



Hammerhead (Kinkaid Shifters #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A love as vast as the ocean, a mystery as deep as the sea...

After a lifetime of violence, former mercenary and Alpha hammerhead shark shifter Miguel longs for a fresh start. Sent to the Kinkaid Clan with the rest of his small pod of sharks, he's determined to leave his dark past behind and build a future filled with peace and maybe even love.

Deidre, a selkie from the magical shores of Ireland, arrives in the Gulf to visit her Kinkaid kin and her playful curiosity draws her to Miguel. Their connection is undeniable, and the sultry waters of the Gulf can barely contain their growing passion.

When a mystical island appears on the horizon, shrouded in mist and brimming with ancient magic, their budding romance takes a dangerous turn. Deidre becomes entranced by the island's seductive pull, and Miguel must rush to save her from its enchantment. Can Miguel and Deidre overcome the forces that threaten their fledgling relationship and claim the love they were destined to share?

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On the Top-Secret Plum Island military base

Miguel's wrists ached in the uncomfortable iron cuffs. His shark snarled beneath his skin, but shifting would only leave him flopping around on land, unable to breathe. He might be on an island, but these military shifters weren't going to let him anywhere near the water.

Oh, he could shapeshift to get out of the cuffs, then shift back to human, but the men around him would probably kill him before he managed the second shift. They hadn't let him or any of his men alone long enough to even try to escape since being captured on the beach. There weren't supposed to be shifters on this island. The intel for this op had been sorely lacking, which only made him angrier at the predicament he now found himself in.

Miguel forced his breathing to remain steady as the lion shifter across the table leaned forward, golden eyes gleaming in the dim light of the interrogation room. Kinkaid lions didn't play games. He knew that much. Everybody knew that much.

"You think we should just let you go? When you're probably working for the Venifucus?" The man across the table—a Kinkaid, for sure—glared at Miguel, his golden eyes gleaming. His delivery was smooth, but there was a dangerous edge beneath his calm facade.

Miguel didn't like hearing that word. Venifucus. He might be a shark and therefore living in the morally gray area between the Light and darkness, but he wasn't evil. None of his guys were that bad, really. And none of them were allied with that ancient order known as the Venifucus.

Miguel lifted his chin. “We’re not your enemies.”

The man’s brow arched. “No? Because from where I’m sitting, you and your little band of sharks are working for the same son of a bitch who keeps trying to kidnap my friends. The same bastard who ordered a hit on the women closest to them. Civilian women. Human women. In order to get to the men. That’s pretty low. Even for a shark.”

Miguel swallowed hard, working to control his anger. He didn’t like this lion, or the snotty way he spoke of sharks. “We didn’t know what we were getting into when we took the job.”

The lion snorted, seemingly unimpressed. “Didn’t know? You’ve been trying to kidnap soldiers by targeting their families. That’s not just not knowing —that’s willful ignorance. Or maybe you’re just blindly following the orders of your Venifucus masters.”

Miguel said nothing. What could he say? That he’d been blinded by the promise of an easy payoff? That his pod had wanted to buy homes, build a small coastal community like those damned bears in Grizzly Cove? That they’d needed the money to escape a life of endless fighting?

Excuses. Weak justifications. None of them would change the fact that they’d taken blood money.

“Look,” Miguel growled, “we didn’t kill anyone. We didn’t intend to kill anyone. We’re not proud of what we did, but we’re just doing a job. We’re not them.” He couldn’t bring himself to utter the name of that ancient, evil sect.

The shifter’s lips curled into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “Not them, huh? Then tell me, Miguel Aroyo—who exactly are you?”

Now, that was a really good question. Too bad Miguel didn't have an answer.

The lion shifter stood, pacing slowly around the table. "We should have let those Green Berets finish you off." He growled a bit, his cat issuing a warning. "But my Alpha thinks you might be worth something, so you're not dead. Yet."

The door creaked open before Miguel could respond. Another man walked in, but this one wasn't a lion shifter. He carried himself differently—graceful, calm. Predatory in a way that made Miguel's instincts sharpen. He smelled faintly of the ocean.

This one had to be a seal shifter. A selkie. The Kinkaid Clan had plenty of them, too. Miguel had no name for this one, but he knew the look in his eyes well enough. This was a man used to dragging secrets from the unwilling.

The selkie set a thick file on the table and flipped it open. A stack of surveillance photos slid across the surface. Miguel didn't need to look to know what they contained—images of him, his brother, and his podmates moving along the coast, meeting with Kettering's men. Proof of their sins.

The selkie finally spoke. "Let's talk about what you're going to do to earn your keep while you're in our custody."

"You're not letting us go," Miguel said quietly, mustering what dignity he could. "But you're not going to kill us. What gives?"

"We have other plans. Unlike your former employers, we like to think we have a bit more patience in learning the truth about those we capture. We can't let you go, but we're not murderers. If you abide by our rules, you'll stay alive and even come out of this with a bit of money in the bank. If you cross us, you're dead. We're giving you a chance, but only one. Screw up and you're all history."

Miguel exhaled slowly, feeling the cuffs dig into his skin.

Shit .

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“What do you think?” Liam Kinkaid, a tall, blond Navy man and lion shifter asked those who had been observing the interrogation. Liam was running things under his father’s command on the top-secret military base off the coast of Long Island.

“It’s an audacious plan, if it works,” offered Captain Haliwell, the leader of the Green Beret unit that had been targeted by the hammerhead shifters and others in the employ of foreign agents. “Though it’s a shame there’s no secure prison where you can hold them until this is all over. It’s a risk letting them work for your family.”

“There aren’t many prisons that can hold shifters long term,” Liam explained again. These Green Berets had some awesome magic, but they were new to it, and to the wider world of shifters and other magical beings. “Our law is usually harsh and the penalty for doing something as heinous as they tried to do is usually death, but killing them in the heat of battle is one thing. Killing them in cold blood isn’t really something our human sides condone. And given their somewhat ambiguous reputations as men who only take jobs that aren’t completely evil, it’s good to give them a shot at redemption. Even though my lion wanted to rip their heads off at first.”

“Well, if they can be turned to work for our side, then so much the better,” Captain Haliwell said, rising from his seat at the conference table. They’d moved into the conference room to discuss the results of the interrogations more than two hours ago. Each of the shark shifters had been grilled and examined every which way and now they had to discuss whether or not their plan still seemed viable. “For what it’s worth, I think that last one—Miguel—is their leader and he seemed surprised that you were going to let them all live. He also didn’t hate the idea of working for your Clan,

which surprised me. He's not what I thought he was, but what he is, is still a mystery."

"Exactly my thoughts," Liam concurred. "We'll give the Clan in Texas a chance to sort them out and then we'll see." Liam stood and stretched. "Like you said, if we can get them on our side, it'll be a feather in our caps. Sharks have shady reputations, and some are downright evil, but the ones I've dealt with before were great whites or other varieties of shark. I've never really crossed paths with a hammerhead before. They're...weird."

Captain Haliwell laughed. "No shit. I've always thought those things looked downright prehistoric and I can't really wrap my head around a person shapeshifting into one of them. I still have problems believing in lion shifters and werewolves and all the rest of you that I deal with every day."

"Give it time, Captain," Liam said with a grin. "We'll grow on you. I know it."

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Three months later, off the coast of Texas

Miguel and Jose Aroyo didn't claim to be shifter geniuses, but they both knew they had screwed up royally when they'd accepted a job from eccentric German billionaire Abdul Kettering. The half-Afghani Kettering was heir to a fortune made by his late, arms-dealer father, and he continued in the same line of work, among others, that were definitely gray areas, if not totally black.

As shark shifters, Miguel and Jose weren't exactly goody two-shoes. They lived their lives in the gray and hadn't been raised to expect mercy from land-based shifters, or the humans that ruled over the dry areas of the world. Sharks had to be tough, or they'd get trampled when they chose to walk on two legs. In the water, they were supreme—or close to it.

Miguel and Jose were hammerhead shark shapeshifters. Just like the rest of their small group of bachelors that had banded together in hopes of making a lot of money in a short amount of time and setting themselves up like those crazy bears had in Washington State. The sharks didn't expect to start their own town or anything as grand, but they could maybe buy houses in some coastal area and form a little community.

If they got that far, they hoped to attract mates, the way the bears supposedly had. Life was hard alone, and the hammerheads just wanted a nice place on the shore where they could live life and maybe raise families. But to do that, they needed cash, and Abdul Kettering had offered them a whole lot of money to capture a few human Green Berets.

They had guessed the mission would be difficult—since the human men had extensive training—but definitely do-able. Miguel and his friends were sharks, after all. Kettering had told them that the Army guys might have a bit of magic, but they were new to it and probably couldn't use it well. He'd also suggested going after the women around those Army dudes as a way to force them to comply, after the outright snatch attempts made by earlier teams hadn't worked out as expected.

Boy, had that been a mistake. Miguel and his small pod had been trapped and caught like any dumb flounder.

They'd been shot with poisoned arrows by a human woman who'd turned out to be some kind of witch. At least, that's what they believed after being magically poisoned and then given a magical antidote by the same woman.

The same woman their black-hearted mercenary colleague Kotsa, who was a sniper, had shot only a few days before. He'd shot her in the shoulder—though he'd been aiming for her heart. Yet, she'd been healed enough to draw and aim a compound bow, which was no easy feat for a woman, even one with no injuries. She'd also managed to shoot two men with that bow in rapid succession. Miguel still didn't know how she'd managed that. They were shifters, for goodness' sake! They should've been too fast and agile for her to hit even one of them, much less two.

The Green Berets had captured the pod and then turned them over to a bunch of shifters who were also Navy SEALs. The leaders were Kinkaid's, which opened a whole other can of worms. No shifter wanted to get crosswise with the all-powerful lion king, Sam Kinkaid. He was rumored to be ruthless in both business—where he'd made billions for both himself and his Clan—and when it came to his people. And the entire operation on that secret military installation seemed to be run by one of the elder lion Kinkaid's. The SEAL Teams were known to be lousy with Kinkaid selkies. And they were everywhere on that island where the target Green Berets had been stashed.

Oh, yeah. The whole mission had been a clusterfuck from the moment Miguel and his pod had signed on. They'd gone in without all that vital information and had been caught totally unprepared. They'd been interrogated until Miguel felt sure they had no secrets left. Then they'd been put on transport and sent to Galveston, Texas, of all places. There, they'd been put under the watchful eye of the Kinkaid Clan. Getting away from the lion king's justice was not going to be an easy thing.

It became clear almost at once on their arrival in Galveston, as to why the sharks had been sent to the Kinkaid's. The Clan wasn't just made up of lions, but selkies as well. The Irish ancestor of the current Alpha had been a selkie—a seal shifter. As a result, the current Clan had both lions and seals in it, and it was to the seals that the sharks had been assigned.

In the wild, some species of shark might eat seals, but these shifters were not prey by any stretch of the imagination. The hammerheads had been put to work on one of the many boats owned and operated by Kinkaid Industries and sent out to do deep-sea repair work on the floating oil rigs Kinkaid owned in the Gulf of Mexico.

The work suited their abilities, and they were actually being paid really well to do it, so the sharks were going along with their punishment and semi-captivity, for now. It was better not to anger the all-powerful king of the lions and get most of the military shifters in the U.S. on their trail once more. Miguel and his pod mates had discussed their situation at length, and they all believed it was better to bide their time working for Kinkaid and saving up their money.

They still might be able to live out their dream of buying nice homes on the waterfront and attracting mates. In fact, some of the ladies of the Clan weren't put off by their being sharks, and a few of the guys in the pod had been casually dating some of the women in the area. Those guys, in particular, didn't mind the change of plans at all.

It might take longer to achieve their dream this way, but at least they were doing it without earning the enmity of some very powerful people. Miguel realized that, as he got older, he didn't really want all the conflict and strife in his life that he'd craved in his younger days. Now that he'd passed his century mark, he just wanted to settle down somewhere with a good woman and raise children, if possible. Was that too much to ask? Even for a shark?

It's not like he was a great white. Those bastards were tough S.O.B.'s, and these days, were running with the mob in various countries. They were smuggling drugs, kidnapping pretty young women to sell to the highest bidder, and running prostitution and murder-for-hire rings all over the world. Not good people to get involved with.

Hammerheads, by contrast, were still sharks, but they were the butt of a lot of jokes among other kinds of sharks. It wasn't fair. They were just as lethal. Just as deadly. They just looked a little weird to the modern eye. Could he help it if evolution chose to leave them as they had been millions of years ago with their eyes so widely spaced apart?

At least they had a cool name. Hammerhead. Yeah, Miguel had always liked that. It sounded badass.

But they weren't as bad as the great whites or some of the others. They kept to themselves a lot because of the teasing and derision. Which was why this small group of bachelors had banded together when they'd met up in the ocean, and on land. There was strength in numbers, and all of the guys in his small pod were similar in skill, temperament and goals. They all wanted to settle down and figured it would be easier as a group than trying to do it solo.

Miguel leapt up out of the water in his human form to land on the deck of the Kinkaid boat. He had a work shift today, and he'd come back to the boat to get his gear. The Kinkaid's were cool about letting him and his pod swim in the deep as much as they

liked. It was easier to live as a shark, with lots of space to swim, than be stuck on a little boat for days on end. As a result, most of the guys stayed in their fish form on their days off, only touching base on the boat when they were scheduled to work.

The selkies spent a lot of time in the water too, so the hammerheads couldn't get into too much mischief. A fast and supple selkie was always somewhere nearby, keeping tabs on them. Gaining more trust would take time. Miguel knew that. He and his pod had screwed up, and it was going to take a while before the Kinkajids got over it.

In the meantime, he and his friends were making really good money doing work that suited them. It honestly wasn't like being a prisoner at all. They had a lot of freedom, though the Kinkajids did keep an eye on their whereabouts and what they got up to on their days off. Which wasn't much. There wasn't a lot to do around here, so far from shore, except swim, hunt and swim some more. Typical shark stuff. Not too exciting, really.

Except... Miguel had thought he'd seen something on his last big circle of the boat. He'd surfaced for a few minutes, orienting himself to where the boat had moved during the last day or two while he'd been swimming, and he could have sworn he'd seen something in the distance.

An island.

An island that disappeared when he'd taken a second look. One minute, it was there. The next, poof, it was gone.

That smelled of magic to him. Unless he'd finally gone around the bend and lost all his marbles. He didn't think so, though. He suspected it was magic that kept that island shrouded from view most of the time.

Intrigued, he'd wanted to check it out, but he had a work shift. If not for that, and the

progress he and his pod had been making with their Kinkaid watchers while all acting on their best behavior, he might have gone searching for the mysterious island. But he'd promised the rest of the guys. They were all going to behave to get the heat off the group. He couldn't let them down.

So, he'd gone back to the boat and vowed to check it out on his next few days off.

Deidre had arrived on the boat only that morning and was still getting used to the way her Kinkaid cousins ran their business. She'd been briefed on the shark shifters who were under observation of the Clan for having done some bad stuff. She wasn't surprised. Sharks were the ultimate bad boys of the water shifter world. She'd run across her share of sleazy great whites in her time, but she'd never encountered a hammerhead shifter.

She was looking forward to learning more about them, actually. If she was going to run a boat like this in her home waters for the far-reaching and ever-expanding Kinkaid Industries, then she was going to have to find some aquatic shifters of her own to work on her crew, and sharks were known for their muscle and stamina. She just wouldn't hire any great whites. She didn't like what she knew of them, and she'd never met a single one that wasn't some kind of scoundrel.

Most of them were on the wrong side of both human law and the eternal battle of good vs. evil. She didn't want to deal with any of that on her crew. She just wanted strong men who could handle the pressure and had the strength to do the job. Was that too much to ask?

When she saw the bronze-skinned Adonis leap out of the water and land on the deck of the boat, her breath caught. He was like something out of legend. He'd shifted in mid-air, though he seemed to have started the shift the moment he left the water, and by the time he was on deck, he was on two feet. Very human. Very naked. And very well hung.

As a shifter herself, she was used to nakedness. Almost every shifter went into and came out of their shift without their clothing. Only the really super magical species could take their clothing into shift and have it return when they resumed their human form. She didn't know where it went or how it all worked, but she just chalked it up to another magical mystery.

As a selkie, she had a lot more magic than the majority of shifters, but she still had to do the naked thing when she shifted shape, so nakedness was nothing new or exciting to her. Except maybe when she saw a bod like the one that had just leapt onto the deck like it was no big deal.

He was a handsome so-and-so, she'd give him that. He had dark hair that had just enough natural curl to make it look silky and inviting. His body was ripped. Sleek muscle, broad shoulders, and washboard abs that made Deidre's mouth go dry. Sweet Mother of All, that man was hot .

"Oh, good," came a voice from behind her. "Cousin Deidre. When did you come aboard?"

She turned to greet her cousin, Tom Kinkaid, with a big smile. "Just a few minutes ago, actually," she told him, reaching up to give him a big hug. "I swam up and borrowed clothes from the bin."

Most shifter households and boats, for that matter, kept extra clothing available for those who arrived in their animal forms. On a boat like this, it was even more important for there to be towels and dry clothing available for those coming out of the water. Deidre had her hair wrapped in a towel and was dressed in a loose T-shirt and shorts that she'd found in a compartment on deck.

Tom was a lot taller than her, and he gave great big bear hugs, even though he was a seal shifter, like herself. They'd known each other a long time, and he was like

another brother to her. In fact, it had been his idea to expand this operation to the European market, and he'd even suggested her family to run it. This first visit to the Gulf to check out how it all worked might be the beginning of a new business line for her family back home.

"That was a long swim for you," Tom said as he pulled back to look at her. "Are you tired? Do you need to rest?"

"In these temperate waters? It was nothing. Truly. I enjoyed the exercise. You're a spoiled selkie with such warm water to swim in. It feels almost tropical down here to me," she told him, laying the brogue on thick, just to tease him.

"Let's go to the galley and get some coffee. I want to hear all about your family and how everyone is doing. I'll give you the nickel tour of the boat on the way down," Tom offered.

She agreed, and they headed below for the tour and the promised coffee, as well as a plate of sticky buns and some other confections that Americans loved so much. Who was she kidding? Deidre liked them just as well and enjoyed her frequent trips to the U.S. and the varied cuisine in different parts of the country.

It wasn't until later that same day that she ran into the handsome shark shifter. The crew had gathered in the galley for dinner, and Tom introduced her as an observer. The dark-haired man was there. She learned his name was Miguel, and his brother, Jose, sat next to him. The other sharks were spending most of their time in the water since they were off duty at the moment. Tom explained how the on-duty crew lived on the boat while the off-duty guys generally liked to spend their time in the wild rather than cooped up on the boat. It made sense to her, though the waters of her homeland weren't nearly as comfy and warm as these. Still, they were creatures born of the sea, and nature had all sorts of beauty, even in the harshest of weather.

She found herself sitting across from Miguel when they were all seated in the relatively small galley, and every time she looked up, she found his dark eyes trained on her. His intensity made her feel a bit uncomfortable, but she tried not to let it show. She could handle a handsome man who probably knew just what effect he usually had on the fairer sex. Best not to let him know he was getting to her.

He was a shark. She wanted nothing to do with sharks of any kind, no matter how handsome. She was a selkie of a long and proud magical heritage. None of her ancestors had ever gotten mixed up with a shark. Lions, maybe, but no sharks. And lions tended to be noble creatures at heart. She couldn't say the same about sharks. They weren't even mammals. Who knew what was going on in their fishy minds? And she had no clue how it worked when half your soul was human and half giant, deadly fish.

They didn't have a good reputation and everything she'd seen of the sharks in her home waters hadn't impressed her. They were apex predators and most species of shark hunted seals in the wild. None would dare hunt a selkie, of course. Her innate magic protected her from that sort of degradation. But the great white shifters she'd known would threaten selkies just for fun. They were all pretty warped and the biggest, baddest bullies of the sea.

She'd never had any interaction with hammerhead sharks, though. The ones present at the meal were handsome. Miguel was, by far, the most alluring man she'd ever seen, even knowing he shared his soul with a shark spirit. No matter her low opinion of sharks, she couldn't help but notice him, especially when he seemed to be watching her as much as she was watching him.

Was it possible? Was he as fascinated by her as she was by him? She wasn't sure, but it was beginning to feel that way.

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Miguel couldn't stop looking at the red-haired goddess who had suddenly joined the crew. They were far out at sea, and no other boats were in sight, so she had to be a selkie to have come all this way in her seal form. Tom had introduced her as a cousin, so that cinched it. The Kinkaid Clan was known primarily for two kinds of shifters in the family line. Lions and selkies.

Miguel loved listening to the lilting sounds of her speech. He'd spent a little time in Europe but not much in the British Isles. The few Irish he'd met had been male, and he'd never had such a stark reaction to hearing them talk. As it was, Miguel could listen to her for days and never tire of the way words rolled off her tongue.

And that hair. Red as a sunset over the Caribbean and fiery as the sun itself. He wondered if she had a temper to match and almost couldn't wait to find out. What he didn't understand was why he was so intrigued by the woman. He'd met pretty women before. He'd bedded his share of them too. What was it about Deidre that made him want to explore all her hidden facets and get to know everything there was to know about her?

He found himself on deck after dinner, gazing up at the stars as he often did. There wasn't much else for entertainment out here in the middle of the Gulf. He usually spent a few minutes star gazing each night before seeking his bed. But tonight was different. Tonight, she was on the boat.

And tonight... She came out on deck to stand very near him, also gazing upward. His heart started beating faster in anticipation.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" she asked conversationally.

“It is,” he agreed, trying to think of something smooth to say and drawing a blank.

