words.

The driver closes the door and starts the engine. Bash pulls out a bottle of champagne. “This definitely calls for a celebration! You’re the most amazing mermaid alive.”

“That she is.” Halen grabs the bottle and pops the top. “To Marra!”

Bash pours the drink and hands out the flutes. “To Marra!”

We all drink, not that I really need more after the useless wine. I sip mine, though it doesn’t really affect how I feel. Don’t want to put anyone to sleep if I end up singing with the band—even though all I really want is to sleep as long as possible. I have a feeling I’m going to get a lot of attention once we get back to the academy. However, I’m not sure what the attention will be. Will I get made fun of for fully gaining the legendary queen’s powers? Or will people be mad at me for fighting the beloved king? Seems I can’t do right no matter what I try or whose daughter I am.

Makes me wonder how I’ll ever become a beloved leader of the oceans, like my

predecessor. Or maybe I'll just rule Valora years down the road after my dad has had a long reign. I kind of like that thought more.

The car stops, and the driver lets us out. My breath hitches as I stare at the dark building. In a way, it brings me back to my first day here. I really don't know what to expect, but at least this time around I have my two closest friends at my side.

Bash puts his arm around me and kisses my cheek. "You coming?"

I lick my lips—a lingering habit from life on land—and take a deep breath. "Yeah. If people hate me, will you—?"

"Hate you?" Halen exclaims. "You're a celebrity!"

"Hasn't helped me so far."

She puts her hands on my arms. "You should've heard everyone talking about you when you completed the trials! Right, Bash?"

He nods. "Everyone was rooting for you the whole time, and the celebration after you brought Tiberias back to life was unreal."

"Deafening." Halen rubs her ears. "If it was your dad's plan—it's still weird calling him that—he succeeded. Everybody else finally sees what we have all along! Just don't forget who was here for you before you were popular."

"And who tattooed your name on his chest." Bash rubs his shirt over the ink.

Halen's eyes widen. "Seriously?"

"How could I ever forget you two?"

“Come on. I don’t know about you, but I’m famished.” She grabs my hand and yanks me away from Bash and toward the building.

“Hey!” Bash catches up and opens the door for us. As soon as he does, it sounds like we’ve entered a party rather than the academy.

Halen leads us in the direction of the noise, and as soon as we reach the dance hall, I freeze in place. It’s decorated with balloons, streamers, and bright lights, and has tons of food along the walls. People turn my way and a wave of congratulations runs through partygoers.

Students I don’t know hug me and talk excitedly over one another. It’s overwhelming, to say the least. Bash pulls me away to one of the food tables, and fills our plates. Even as we eat, more people come up and talk with me about the trials and how they were rooting for me all along. I just smile and thank them.

After we eat, Bash leads me to the dance floor. I lean against him and close my eyes, giving into my fatigue and trying to take in the events of the day. It’s hard to believe the trials and the dad curse are all behind me. No more stomach pains, no more having to sneak around to find out about secret ancient legends. It’s all out in the open now. All fulfilled and ready for the future.

Finally, I can choose my own destiny. I may have Queen Sirena’s hair, powers, and trident, but everything going forward is all up to me. Whether I choose to rule is yet to be seen—and I’m glad for that. It’s far too soon to even think about. The only things I want to worry about are getting through the academy, fully adjusting to life as a mermaid, and spending as much time as possible with Bash and Halen.

Chapter 29

Epilogue

I bump into an overgrown flower then turn to Bash, trying to hold back a smile. “Someone needs to take care of this garden.”

“Is that a jab?” He snickers. “It’s not my fault it was neglected all summer.”

“You’re here now!” I give him a playful shove.

He pulls me close and kisses me deeply. I melt against him and enjoy the moment. We barely had two minutes alone during the entire summer break, and soon we’ll have to head inside for the beginning of the school year ceremony to welcome all the new students.

I’m no longer a lowly first-year. Nobody resents me—and even if Earwyn and her dogfish still dislike me, they graduated. I hear her dad gave her a year of hard labor before choosing her career. I’m pretty sure my dad had something to do with that, but I haven’t asked.

Bash pulls back. “What’s so funny?”

“Was I laughing?”

He gives me that crooked grin of his. “Yes.”

“My mind wandered to Earwyn.”

“Who’d have guessed she’d go into construction?” He snickers.

My shell phone rings. I pull it out and read my text.

“Is Halen here?” Bash asks.

I shake my head. “Mom’s just letting me know they made it to their honeymoon. She says the coral is beautiful.” I smile for her. She always wanted to go to Hawaii, but now gets to spend time in its waters, finally married to the love of her life.

A new text comes in. She sent a picture of the scenery. It’s breathtaking. I show Bash, and he gives me a grin, hugging me to him. “We’ll have to go there for our honeymoon.”

I arch a brow. “Is that a proposal, because it’s not at all what I expected. I always pictured—”

“Always a comedian.” He shakes his head. “No. When I propose, you’ll know it. Trust me. But that’ll be after you’ve graduated. I don’t want anyone to accuse me of distracting you.”

“You already do.” I put my hands on either side of his face and bring him in for a kiss. “But before we go to Hawaii’s waters, we’re heading to land so you can see the sights and meet Ivy.”

He smirks at me. “You sure you got rid of my curse?”

I hold back a laugh. “Are you joking?”

“Of course. I couldn’t believe legs formed when you ran the anti-spell.”

“I wasn’t expecting that, either. I’m still figuring out my powers.”

Bash snickers. “Clearly.”

My phone beeps.

He pulls back. “Another text? Tell them it’s your first day and you’re busy.” Bash kisses me again. “Busy making up for lost alone time getting ready for the royal wedding all summer.”

I grin. “It’s not her. That was my alarm reminding me to get to the auditorium.”

He groans. “Already?”

“I’m the student body president, so I can’t be late. What kind of example would that set for the first-years?”

Bash gives me a playful put-out expression. “I guess you’re right. Then you’d have to spend the whole year trying to get them in line.”

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“That’s in addition to getting you in line.” I lace my fingers through his and head down the trail.

“Hey, now!”

We laugh as we make our way through the overgrown garden and go inside. By the time we get to the auditorium, it’s already packed with students eager to start a new school year. It saddens me that this’ll be Bash’s last year at the academy as a student, but Middlebrooks has already offered him a position as her personal assistant after graduation, so he’ll still be here. Just not as a student.

Bash squeezes my hand, then sits with Bahari. I wish I could join them, but I was voted student body president. The last time a second-year was given that honor was when my dad was here. I take a seat on the platform along with some faculty and other student leaders who will welcome everyone.

Halen waves to me from the second-year section. I smile and turn my attention to Middlebrooks, who is speaking into the microphone.

My heart races as it always does before I have to speak in front of a crowd. But this is good practice in case I choose to become queen someday. I probably will, but my life is my destiny. My choice. And there’s only one thing I’m sure I want at this point.

I glance over at Bash, who crosses his eyes and sticks out his tongue. He knows I have to keep a straight face while up here. And that’s why I love him.

He’s my destiny. Everything else is just details.