“It’s so warm and lovely here,” she went on, saving him from having to say more. He looked at her, and there was a smile on her face as she gazed upward. “A far cry from my home waters.”

“I once swam around Scotland and Ireland,” he contributed, glad when she looked over at him. Their eyes met and held. “I thought the coast there was lovely, though of course, the weather was cooler. Still, it had a beauty all its own.”

“I would agree with you on that,” she said, smiling again, this time at him. He felt warmed by the radiance of her smile.

“So, you’re going to expand Kinkaid Industries operations to oil platforms near your home?” he asked, making conversation as the moment stretched.

She nodded. “That I am. My family runs a subsidiary of K.I., and we have boats like this that could handle the work. We just need to find capable crew and learn how this kind of operation works. That’s what I’ve been sent here to learn.”

“Then you’ll return home and start a crew of your own?” Miguel didn’t like the sound of that. He didn’t like anything that implied her leaving.

What was wrong with him?

“I suppose so,” she replied, sounding a bit unsure. “I’ll be setting things up. That, I know. But whether or not I actually run a crew of my own will be up to my brothers. They like to run the boats and see me as more of an office manager.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Miguel said, though he acknowledged inwardly that he was a bit of a chauvinist himself.

He didn't like seeing women working in dangerous conditions, but if that's what she wanted for her life, then who was he to say no? They were strangers. They'd only just met. He had to keep reminding himself of that little fact.

"I hope you'll feel free to ask me any question you like while you're here. I have not worked on this crew long, but surprisingly, I do enjoy the job and find I'm good at it." Even he was surprised by how much he enjoyed keeping the underwater parts of the oil rig in good repair and preventing any problems that might possibly cause trouble for the water that was his second home.

"I might just take you up on that," she replied, smiling at him again. He felt the impact of that smile down to the soles of his feet. "Since you don't mind my asking," she began, seeming a bit shy all of a sudden, "what did you do before you started working here?"

"Your Kinkaid cousins didn't tell you?" He was surprised by that idea. She shook her head, her pretty red hair wafting a few strands in the breeze.

"My brother and I were soldiers of fortune for a few decades, then we tried to go private and made a big mistake."

He let that just sit there, to see what she'd say next, but she never got the chance. A bunch of others came on deck, and she scurried away after a brief goodbye. Maybe she didn't want to be seen talking with a shark.

It rankled. It shouldn't, but it did. Miguel looked at the stars for a few more minutes, then went below to seek his bed.

But what he found when he entered the compartment where he and his podmates shared quarters was a bit of an ambush. Ibrahim, Jorge, and Marco hadn't left the boat yet, though they were off-shift tonight. Miguel knew they preferred to spend

their nights in the deep in their shark form if they didn't have to work. The boat was a little too crowded for creatures that were used to having the entire ocean to traverse. But they were waiting tonight, and Miguel sensed they wanted to speak with him. He sighed as he entered the compartment, ready for the onslaught.

"What?" he asked simply, waiting to hear what they would say.

Marco stepped forward, his long dark hair moving around his shoulders as he shook his head. "It's bad, Miguel."

"What is?" Miguel asked, stepping more fully into the room and looking from face to face.

"I got a call on the burner phone they slipped to me at the rest stop," Jorge admitted, his hands resting on his knees, his entire posture looking a bit defeated.

Jorge, along with the rest of them, really didn't want to be in the thick of battle anymore. They'd all done their time fighting. Now they just wanted to try to find some semblance of a normal life. If they could.

An agent of their former employer, Abdul Kettering, had slipped several of the tiny phones to various members of the pod during a rest stop while they were being transported over land from New York to Texas a few months ago. None of them had ever used the phones to Miguel's knowledge.

"Who was it and what did they want?" Miguel asked Jorge directly.

"She didn't give a name, but she claimed to work for Abdul. She offered me a whole lot of money to sabotage the rig," Jorge admitted.

"The oil rig? The one we're working on?" Miguel asked to both clarify and buy

himself some time.

“The very same,” Jorge said, his tone glum and a bit angry.

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her I’d think about it,” Jorge admitted, looking up at Miguel. “I hope that was the right move.”

Miguel nodded. “For now, I think that’s all we can do. Just string them along until we figure out what to do about this entire situation.”

“Kettering is going to be a problem,” Ibrahim intoned, keeping his voice low, his tone urgent. “He’s not the kind of man to just walk away. He’s going to keep trying us, one at a time, until one of us gives him what he wants.”

“And knowing that helps us prepare to deal with him,” Miguel reminded them. “As long as we stick together, there’s nothing he can really do to us.”

“But if one of us cracks...” Ibrahim looked around at each man gathered in the dark room.

“We won’t,” Miguel said, hoping he was right. “We’ve been through a lot together. We’re family now. We know Kettering is trying to break into that and so we’re forewarned against his attempts. Right?”

Jorge seemed to take heart. “You’re right,” he said finally. “I didn’t crack and I won’t. I threw the phone into the sea.”

Miguel went over and clasped Jorge’s shoulder. “You did the right thing, brother. Don’t give them an answer either way. At least until we can come up with a better

plan.”

“Should we warn the lions about the rig?” Marco asked.

Miguel shook his head. “If none of us caves, the rig will be safe. And if we warn them, we’ll have to admit to having the burner phones.” It was really a no-win situation for them. They’d earned a bit of the Kinkaid’s trust over the past months, but that would be shaken if they admitted to having the phones. They couldn’t risk it. “But keep your eyes open,” he added, hoping there wouldn’t be anything to find.

*

Deidre was very disturbed by the encounter and sought refuge in her state room to think things through. What was it about that shark-man that attracted her so thoroughly? And why?

Sure, she hadn’t been with anyone in a long time and she could count on one hand the number of men she’d slept with, but what was it about this man—this shark—that made her want to jump his bones? She could hardly control her reactions to the man when she was in his presence and that just jumbled her brains beyond her own comprehension. Nobody had ever had that kind of effect on her. Why a shark, of all things?

Deidre chewed on her lower lip as she paced the small room that was hers for the duration of her visit. Attraction was one thing, but a man like Miguel...

He had done things. Dangerous things. He’d been a soldier. She’d heard rumors from her kin that he’d kidnapped people. Maybe even worse. Her rational mind told her to walk away, to let the attraction end before it had a chance to really get started. But her selkie side? The reckless, instinct-driven part of her soul?

That part of her thought it recognized something in Miguel, something deeper than just a charming smile and a sculpted body. Beneath the rough exterior was a man trying to change. A man who might just be worth the risk.

She groaned and rolled her eyes at herself. I must be losing my damn mind.

Deidre threw herself onto the bed, rubbing her hands over her face. She'd never been reckless in love. In fact, she'd been cautious to the point of frustration. She had always made safe choices—human men who didn't know what she was, men who wouldn't tangle her life up with dangerous politics or old shifter feuds. And yet, here she was, drawn to a shark shifter with a past steeped in blood and mercenary work.

She knew better. She should know better. And yet, her selkie stirred at the thought of him.

That side of her had been restless for years, watching others in her family find mates, settle into their lives. Selkies weren't solitary creatures. They thrived in partnerships, in family pods. And Miguel...

Her stomach twisted. Miguel was not a safe choice. He was a hammerhead—literally and figuratively. He wasn't gentle or predictable. He was dangerous in ways she couldn't even begin to catalog. So why did her soul keep leaning toward him?

She sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. It wasn't just his looks—though, Mother of All, the man was carved like a statue and moved like he owned the space around him. It wasn't just his confidence either, that easy charm that could shift into sharp-edged menace in a second.

No, it was something else. Something deeper. It was the way he watched her. The way he paid attention to her words and the way he looked at her. Not just with appreciation, though that was there too. But with hunger. As if he wanted more than

just a fleeting moment with her. As if she wasn't just another woman he might want to warm his bed, but something... more.

Her selkie side liked that. Way too much. And that was the most disturbing part of all.

She had learned to listen to her instincts. They had always steered her well. But this? This felt like diving into open ocean, with no way of knowing if she was about to swim into deep, dark waters that she could never come back from.

Deidre exhaled sharply, standing and resuming her pacing. She had two options. First, she could shut this down right now. Keep her distance. Ignore the heat that flared in her belly every time Miguel so much as glanced at her. The second option was to lean into it. See where the current took her.

The safe choice was clear. The smart choice was clear. So why did it feel like she was already drifting toward him, no matter how hard she tried to swim the other way?

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The next day, Miguel had to work. He put in his time in the depths, maintaining the oil rig, but when his shift was done, he found himself looking forward to getting back on the boat and maybe running into the delectable Deidre again. He turned himself toward the boat, swimming steadily, thinking hard about his situation.

Salt stung Miguel's skin as he cut through the waves, his shark form slicing through the deep. He probably should have been running. Some of his guys still talked about leaving, if they found a moment when they could break free of this easy captivity. The Kinkaid's had given them just enough leash to breathe, easing their watchfulness over time. If the sharks were smart, they'd take it and disappear.

But they weren't running. Because Sam Kinkaid had given them a deal and Miguel had accepted it on behalf of his men. They might be sharks, but they honored a deal if the other party did the same. So far, Kinkaid had treated them well.

The deal was to work tending the oil rigs. Stay in the water, stay useful. Prove they weren't a threat. And in return? No death sentence. No permanent chains. Maybe—just maybe—a future.

It wasn't total freedom. But it was better than death or rotting in some sort of prison setting.

Miguel surfaced, breathing in the night air, his human form snapping back into place as he gripped the ladder of the Kinkaid vessel. The deck was slick beneath his feet as he swung himself up, seawater dripping from his bare skin.

A selkie stood near the railing, watching him with assessing eyes. Tom Kinkaid. The

leader of this crew.

“Efficient,” the man said. “Sharks always are.”

Miguel ignored him. He didn’t totally trust these seal shifters—oceanic, sure, but not his kind. Kinkaid had assigned them to the selkies for oversight, and the irony wasn’t lost on him. In the wild, sharks often hunted seals. On this job, they took orders from them.

The boat rocked gently, the Gulf stretching dark and endless around them. Jose surfaced next, hauling himself aboard, followed by Marco. They hadn’t run, which made Miguel secretly glad.

They were all working. Proving themselves. For now.

But Miguel couldn’t shake the feeling that this wasn’t over. That somewhere out there, Kettering waited to hassle them for their failure. That something was watching.

And then... That misty island appeared in the distance. Miguel stiffened, wiping salt from his eyes. No. Not possible.

One second, there was nothing but open water. The next, an island wavered into view. Dark cliffs. Dense jungle. Then, just as quickly, it was gone.

Miguel’s blood ran cold. Had to be magic. And magic, in his experience, never led anywhere good.

It had been too fast for any of the others to have seen it, so Miguel kept his mouth shut, but he wondered, if he’d had time to point it out, would the others have seen it? Or was it something that was appearing only to him? And, if so, why?

He was still pondering that thought a few hours later on deck, as he gazed at the stars. Or maybe he was waiting to see if the island would show itself again. He wasn't quite sure. Better yet, he might be hoping for a repeat encounter with the lovely selkie, Deidre.

As if his thoughts conjured her, she appeared on the deck a few minutes later. He took a quick look around and realized they were alone for the moment. He waited quietly to see if she would come over to him. Oh, how he hoped she would.

It was unseemly, really. He found himself tensing with anticipation, almost holding his breath to see what she would do.

Satisfaction ran through him when she walked closer. They exchanged casual greetings as she settled in next to him at the rail, looking out at the dark water and twinkling stars. They talked of inconsequential things at first, then she seemed to gather her courage and broached the subject of where they'd left off the night before.

"The last time we talked, you said you'd made a big mistake taking your last job. What was it?" she asked, making him wonder why having the good opinion of this woman had begun to matter so much to him.

Miguel decided to just lay it on the line. No use trying to spin anything to make himself look better. He wasn't the kind of man who tried to manipulate events to his own advantage. He knew in his heart he had to just be truthful with this woman and let the chips fall where they may.

"We took a job from a man named Kettering—"

"The old arms merchant? I thought he was dead." She interrupted him, looking at him with wide eyes.

“It was his son, though I suppose he’s in the same business,” Miguel answered. How did she know about Kettering? There was more to this pretty little selkie than met the eye, apparently. “He was offering a whole lot of money for what we thought was a simple job.”

He paused, wondering if he should tell her the rest, then decided to open up a bit more. There was something about her that made him want to have her good opinion, and failing that, for her to know the whole story about why they’d chosen to take Kettering’s offer.

“We’d heard about those crazy bears in Washington state, and how they’re all finding mates by settling down in a town they built,” he went on. “We didn’t think we could build a town, but we thought about buying some beachfront properties next to each other and forming a little shark community. We’ve been fighting a hell of a long time, and all of us are eager to settle down and find a place to retire and live life like normal people and not have to fight all the time. We figured this one last job would allow that to happen, but it got complicated, and it all went a little too far.”

“Oh, no. What did you do?” She looked like she was bracing for bad news.

“We didn’t kill anybody,” he shot back, not liking the way she seemed to expect the worst of him. “We may be sharks, but we’re not like those great white fools. Though I will admit, Kettering had us doing some things I’m not too proud of in the harsh light of day. We couldn’t get to the targets he wanted, so he had us threaten their families. The females, especially.”

“You didn’t,” she breathed, sounding scandalized.

He’d had a lot of time to think about what he and his pod had done, and with the luxury of time and distance from the events, he had realized just how badly they’d screwed up.

“Kettering had a sniper shoot one of the women right as we were coming on board his operation, and we didn’t like that at all, but it was too late. We’d already taken his money.”

“Did she die?” Deirdre asked in a shocked whisper a moment later.

“No. She pulled through, thankfully. We heard later that, before we’d joined his crew, he’d had his foot soldiers shoot up a shopping mall. We were brought on to perform an assault from the water after his previous team had kidnapped a woman and taken her out to sea. It didn’t work. She was rescued. Which is why he sought us out because of our reputation for working under water and along coastlines.”

“But once you found out what he was all about, why didn’t you leave?” she asked.

“You don’t just leave a guy like Kettering. Once you take his money, you’re hooked until he wants to release you. Or you die. That’s the only way out with a guy like that,” Miguel replied, frowning as he shook his head. “We should have done a more thorough background check, but the job didn’t sound that sleazy or difficult when it was first presented. It was only as we got to know the targets and methods tried in the previous attempts that we started to feel uncomfortable.” Miguel chuckled wryly and shook his head. “I’m not painting us as saints. We’re still sharks. We don’t turn up our noses at a little bloodshed. But we’re hammerheads, not great whites. We try to at least have some principles.”

“So, how did you get caught?”

“Kettering sent us in on what looked like a simple beach snatch. Pre-position our gear the day before. Swim in, grab our gear, subdue the mark and swim back out with her. Easy, right?” He looked over at her and saw the wide-eyed expression that he didn’t quite like on her lovely face. “Only, it didn’t go as planned. We rose up out of the water, and the mark—a woman—was more than ready for us. She’d set us up like a

pro and took us down with arrows tipped with some kind of magical poison. That's really odd, because we hammerheads are immune to most poisons. It was the magical aspect of the substance on the arrows that we couldn't handle. Mercifully, she gave us the antidote later, so we weren't any worse for wear, but we were—and I guess, to some extent, still are—prisoners. They sent us to Kinkaid, and we've been under their eye ever since.”

“I see,” Deidre replied softly. “So do you plan to go back to soldiering after this is over?”

He was surprised by her question. “No. We all pretty much decided we were done with that kind of life. It turns out I like this kind of work, and the money is almost as good as being a mercenary, only I don't get shot at, which is a bonus to my way of thinking.”

She chuckled, and he felt better. He'd have hated it if learning of his shadowy past had ruined her opinion of him.

“Deep sea work is specialist stuff for humans. Our kind can make a lot of money out here doing what comes naturally to us,” she said, proving to him that she was smart as well as gorgeous.

“I am beginning to see the wisdom in that path,” Miguel admitted, agreeing with her. “So are many of my pod mates. We've all been fighting and traveling the world too long, and the idea of settling somewhere is very appealing.”

“Where are you from?” she asked, changing the subject. “I'm assuming somewhere in South America, right? And are all your pod mates from the same place?”

“My brother and I are from Brazil, but the others are from all over. Jorge is from Columbia. Marco is from Venezuela. Ibrahim is Moroccan. Ndukwe is from Nigeria,

and so on. What binds us all together is that we're all hammerheads and were brothers-in-arms in the mercenary ranks. That's how we all met, and we all decided to retire at the same time. We figured the only work we could get was as private soldiers-for-hire, but since Kettering was our first private contract, I think we've all been soured on that idea. We've been talking about our futures and the changes in our plans. I think most of the guys are going to try to find more work like this if the Kinkajids don't want to keep us after our stint of good behavior is up."

"You all come from warmer waters than where I'm from," she observed.

"The breeding grounds tend to be in warmer latitudes where food is plentiful most of the year. Our families settled where their beasts could be content while raising young, and their human sides could have a home on land, near the water. It just worked out that way. But as adults, we swim wherever the mood, and the tides, take us," he told her.

A plan was beginning to form in Deidre's mind. An impossible plan. One that might keep this mysterious man close to her for longer than just this little fact-finding mission she was on.

Why in the world did she find him so compelling? He was a shark, for Goddess's sake! Sharks were known as the bad boys of the sea. Then again, she'd always had a thing for bad boys.

Leave it to her to find a super sexy shark shifter out here in the middle of the Gulf, far from her home waters. What was this madness overtaking her senses? Was it merely a taste for the forbidden, or something deeper? Her inner seal was jumping up and down, demanding to be heard, but her human side was wary.

Miguel had just admitted to making some really bad decisions and doing things that weren't quite...right. Kidnapping people—even if he thought they were just regular

human soldiers, which was terrible to begin with—and targeting the women who were important to them when they couldn't get to the men... Well. That just was plain awful. No way around it.

Though, he had said a few things that she might believe about the sharks coming to the job late and not quite realizing what had gone on before they'd gotten there. Unless he was just trying to make him and his men sound more innocent, to try to fool her. He was a shark, after all. But he'd confessed to having made mistakes. And she didn't have any experience with hammerhead sharks. Were they really that much different from the other shark species who had well-earned their sinister reputations?

She wondered if she could ask her Kinkaid cousins about it, then nixed the idea. They would know why she was asking, and it didn't feel right to put her interest on display like that. She didn't understand why she was so attracted to Miguel in the first place, and she didn't know some of her cousins all that well, despite the relationship. The last thing she wanted was to be teased about it or, worse, chastised for her interest in a shark, of all things.

No, this was too special and new...and totally unprecedented. She wanted to keep it to herself for a bit longer. She wouldn't talk to her cousins about Miguel. At least, not in any obvious way, if she could help it. But she would take any opportunities she found to talk to him, and maybe she'd swim with him. You could tell a lot about a shifter by observing their beast form. That's what her mother always said, anyway, and Deidre believed it.

"Are you working tomorrow?" she asked him, hoping she didn't sound too eager.

"Yeah, I've got a deep dive to replace some components. Should take a couple of hours."

"You don't work every day, though. Right? What do you do with your time off?" She

was curious about his schedule.

“We usually stay in the deep on our days off. Being cooped up on this boat gets a little too crowded, you know?”

“I know exactly what you mean,” she replied. “Maybe we can swim together for a bit sometime,” she proposed cautiously, trying to sound nonchalant.

“I’d really like that,” he said, smiling that sexy Latin lover smile at her. She just about swooned right there on the spot. “Have dinner with me tomorrow night. We can have a picnic on the top deck. What do you say?”

She smiled at him, liking his suggestion a lot more than she probably should. Well, if she was going to go off the deep end, she might as well go all the way.

“I say, why not?” she answered finally. “I’ll look forward to it.”

They made a few more arrangements, nailing down the time and place where they would meet, though the boat wasn’t so large that it would be truly hard to find someone on it. Then they parted. She wanted to reach out to him, but it was too soon. She wasn’t going to dive in with both flippers this time. No. She was going to let this situation develop as naturally as possible while keeping her wits about her. He wasn’t a seal. She wasn’t sure if hammerheads felt the same feelings as seal shifters. They had fish halves, after all, and who knew how fish really thought?

Seals were mammals, so they were a bit closer to human sensibilities than fish. Or so she believed. She wasn’t really sure how fish viewed the world. Mostly, her seal thought of them as dinner. Though she had never, and would never, be up to challenging a shark. Some of those hammerheads grew to ginormous size! She wondered what it would be like to swim with Miguel in his shark form. He could breathe underwater, so he wouldn’t have to surface at all, though she had to come up

for air every few minutes. Would he be considerate of her needs or would he just do his own thing? She'd have to find that out for herself. Soon.

Yes. She looked forward to learning a lot more about the man. Starting with the dinner date tomorrow. After that, if it went well, she'd want to swim with him. Her seal was naturally curious and playful. Would he find her silly? Or would he humor her whimsical side? There was only one way to find out, and that was underwater. She could hardly wait to swim with him and discover what kind of heart lay beneath that sexy exterior.

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Dinner under the stars on the top deck of the boat was both better and worse than Deidre thought it would be. Better because Miguel had really thought of everything and had even scrounged up a bottle of very fine wine to go with the picnic meal that he served on a blanket he spread on the deck.

It was worse because they weren't alone. For some reason, just about every selkie on board—and there were more than a few—found a reason to come up to the top deck while they were eating and stopped to say hello and chat for a bit. One would leave, she'd take a bite of her food, and then, it seemed, another would appear. She wondered if they'd made up a schedule so that she wouldn't be alone with Miguel for more than a few minutes at a time.

Really, it was absurd. She was a grown woman with a mind of her own. If she wanted to spend time with a Latin American hunk who just happened to be a shark when he shifted, then what business, really, was it of theirs? She almost shook her head as yet another selkie relative appeared on the deck and started walking over.

"This is getting ridiculous," she muttered. Miguel almost choked on his wine. Apparently, she'd spoken just a bit too loud, and Miguel had heard her. Oops.

She pasted a smile on her face and greeted her selkie cousin. When he finally left, Deidre took the opportunity to apologize to Miguel.

"I'm really sorry about all the interruptions. I'm not sure what's going on with my cousins, but I may have to have a little talk with them about my autonomy."

"They care for you," he said, nodding understandingly. "They worry, perhaps, about

seeing you making friends with a shark.”

He shrugged in that sexy Latin way he had, but she sensed he was making light of the situation for her. She suspected he really was saddened and hurt by her family’s suspicion and over-protectiveness. Seriously, what could he do to her on the boat? There were people all around, and she wasn’t defenseless.

Miguel might be a big, strapping, handsome-as-sin shark shifter, but she wasn’t completely helpless. All she had to do was yell, and a bunch of selkies would come running. She knew that for a fact. Even if they weren’t overt about their watchfulness, they were always aware of their surroundings and looking out for each other. That was just the way selkies were built.

But this over-the-top surveillance was really going too far. If they didn’t cut it out soon, she’d have to say something.

“It isn’t right,” she muttered. “I’m beginning to think they assume I’m some sort of selkie weakling who can’t string a thought together for herself. I’m insulted on my behalf, and on yours, Miguel.” She said that just loud enough that she hoped whoever was waiting at the bottom of the stairs would hear her.

She thought she saw the top of someone’s head appear and then quickly retreat on the steep stairs, and she nodded to herself. So what if they’d heard her complain? She was a grown woman, and as much as she appreciated the concern, surely one or two check-ins had been enough.

“Your family knows what I did in New York,” he reminded her. “They’re just being cautious. I do not blame them.”

“Then you have a lot more patience than I do.” She shrugged and decided to lighten the mood. “Maybe it’s my red hair. Fiery temper and all that.”

“I love your hair,” he said, his voice dipping low, lightly accented in a way that made her tummy wobble. “It’s like silken flame.”

“Are all Brazilian men so poetic?” she asked, allowing her voice to ease into more intimate tones.

She brought the glass of tasty wine to her lips and sipped as she met his eyes over the rim. She was flirting for all she was worth, and he seemed to be responding in kind. Frankly, she was surprised. She’d never really been a femme fatale type of woman, but Miguel made her feel like a born seductress.

“It is easy to wax lyrical when the subject makes it so easy,” he replied, charming her with his turn of phrase. “You are a beauty, Deidre. If I did not know better, I would say you were a sea siren, not a seal.”

Her heart skipped a beat as he moved closer, but he was only reaching out to refill her wine glass. A little part of her was disappointed, but another part was charmed by his gallantry. He was a very attentive dinner partner, always making sure she had the best of the tidbits he’d gathered and that she wanted for nothing. She’d never been the center of a man’s attention before. At least not in a romantic way.

“And you, sir, are a charmer,” she said, feeling just a tad uncomfortable at his praise. She wasn’t used to such lavish words from men.

Truth be told, she’d been off the dating market the past few years after a disastrous relationship with a human man she’d deluded herself into hoping had been her true mate. He hadn’t been her mate. He hadn’t even been a very good boyfriend for the two years they’d been together. He’d ignored what she’d wanted, she realized only in hindsight, and they’d always ended up doing whatever it was he wanted to do. From the places they went, to the kinds of food they’d ordered. He’d been the one in charge of everything about their relationship, and he’d never once asked for her opinion on

anything.

He'd taken her for granted, and it had taken her two years to figure it out. When she had finally woken up and realized what was going on, she couldn't believe she'd been so bamboozled by a handsome man with a persuasive manner. She'd been so in awe of the fact that he'd acted like a human Alpha, that she hadn't read under the surface to the sheer self-centered Narcissism that had made him behave that way.

True Alphas weren't self-absorbed assholes. They were in charge, sure, but always with the understanding that they cared for their people and protected them while allowing them to grow and evolve, each according to their own talents and desires. Sam Kinkaid was that kind of Alpha, and that's one of the main reasons, she believed, why his Clan and his business enterprises were so successful. He didn't take anyone for granted. Each member of his Clan—from the youngest babe to the eldest grandparent, and the most submissive selkie to the most dominant lion—were his people. He cared about each and every one of them, and he always took their needs into account when making decisions that might affect them or their families.

Sam was the kind of man she could respect and follow without question. He was also a good role model for the kind of man she should be looking for as a mate. Sam wasn't for her, that much she knew. Her selkie side liked him, but that was all. Her human half found him fascinating and handsome in an oblique sort of way, but he felt more like an older brother than anyone she could date.

That was probably for the best. She would never fit as the Alpha female of the Kinkaid Clan. She knew her own strengths and limitations, and that sort of responsibility wasn't for her. She knew that with certainty.

But was Miguel really the kind of man she could respect? Perhaps, even love? She wasn't sure, but for right now, he was certainly the kind of man that made her want to take a walk on the wild side. Maybe that was enough for now. It had been a long dry

spell for her, and shifters weren't known for their celibacy.

Generally, shapeshifters sowed their wild oats for years before they settled down to hunt for that one special person who could be their life's mate. She wasn't sure if that's what she was doing here. She hadn't intentionally come here looking for a mate, but her seal side had perked up when she'd met Miguel and had been watching him with interest ever since. That was unusual in the extreme. It made her wonder if there was more going on here than she would have expected.

But only time would tell. For now, she was just going to enjoy herself with a handsome man on a moonlit night under the stars, sharing tasty wine and good conversation. If anything else should come of it, well, that was a consideration for tomorrow.

"Are you planning to go back to the boat tonight?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he replied, giving her a sly smile. "I could be convinced."

Her blood heated just like that. He was waiting for an invitation from her. If she issued it, she could have a guest in her stateroom overnight. It would be tight quarters, but she had one of the larger rooms as an honored guest of the Clan, and he'd fit.

He'd fit in other ways, she'd just bet, too. Her pulse sped with excitement just thinking about the possibilities. Dare she invite him to spend the night? Would that seem a bit too eager?

Probably not. They were both shifters, after all. It wasn't like he was her last boyfriend, who'd been human, and she'd had to play hard-to-get for a bit before succumbing to his charms. She could sleep with Miguel, and they would both know it was simply a part of shifter life without the human hang-ups that often went along

with such things.

Of course, if he turned out to be her mate—something her eager young pup of a seal was prodding her toward—then things would get a lot more complicated. Or simple. Mates were sacred. If he really was her mate, the others would just have to accept that and butt out of their business.

But the odds of that were slim. Shifters believed there was only one true mate for each of them, predestined by the Goddess, Herself. It would be very unlikely that Miguel was her true mate. It sure would be fun finding out, though.

“How about we take a moonlit swim after this, and then, we’ll see how it goes?” she countered as his dark eyes sparkled at her.

“As you wish,” he replied, sipping his wine as he smiled. “Never let it be said I rushed a lady into anything.”

It was dark when they both entered the water. Miguel stripped off his clothes and dove in from the top deck in his human form, then shifted into shark form underwater. He had learned over his time among the selkies of the Kinkaid Clan that they were often a bit shy about changing in front of others, which wasn’t usual among shifters, from all he had seen, but he didn’t mind. Although the prurient part of his mind would’ve enjoyed seeing Deidre in the flesh, so to speak, he also didn’t want to make her uncomfortable in any way.

He also didn’t mind giving her a little show before he dove into the water, letting her inspect the goods, so to speak. If she liked what she saw, that might just get him that much closer to sharing her bed tonight. Or, if not tonight, then some night in the not-too-distant future, he hoped.

He stayed below, enjoying the feel of the water in his gills. His vision in this form

was very different from how he saw in his human form. Hammerhead sharks had their eyes out at the ends of the hammer portion of their bodies, spaced wide apart. It gave him some advantages underwater, but it also hampered him a bit, at times.

He felt the disturbance in the water when the seal splashed down a short distance from where he'd landed. Deidre had shifted up top before making her dive into the water, which was what he'd expected, though he confessed he was still somewhat disappointed not to be able to see her naked human body.

That would come, in time. He just had to be patient and gain her trust.

He swam steadily, allowing the curious seal to dart around him, checking him out. He made no aggressive moves. Not that his kind of shark hunted seals like some of the other shark species. No, because of the shape of his head, he liked to feed on rays and skates when he was in this form. He was pretty much impervious to the stingray's poisonous barb, though it did still hurt to get shanked by one of those things. He didn't feel it as much in his shark form, but when he shifted, there was always a bit of residual tenderness if the barb had hit a sensitive spot.

The older he got, the less he enjoyed hunting his food as a shark. Catered dinners on land definitely held appeal. Especially when he could share them with a pretty girl, as he'd just done with Deidre. In fact, he couldn't remember a meal he'd enjoyed more in years.

Of course, it had been a few years since he'd been on the dating scene, though he'd had encounters with women when he'd been working as a mercenary. Nothing serious, though. And certainly nothing resembling a real date. The kind of women he'd dallied with weren't the sort to require wine and roses, or even conversation. They knew what they wanted from a man and weren't too shy about reaching for it.

That had suited him just fine the past few years. He hadn't put down roots anywhere

and hadn't really wanted them. But things had changed in recent times. Even his shark yearned for a female to swim with, and at this point, it wasn't picky about what species she came in. He just wanted a partner who could share his life, even if it was only on land. He'd be willing—no, happy—to find a mate, even if she was human and couldn't swim with him.

But the playful seal that swam circles around him now was an excellent swimmer. She might even be more agile and a bit faster than him, though he wasn't trying to outswim her right now. If they ever had to put on speed for any reason, he was confident that he could get up to his cruising speed relatively quickly and could hold it for hours. The selkie was fast, but he wasn't sure she had the same kind of endurance as his shark form. For one thing, she had to surface every now and again for air, where he could sweep across the deeps, never needing to surface for any reason. He was at home here, even more than she was.

She was adorable, though. He would admit that freely. She was like a puppy, frolicking around him, her joy in the water contagious. He found himself tilting his head this way and that to keep up with her antics, and he missed her when she surfaced to take a breath. Following her, he swam closer to the surface, hoping to make things a bit easier for her. He'd do just about anything for Deidre, which was a startling realization. She'd become precious to him in such a short while. That was something significant, he thought, but he was enjoying the swim too much to dwell on it now.

After a time, she went up to the surface and stayed there. Miguel circled her, realizing she wasn't coming back down, so he shifted form and kicked to the surface to check on her. He found her looking raptly toward the horizon, and he followed her fascinated gaze. He wasn't altogether surprised at what he saw. What he was surprised by was that she seemed to see it too.

"I've seen that island a few times, though nobody else believes me," he said aloud,

which seemed to break her concentration. She was still in seal form, but a quick shimmer of magic, and she was back to her human shape and able to talk to him.

“You see it too, right?” she asked, treading water easily as she kept looking back at the island as if it might disappear.

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He nodded. "I see it, though it seems like it comes and goes. I think it's some sort of optical illusion. Either that, or I'm going crazy."

"If you're crazy, then I am too," she muttered in seeming disbelief. "Maybe it's one of those mysterious things, like they say happens in the Bermuda Triangle."

"We're nowhere near Bermuda." He chuckled. "You don't really believe in that sort of thing. Do you?" He could hear the skepticism in his own tone, and it wasn't quite convincing, seeing as they were both looking at an island that shouldn't really be there.

"I'm Irish. I believe in lots of fairy stories," she replied, shooting him a grin that sparked his interest in her rather than the mirage they were sharing. "Do you think we should try to swim to the island and check it out?"

Miguel noted the deviltry in her sparkling eyes. It seemed he was going to have to be the cautious one in this relationship. If they had a relationship. He still wasn't sure where that part of the evening was headed, but he was happy enough to swim with her and entertain her flights of fancy. But he didn't think swimming to a magical island that seemed to appear and disappear at will was the best idea they'd had all day.

"I'm not sure that's wise," was all he said in reply.

She looked at him, taking his measure. There was a nice moon out tonight with allowed them to see even more than they could with their excellent night vision. Both of them were at home in the water and on land, which made them well matched, he

thought. But he was getting ahead of himself.

“I’ll grant you, it looks pretty far away, but aren’t you just a little bit curious about what’s going on there? I mean, it could be like Brigadoon , and this is our one chance to visit before it goes back into hiding for a hundred years.”

“Brig-a-what?” he asked, almost laughing.

“ Brigadoon . It’s an old movie where there’s a Scottish town that only appears for one day every hundred years, and Gene Kelly stumbles across it and falls in love with the pretty young lass in the village. He has to make a choice to leave and continue his modern life or follow his heart to be with the girl, forsaking his life and friends to be with her.” She sighed happily. “It’s a very romantic tale, and there’s lots of great dancing.”

“It’s a musical?” He was surprised by this indication of her whimsical nature, but it fit with the playfulness of her seal side.

“I like old movies and especially the musical extravaganzas of the Golden Age of Hollywood,” she admitted.

“We’ll have to watch Brigadoon together sometime.” She smiled at his suggestion.

“I’d like that. I’ll see if I can download the movie from somewhere so we can watch it on our second date.” She looked at him a bit shyly. “If you want a second date, that is.”

“Are you kidding me right now? Of course I want a second date.” He maneuvered a bit closer to her in the water. “You are a beautiful and alluring woman, Deidre, and my shark likes the way you swim.”

He put one arm around her waist, pulling her bare body closer to his very gently. He gave her every opportunity to move away, but she moved closer instead. Both sides of his nature liked that. A lot.

“I like the way you swim too,” she said softly. “I’m kind of fascinated by the way you move underwater. As if nothing and no one could ever stand in your way.”

She saw him as strong. He liked that a little more than he’d admit, even to himself.

“You could, meu corac?o . You could stop me in my tracks just by crooking your littlest finger.”

He’d called her his heart . He hadn’t really meant to. The endearment had just sort of slipped out, but he didn’t feel like retracting it in any way. It felt good and right. She mattered to him in ways he didn’t quite understand but wanted to investigate further. Much, much further.

“I don’t want to stop you, Miguel.”

Her words came out on a sigh as his lips drew closer to hers. Then their lips met, and they shared a kiss unlike anything he’d ever experienced before. His arm tightened around her waist, and her slick wet body pressed against his. She felt luscious against him, her breasts full and ripe against his chest.

He wasn’t sure how long they floated and kissed and kissed and floated, the water buoying them along as time and space stood still. While he loved the water, he wished for something firm beneath them so he could take her down and make love to her the way his body wanted. His mind knew it was too soon, but his dick didn’t really get the message. Even the cold water couldn’t suppress his body’s enthusiasm for that idea, though he did his best to tamp it down.

They'd still have to swim back to the boat at some point, and he didn't want to do it with a hard on. For one thing, it was a bit freaky in his shark form. The twin appendages of the shark didn't translate to his human body, thank goodness. Though he had dated this one sex-crazed snake shifter woman in Nepal who'd been disappointed that he didn't have two dicks in his human form. She'd been quite the freak in bed, but in the end, he'd been somewhat relieved to leave her behind after his work in that country had been finished.

But why in the world was he thinking about that right now? He had the most beautiful, interesting and classy woman in the world in his arms. Unlike the snake shifter, this woman was definite mate material.

That thought brought him to his senses, and he backed off, breaking the kiss. Her pupils were dilated with pleasure, and he felt a momentary pride for putting that dreamy look on her lovely face. Then he realized he probably looked just about as stunned as she did, and he almost shook his head in disgust at himself for being such an idiot.

It was only a kiss. True, it had been a doozy of a kiss, but still, just a kiss. She might look all dreamy and gorgeous right now, but maybe the kiss had just been another in a long line of them in her life that brought momentary pleasure but nothing long-term. He wondered idly why that thought disturbed him so much.

As the silence stretched between them, and her gaze grew less befuddled and more aware, a sudden flush put roses in her cheeks that were visible even in the dim light of the moon. Then she moved farther away from him and looked at the island, still shimmering in the distance as if she was considering her next move.

The water was warm, the night air still, and yet Miguel felt a shiver crawl down his spine. Because the island was there. And it shouldn't be.

One moment, there had been nothing but open ocean. The next, a dark mass of land had risen from the misty waves. Jagged cliffs, dense jungle, a shoreline bathed in moonlight. Like it had always been there. Like it had just... decided to be seen.

Miguel treaded water, his sharp eyes locked on the impossible sight before him. Beside him, Deidre floated effortlessly, her seal instincts likely as unsettled as his shark's. Finally, she broke the silence.

"We both still see that, right?" Her voice was hushed, like she was afraid speaking too loud might make the whole thing vanish.

Miguel exhaled, slow and measured. "Yeah." He looked again, just to be sure. "And that means we've got a problem."

Deidre's brows furrowed. "Why a problem?"

He turned to her, incredulous. "Because islands don't just appear and disappear, Deidre. And you and I seem to be the only ones who have been able to see it."

"What makes you say that? Have you seen it before?"

Miguel nodded. "I've seen it a few times but nobody else seems to have noticed it at all. Or maybe they're just not talking. I don't know." He knew his frustration was coming out in his words. "If other people on the boat were seeing it, I think word would have gotten around." He gestured toward the mysterious island. "Either we've been swimming too long and we're seeing things, or that island is playing tricks on us."

She tilted her head, eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "Maybe it's neither."

"You have another explanation?" Miguel narrowed his gaze.

Deidre didn't answer right away. Instead, she studied the landmass as if trying to feel it. Finally, she murmured, "I've heard stories about places like this from others of my kind back home."

"Selkie fairy tales or more old movie musical plots?" He smirked a bit.

She shot him a sharp look. "Some fairy tales are real, shark."

"Enlighten me, then." His lips twitched despite himself.

Deidre turned her gaze back to the island, her voice softer now. "There are places in the world where the veil between realms is thin. Places that don't exist on maps, that can't be found unless they want to be found."

Miguel frowned. "You think this is one of them?"

"I know it is."

Miguel wanted to argue, but the unease coiling in his gut told him she wasn't wrong. His instincts were sharp, honed over years in the water, and every fiber of his being told him that this wasn't natural.

He studied the shoreline, his mind racing through possibilities. "If it's real, then why hasn't anyone else seen it?"

She shrugged a bit. "I can't rightly say, but I think we should investigate." A cunning light entered her pretty eyes. "Race you there," she said quickly, challenge in her tone as she dove beneath the water.

Cursing under his breath, Miguel followed quickly behind, but she'd already shifted into her seal form and was off like a shot. He transformed in a flash and followed her,

careful not to let her out of his sight in the murky depths, though she stayed closer to the surface than he would have. Each time she breached to take a breath, he kept her in his sights and was just a short distance behind her.

He wasn't racing. He was watching over her path. Protecting. Making sure she got wherever she was going as safely as possible. They swam quite a way toward the distant island when she came up for air and then stopped to tread water. He rose to the surface, shifting form as he broke the surface so he could breathe the air and see what had caught her attention. She shifted a short distance from him, retaking her human form as well. He was watching her when she turned to him.

"Why did you stop?" he asked, his voice low, his gaze questioning.

She turned to him and tilted her head. "Don't you feel that?"

"Feel what?" he asked.

Deidre's lips parted, but before she could answer, the island disappeared. Between one blink and another, it was gone. Nothing but ocean remained where the cliffs had stood.

"It's gone." Her voice was a whisper in the night.

"What?" He shook his head a little, then realized what she meant. The island in the distance was gone again. He did a double take just to confirm, but there was no island in sight. "Son of a..."

They were both silent for a moment, contemplating the empty horizon. Then she shook her head.

"Well, that was a waste." She sounded so forlorn, he felt the impulse to comfort her.

“No, it wasn’t. We got to swim together, which I enjoyed very much. And we got to spend a little more time together, away from your nosey cousins.”

He grinned, hoping she would do the same. After a moment, she did.

“I’m really sorry about them,” she apologized again for her extended family’s behavior toward him. “I’m sure they mean well.”

“I’m certain they do,” Miguel allowed. “And you have nothing to apologize for. In my country, men are taught to be protective of women from the cradle. At least, my brother and I were. I’m not sure what’s going on there now. It’s been many years since I’ve been back. There is nothing for me there now. The only family I have left is Jose, and we’ve been working and traveling together the past few decades.”

“That’s good,” she said softly, moving a little bit closer, though there was still several feet of water between them. “It’s good to have family around, even if they do butt in a bit too much sometimes.”

Her smile enchanted him, but they were very far from the boat, and he wanted to see her safely back—or at least closer to the boat—before he made a move, hoping for more. Though he wasn’t sure he’d get past her nosey cousins. Still, he was willing to try to walk the gauntlet if she gave him the signal that she was receptive. Being with her was fast becoming his one and only goal, regardless of any consequences that might result.

That thought should have given him pause, but oddly, it didn’t. Even his inner shark was on board with spending as much time as possible with the sexy selkie. It was the first time in his recollection that his shark had formed an opinion on any of the females he’d been around. Mostly, the shark was indifferent to his human side’s libido. The fact that it was urging him on in pursuit of Deidre was...interesting. And possibly a little concerning, though he chose to ignore that for now.

He wanted her, and he was going to have her if she agreed. Let the chips fall where they may after that.

“I guess we should start back,” he said, looking from her to the boat in the distance.

“Where do you think the island went?” she surprised him by asking.

He looked back at her beautiful face with that gorgeous red hair slicked back, showing him her classic bone structure. He wanted to lean forward and kiss the tip of her pert little nose, but he refrained.

“I have no clue,” he replied, unable to take his eyes off her. “Some sort of magic. Or maybe it was just a simple optical illusion. I really don’t know.”

“But you’ve seen the island before, right?”

He nodded. “A few times. But usually, it’s when I’m working, and I can’t just take off and investigate. Not when I’m on the clock.”

“It’s a shame we couldn’t have gotten closer tonight,” she said, looking back toward where the island had been. Then she shrugged. “Still, there’s no use moaning about it. Let’s swim back to the boat.”

“Okay, but no racing this time,” he told her, smiling. “Let’s enjoy the water and the moon dappling its light through it.”

She looked at him from the corner of her eye, her head tilted coquettishly. “I had no idea you had a poetic soul, Miguel.”

“There is a great deal still for you to discover about me,” he teased right back. “And for me to discover about you.”

“I look forward to it.”

She grinned at him and set out swimming at a leisurely pace in her human form before eventually shifting back to her seal shape and dipping below the surface. He joined her there, shifting as his body was engulfed fully by the water.

They swam back together, the seal playfully circling around him from time to time before surfacing for air and then coming back down to join him. He loved watching her swim at his side. She was so graceful in both of her forms. He was quickly becoming entranced by her.

When they got closer to the boat, he was well aware of the other selkies on patrol, and even a few of his brethren swimming lazily in the area. They didn't intercept him and Deidre, but he was certain they made note of their passing. Let them wonder what he and Deidre had gotten up to—or were about to get up to, if she gave him the invitation he so desired.

When they reached one of the ladders on the side of the boat, they both shifted shape and surfaced, pausing just beneath the ladder. She was so beautiful, she nearly took his breath away, and he found himself unable to speak, though his heart was hoping she would invite him to prolong the evening. He'd never enjoyed a simple date more than this one.

“Do you want to come back to my stateroom for a nightcap? I have a bottle of good Irish whiskey from home. One of my uncles bought a distillery about a hundred years ago, and he's been perfecting his craft ever since.”

“That sounds interesting,” he replied, unable to say much more than that as his insides heated with desire.

“Just follow me,” she said and launched herself up the ladder, at the same time

allowing him to get a good look at her naked form. If that wasn't a luscious invitation, he didn't know what was.

Great. Now he was going to have to board the boat sporting wood. Anyone who saw him would know that he had the hots for Deidre. Of course, they had probably figured that out already. Their date had been monitored by most of the selkies already. Only in the water had they been able to find a little bit of privacy.

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Deidre wasn't sure she was doing the right thing by inviting the shark to her quarters, but that was her human side and its doubting nature speaking. The selkie side of her wanted to play more with the shark in whatever form he took. It wanted to be around him...possibly forever.

Whoa . It was too soon to start thinking about that sort of thing. Too soon to pin any sort of hope on Miguel as a life-long partner. He'd admitted to having questionable judgement in the past and having been a mercenary. While she didn't have any objection to a man who knew how to fight, the idea of fighting for money—not for what was right—made her wonder.

Was it even possible that a shark could serve the Light? The ones she'd run across before had been firmly in the gray or even in service to the darkness itself. Of course, she'd never met a hammerhead shark before Miguel. They didn't look like other sharks. Maybe the differences weren't just in their looks, but in their souls as well.

She couldn't be sure on such short acquaintance, but she had gotten to know him a little over the past day or so, and her inner beast was a fantastic judge of character. It didn't see in shades of gray. It either liked someone or it didn't, and it truly liked Miguel. In fact, it almost loved the big man.

Which meant it would be very easy for the rest of Deidre's soul to take that final plunge and fall all the way in love with him, if she wasn't very careful. Knowing that, she still couldn't quite bring herself to end the night without making love with him. It had been a long dry spell for her, and her wild side needed the release as much as her human half did.

She hadn't met a man that attracted her as much as Miguel did in...probably...forever. She couldn't bring herself to deny them both the pleasure that she was almost certain could be found in each other's arms. She wanted him. Tonight.

Tomorrow would take care of itself. She hoped.

Taking a deep breath for courage, she opened the small hatch that led to her stateroom. It wasn't very large, but it was private, and as long as they kept the noise level low, nobody outside this small cabin would hear what they were doing. Or so she hoped.

She was pretty sure at least one or two of her eagle-eyed relatives had spotted her leading the big shark shifter to her room, but they hadn't stepped in or interfered. For that, she was grateful. She would've had to have strong words with anybody who tried to stop her from doing what she wanted to do. She was a full-grown woman. Not a child to be protected from the big, bad shark.

She felt him behind her, following closely but not making a sound. He had stealthy ways, which she could respect. Her brothers were like that too. They'd all served in the military forces back home and had learned all sorts of special skills that they'd never seemed to forget. They were especially good at sneaking around and spying on their sister, which had annoyed her to no end when they'd all been younger.

These days they reserved their super top-secret ninja skills for more important things and had learned to let their sister do as she pleased. Mostly. They still butted their big noses in from time to time, and she'd have to remind them that she was a fully capable adult, and their interference was neither appreciated nor appropriate.

She gave up all thought of her overprotective family as Miguel entered the small cabin behind her and shut the door. She went straight for the bottle of whiskey, which

was the ostensible reason she'd invited him to her room. She might as well follow through with the idea of a nightcap, just in case he wasn't on the same page as her. Plus, a little so-called Dutch courage wouldn't hurt. It had been a long time since she'd been with a man. And she didn't think she'd ever been with a man as powerful as Miguel.

He was strong, but he also had this very Alpha personality that impressed her. And he was as handsome as sin, and probably knew it. Just looking at him made her breath catch. She'd been attracted from the first moment she'd seen him, and that hadn't altered since getting to know him a little better. If anything, she was even more attracted to him now.

She took the bottle out of its niche. Everything on the boat had to be secured against the motion of the ocean—especially breakables. Next to the bottle were two glasses, also secured in specially-built cubbies. This stateroom really was meant for luxury, and it was kind of her cousins to give her such nice accommodations. She would've been happy in a smaller and less well-appointed room, but they'd gone all out to make her feel welcome.

She'd sent several cases of the family's tasting whiskey ahead for them. Shifters weren't as affected by alcohol as humans, but they did enjoy the subtle flavors, and her family's Irish whiskey was among the best of its kind, if she did say so herself.

"Do you need any help?" His voice was low, and right behind her. She spun to find him only inches away.

"You're even stealthier than my Navy SEAL cousins," she whispered as her breath caught at the smoldering look in his eyes.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he replied, giving her one of those sexy, lazy smiles of his that made her knees weak.

Wordlessly, holding her gaze, he took the bottle out of her hands and put it back on the shelf, in its secure cubby. He stepped even closer to do so, reaching past her shoulder and pressing his body lightly against hers. The hand that wasn't holding the bottle made its way around her waist, and as soon as the bottle was secure, his other hand moved to cup her cheek.

“Why don't we save the tasting for later? I've got other things I'd like to sample right now. What about you?” His audacious smile dared her to agree.

“I think you might be on to something there,” she said, smiling back as she moved into his embrace. His head lowered as she lifted her chin, and then, his lips were on hers, and their kiss was the most delicious ambrosia she had ever tasted.

Who needed whiskey when there were such kisses to be had?

She wasn't sure how long they kissed. Time sort of stood still, and only sensation mattered as her senses took over her body. Enjoying. Linger. Learning this new lover who was so incredibly considerate of her wants and desires. Her needs.

She was quickly coming to need him as she'd never needed anyone before. By the time he took her down onto the smallish bed that took up a large part of the cabin, she was more than ready. He'd undressed her by bits and pieces, so there was little left in the way of their passion by the time she lay beneath him on the soft sheets.

He had given attention to every part of her as he uncovered it, laving her skin with kisses and little nipping motions of his lips that sent excitement shivering through her body. She hadn't let him do all the work, of course. She was as curious about his body as he probably was about hers. She'd daringly pushed at his shirt and then his pants until he was naked and in her hands.

Hard. Hot. Ready.

When his finger slipped into her to test her readiness, she nearly came on the spot but held strong. She wanted to feel the real thing. She wanted to know his possession in all ways and reach for the pinnacle she sensed finally lay within her reach. Not that she hadn't known pleasure in the past, but she'd never had that nearly divine experience some of her friends had told her about. She thought maybe she'd find that with Miguel.

If he couldn't bring her to that place that she'd only dreamed of but never experienced, then nobody could. She'd bet good money on that. Miguel was like no man she'd known before. He spent so much time just making sure every touch and every motion was good for her. He really seemed to care more about her pleasure than he did his own, which was a bit of a change.

Not that she hadn't had some considerate lovers in the past, but those men hadn't had the level of self-control that Miguel was exhibiting. He impressed her in so many ways. Not least of which was the way he controlled himself and his immense power. She'd noticed that before. He walked and held himself carefully, as if aware, even in his human form, of the damage he could inflict should he somehow lose control.

He was like a sheathed blade. Deadly in potential, but safe if kept under control.

She looked down his hard, naked body and realized with a grin that maybe his blade was out of its sheath now, but she knew just where to put it to keep it safe. It would be her pleasure. She was sure of it.

Deidre lay back on the bed and spread her legs, inviting him in. Miguel smiled once more, licking his lips as he did the unexpected. He didn't claim her immediately. Not in the way she expected, at least. Instead, he lowered his head to her most intimate place, and that devilish tongue of his taught her new heights of pleasure. She did her best to contain her cries, snatching one of the pillows and pressing it to her lips so she wouldn't scream as climax after climax wracked her bones.

By the time he crawled up her body to join them together, she was almost convinced that she couldn't find any more pleasure that night. Maybe not ever. He'd killed her with ecstasy.

Then he pushed inward and proved her wrong in the most glorious way possible.

"Is this all right?" he whispered near her ear when he was fully seated. She felt the little nibbling kisses on her ear and temple ignite a whole new fire inside her, which she'd thought impossible just a few moments ago.

"It's a lot better than just all right," she murmured in response. His masculine chuckle made her heart feel light and happy. Her inner seal approved, enjoying the playfulness even at such a serious moment.

"Stay with me, meu corac?o ," he counseled gently. "I promise to make it even better."

"I didn't think that was possible," she answered honestly, letting just a bit of her astonishment and approval into her tone.

"Oh, I like that," he replied, beginning to move slowly at first. "And I also hate it that none of your other lovers have ever treated you right."

"Remind me to ask you later if this sort of thing is normal with you Latin lovers or if you're some sort of anomaly," she said as her breathing started to pick up...along with her passions as he began to move more swiftly within her.

He laughed again but tried to stifle it. They really couldn't make too much noise, lest the whole boat know what they were doing. Not that they didn't already, but it would be even more embarrassing for her if everyone actually heard them having noisy sex. It was considerate of him to play along and try to keep it down. Some men she'd

known would deliberately slip up and make some sort of undeniable noise just to prove their masculinity, but she had the feeling Miguel was very secure in his own place in the world. He didn't have anything to prove. She knew that for certain now.

He began to press into her in a way that ignited something inside her she'd never felt before. He hit a spot in her channel that made her rise higher than she ever had before and then... She was falling over a precipice, but Miguel was with her, holding her, keeping her safe even as she split apart into a million pieces of pleasure. He held her throughout, and she felt him pulsing within her in one dim corner of her mind.

They had come together in this perfect place that she had never known before. Now, finally, she understood the indefinable something that poets wrote about and her friends had claimed to have found with their mates.

Sweet Mother of All! Had she just found her mate?

She didn't speak of it. It was too soon to even think such things, though the thought had already crossed her mind. She just really and truly hadn't believed such a thing might actually be possible. And now, here she was, held tightly against a man who had not only rocked her world, but who might just be the man she needed in her life—permanently.

Miguel rolled, taking her with him, their breathing harsh with completion, his arms still around her. He was cuddling her, she realized with a sense of amazement. Had she finally met a man who actually liked to cuddle after sex? Would wonders never cease?

Her inner seal was basking in the attention of her new lover, enjoying the cuddling as much as her human side. Never had her wild side been so involved in any of her relationships. Never had her seal liked one of her human playmates enough to make itself known like this.

Deidre snuggled into him, enjoying the closeness. She stroked his shoulders, loving the feel of his muscles and the sleekness of his skin. Which made her wonder what his shark skin would feel like under her fingertips. Maybe someday soon, she'd find out.

"So, tell me. Was that better than just all right?" Miguel asked, grinning at her as he spoke in a low, intimate tone that didn't carry beyond the two of them.

She wanted to laugh but held it in check. She knew her expression showed her merriment, and she saw an answering glimmer in his dark eyes as he watched her. He was so handsome, just looking at him sent butterflies dancing in her stomach.

"I think you already know the answer to that," she replied, reaching up to nibble on his lips for a short moment. She was giddy with the languor of pleasure. Her limbs felt heavy, and her whole body was sated. "And for the record, I do think you're an anomaly."

"In a good way, I hope."

"Oh, most definitely. In the best possible way." She kissed him then and lost track of time as the passion, which she thought had been extinguished, rose to a bright flame once more.

This time, they came together more slowly, but no less explosively. If anything, the pleasure was even greater, which she hadn't believed was possible.

It was a long time later before they finally got to sampling the whiskey, and then, they sampled other things a few more times before finally finding a bit of rest before the sun rose.

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Unfortunately, Miguel had to work the next day and could not linger in bed with his new lover. He left her with regret—something he had never experienced before with any other partner—and went to his own quarters to get ready for his shift. Nobody was foolish enough to say anything to him directly about where he'd spent the night, though he did receive more than a few speculative glances from the other men.

He checked his gear and was aware of the silent treatment he was getting from the male selkies who oversaw the operation. That, he understood. Even respected. They were waiting to see what would happen between Miguel and their Irish cousin before leaping to any conclusions, or actions, that might be more harmful than helpful in the long run.

Miguel was glad for their caution. He'd hate to have to pound one of Deidre's cousins into dust, for her sake. Causing strife between her and her extended family was not his intention.

He did notice they kept an extra close eye on him as he went about his work, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. Even among other sharks, hammerheads were always looked at a little differently. He often thought that his other half was the most misunderstood species of the shark world.

It was the eyes on the ends of their hammers that made people uncomfortable, he knew. It probably did seem a bit freakish to others. He'd been stared at in his shark form all his life, and he'd gotten used to the extra scrutiny. But Deidre hadn't stared or made him feel uncomfortable. She was cute as a button in her seal form, and his shark admired the way she swam so agilely in the water. He'd had a good time swimming with her and an even better time making love with her.

If he'd been wearing socks at the time, she would have knocked them clean off. The intensity of the pleasure he'd found with her had been unparalleled in his experience. He hadn't really expected that, but he was floored by the increasing likelihood that Deidre was his mate.

As he went about his workday, he was plagued by thoughts of the night before and the way she'd made him feel. Like he was king of the world peopled only by the two of them. She was his queen, of course, and he would have been content to rest forever in that place where they were the sovereigns of their own little world.

He wasn't sure if that was love. He'd never been in love before. Of course, he'd never considered that the woman in his bed might just be his mate before, either. Everything was new and different with Deidre, it seemed, and he was finding it increasingly interesting to be around her, even if the permanence of the thoughts in his mind might also be a little alarming.

This was what he'd wanted, he had to remind himself. All those years of wandering alone. He'd dreamed of finding a woman to share his life...and his love. He'd even made plans to try to attract a mate. Making money with his like-minded friends had been a very real attempt to try to earn enough to settle down somewhere and begin seriously searching for his other half.

And here he was... In a place he'd never expected to be, doing a job that he'd never expected to do, and having met a most unexpected woman who turned him on like no other. She just might be the answer to his prayers.

If she would have him, of course. She might not want to settle down with a shark. His species did have a questionable reputation among shifters. Several of the other shark varieties were often found on the wrong side of not only the law, but the eternal battle between good and evil.

He'd be the first to admit that some of those great whites were downright no good. As a hammerhead, he'd tread the line between light and dark a little close sometimes, but he liked to think that he'd never really crossed it too badly. That mission on Long Island had been bad business, but ultimately, he and his men had been captured and sent here, which worked out really well. He'd had a lot of time to think about the error of his ways while he'd been working here in the Gulf, and he'd drawn a lot of conclusions that made him think his life was going to take a whole new turn once his time here was done.

Maybe there was something to the Goddess and Her working in strange ways. Maybe...just maybe...he'd been guided into that particular job so that everything that had happened since had brought him to this place. To find Deidre. If she was truly his mate, his life would be changed forever. If she would have him.

It all kept coming back to that great big unknown. He didn't know the first thing about how selkies identified their mates. There were many legends about selkies going back to the sea leaving bereft lovers and even children on land. Were selkies really that fickle? Did they not feel the urge to find their one true mate and spend the rest of their lives in fidelity with that person?

Or were the legends a reflection of truth? Were selkies—known all over history for loving and leaving—not as affected by the mating pull as other species? He'd have to find out. Somehow. It wasn't the kind of thing he could just ask straight out. He'd have to be crafty and find a way to discover the truth. Maybe some of the male selkies would be willing to discuss it with him.

They might be worrying about their cousin and him, but maybe if they knew he was thinking along more permanent lines, they would be willing to answer his impertinent questions. Either that or they'd try to kill him all that much faster.

Well. They could try, but Miguel was confident enough in his own power that he

knew they wouldn't succeed. If worse came to worst, he could dive deep where those air-breathing seals couldn't get to him. The only thing really keeping him here was his own desire to get his head on straight and find a better future for himself and his friends.

All in all, being here with the Kinkaid's had been a blessing to him. The job was interesting, and it had opened up a whole new world of possibilities for him. He'd talked it over with his brother and the other hammerheads, and they'd all agreed. They were done fighting for pay. From now on, they'd seek this kind of work, and most of them wanted to stay on with Kinkaid if there were openings. The selkies had been hinting that the hammerheads would be welcome to keep working for them, even after their period of surveillance was over, and most of them were planning on staying with the company either here or at one of their other locations.

After all, Kinkaid had interests far and wide, in most of the world's oceans. There was plenty of work for men with their particular abilities and skills. Honest work that was both challenging and rewarding. The kind of thing a man could do and hold his head up high. It also paid really well, which was important to a man considering settling down and finding a mate. Perhaps having children. Stability was important in such matters.

Deidre's cousin, Tom, cornered her just after breakfast. She'd arrived late, and a few eyebrows had been raised in her direction, but nobody said anything right away. They all ate their meal and left the galley behind, beginning their day's work. Only Tom lingered, fixing himself another cup of coffee as he waited for the room to clear out. Deidre was still working on her plate of bacon and eggs, and realized she couldn't really avoid the confrontation she sensed in the air. With a resigned sigh, she looked up at her cousin as he came over to stand in front of her table.

"You might as well sit," she invited, gesturing to the seat across from her.

Tom sat down, putting his mug of coffee down on the table in front of him. His expression was troubled, and she didn't look forward to hearing whatever it was he had to say. She was pretty certain she knew what this was about, and she really didn't want anyone interfering with her new and fragile relationship with Miguel. Not until she knew more about where they were going—if anywhere. But Tom looked like he would have his say no matter what she thought, and she resigned herself to hearing it. She owed him that much, she supposed. He'd always played fair with her and her family.

“Are you sure you know what you're doing with the shark?” he asked in a gentle but firm tone.

“Not really, but it feels serious, Tom. For my part, I'm not just playing around,” she declared, sucking in a breath at the honesty of her own words. She hadn't really intended to be quite so transparent with Tom, but it probably was for the best.

“But what about him?” One of Tom's eyebrows rose in question, and she had to shake her head.

“I'm not sure. It's all very new, and it could be that nothing comes of it. Or it could be a lifetime thing,” she admitted.

Tom frowned. “That serious?”

“Possibly,” she hedged. “My seal really likes him in both his forms. As do I.”

The frown deepened. “You know what he did, though, don't you? He's not quite the angel he appears.”

That startled a laugh out of her. “I know he's not angelic. Not by a long shot.” Especially not after last night. He was more of a devil in the sheets than an angel, and

she liked him that way just fine. “And yes, he told me about the job they took from Abdul Kettering. He explained why they did it, but he didn’t make excuses. He knows they almost stepped over a line, and he’s not proud of it.”

“They shot a woman,” Tom objected, outrage in his carefully controlled tone.

“A fellow named Kotsa did that. He wasn’t a member of the hammerhead group.”

“Sure, that’s what he said, but how do we know it’s the truth?” Tom countered.

“I believe him.”

“You’re blinded by his good looks and the fact that you slept with him last night.”

She finished her last bite of eggs and stood, picking up her plate with as much dignity as she could muster.

“With all due respect, that is really none of your damned business.”

Tom stood as well, facing her. “I care what happens to you, Deidre. I don’t want to see you get your heart broken by some shark.”

“I may look young and fragile to you, cousin, but I’ve got more years under my belt than you might think. I do know what I’m doing, and I do wish the men of my family would give me a little credit for being a fully capable adult.” She saw his eyes widen as she fought back, and she felt small for hurting him, so she softened her tone a bit, but she wasn’t going to give in completely. “I do appreciate your concern, Tom. I really do. But it all could be for naught. My seal is enjoying swimming with him. My human side enjoys being with him. If it’s no more than that, then there’s no need for your worry. If it is more, then I expect you to accept my judgment and that of my beast. After all, if the seal claims him as her mate, and his shark does the same, then

there's nothing any of us can do to change it."

He didn't look convinced, and she was sure he wanted to say more, but she moved to put her plate in with the other dirty dishes, and he picked up his coffee. As she headed for the door, she looked back at him.

"It's all in the Goddess's hands, cousin. You know that. And if my heart gets broken, that's up to Her too. Right now, I'm just going to see where this goes and enjoy the moment. After all, I'm finally getting to have a little fun without my brothers around to rain on my parade. That's rare for me, and I intend to live it up. At least a little. Don't ruin it for me."

He shook his head and muttered, "I hope you know what you're doing. If you get hurt by that sharky so-and-so, your brothers will never forgive me."

"If that happens, and I honestly don't think it will, they really don't ever need to know about it. Do they?"

She waited in the doorway until he shook his head again and sighed heavily. He didn't say anything further, which she took as a win. She sent him a small smile as she left the galley, and when he didn't follow immediately behind, she was relieved. She didn't want to fight with her extended family, but she also had to be firm and let them know that she was her own woman.

She might appear small in stature, but she had a big presence, and her seal had a fiercely maternal streak that made her one of the strongest members of her Clan back home. The American Kinkajdos didn't really know enough about her yet to realize that, but she thought Tom was beginning to get a clue.

She paused on deck, going to the rail where she stood for a moment enjoying the fresh morning air. Tom paused beside her on his way to work and apparently had one

last tidbit of wisdom to share. Darnit. She'd thought she'd ended that very awkward conversation in the galley. Sighing, she waited to hear what more he had to say.

“Even as long as they’ve been under our scrutiny, we’re still not completely certain we can trust those hammerheads. They’re good workers, and they haven’t run off yet, though they could easily dive too deep for us to follow and swim away. That counts in their favor. But they’re cagey, and I still can’t really get a read on them. Their fishy nature makes them inscrutable, though their human sides are personable and even charming. I just don’t want you falling for one of them without knowing if he can be trusted with your heart. I’m praying you’re not setting yourself up for disaster.”

“While I appreciate that—and don’t think I’m going into this with blinders on—I can’t seem to stay away from him. Right now, I’m operating on instinct, and all of my instincts say he’s a good man. Whether or not he’s my mate remains to be seen. But for now, I’m enjoying my time with him, and ultimately,” she turned to meet Tom’s gaze, her tone serious, “the heart wants what the heart wants. Right now, my heart wants him. Don’t make it harder on me than it already is, Tom. Just let me see where this leads, and if he turns out to be a rat in a sharkskin suit, I’ll let you pummel him into seaweed for me. Okay?”

Tom chuckled a little at her description, and she felt better. He nodded reluctantly and finally walked away to get on with his day. She watched him go, wondering if she would have to let him pummel Miguel or not.

She’d laid it on the line with Tom. Her heart really did want Miguel right now, and she had a feeling it would want him for the rest of her life. She was very close to being—if not already—in love with him.

The thought made her pause. It felt right. She probably was already in love with the man, and her inner seal wanted to tell him and see what he thought, but her human side wanted more. She wanted to hear it from him first, so she’d know for certain that

he wasn't just agreeing but actively seeking to win her heart. She wanted him to love her enough to declare himself.

Now, if only he would play along. She didn't know how long she could hold back her inner seal's enthusiasm for pouncing on the man and finding out what he felt. The human side had to be a bit more subtle, but the seal didn't understand subtlety. She shook her head. Conflict between her two natures was always a pain, but this time, the human half had to stand firm. Her whole future might depend on what happened next.

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Miguel finished his shift later that day and swam back to the boat. He was looking forward to spending more time with Deidre, but there were a few questions about selkies he needed to have answered first. He suspected his questions might not be welcome with most of the male selkies, but there weren't any other women on board at the moment. Still, he needed to know certain things before he went much further, so he decided to ask the one selkie male he knew best.

Which actually wasn't saying much. He and his men had mostly stuck to themselves since arriving in Texas. The selkies weren't their friends. They'd started out as their jailers, and now, they were sort of co-workers who held a supervisory role that made it hard to bridge the gap. But if Miguel was going to proceed in his relationship with Deidre, he was going to have to find a way to change that.

Tom Kinkaid was more or less the leader of this little expedition, and he was the selkie with whom Miguel had interacted the most. He was also a hard ass, so Miguel was nearly certain his questions would be met with suspicion, maybe even disgust, but he really had nowhere else to go with his queries. This was too important to approach with insufficient information. His whole future might depend on the answers to his questions, so he had to ask them, no matter how uncomfortable the situation was.

To that end, Miguel waited for Tom on deck when he jumped out of the water shortly after Miguel. Though Miguel had been working in the deep all day, he'd noticed Tom's seal circling above more often than usual, which led Miguel to believe that Tom knew something was going on between Deidre and Miguel. He hadn't been watched so closely since they'd first arrived, and Tom usually let his men do the supervision these days, while he dealt with the bigger picture.

But today, he'd been in the water, doing the grunt work. The only thing that had changed from yesterday to today was Miguel's level of involvement with Deidre, so that had to be the reason. Nevertheless, Miguel decided to get at least some of the issue out in the open—and hopefully have his questions answered at the same time.

“What are you waiting around for?” Tom asked as soon as he shifted into his human form and began tugging on his clothing with angry movements.

“I was waiting to talk to you, actually,” Miguel admitted, not allowing himself to be baited into a fight with the other man. That would get him nowhere and could cause friction between himself and Deidre, which would be counterproductive.

“About what?” Tom said, shrugging on his shirt.

Miguel could feel the animosity rolling off Tom in waves. The direct approach might cause even more friction, so Miguel went a little oblique.

“I realize we've been working here for a while now, and I've never bothered to learn more about you or your people. I'm sorry for that,” Miguel said, feeling the truth in his words even as he said them.

“Buttering me up because you're sleeping with my cousin?” Tom asked baldly.

Luckily, no one was around to hear his words, or Miguel might've had to make an issue of it. The tone was just a bit disrespectful of Deidre, and Miguel didn't like that at all. He tried to tamp down his anger and remain levelheaded. He'd get no closer to his goals if he ended up fighting with the man.

“What we have, or have not, done is no concern of yours, Tom,” Miguel warned the other man, then sought to soften his stance a bit. He had to bring the emotions down a notch if he wanted to reach his goal. “Meeting Deidre has made me realize that I

know very little about your people. She has made me want to know more. I do not wish to cause any misunderstandings because I don't know enough about your kind."

Tom seemed to think about that for a moment, then leaned back against the rail. He regarded Miguel with a jaundiced eye, but his anger seemed to be cooling.

"Why aren't you talking to Deidre?"

"Because I don't want to mess this up," Miguel admitted. "She is very important to me." He left it at that and saw Tom's gaze grow speculative.

"How important, exactly?" Tom challenged.

"Forever, important," Miguel said softly. "Possibly." Tom frowned. "If your kind mates like mine does, then...maybe. I don't know enough about how selkies do things to know for sure."

Tom cursed under his breath, looked out to sea and then back again, shaking his head.

"You're that serious? So soon?"

"I am thunderstruck," Miguel said simply. "Almost from the moment I first saw her, my inner beast stood up and noticed, which it never has before. Ever. The shark has little interest in how I conduct myself on land as long as it gets equal time to swim in the deep and hunt its favorite prey."

"Rays and skates, right? I tried to read up on your species when I heard you were being sent here for us to oversee. And you're immune to their poisonous barbs? Does that hold true for shifters as well as it does for your fishy cousins?"

Miguel thought it only fair that he answer Tom's question, since he was seeking

answers of his own. Maybe if he was free with his own information, Tom would give him the knowledge he needed.

“We are immune to most poisons in both our forms, which is why being captured due to a poisoned arrow came as quite a surprise. And a comeuppance, you might say. I was so cocky about my immunity to poison, that I never considered magic might be involved. That witch humbled us all and made us rethink our choices,” Miguel admitted.

“Getting captured did that, my friend. The magical poison was just the slap in the ego you all needed to realize that you weren’t completely invulnerable. Every warrior needs a good kick in the ass every once in a while, to bring them back to Earth and remind them that they’re not invincible. Keeps us humble and working toward that impossible goal to make ourselves a little better each day.” Tom sighed. The tension ratcheted down a bit, much to Miguel’s relief. “Do you recognize poisons in your human form, even if they don’t hurt you?”

Miguel considered. “I know the flavor of many poisons,” he admitted. “It is something we learn from our youth because hammerheads are often tested by the other shark species for their own amusement. We are usually taunted by the great whites because of our choice of prey. They see us as weaker, though we can grow to great size, and most of them won’t mess with an adult hammerhead. We also swim together in small groups to protect each other from those jerks. They like to taunt us about our looks too, which is, of course, ridiculous. Though you know how easily children can hurt each other’s feelings. It is not easy to be so different from the others when you are young.”

“Huh,” Tom said, passing an appraising eye over Miguel. “I hadn’t considered that. Even other sharks think you look odd in your shark form?”

Miguel nodded. “They do. Great whites are especially close-minded. They are very

inbred, and my people believe that their desire to breed only with each other has limited their gene pool and made them dull witted. They may look fierce, but most of them aren't very bright. They rarely, if ever, mate outside their own species unless there is some monetary or political power to be gained by the match. Even then, they don't often have children with their supposed mates because they would consider such children half-breeds and unworthy to be part of their Clan."

"I didn't know that about them. What little information we have on them is anecdotal, at best. Though your observations do explain a bit about what we've heard from the mer pods in the Pacific Northwest," Tom allowed. "I'm going to pass on your information, which I think you already realize. We need all the intel we can get on those who might be on the other side of the great conflict."

Miguel nodded. "Of course. I have no allegiance to the great whites, even though we are all sharks. The various species of sharks tend to stick together with their own kind. Especially us, since we're seen as so different from the others."

"I guess I can see that. So," Tom tilted his head and met Miguel's gaze, "what is it you want to know about selkies?"

"Do you mate for life? The legends about your people leave me wondering," Miguel admitted with a rueful grin. "All those lovers trapped on land by their mates, leaving as soon as they got the chance."

"Those weren't tales of true mates, my friend, but of captives, held for their beauty and strength. Of course, they fled when they found an option to do so. Humans haven't always been kind to my species, and since they write the stories and tell the tales, their versions of events aren't reliable." Tom paused, and Miguel nodded.

"That helps, but when your kind do find mates, do they mate for life?" Miguel felt comfortable enough to try again for the answer he so needed.

“Do yours?” Tom countered.

“Yes,” Miguel answered solemnly. “True mates can never be parted.”

“It’s the same for us,” Tom admitted finally, and Miguel felt a little thrill of happiness on hearing it.

“That’s great,” Miguel said, unable to fully hide the leap of joy in his heart.

“You wouldn’t be asking this if you didn’t already think she was your mate,” Tom ventured, speaking in a low tone. “But the choice has to be hers. If you are true mates, we won’t stand in your way, even if I could wish for some other outcome.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly complimentary, but Miguel understood. He and his men had come here under a cloud. Tom had a right to feel a bit ambiguous about these developments, but Miguel would win him over in the end. He just knew it.

“The mission on which we were caught was not our finest hour,” Miguel admitted. “You have reason to suspect us, for which I am sorry, but I hope you will come to see us as allies, not as enemies, in time.”

“I hope so too,” Tom said after a short pause. Then he straightened from his leaning position and offered his hand to Miguel. The two men shook hands and parted on friendlier terms.

Miguel breathed a sigh of relief. That tricky conversation had gone about as well as he could have hoped. Now he had to just broach the topic of mating with the one person who mattered most. He just didn’t know how he was going to do that, when her denial might break his heart.

Jose stopped Miguel as he was on his way to their quarters and pulled him aside for a

quick talk. Miguel had noticed his brother shooting him strange looks when they'd all gone back to the boat and Miguel hadn't followed the rest of the guys. He'd stayed on deck to wait for Tom, which wasn't usual at all, and of course, Jose had noticed.

"What's going on?" Jose asked, keeping his voice low.

"Nothing," Miguel said, trying to circumvent his brother's curiosity. He didn't want to have this conversation with him right now, but he knew they'd have to have it eventually.

"You've spent time with the selkie woman. It's the talk of the crew. Now you're hanging back to talk to her cousin. What gives, bro?" Jose insisted.

It looked like they were going to have this conversation now, whether he was ready for it or not. Miguel took his brother by the arm and escorted him out of the passageway and into the room they shared when they were on the boat. It was small, but it was private, and if they kept their voices down, nobody would hear what they said. Hopefully.

"This goes no further because I haven't said anything to her yet, understand?" Miguel eyed his younger brother seriously, waiting for his agreement. Slowly, Jose nodded. "All right. I wanted to ask Tom about selkies because my shark really has a thing for Deidre."

Jose's eyes narrowed. He knew what Miguel was referring to. He was a hammerhead too.

"Are you serious? The fish never gets involved," Jose whispered.

"I know. But it has now, and my human side is just as involved. I think..." He trailed off and dragged one hand through his curly dark hair. Then he tried again. "I think

she might be my mate.”

Jose sat down on the bunk behind him and shook his head. He looked as stunned as Miguel had been when he’d first realized what might be happening between him and Deidre.

“This is going to change everything, isn’t it?” Jose said after a moment’s pause.

Miguel leaned back against the wall of the small cabin and nodded. “I think so,” he admitted. “But I believe the changes will be for the better. If she is my mate, then we finally have proof that we can all get what we really want. A mate. A life filled with family and joy instead of always being on the move and scrambling to make a living. A renewed reason for living. A goal for the rest of the guys and you, my brother. If this works out, it’s a fresh start.”

“For you, maybe,” Jose said grudgingly. “The rest of us still need to find mates and figure out a way to settle down and support a family.”

“But you’ll know it’s possible, and Deidre and I will help lead the way for the rest of you. Her family business is branching out to do this kind of work up where they live. I bet we can all get work with them and stay together as a Hammerhead Clan. That way, we can work on finding mates for everybody. Deidre probably has a lot of female friends where she comes from. We need to branch out and try new places. Meet new people.” He paused to let that sink in for a bit before continuing. “But it does mean we’ll all have to get on the straight and narrow. No more morally gray jobs for any of us. I want to be able to hold my head up among Deidre’s kin. They are all sworn to serve the Light. Like all of these Kinkaides. If she agrees to be mine, I won’t chance losing her for anything in the world, which means I will swear myself to the Light as well. I don’t ask that of the rest of you, but I will ask that you don’t embarrass me in the eyes of my mate or her family.”

“You would really swear yourself to the Light?”

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Jose looked at his brother with a stunned expression. They were sharks. Sharks skated very close to the line where good and evil were concerned. The idea of pledging an oath of such importance was clearly shocking to him.

Miguel nodded without hesitation. “I would do anything to make my mate happy and proud to be with me. If I continued to swim in the gray, I know it would break her heart, and that I will never do. Not intentionally.” Miguel’s words were measured and fell quietly in the still room.

Jose shook his head once more. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you, bro?”

Miguel straightened from his leaning position and went over to sit next to his little brother on the edge of the bunk. He bumped shoulders with his brother in a familiar way.

“I guess I do,” Miguel agreed. “But I like this feeling. I never dreamed I would find my mate so easily, but the more I’m with her, the more I believe she is truly my one and only, and I don’t want to go on without her. I can only hope she feels the same.”

“You have to talk to her,” Jose said, turning to meet Miguel’s eyes. “As soon as possible.”

“I know, but...” Miguel cleared his throat and tried again. “I have to confess that I fear her reply. My heart is sure, but I don’t know about hers, and that frightens me more than anything I’ve ever experienced.”

Jose had to know just how hard it was for his brother—a fellow shark—to admit he

was afraid. He put his arm around Miguel and squeezed his shoulders.

“You have to do it, bro. You have to know one way or the other before you can move forward. And I think I can speak for the rest of our little Clan when I say that we’ve done well under your leadership. We’re loyal to you. And after that last job, most of us were ashamed of what we’d contracted to do. That didn’t sit well with any of us. Not just you. We all felt bad about what we almost did. I think you’ll find everyone willing to follow your lead onto a more honest path, if that’s the way you want to go.”

“You’ve talked to the others?” Miguel asked, his eyebrows rising.

“We’re not blind. We noticed a few changes and have talked about what that might mean for the pod. The guys seem to want to stick with you and follow your lead. You’re our Alpha, whether you like it or not.” Jose grinned and slapped his brother on the back.

Miguel felt his heart open with joy to hear his brother’s words. He’d thought they might stick by him, but to hear Jose confirm his hunch was gratifying. As was the idea that they would follow him. They’d always been a loose Clan of hammerheads just trying to make their way in the world. They hadn’t really formalized their group and named a hierarchy, though mostly the rest of the men followed Miguel’s lead, making him the unofficial Alpha of the group from almost the very beginning.

If they chose to follow him now, that would make things more formal, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to be the acknowledged Alpha of a shark Clan. Then again, he’d been doing the job for a while now, and if the men wanted him to lead, who was he to say no? He wanted the best life not only for himself, but for his friends as well. That was a good start, and hopefully in time, they would all find mates and settle down to work on expanding their little Clan by having children and finding like-minded souls who wanted to join them.

The future was starting to look very bright, indeed. But it all depended on Deidre. He'd have to talk to her as soon as he could scrape up the courage. Her answer would determine the path of his life from here on out.

But first, he had to talk with his men. Ndukwe and Ibrahim should still be on the boat. Miguel would start with them. He went down to the small room they all shared in shifts and found his quarry. Jose went with him.

The room smelled like salt and sweat, the air thick with unspoken things as Miguel and Jose walked in and closed the door behind them. Hammerheads generally didn't do speeches. They didn't do long, drawn-out conversations about morality. They'd spent too many years in the gray, navigating the world's underbelly, taking jobs no one else would.

But things had changed. Miguel could feel it. The weight of it.

Sitting on the edge of one of the bunks, he looked at the other three men. His brother was leaning against the wall, arms crossed but gaze steady. Ndukwe, the Nigerian hammerhead, perched on a crate, fingers drumming restlessly on his knee. Moroccan Ibrahim, standing near the door, already half in a fighting stance like he was waiting for an argument. Ibrahim was never easy. He liked to fight. Sometimes just for the hell of it. Miguel almost shook his head, but refrained.

No one spoke at first. Then Jose, ever the pragmatist, broke the silence.

"Tell, them, bro," he suggested to Miguel. "Ask them what they think."

"Ask us what?" Ndukwe asked, looking from brother to brother.

"I need to ask you guys something," Miguel hedged, wondering the best way to approach this. Straight out would probably be best, even if Ibrahim was poised to

fight.

“Spit it out, bro,” Jose advised. “It won’t get any easier by delaying.”

“The thing is, I’m involved with the selkie woman, Deidre,” Miguel revealed. “It’s early, but I think it could get serious and I think you all know what that means. If I’m to have her in my life, I’m going to have to swim the straight and narrow. I was wondering if you all would agree to do the same.”

“You mean, no more swimming on the dark side of good and evil,” Ndukwe clarified.

“Not even the gray side,” Jose put in helpfully. “Big bro is going legit.”

“So why do we have to do the same. We’re sharks, man,” Ibrahim put in, relaxing his stance a bit, which Miguel chose to take as a good sign.

“I know,” Miguel replied, looking at them all one by one, meeting their gazes steadily. “But if I align myself with a Kinkaid, it’s what I’ll have to do. Frankly, we’ve been treading the line for a long time, never quite committing to anything fully on the dark side, and you know it.”

“Yeah, but it was always an option,” Ibrahim reminded him. “You’re asking us to take that option off the table. For now? Or forever?”

“If she agrees to the mating, then it’ll be a permanent change. I can’t have my podmates doing sketchy stuff while my mate serves the Light with all her heart,” he reminded them.

Silence met his words. Finally, Ndukwe spoke.

“This isn’t a decision we can make lightly.”

Miguel exhaled, dragging a hand through his damp hair. “You think I don’t know that?”

Jose shrugged. “I think we need to lay it all out.” His sharp gaze flicked to Ibrahim. “Before anybody does anything stupid.”

Ibrahim scoffed, crossing his arms. “You act like swearing fealty to the Light is the only path. Like we have to pick a side at all.”

Miguel met his gaze evenly. “Because we do.”

Ibrahim snorted. “Who says?”

Miguel clenched his jaw. “You think Kettering will just forget all about us? You think we can float through life, pretending we’re not already marked? The darkness is coming for us, Ibrahim. The only question is whether we let it take us.”

“And you think shackling ourselves to the other side is any better?” Ibrahim stepped forward, voice sharp.

Ndukwe, quiet until now, shifted on the crate. “It’s not shackles,” he said slowly, carefully choosing his words. “It’s a choice.”

“Sure. A choice between getting used as weapons by one side or the other. You really think the Light will treat us any better than the mercenaries we used to work for?” Ibrahim laughed, humorless.

Ndukwe’s jaw tightened. “I think we’ve seen what the dark does. I think we’ve felt it. And I think... maybe it’s time we fight for something other than ourselves.”

Miguel watched the exchange carefully. Ndukwe was hesitant, but his moral compass

had always been steadier than the rest of the other guys. Ibrahim? He was still on the edge, still looking for the exit before he had to commit.

Jose leaned against the wall, his expression unreadable. “It comes down to one thing. Who do we want to be?”

“We are sharks. That should be enough.” Ibrahim’s hands curled into fists. The man had always been a brawler.

Miguel pushed to his feet walking over to Ibrahim. Facing him down.

“No. It’s not.” Miguel let the words settle, let the weight of them sink into the bones of the men around him. “We’re hammerheads,” he continued, voice steady, sure. “We’ve spent decades swimming in the gray. Doing things we told ourselves didn’t matter. But they did. They do.” His gaze swept over them, brothers forged in war, in mercenary work, in blood. “I don’t know if we can be good men,” he admitted. “But I know we can try.”

Ibrahim shook his head, eyes stormy. “And if I don’t want to swear my soul to a war that isn’t really mine?”

Miguel exhaled through his nose. “Then you walk away from the pod. From us all.”

Ibrahim’s nostrils flared, but he didn’t speak.

Jose finally pushed off the wall. “I’m in.” His voice was solid, final. “I can’t go back to what we were. I don’t want to.”

Ndukwe nodded, a slow but steady movement. “I will stand with you.”

All eyes turned to Ibrahim. A long, tense beat passed before he looked away.

“I need time to think about this.”

Miguel nodded. “Then take it.” His voice dropped, low and serious. “But remember—time runs out eventually. And when the darkness comes knocking, you better know which door you’re standing behind.”

Ibrahim clenched his jaw, then turned and stalked out. The door shut behind him, leaving the three of them alone.

“Well, that went well.” Jose let out a breath.

Ndukwe shot him a sarcastic look. “You think?”

Miguel didn’t answer. He just looked at the door, at the space Ibrahim had left behind, and hoped—for all their sakes—that his friend made the right choice.

Miguel had done what he could. He’d posed the question and planted the seed. Now it was up to his pod brothers to decide for themselves. Finally, Miguel could seek out the woman for whom he’d change his entire life. He couldn’t wait to see Deidre again. Nodding to his brother and Ndukwe, he left the room and sought out the true light in his world.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:01 am

A knock at the door of her cabin startled Deidre. She was tidying the small room after a long day of learning the ropes. She'd thought a lot about what Tom had said to her and had decided to try to cool things down between herself and Miguel, if at all possible. They didn't have to be in a rush and she really needed to know more about him and his past before she did something irreparable, like give him her heart.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Miguel," came the deep reply as every part of her traitorous body thrilled in response.

Deidre closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Get it together, woman . Ignoring him wasn't an option. He already knew she was in the room. She was apprehensive to see him, but eager at the same time. She crossed the room, hesitating just long enough to smooth her hair and school her expression before pulling the door open. It wouldn't do to look too eager.

Miguel stood there, leaning casually against the frame, bare-chested and still a little damp. He must've come aboard only a short time ago. His dark hair was slicked back, water droplets catching the dim hallway light and sliding down his sculpted chest like the ocean itself refused to let him go.

Deidre's mouth went dry. It was sinful, how good he looked. His gaze flicked over her, flashing with concern as she stayed silent.

"You okay?" he asked. His voice—low, rough, and edged with something she couldn't quite place—sent a shiver down her spine.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly, folding her arms, as if that would somehow shield her from the heat rolling off him. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Miguel’s lips curled at the edges, not quite a smirk, but close. “I don’t know. You weren’t around when I came in from my shift. Thought maybe I had managed to scare you away.” One corner of his sexy mouth lifted in a sinful grin.

“I don’t scare easy,” she replied, unable to resist his charm. Damn, the man was smokin’ hot.

“Good,” he murmured, stepping just a fraction closer, his presence filling the doorway. “I wouldn’t want that.”

Deidre knew she should take a step back and create a little space between them. According to her nosy cousin, she should shut the door and put an end to this dangerous thing sparking between herself and Miguel before it became something she couldn’t control. But she didn’t move. What did her cousin know? Surely, Tom couldn’t appreciate the magic that drew her toward this incredible man?

His scent wrapped around her—salt and sun-warmed skin, something undeniably male, something undeniably him .

“My cousin read me the riot act about you. He told me to steer clear of you,” she said, though her voice lacked conviction. “You probably shouldn’t be here.”

Miguel cocked his head. “No?”

“No.” She exhaled sharply. “This isn’t a good idea.” She wanted to believe it, but her inner seal was bouncing in joy that Miguel had come to her door.

“Then tell me to leave.” He was quiet for a moment, watching her with those dark,

fathomless eyes.

Her stomach clenched. He was giving her an out. All she had to do was say the words. But she couldn't. Because she didn't want him to go. The realization hit her like a rogue wave, stealing her breath.

Miguel studied her, his gaze dipping to her lips before returning to her eyes, as if waiting for her decision. The smart choice was to close the door in his face, but she couldn't seem to bring herself to do that. Instead, Deidre stepped closer. She saw the change in his expression—a flicker of something raw, something hungry, before he smoothed it over.

“I should tell you to go,” she admitted quietly, tilting her head up to meet his gaze.

Miguel's lips quirked. “But you won't.”

She swallowed hard. “No. I won't.”

His hand lifted slowly, giving her every opportunity to pull away, but she didn't. His fingers brushed her jaw, a gentle touch that sent heat curling through her veins.

“Then maybe,” he murmured, voice like low thunder, “this isn't such a bad idea after all.”

Deidre had no idea if he was right. But in that moment, with the weight of the ocean pressing against the hull, with Miguel standing so close the air between them felt electric, she didn't care.

And when his lips finally met hers, she knew—she was already too far gone to turn back now. Her cousin could go jump in the ocean and stay there. This was too good to deny.

She didn't object when Miguel pushed her gently back into the room and closed the door behind them. He turned her, pushing her up against the back of the door and she cooperated when he urged her legs upward to wrap around his hips. Damn, that felt good. She'd been missing this all day. Missing him.

Miguel's lips brushed against hers—light as a whisper, testing, waiting. Deidre's breath hitched, her pulse thrumming beneath her skin like the pull of the tide. He wasn't demanding. He wasn't forcing. He was offering.

She could still pull away. But she didn't. Instead, she pressed closer, her hands sliding up his bare chest, tracing the ridges of his muscles. Miguel inhaled sharply, his body tensing beneath her touch, as if holding himself back.

Not necessary. Deidre tilted her head, deepening the kiss, and that was all the invitation he needed. Miguel groaned low in his throat, his hands skimming down her back, strong and sure, pulling her flush against him. Heat flared between them, the damp air thick with something electric, something alive.

His mouth moved over hers—slow at first, savoring, then hungry, demanding. She met him stroke for stroke, drinking him in, feeling the way he unraveled beneath her fingertips. His hands found the hem of her shirt, fingertips grazing the bare skin of her waist. She shivered—not from cold, but from the way he touched her. Like he was memorizing every inch of her, as if this moment was something he needed to burn into his soul. And she understood that feeling, because she felt it too.

His lips left hers, trailing fire along the curve of her jaw, down the column of her throat. Deidre gasped as he found the pulse at the base of her neck, his teeth scraping just enough to send a thrill dancing through her veins. She fisted her hands in his hair, tilting her head back, silently inviting more. His answering growl sent another shiver down her spine.

He leaned into her, his body pressing against hers, solid and unyielding. She felt the strength in him, the raw power carefully restrained, waiting for her to set the pace. Deidre's fingers traced down his spine, nails raking lightly over his skin. His breath hissed out between his teeth, his forehead dropping against hers.

"I'm not sure I can be gentle this time. I want you too much," he murmured against her lips, voice rough, edged with something dark and dangerous. Deidre smiled, tilting her hips just enough to make him groan.

"Good," she whispered. "I don't want gentle right now."

Something in him seemed to snap as his gaze met hers. The chocolate brown of his eyes lit with a fire that began heating her blood to a boiling point. She was with him. She couldn't wait to find out what he'd do next.

"Be careful what you wish for, babe. You're about to discover another reason they call us hammerheads." A devilish uptilt of his lips made her want to both laugh and moan.

All she had time for was a gasp as Miguel surged forward, capturing her lips again, this time fierce, claiming, unstoppable. His hands roamed, exploring, teasing, pulling her deeper into his fire. She met him with equal intensity, pushing, taking, daring him to let go. And then, he did.

The world outside the cabin ceased to exist. There was no past, no future. Just this moment. Just them. And Deidre knew—when morning came, she wouldn't regret a damned thing.

He rid them both of their clothes, even as he kissed her deeply, his tongue imitating what he would do to her other parts very soon. If she was lucky. She believed she was about to get very, very lucky.

That scandalous thought in mind, she gasped when he released her mouth and dropped to his knees in front of her. She was wearing only the tiny scrap of her lace panties. He'd left those when he'd summarily dismissed her pants. She'd already kicked off her shoes by then and now the underwear was all that was left of her coverings. A lacy bra and the panties. He'd left them for some reason.

"I like this," he said, looking up at her with hunger and a hint of satisfaction. "I like your lacy things," he clarified, running one finger under the skimpy band at the top of her thigh. She tried not to shiver too forcefully. "And, to be clear, I like what's under the lace even better." His gaze turned smokey as he reached up with both hands to take the elastic at her hips and glide it down over her skin, baring her to his gaze.

He was on eye level with her most private place and though she might've felt uncomfortable with any other man, with Miguel, it felt natural. Right. Perfect.

Then, he leaned forward as the lace fell to the floor around her feet. He used one hand to spread her legs and the other to spread the soft lips at the top of her thighs. Blowing lightly on the exposed nub that made her shiver, he whispered.

"Beautiful."

She barely heard him, but she felt the impact of that word and his warm breath against her skin. She felt her excitement gather as his tongue peaked out to swirl around her clit, making her tremble. She pushed back against the door, jutting her hips out and allowing him to spread her legs farther apart so he could reach deeper with his fingers and tongue.

He pushed one thick finger inside her while his lips touched her intimately, sucking on her body in a way that made her nearly delirious. He added a second finger, and she almost screeched as pleasure filled her. His fingers moved in and out, establishing a rhythm she followed with her hips. She couldn't help herself.

“Miguel!” she cried out his name as a small orgasm shook her. He soothed her with his tongue and fingers, coaxing her pleasure.

“Oh, I like that, querida ,” he murmured when he drew his mouth away from her body. He looked up at her, smiling in that devilish way of his. “I like when you call my name in ecstasy. I know already that I’ll want to hear that more often.”

“Miguel, please,” Deidre plead with him. She had already achieved one small climax, but her thirsty body wanted more. More of him . Much, much more.

Standing in one smooth move, Miguel lifted Deidre in his arms and walked her over to the bed. She loved his display of strength and mastery, and couldn’t wait to see what he had coming next. Much to her surprise, he laid her on the bed and just looked at her for a long moment.

“What?” she finally asked, feeling a bit put upon that he wasn’t moving faster to join with her. She was ready. More than ready. She needed him. Didn’t he realize that?

“I just wanted to enjoy this sight for a moment. You’re beautiful, Deidre. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever had the good fortune to be with.”

She wasn’t sure if she really believed him because he was built like a Greek god and she was fairly certain he could have his pick of the most gorgeous women in the world. With all his travels, she couldn’t believe he hadn’t had the opportunity.

“I sense you don’t believe me,” Miguel said, that tiny smile on his face as he stalked up her body to hover over her on the bed. His lips dropped to her collar bone, kissing lightly as his fingers reached under her lacy bra to trace around one nipple.

That was more like it. That’s what she wanted. Him touching her body, making her squirm as her passion—which was very close to the surface already—rose higher

once more.

He dragged the lace down so her breast was exposed. His lips followed, sucking and licking her nipple as his hand went to the other one, pinching it lightly between his thumb and forefinger. Oh, she liked that.

“Tell me you know how beautiful you are,” he murmured against her skin.

She didn’t know how to answer that. She knew she was good looking. She was a shifter. Most of them were. But beautiful? No. She wasn’t convinced of that. No other man had ever told her she was the most beautiful woman ever. She probably wouldn’t have believed anyone if they’d tried. But Miguel seemed serious. Still, she stayed silent but for the increase in her breathing.

“I see I’m going to have to work on that,” Miguel said, lifting to undo the clasp of her bra and remove it, freeing her generous breasts. He paused to kiss her lips, the fire between them burning bright.

His clothes were long gone when he moved between her legs, spreading them wide. She looked down, seeing how ready he was for her. When she reached for him, he guided her hands away, gently but firmly.

“No touching,” he told her. “I want to make this last.”

“Okay,” she breathed, her voice wispier than she would have believed. This man affected her on every level.

He joined his body to hers slowly, pausing to make sure she was ready for him. And then, he took her on a wild ride that included multiple changes of position, ending with her on her hands and knees while he pounded into her from behind. Hammerhead, indeed, she thought, blushing.

The moment he slapped her ass, she came so hard, she cried out, trying belatedly to muffle her shout of his name in her pillow. They weren't alone on this boat. No need for everyone to know they were fucking like bunnies in her state room, though she thought maybe most of the crew already had some idea based on how little she'd been able to control her own noise level.

It wasn't her fault, really. It was Miguel. If he wasn't such a masterful lover, she wouldn't have lost control. The very idea of that silly argument made her smile as he joined her in pleasure, then withdrew and turned her to lay in his arms.

That he liked to cuddle had surprised her, but she reveled in his warmth and care. He kissed her face gently as they lay together in the aftermath of one of the best orgasms of her life.

"Your hair is like a flame, and I feel like a moth, being drawn into your orbit. You singe me with your fire, querida, but I don't mind at all."

His words charmed her. Like everything else about this man. He was so freaking special. So intense. She loved that about him.

"You're more poet than warrior, aren't you?" she asked playfully, unsure how to take his compliment. She hadn't received a lot of those kinds of sentiments in her life and it was hard to know how to handle it.

"I'm both," he said, shrugging slightly. "Though for many years, my poetic side has been repressed as I fought to earn my living."

"Do you miss it? The soldiering?" she asked, turning to look into his deep brown eyes.

"Not at all. I still have my pod. My comrades. And we have good work now, to earn a

good living. We were all feeling tired of that life. The constant fighting was wearing thin. And the hustle wasn't easy either. Constant travel. Looking for work. Entering into crazy situations on a moment's notice, or just waiting around for the action to start. It wasn't an easy life and I'm glad I'm out of it."

She believed him. His words held the ring of truth, and she didn't see any hint of deception in his beautiful, sultry eyes.

"So you won't go back to it?" She just had to be certain.

He shook his head. "Not if I can help it."

"I'm glad." Fatigue caught up with her as his words set her mind at rest. She lay her head back down on his shoulder and let herself drift away on the languor being with him had created in her body. He held her as she drifted off and she knew no more until morning.

When she woke, he was already gone. His shift started early and although she was disappointed not to have him here when she woke, she knew it was for the best. They both had work to do.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:01 am

Later that day, after an abbreviated work shift was complete, the hammerheads all arrived on the deck of the boat around the same time. Jose and the others went off toward their cabin, but Miguel stayed on deck for a moment, looking around casually to see if he could spot Deidre.

But the footfalls that came up behind him didn't belong to Deidre. He'd felt Ibrahim's presence long before he saw him. The man moved like a predator even in his human form. Always had. Even when they weren't on a battlefield, he carried himself like a man ready to fight his way out of anything.

The deck was quiet. Most of the crew was busy working while the hammerheads had completed a task that allowed them to break early. The island hadn't made an appearance yet today, for which Miguel was oddly grateful.

Ibrahim stopped a few feet away, silent for a long moment. Then he shook his head and muttered.

"I hate this."

Miguel smirked but didn't look at him. "Yeah?"

"I hate being backed into a corner. I hate being told I have to pick a side. I hate that committing to the Light feels like another leash around my damn neck."

Miguel finally turned, crossing his arms. "So don't do it."

"Screw you, Miguel." Ibrahim scowled.

Miguel arched a brow, waiting. Ibrahim exhaled sharply, dragging a hand over his head.

“Oh, fuck it all. I’m in,” he finally said. The words were grudging, pushed out like they physically hurt him. Miguel stayed silent, letting him talk.

“I’m not saying I trust any of this,” Ibrahim continued, pacing now, tension rolling off him in waves. “I don’t trust the Light. I don’t trust fate, or destiny, or any of that mystical bullshit. But...” He exhaled roughly. “I trust you. And I trust the pod.”

Miguel studied him. “And that’s enough?”

Ibrahim stopped pacing, turning to face him. “It has to be.” He squared his shoulders. “You lead, I follow. You say we work for the Light, then fine. But I’m not here to serve some higher purpose. I’m here for us.”

Miguel considered that, then nodded. “Fair enough.”

A muscle ticked in Ibrahim’s jaw. “Just... don’t expect me to start praying to the Goddess or any of that mumbo jumbo.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Miguel chuckled.

Silence stretched between them, the only sound the rhythmic lapping of waves against the hull. Finally, Ibrahim let out a breath, rubbing the back of his neck.

“This better not come back to bite us in the ass.”

“Oh, it absolutely will.” Miguel smirked.

Ibrahim groaned. “Of course it will.”

Miguel clapped a hand on his shoulder, grip firm. “But at least now, we’ll be in the fight together. And we can hold our heads up high around these Kinkajids.”

Ibrahim held his gaze, something unreadable flickering behind his dark eyes. Then he huffed, shaking his head.

“Yeah, yeah. Just try not to get us all killed, capit?o .”

Miguel grinned. “No promises.”

And just like that, Ibrahim had made his choice. Grudging. Stubborn. But real. And in the end—that was all Miguel had needed to hear.

Ibrahim left and Miguel was going to seek out Deidre, but a clamor arose from the deck above, followed by a loud boom from the direction of the oil rig. Miguel looked around to see what was going on and watched in horror as more than a few of the workers from the platform fell to the waves far, far below.

“Oh, shit,” Jose appeared at Miguel’s elbow, cursing. He was already shedding the clothes he’d just put on and was running for the rail.

Miguel was right behind him. Those men who worked on the platform were mostly land shifters, he knew. They would need help if the fall hadn’t killed them outright. All around, selkies and shark shifters were stripping and diving into the water from whatever handy rail was closest, all swimming out as fast as they could to help retrieve the men who had fallen into the icy depths while the remaining people on the rig dealt with the small fire that had resulted from the explosion.

The captain of the boat fired up the engines and moved closer to where the men had fallen, but the shifters were already well on their way to the site. Miguel and Jose had shifted to their shark forms, and their wide range of vision helped them spot two men

who were clearly unconscious and sinking deeper. Jose went for the one on the left while Miguel swam for the man on the right.

Getting his hammerhead under the man's limp body, Miguel pushed to the surface as quickly as he could. The man wasn't breathing, and it was important to get the water out of his system as quickly as possible if they were to save his life. The man had other problems too. Miguel saw a broken leg, at least, and suspected there might be internal injuries after such a long fall. The surface of the ocean at that distance wasn't as forgiving as diving into a swimming pool from only a few meters.

And the men Miguel had seen hadn't been diving. They'd been falling in whatever position the blast had put them in. Depending on how they hit the water's surface, they could have all sorts of injuries. Miguel and all his men had basic first-aid training from their mercenary days. One didn't last very long in the soldier-of-fortune business without knowing how to patch each other up until they could get to real medical personnel.

Miguel shifted into his human form as he broke the surface of the water and caught the man in his arms. He manipulated him into position and did his best to help clear the water from the man's lungs. The guy was a shifter, so it didn't take much effort. Shifters had all sorts of natural advantages over regular humans, and Miguel had just a slight touch of magic that allowed him to help expel some of the water from the man's lungs magically.

The man's own reflexes did the rest as he began to choke and cough up the water that had invaded his system. Miguel held him securely above water while he caught his breath, noticing when the man turned his head to try to see Miguel behind him.

"Are you good?" Miguel asked. "I will tow you to the boat so they can see about your leg. Any other breaks that you're aware of?"

“Probably a couple ribs,” the man said, gasping only a little as he recovered his breath more completely. “Thanks, man. You saved my life.”

“Happy to help,” Miguel said quickly. “Now, I’m going to put my arm under yours and tow you that way, all right? If it’s too painful, let me know, and we’ll figure out something else.”

“I’m good to go,” the man said stoically, not making a peep of protest when Miguel started pulling him through the water.

It had to hurt, but the sooner they got this part out of the way, the sooner the guy could get on the road to recovery. Miguel saw his brother hauling his own rescue toward the boat ahead of him, and a few of his other friends doing the same. A few of the selkies had guys under tow as well.

Miguel sent a quick prayer up to the Mother of All, hoping they’d found everyone who’d fallen. It would be truly awful if they lost anyone.

When he reached the boat, which had come a lot closer to the scene, there were helping hands ready to assist the man up onto the deck. Miguel caught Tom’s eye.

“Did you get a count? Did we get them all?” Miguel asked, ready to turn around and do a search grid, if necessary.

But Tom was nodding. “I talked to the guys on the rig. Fire’s out, and everyone is accounted for between those that are still on the rig and those we have here.” He looked around at the deck, now littered with the bodies of the wounded and the small crowd that was tending to them. “They lost two men up top, but everybody here is alive and looks to stay that way.” Tom nodded in satisfaction, then looked back at Miguel. “Thank you for diving in. You and your guys were an immense help.”

“Glad to assist,” Miguel replied quickly, not quite comfortable with the almost-praise. “Is there anything else we can do? Most of us just have basic first-aid training, but if there’s something shipboard, or even up on the rig, that we can do to free up those with more expertise, we’d be glad to do it.”

“That’s much appreciated,” Tom replied immediately. “We could use more help on the bridge. Got any experience running boats?”

Miguel nodded. “My brother and I ran commercial fishing boats only a little smaller than this one when we were younger. Before we went into soldiering.” Miguel sent his brother a hand signal, and Jose jogged over.

“Good. You two go up to the bridge. Tell ‘em I sent you and what you can do,” Tom ordered, already heading toward one of the fallen men to help.

“Roger that,” Miguel replied, and he and Jose went up to the bridge.

What followed was a night spent keeping the boat running smoothly while the men who’d been on the bridge went down to the deck. Both of the men they replaced were trained medics and were able to do quite a bit to help the injured.

Miguel noticed that Deidre was down on deck too. She was helping set broken bones and applying pressure bandages and butterfly closures until the victims’ shifter healing abilities could kick in and close the wounds.

Once Miguel and Jose were alone on the bridge, Jose turned to his older brother.

“What the fuck was that? Kettering, you think?”

Miguel wanted to shrug it off, but he had an uneasy feeling that the chicken named Kettering had just come home to roost. Shit .

“I think the possibility has to be considered,” Miguel said carefully.

He really did not want to have this conversation. Not with anyone. But he knew he’d have to talk to his brother, at the very least. Likely, he’d have to talk to the Kinkaid’s about his suspicions, too, but he had to figure out a way to do it without making him and his men look like the blackguards they had been.

“Damn, bro.” Jose shook his head. “What are you going to do?”

For a fleeting moment, Miguel resented the fact that he was the one who had to come up with a plan on how to straddle the line once more. Sharks weren’t like other shifters. They didn’t really go in for the Pack structure. But somehow, he’d ended up as the leader of his little group of ex-military hammerheads and he had better suck it up and come up with a viable strategy. There was a lot riding on this. Not only his pod and their safety, but also his relationship with Deidre. He didn’t want anything to screw that up. Not when it had only really just gotten started.

“I’m going to have to find a way to talk to the Kinkaid’s about what we know,” Miguel said. “Without implicating us too badly.”

Jose whistled low through his teeth. “That isn’t going to be easy.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Miguel felt his frustration rise again, but tamped it down. He had to think. Maybe bouncing a few ideas off Jose would help. “I got a text from Luis. On the burner.”

“No shit. Are you going to answer it?” Jose turned toward Miguel and met his gaze, one eyebrow rising in question.

“I think, after today, I have to, if only to see what information I can get out of him,” Miguel replied, not really liking the idea, but seeing no viable alternative.

“When?”

Miguel liked his brother’s firm tone. It said that Jose would support Miguel in whatever he decided to do. No matter what. As it should be between brothers.

“I think, tomorrow. Let him stew for another day and see what shakes out from Kinkaid’s investigation of whatever happened up on the rig.”

“Ah.” Jose nodded. “Good plan. I’ll back you up, no matter what. Just say the word.”

“Thanks, bro,” Miguel replied, gratified by his brother’s staunch support. He was a good kid.

A good man—he corrected himself—with almost as much military experience as Miguel, and a good head on his shoulders. Miguel had to remind himself of that every once in a while when he started thinking of Jose as his kid brother. The kid wasn’t really a kid anymore, and damn, was Miguel proud of the man he’d become.

They watched over the boat while the Kinkaid’s scrambled to take care of their people, keeping everybody afloat and safe on the Gulf waters through the night.

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The next day was devoted to recovery both on the rig and the boat. Only the two men on the rig had actually died. They'd been in the direct vicinity of the explosion when it happened. Nobody else had serious enough injuries to be airlifted back to land, but that had remained a possibility they'd kept in reserve—at least until they'd assessed everyone who'd been injured and realized they would be well enough on their own given time to rest and recover.

Some of the men from the rig had been sent back to it. They had rooms there and their own belongings, plus co-workers who could help them, if needed. A few were still not ambulatory enough to make the trip up to the rig from the ship, so they remained on board. As a result, most of the sharks were spending their sleep shifts in the deep, to leave the bunks open for the injured while the selkies tended to their needs.

Miguel had found a bit of privacy, though, to make that call, answering the text he'd received. He sat alone on the lower deck, with the burner phone he wasn't supposed to have. It had been slipped to him on a bathroom break at a truck stop on the way to Texas. That had been all the opportunity Kettering's agent had needed to get the phone to Miguel.

He hesitated before powering it up. There was a new, even more cajoling text waiting for him from one of his South American contacts. Luis was a fellow mercenary who had hooked Miguel and his pod up with jobs from time to time.

As a matter of fact, Luis had been the one to connect Miguel with Kettering in the first place. He'd probably also been the orchestrator of the phone drop, which was why he had the number. Luis had another job lined up and wanted to know if Miguel

was up for it.

Luis's tone was coaxing, even in text. "It's easy money, hermano. Just one last job. Are you in?"

Miguel's stomach clenched. A few months ago, he wouldn't have thought twice. But now? He glanced upward, thinking about Deidre. Miguel turned the phone over in his hands, considering.

He should say no. But did he really believe in second chances? Did he think Deidre could accept him and his dark past and be the mate he desired with every fiber of his being? He had to believe the Goddess would not bring them together just to tear them apart.

Miguel pressed the button that would send his call. Luis picked it up on the second ring.

"Amigo, you got my text," Luis said, his tone expansive as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"I got it," Miguel tried for a friendly tone, but his patience was about to snap. He had to get what information he could out of Luis without the other man realizing what he was doing. "What's the job?"

"I heard there was excitement yesterday on that oil platform," Luis answered obliquely and Miguel's stomach knotted. The only way Luis would know about the oil rig explosion was if he'd had something to do with it.

"Your work?" Miguel asked, trying to sound disinterested.

"The contact was made through one of my men, but you know that rig is a tight ship.

I heard the poor bastard who took the money won't ever have a chance to spend it." Luis sounded very cavalier about the death of one of the rig workers. The slimy stone-cold bastard.

"Two died. Were they both on the payroll?" Miguel asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Just the one, as far as I know," Luis replied easily. "Young and stupid. He actually believed there was a timer delay on the device we gave him. Can you imagine?"

Luis's laughter grated on Miguel's nerves, but he filed the information away in his mind. It might be true. Or not. You could never really tell with Luis. Of course, there was no advantage to lying about this, so it might just be valid.

"So, amigo ," Luis said after his laughter faded, "are you interested in a big payday?"

"Maybe. What's the job?"

"Boss wants someone to finish what was started yesterday. He wanted the rig to splash down in the ocean, gushing oil. Environmental disaster to ruin Kinkaid," Luis said.

"Dude. You know I'm a shark. I don't like the idea of polluting the water. I have to swim in it," Miguel reminded him. That might be his out for turning down the job while still leaving him in the gray as far as Luis's opinion was concerned.

"I know, but it's a big payoff, man. Big enough to buy some beach on the other side of the planet away from the gusher, if you want."

"I don't know, Luis. That's a really big ask for a water shifter. None of us want to shit where we eat, you know? Even if the money is good."

Luis made a tsking sound. “So I am discovering, mi amigo . I had no idea you water shifters were so fastidious.”

Ah . That told him something. Luis was having a hard time finding takers for his big payoff. Good .

“Contamination spreads very far, very fast in the ocean, Luis. It’s different on land,” Miguel said.

“So, is that a no?”

“It’s an I’ll think about it ,” Miguel said, hoping Luis would take his words and not read too much into them. He didn’t want this weasel knowing Miguel was working for the Light. Not while keeping his gray reputation could be of more help to his chosen side.

“Call me when you’re finished thinking,” Luis replied. His tone was still light and smarmy, so maybe Miguel had been successful in keeping his cover.

“Later,” Miguel said in farewell and shut off the phone.

He thought about what he had learned. The Kinkaid Clan needed to know what was planned for their oil rig. Miguel just had to figure out a way to tell them without implicating his own people in anything shady.

Cursing under his breath, Miguel flung the phone overboard with all his might. It flew a long distance before plunging into the sea. Even if one of the selkies found it, the electronics would be ruined.

No more second guessing. No more “one last jobs.”

He had already made his choice.

He'd chosen the path of Light...and a chance with Deidre.

*

Sam Kinkaid, as Alpha of the Clan, was made aware of the situation on the oil platform. He'd flown himself out to the rig in his own small helicopter the next day as soon as it was light enough to fly. He landed on the rig to check things out up there, but had made the climb down to the boat, which was now anchored very close to the rig, to check on the injured. Most of the sharks were at sea, but Miguel and Jose were in the wheelhouse again, taking a shift running the boat so those with more medical training could remain with the injured.

Miguel hadn't seen Deidre since the night before when she waved wearily to him from the deck before she went below. He'd wanted so badly to go to her. Just to hold her for a few minutes in reassurance. Whether he would be reassuring her or himself wasn't something he looked at too closely. But it was not meant to be. He and his brother had to keep an eye on the boat so others could help those in need.

They'd caught a few hours of rest in the middle of the night but were back on the bridge the next morning, taking over from the night shift. The boat didn't need a lot of attention while they were anchored, but someone had to be on the bridge in case something happened. That was their job. For now.

Miguel watched Sam Kinkaid come aboard. The man looked fit and moved with his inner lion's grace. Miguel hadn't expected anything less, though he'd only ever seen the man in a business suit before. They'd been brought before him in a Houston hi-rise when they'd first been brought to Texas and handed over to the Clan's custody. He'd read them the riot act for a few minutes about what they'd done, then told them exactly what he expected of them now that they were under his control.

Every shifter in the world was aware of the Kinkaid's and their Alpha, who had ended up as the king of all lions, despite being an American. It was said his ancestry went back to Africa and Ireland, or maybe it was Scotland. Miguel didn't know for sure. After wars in Africa had killed off all the royal lines of white lions there, he'd been the only one left in the world. Grudgingly, the African lions had asked him—albeit unhappily—to take his rightful place as their Goddess-touched king.

That's how the cat shifters rolled, Miguel had heard. They chose their monarchs by some kind of sign. He wasn't too sure what the sign was for the pantera noir, but he knew those secretive ninjas of the cat shifter world called their queen the Nyx. For tigers, it was the white tigers that ruled over the tigre d'or. And for lions, that white fur thing again pointed to the monarch. Right now, Sam Kinkaid was the only lion shifter with white fur in the entire world, which made him the lion king.

Not only that, but he was also a billionaire businessman with his hand in many pies, as the saying goes. Sam Kinkaid had a great deal of power in both the shifter and human worlds. He was not a man to be trifled with, and the hammerheads were treading lightly around him and his Clan.

Miguel had been impressed by the power of the man. Even wearing a business suit, he'd been ferocious. Seeing him now, climbing over the rail in worn BDU's and a black T-shirt that showed his muscular physique, Miguel was even more certain that Sam Kinkaid hadn't been handed the title King of All Lions just for fun. He was a Power.

And he cared for his Clan. That was plain to see. Most of the injured men who'd worked on the oil rig had been part of a werewolf Pack that had sworn allegiance to Kinkaid. The fact that the Alpha had come all the way out to see them meant that he took their fealty seriously. Wolves depended more on the Pack structure and needed the reassurance of seeing their Alphas—even those of different species to whom they had given their loyalty.

Sam Kinkaid was clearly intelligent enough to have realized that and had come as soon as he was able, to make sure everyone in his Clan was cared for properly. Miguel heard through the gossiping crewman that came up to the bridge to bring trays of breakfast for him and his brother that Sam was seeing every man who'd been hurt, personally. The Alpha was spending a few minutes with each person, talking to them and listening to their stories of what had happened. He was a hands-on Alpha who jumped in to help when there was a problem. The man was damned impressive.

Miguel supposed he shouldn't have been surprised when a few hours later, Sam Kinkaid came onto the bridge. Jose straightened up in his chair, and Miguel put down the chart he'd been looking at to greet the Alpha.

"Welcome, Alpha Kinkaid," Miguel said formally.

"Good to see you both again," Sam said, taking one of the seats on the bridge and motioning for Miguel to be at ease. "I wanted to come up and thank you for pitching in yesterday. I heard what you and your men did to save lives, and I'm grateful."

Miguel bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement. "It was the right thing to do," he stated quietly, uncomfortable with the praise of this Alpha who was so clearly sworn to the service of the Goddess.

Close up, Sam Kinkaid was almost a being of Light, from whom goodness shone. At least to Miguel. Then again, Miguel had always seen things a little differently than most shifters. He and his brother had a witch way back in their family line, and sometimes, they had just a touch more magic than the other sharks.

"I also hear that you're getting close with some of the selkies. Tom gives you all a good report, though he is concerned for our cousin, Deidre."

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Sam didn't dance around the topic of Miguel's relationship with Deidre, which Miguel could respect. But Miguel also really didn't want to talk about this in front of others. Of course, Jose was his brother, so it wasn't like Sam had brought up the topic in front of everyone, but still...

"What is between Deidre and I is private. If, in due course, something permanent comes of it, you will know, Alpha. In the meantime, I can reassure you that my intentions are honorable, and if she asks it of me, I will swear myself to the Light forevermore."

Jose sucked in a breath. Those weren't words sharks ever spoke lightly. Mostly, they liked to remain undeclared in the ongoing war between good and evil. At least, the hammerheads did.

"I see," Sam said quietly, holding Miguel's gaze. It was a mark of Miguel's own Alpha tendencies that he didn't look away. The lion might be king of the jungle, but the sharks were lords of the seas. "That's good to know, Miguel. I will hope for the best for both of you, and I also hope you'll understand that my interest is purely in seeing that my cousin isn't hurt by the association. I have her best interests at heart, as I do for all my people."

Miguel nodded. "I see that, Alpha. Your attention to your Clan does you credit, and I admit, I've been impressed by both your people and your own actions since coming here." Miguel figured he might as well give the lion a little bit of the respect he'd already earned since Miguel might end up living under his rule if Deidre accepted their mating. "I have no intention of causing harm to Deidre, or any of her Clanmates. I've already talked to Jose about this, and if the Goddess so wills it, then Deidre and I

may have news for you in due course. More than that, I cannot say.”

Sam was silent a moment, regarding him steadily. Finally, he nodded again.

“Well, all right, then.” Sam got up from the chair and offered his hand to Miguel, shaking his with a powerful grip that was calibrated to welcome, not to warn. Interesting. Sam then turned to Jose. “What do you think of all this?”

“I support my brother. If his path to happiness is with your cousin, then me and the guys will do all we can to help, including swearing ourselves to the Light.”

Miguel was a little taken aback by Jose’s words.

“They all decided?” Miguel asked before Sam could say more.

“Last night, we held a little informal meeting.” Jose shrugged as if it wasn’t important. “You’re our leader, Miguel. If you’ve found what we’ve all been looking for, then we will support you and continue under your leadership. You haven’t steered us wrong yet.”

“The contract with Kettering was a huge mistake,” Miguel admitted, shaking his head.

“Maybe. But maybe it was meant to happen, to bring us here,” Jose said, surprising his older brother. “They do say the Lady works in mysterious ways.”

Miguel looked from Jose to Sam. The Alpha’s expression was considering, not scoffing as Miguel had expected.

“I don’t know what to say, bro.” Miguel sent his brother a look he hoped would convey how much his support meant to him.

Jose waved one hand dismissively, though Miguel knew his little brother well enough to see that he was as touched by the moment as Miguel was. “It’s not as if we haven’t all been enjoying our time on the straight and narrow. And even if we’re sharks, we’re not like the great white assholes. We’ve remained neutral in words, but in our hearts, you know we’ve never really walked too close to the dark side. We may have pretended we would, but our little pod doesn’t roll that way. Your leadership didn’t attract those kinds of guys, you know, bro? So, if you’ve found a way to settle down with a mate and find some happiness, we all decided we were more than willing to give it a go. Declare ourselves to the Light and all that entails. Come out of the shadows finally, and hopefully, find mates of our own at some point.”

“Ambitious plans,” Sam said softly into the stunned silence that held Miguel captive for a moment. “But do-able.” He leaned against one of the consoles. “Like I said before, you all have a good report from Tom, and he’s an excellent judge of character. He leads the water-based part of the Clan, in fact, though he does it quietly. I know you swimmers are a bit different about your hierarchies than we land-shifters are.” Sam straightened and held out his hand to Jose. “Thank you for clarifying things. This will make it easier if their relationship does turn into something permanent. I was hesitant about you guys before, but if you’re willing to swear to the Light in a ceremony in front of a priestess, then I would welcome you into the Kinkaid Clan, if that is your wish.”

Holy shit. That was a huge concession, and all three of them knew it.

“We are honored by the offer, Alpha,” Miguel said respectfully as Jose nodded his agreement with Miguel’s words. “I pray to the Mother of All that we are able to take you up on that generous offer. And if we join Kinkaid, we will be loyal and true. Hammerheads don’t change allegiances easily. If we give you ours, you will have it for life.”

Sam left after another round of handshakes, leaving Miguel and his brother alone on

the bridge. The events of the past minutes were so momentous that Miguel couldn't really speak of them for a long moment. Silence reigned in the wheelhouse as the brothers thought through all that had just been said. Finally, Miguel addressed his little brother.

"I love you, bro. Thank you for standing with me."

"Anytime, bro."

A few minutes later, others came onto the bridge, and the moment of privacy was lost. Just as well. The Alpha lion had given Miguel a lot to think about.

Now, more than ever, he had to find a way to talk to Kinkaid about Kettering and the threat to the oil rig. It was just a matter of finding the right time and the right way to do it.

*

Deidre was tired after all the excitement of the explosion. She took a breather from her almost non-stop duties caring for those who'd been badly injured and went up on deck to just breathe some fresh air.

The boat rocked beneath her feet, the warm Gulf waters stretching all around her and the boat. The water was oddly flat despite the usual shifting currents. The air still carried the faint acrid scent of smoke from the explosion, but even as she breathed, it dissipated into something else. Something ancient. Something calling to her.

She inhaled slowly, listening with her inner spirit, not just her ears. This call was something different. Something magical.

There were no voices. No obvious movement. Just the rhythmic pulse of the waves,

steady and insistent, like a heartbeat beneath the surface of the water. Her selkie instincts flared.

There. On the horizon. The island shimmered into existence.

It wasn't supposed to be there. A moment ago, there had been nothing but water in that direction. But now, the island loomed in the distance, rising from the mist like a memory that refused to be forgotten.

Her pulse quickened. The logical part of her knew she should stay on the boat. Miguel and the others were busy, still dealing with the explosion and its aftermath. She should wait. She shouldn't do anything reckless. And yet...

She took a step forward. Then another. The salty wind whispered across her skin. The island was calling her. Not with words, but with something deeper. Something woven of the sea itself, in her blood.

It felt like destiny, though she couldn't explain why. Deidre's hands trembled as she stripped off her shirt, then her shorts. The deck was cool beneath her feet as she walked to the edge, the water shimmering below.

She should turn back. She should wait. She should find Miguel and tell him what she was going to do, but the pull was too strong. The island wanted her.

Shedding her clothing and just dropping it to the deck, she dove into the warm waters of the Gulf. They closed around her like an embrace, warm and welcoming. Her selkie surged forward, magic prickling along her skin as she shifted. She kicked hard, her seal form sleek and fast, cutting through the waves.

Within moments, the boat faded behind her as the island rose ahead. And then, just as she neared the shore, a sudden force gripped her. It wasn't a physical force, but

something very different. Very magical.

She gasped, shifting back to human form, treading water as she tried to figure it out. The island loomed before her, real and unreal all at once. The sand was silver in the hazy light, the cliffs jagged and dark. She could see dense jungle just a few feet up from the beach and the strangest trees and foliage she'd ever seen. It didn't look like anything of this earth. It looked...different. Very, very different. And intriguing.

Mist curled at the edges of the shore, moving like breath. She hesitated. For the first time, fear crept in. What had she done?

The current swirled around her, no longer gentle, sweeping her toward the beach. A whisper brushed against her ear—not from the wind, not from the sea, but from something on the island.

Come , it said, though not in so many words. It was more a feeling. A directive that she must obey.

Deidre shivered. Then, slowly, she swam to shore. And the moment her feet touched the sand, the world shifted. The stars above flickered. The air thickened, humming with power. She was somewhere else now. Somewhere truly magical.

Somewhere she might never be able to leave. But after a moment, such mundane thoughts drifted from her mind, and she started forward to explore the strange, dense foliage and the fruiting tree that looked just too inviting to ignore.

*

Later that day, when only one or two injured remained on the boat and the regular bridge crew came back on duty, Miguel went looking for Deidre. He asked around, only to find that Deidre had gone swimming a while back and hadn't been sighted

since. Trying to quell his worry that rose from a desire to see the woman who was, in all likelihood, his mate, Miguel got into the water and started hunting. He would find her. Then he would end his own misery and ask if she could possibly accept him as her mate. That plan firmly in mind, he set out, using his little touch of magic to try locate her trail.

As luck would have it, he did get an intuition about which direction to swim. A short while later, he surfaced, shifting to his human form to take a look around. A tingling went down his spine as he spotted the mysterious island, floating in the near distance. Was it closer than it had been before?

He had the sinking feeling that Deidre had seen it and decided to swim closer and check the place out. Shifting back into his faster-swimming shark form, he went below and made a beeline for the apparition.

When he saw sand under his fins, he shifted to his human form and walked out of the water and onto the land. It was solid beneath him. The island was real, after all.

“Deidre!” he called out, hoping she was there and could hear him. The beach wasn’t all that large and led to a densely forested landscape of tropical greenery. “Deidre!”

He ran up the beach toward where he saw movement in the greenery. A moment later, Deidre appeared through a tangle of leaves. She was smiling, and he felt such relief that he ran straight to her and pulled her into his arms.

They were both naked, having come here in their alternate forms and leaving their clothing on the boat. They were like Adam and Eve in paradise, though this island might yet be the serpent’s lair rather than the Garden of Eden. He had to figure out which it was as fast as he could so he could plan the right strategy. Above all, he had to keep Deidre safe.

“Oh, I like this kind of greeting,” she purred near his ear, moving in to kiss him. When they broke apart long moments later, she grinned up at him. “So, you found me.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief but all he felt was the relief still rushing through him.

“I confess, I was worried. Why didn’t you tell anyone where you were going?” He loosened his hold a bit, and she shrugged.

“I didn’t really know if I’d make it here when I dove into the water. I just wanted to get some air and work out the knots in my shoulders from all that worry, now that everyone is on the mend. I saw the island appear, and it called to me. I couldn’t resist.” She stepped away from him and twirled around, her arms held out wide. “Isn’t it beautiful here?”

He thought she was beautiful, but he supposed she had a point. He looked around at the pristine beach and the tropical foliage. He didn’t really recognize any of the plants, but they were all lush and colorful.

“It’s different,” he allowed, reaching out to touch one of the vibrant green leaves that looked almost like a palm, but not exactly. “I wonder if this island is from another realm or something. This all looks almost familiar, but not quite.”

“I know what you mean,” Deidre replied dreamily. “It’s like the tales I’ve heard of faerie.”

“The fey realm?” Miguel asked, concerned. “Is it possible we could have crossed over to it or the island crossed to our realm from there?”

“I’ve no idea,” Deidre said, “but it’s glorious, isn’t it?”

She twirled around again, and he worried for a moment that she had been intoxicated

by something on the island. He didn't know what she had gotten up to before he'd arrived.

"Did you eat or drink anything before I got here?" he asked, his tone a bit sharper than he'd intended. She looked over at him, tilting her head in question.

"I tried a bite of one of those apples," she said, nodding at a tree to his left. The fruit hanging so invitingly from the branches looked a bit like apples, but not quite. "It was delicious."

Shit .

There were all kinds of folktales about people who ate or drank things in faerie and were unable to ever leave. Resolve ran down his spine. He wouldn't allow that to happen to Deidre.

"Much as I'd like to explore this island, I don't think it's completely safe," he told her gently.

"Not safe? Why would you think that?" she asked, her eyes wide and a little glassy as if she were under the influence of something. Then he felt the tingle of magic and looked up toward the pseudo-apple tree.

"You are wise beyond your years, young man." The voice was musical. The being it belonged to was pure magic. A fey. He was looking at a very old fey with white hair and actual wrinkles on her face.

Fey were the next best thing to immortal, and they didn't age the way humans, or even shifters, did. For one of them to have wrinkles and the appearance of age, they were likely truly ancient.

The ethereal woman stepped delicately out of the greenery and onto the beach, moving closer to Deidre and Miguel as gracefully as any prima ballerina. She wore a flowing garment heavy with intricate embroidery, yet still seeming to float around her in a magical breeze localized only to her. Miguel thought he recognized some arcane symbols in the embroidered design but wasn't quite sure. They seemed to phase in and out of his vision even as he studied them.

The woman looked at him carefully, like she was evaluating him for some purpose known only to herself. Her head tilted to one side, and then she shook her head, just once, from side to side.

"No. You're not the one. Close. But not the one."

"The one for what?" Miguel asked, his curiosity piqued.

"The one I've been waiting for," she replied, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. "You didn't think I went through all the trouble of opening a rift just for the fun of it, did you?"

"So, this island is part of the fey realm?" he asked.

The old fey's expression became cagey. "In a manner of speaking."

"Will Deidre have any lasting effects from having eaten your fruit?" Miguel asked, looking from the fey woman to Deidre's glassy eyes and back. Deidre had sort of zoned out, and Miguel was concerned.

"Mild euphoria only," the old woman said dismissively. "The trees help guard my peace here until the right one comes along. She didn't eat enough to get the full paralytic effect. She should be good as new in a few hours once you get her back to wherever you came from."

“Then we’re free to go?” He had to make sure.

“Absolutely,” the fey woman nodded, making a gesture with her arms. “I came here to talk to a very specific young man. A shifter with a touch of magic about him. I’ve seen him in visions, and he looks very much like you. Do you have a brother, perhaps? Or a son?”

“A brother,” Miguel admitted, not sure why he couldn’t seem to lie to the old woman. Perhaps she’d put some kind of spell on him. “A younger brother that I care for very much,” he added, trying to look stern.

“Fear not for his safety. I do not mean to kidnap him or anything like that,” the old woman replied. “However, I do need to speak with him. I can’t keep opening the rift indefinitely. Eventually, my magic will give out. I must speak with him before that happens.”

“I can deliver your message,” Miguel offered, unwilling to send his brother into possible danger.

The old woman shook her head sadly. “I fear you cannot,” she said softly in her musical way. “It is a great secret that only he should hear. The fate of both our realms depends on it. He needs to know what I know for the upcoming battle, or else evil might just win this time.”

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“Y ou serve the Light?” Miguel asked the magical fey woman suspiciously.

She nodded gravely. “As do you.”

“I’ve never sworn myself one way or another,” he objected, but the old fey laughed. The tinkling sound was enchanting.

“My dear boy, you may not have said the words, but it is clear to me that your fate is entwined with this girl’s.” She nodded toward Deidre, who Miguel still held loosely in his arms. “She is a being of Light, and if you are hers, then you follow that path too. Already, your aura is meshing with hers, and the Light begins to claim you. My advice is to accept. Don’t fight it. You may have been born with ambiguity in your soul, but I believe you chose long ago which side of the eternal struggle you wish to be on.” She gave him a knowing look. “Else a being such as she would not have chosen you.”

Miguel’s heart thrilled to the idea that Deidre might have chosen him, but he had to hear it from her first. He wasn’t sure about this intensely magical woman. The fact that she thought the relationship was more solid than he did gave him hope, but it still wasn’t a sure thing.

“I do love her,” Miguel admitted quietly, looking down at Deidre. She was staring up at him, her eyes unblinking and completely dazed. She was out of it.

“I see that,” the old woman said, not unkindly. “Be sure she knows of your love, and all will be well.”

“Are you a seer, ma’am?” Miguel needed to know.

“Of sorts,” the lady admitted. “It was a vision that set me on this course, but though I’ve tried on multiple occasions, you are the first to come visit me.” She looked around and sighed. “I fear this may have been a foolish quest, but I was sure I’d find the right man to lead the water forces of the fey realm against Elspeth this way.”

“Hold on a minute,” Miguel said, shocked by her words. “You’re seeking a military leader? Way out here in the Gulf?”

“Is that where we are?” The woman tilted her head again. “Are you affiliated with the Kinkaid? I believe they are the dominant shifter group with water-based members in the adjoining land area, aren’t they?”

“You are well informed, ma’am,” Miguel answered. It couldn’t hurt to admit to something that every shifter on Earth knew.

“I have spent time in the mortal realm, and I still have contacts there. I am allied with High Priestess Betina.”

“I’ve heard of her,” Miguel admitted. “I hope you will not object if I check out your story with her before sending my brother into possible danger.”

“I have no objection. I am the Lady Mirabella of the White Tower of Aidel. I will give you my token so as to prove my identity to my old friend, Betina.”

Miguel was impressed that she was so confident, but he would still check before telling Jose. Surely, Sam Kinkaid could get word to the High Priestess for something that sounded this important. The lady stepped closer and held out her hand. She had taken off one of her rings and now held it out to him.

He took the ring and marveled at its delicacy. It was a pretty design of flowers and leaves surrounding a central stone that sparkled with the light of a thousand diamonds.

“How will I get this back to you?” he asked, holding onto the ring and feeling a bit odd about the whole thing. This ring was clearly something precious.

The lady looked from Miguel to Deidre and back again. “Consider it my gift to you. Give it to your lady. It holds protective magic. May it serve you both well.”

“I am honored, milady,” he replied formally.

“I am just glad someone finally came to the island so I could get my message out. Check out my story, then send your brother to me. He is needed to fight the forces of evil.”

“Ma’am,” Miguel began hesitantly. He felt it only fair to warn her that she might have the wrong man in mind. “Perhaps you don’t realize it, but my brother and I are shark shifters. Hammerheads, to be precise. We are not selkies, who are the beings of Light you might expect. Sharks are a bit more...ambiguous. I have already told my people that I will swear myself to the Light for all time to be with the woman I love, but I can’t speak for them. Not even my little brother. Perhaps you were looking for a selkie, instead. There’s a boatload of them not far, and many have similar military training to myself and my brother.”

“Hammerhead, you say?” The lady did not seem put off by the idea that he was a shark shifter. “That is interesting. Prehistoric, you might say.” She looked thoughtful. “Perhaps that is fitting. I didn’t know what kind of shifter to expect, to be honest. Selkies were likely, but by no means guaranteed. If you have decided to serve the Light, then it is likely that your brother may also do so, especially after he learns what I have to tell him.” She looked at the horizon over Miguel’s shoulder and then

focused back on him. “But time is short. You two need to return to your ocean and let me go back to mine. I’ll be back in due course. I hope your brother will come here then, so I can speak with him.”

“If all goes as you expect, I suspect he will be eager to hear what you have to say, milady,” Miguel answered respectfully. “He has also seen the island in the past few days and was curious about it.

“Go now, lest you be brought back to faerie with me,” she cautioned. “The effect of the fruit will wear off in a few hours.”

Miguel looked over his shoulder and was shocked to see another land—not of this Earth—where the ocean should be. Then it faded, and he could see the water he expected. He picked Deidre up in his arms and made a run for the water, pausing only to throw a word of thanks over his shoulder to the lady.

“Thank you for the ring. I’ll give it to Deidre when she wakes,” he shouted as he strode into the water.

The lady’s tinkling laughter followed him like the sound of bells on the wind. “Ask her to marry you when you do, young man.”

Miguel saw the disturbing flicker of that other world a few more times as he got Deidre into the water and headed back toward where he thought the boat should be. Luckily, once she got into the water, she began swimming on her own, though she wasn’t going very fast, and she stayed in her human form.

Miguel swam beside her, keeping to her pace. If she was going to get trapped in the fey ocean, by golly, he was going with her. Though, hopefully, they would both get far enough away from the little island to be back in the mortal realm when the island went fully back to the fey.

A few minutes after they set out, Deidre stopped to tread water. “What happened?” She still sounded a bit dreamy, but her eyes were starting to clear a little bit.

Miguel leaned down to kiss her, so glad that she was coming back to herself that he couldn’t contain it. Then he pulled back and looked around. The island was flickering in and out of sight.

“You went to the island. I followed you and found you there,” he told her. “We’ve got to get farther away before it disappears again. Can you swim faster?”

“Faster?” A playful light came into her dazed eyes, and a moment later, she shifted into her seal form and bounded away. Thankfully, she was swimming in the right direction, toward the boat he could now see in the distance.

He moved the lady’s ring from his pinky finger to his mouth and shifted to his shark form and followed after her. She was so joyful in every movement, so graceful in the water and out of it. How could he not be in love with this woman?

The island disappeared behind them, but they were both much closer to the boat now and in no danger of being swept away to the fey realm. Miguel breathed a sigh of relief. The lady from the island had given him a lot to think about, and a lot to do, but the first thing on his mind was making sure Deidre would have him forevermore. He’d do that as soon as possible.

When they arrived at the boat, a cry went up from the deck, halting Miguel’s plans.

“Where have you two been? We’ve had men out searching for you day and night for the past two days,” Tom exclaimed as they reached the deck and wrapped themselves in towels.

“Two days?” Miguel asked, confused for a moment. Then he realized what must have

happened. He sat down on the lid of a storage bin, and Deidre plopped down beside him. She was still a bit dazed, but able to focus a bit more than before.

“Two days,” Tom repeated, frowning. “Where’ve you been?”

“Deidre swam to that island that keeps appearing and disappearing,” Miguel explained. “I followed her. By the time I got to her, she’d already eaten something that looked like an apple, but wasn’t, and is still dazed from it, as you can see. The lady who we met there said it was part of the defense of the shore and that she’d opened a rift from the fey realm.”

“Wait a minute,” Tom said, shaking his head. “What?”

Miguel nodded, his expression turning grim. “I’m going to have to talk to Sam, if you can arrange it. The lady claimed to be friends with the High Priestess, and I need to verify her story. She wanted to talk to my brother, Jose. Something about fighting against evil. But I’m not sending Jose out there until we know for sure she’s on the level.”

“And just how are we going to do that?” Tom was clearly upset by the news.

Miguel held up his hand where he’d put the ring on his pinky finger again after shifting shape. “She gave me this token to show the High Priestess,” he revealed. He could tell Tom wanted him to turn over the ring, but he didn’t move to do so. “And afterward, she told me to give this ring to Deidre,” Miguel added in a low tone only Tom could hear. “She claimed it had protective magic and wanted Deidre to have it.”

Tom shook his head, sighing loudly. “I’ll get on the horn to Sam. He’s up on the rig, so it won’t take long to get him back down here.” Tom looked behind him and sent orders up to the wheelhouse to move the boat closer to the rig again. Then he turned back, looking more closely at Deidre, then back to Miguel. “Is she going to be all

right?”

“The lady promised the effect of the fruit would wear off in a few hours.”

“Interesting defensive strategy,” Tom mused, still concerned about Deidre’s condition.

“She only had one bite of the apple-like fruit. Any more, and I suspect she’d have been stoned into unconsciousness. As it is, she’s been out of it for a while. Were we really gone for two days? It felt like a half-hour, at most.” Miguel shook his head. “Thing is, the island was definitely from the fey realm. The lady confirmed it, and she was, beyond doubt, a fey.”

“They do say time works differently in faerie,” Tom replied, only a bit skeptically.

Forty-five minutes later, Deidre had been tucked into her bed to sleep off the remaining effects of the fey fruit. Miguel had wanted to join her in her cabin to watch over her, but he had work to do. Sam Kinkaid came back onto the boat, and he and Tom met with Miguel in the galley.

Miguel told Sam more about what he’d seen and what the old fey woman had said to him, but he held back a bit about his brother’s possible role in future battles. The less that knew about that, the better, he judged. At least for the time being. If push came to shove, and he decided they needed to know, he’d judge at that point, how much to reveal.

Once Sam heard Miguel’s story, the Alpha pulled out his smart phone and set up a video call with the High Priestess, through the Lords. They took Sam’s call immediately, Miguel saw, then patched him through to Betina with little delay.

“I’m sorry the reception isn’t up to my usual standard,” Sam said, once the High

Priestess was on the line. “We’re on a boat out in the Gulf, and I wasn’t expecting any of this. Apparently, a mysterious island has been appearing and disappearing for the past few days, and two days ago by our reckoning, my cousin Deidre went out to investigate it without telling anybody. One of our crewmen, Miguel, followed her and found her on the island. He also found a woman there, who claims to know you. This call is for confirmation, if you can provide it, before we go any further,” Sam outlined the problem.

“Thank you, Alpha. If you please, let me talk to Miguel.” The High Priestess had a similarly musical voice to that of the lady Miguel had met on the island. Sam handed Miguel the phone, and he could see she was just as ethereally lovely as the older woman he’d met on the island. “Hello. I’m Betina.”

“Your reputation precedes you, ma’am,” Miguel said politely. “I am Miguel Aroyo. Hammerhead shark shifter.”

Betina’s eyebrow rose in what might have been surprise. “I see,” was all she said in response. The High Priestess was a very cool customer. Miguel liked her immediately. “Please tell me more about your experience on the island.”

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“I got no farther than the beach,” Miguel explained to the High Priestess. “I found Deidre, and she was dazed by having eaten a bite of some kind of fruit I’ve never seen before, though it looked a bit like an apple, as did the tree it came from. Then a woman appeared. She said her name was Lady Mirabella of the White Tower of Aidel. She claimed to know you and gave me this token by which she thought you might recognize her and be able to vouch for her.” Miguel held his pinky finger up to the phone’s camera so the High Priestess could see the ring perched between his first and second knuckle. “She claimed she had been opening a rift between the fey realm and here for the past few days in order to meet with a shifter male. She thought at first that I might be the one, but decided I wasn’t and asked if I had a brother or other male relative. As it happens, my little brother is also on this boat, and she wants me to send him to her the next time the island appears, but I really don’t want to send him into danger. The lady seemed all right to me, but we were only on that beach for a few minutes, yet two days passed while everyone was looking for us.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard that time moves differently in the fey realm,” the High Priestess said softly. “Do me a favor. Give someone the phone to hold and rub the tip of your left ring finger over the stone of the ring where I can see.”

Miguel did as she asked, handing the phone back to its owner and maneuvering so she could watch as he rubbed the stone. He thought he saw a flicker of light as he did so, but the ring was facing away from him, so he couldn’t be sure. He did note the widening of both Sam’s and Tom’s eyes, though. Something had happened when he’d done as Betina instructed. He waited to hear what she would say.

“That is the ring I gave to Mirabella, many years ago. I have no doubt. It was imbued with protective magic and the Light of the Goddess. It cannot be faked.” Her melodic

voice sounded with surety.

“The lady gave the ring to me to give to Deidre, but if it is yours, ma’am...” Miguel began, but the High Priestess cut him off with an elegant gesture.

“If Lady Mirabella gave it to you, I’m certain she had good reason, my boy. Do as she willed and give it to your Deidre, with my blessing. It will help protect her and those around her, as long as she wears it.”

“Thank you, milady,” Miguel said, bowing his head slightly in both thanks and respect.

“As for the rest, I believe you must send your brother to the island, hard as that might be for you. Lady Mirabella is one of the greatest fey mages of all time. She is very ancient and has been around longer than almost anyone in the fey realm. If she saw fit to interfere to this extent, it must be very important to both our realms.” Betina paused for a moment before continuing. “You’ve already experienced the time lag. When your brother meets with Mirabella, you may not see him for a very long time thereafter, but he will be in good hands, doing good work. Of that, you may be assured.”

“She said something about him leading the water forces of the fey realm in the coming battles,” Miguel revealed, judging it important to tell her and hoping that Tom and Sam would keep this news under their hats. Both men drew in a breath at Miguel’s words. Betina looked surprised as well.

“Now that’s something,” she mused. “I would have figured other men would be more suited, but then again, the others I had in mind would be watched for just such a thing. By choosing an outlier—a shark, at that—of dubious loyalties, Mirabella is doing something wholly unexpected. Sam, Tom, I expect this to go no further. The less who know of this plan, the better. Do you understand?”

Sam turned the phone back to himself and Tom, who were on the other side of the table from Miguel. Both men were nodding.

“Yes, milady,” they replied in turn.

“Mum’s the word,” Tom said.

“No one will hear of this from me,” Sam promised.

“Good. Now, Miguel, it is imperative that you get your brother out to that island the next time it appears. I can’t tell you how much magical energy it’s taking Mirabella to open that rift time and time again. And though I’m sure it will be hard for you to be separated from your brother, you must do so. The fate of more than just our world may depend on it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, milady,” Miguel replied when Sam turned the phone back to him.

He wasn’t exactly happy about it, but he was beginning to come to terms with the idea that he and Jose could no longer go on as they had before. Things were changing, and he had to keep up.

“Good. And take heart. This is a positive move for our side, and for your family. Hammerheads are some of the most ancient shifters. In fact, many shifter scholars believe that they were one of the first species to shapeshift and were among the predecessors of all shifters living today. You have a proud heritage, my new friend. I expect great things from you and your brother.”

They ended the call not long after, and Miguel was eager to hear what the lion Alpha might have to contribute. He didn’t have long to wait.

“Well, that puts a whole new spin on things, I think,” Sam said as he put away his

phone. “There is no better person to speak for you than the High Priestess, and what she had to say about you and your kind—not to mention your brother—says a lot. Not that I wasn’t getting similar reports from Tom and his people about you and yours, Miguel. You’ll have to forgive my suspicious nature where sharks are concerned. After hearing about the trouble with a great white shifter who had corrupted a mer pod from my friends in Grizzly Cove, my opinion of sharks lowered. I’m also land-based, of course, and I don’t know as much as I probably should about the shifters from the seas, other than my selkie relatives. I hope you will accept my apology for assuming hammerheads were more like those great whites than not.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Alpha. Sharks are sharks. The great whites are definitely assholes, but not all of us are willing to walk the line on the side of Light. Most of my life, I admit, I’ve straddled that line a bit, but now...” Miguel tilted his head. He didn’t want to say more about his change of heart and the woman at the core of it until he’d had a chance to cement things with her, and thankfully, the Alpha seemed willing to let it go for now.

“Now is the perfect time for you to make your stand and declare yourself as a servant of the Light. Now is when you’re needed—when all of us are needed—most. When the armies of darkness are gathering, poised to take over should we fall in battle,” the Alpha said, his tone just a little bit grim.

“And I did my research on you and your men, you know,” Tom said quietly. “I have contacts in the larger mercenary groups, and I heard all about your career. Especially the things you would, and perhaps more importantly, would not do.”

The sneaky bugger had been digging into Miguel’s past, had he? Miguel wasn’t altogether surprised, but he’d expected to hear about it sooner than this. Tom was cagey, that was for sure.

Miguel knew that this was the chance he’d been looking for to tell the Kinkaid Alpha

about the threat to the oil rig. He just still wasn't sure how to broach the subject without admitting to doing some shady things—including having the burner phone. Damn. Just when he'd gotten on their good side, he was going to risk ruining it all, but it had to be done.

"There's something else we have to talk about," Miguel said, hoping he wasn't messing up the good he'd done.

"That sounds serious," Tom said, half-joking.

"It is. And I'm afraid I have to admit to some things that may renew your suspicions about me, but you need to know." Miguel took a deep breath before continuing. "The threat to your oil rig is real and ongoing. I got a call from a contact who is brokering for Abdul Kettering. He's actively looking for someone to sabotage the rig so it falls into the water and causes an environmental disaster. I was told he wants to ruin your business, but it's just as likely that he wants to cause you trouble, so you'll be distracted."

Sam eyed him warily while Tom cursed under his breath.

"You said no." Why was the Alpha so sure about that? Surprised, Miguel nodded.

"I told him I'd think about it. I know he's approached others. The initial bomb that went off was paid for by Kettering, in fact. At least, that's what Luis claimed. Luis is a mercenary broker of sorts. He's the one who first introduced me to Abdul Kettering. He also claimed that the young man who took Abdul's money wasn't alive to spend it. They'd told him there was a delay timer on the bomb, which there wasn't. They never intended on him living through the blast." Miguel paused to let that sink in. "That's the kind of people we're dealing with."

"I knew that already," Sam said quietly, just watching Miguel with a calm expression

that Miguel couldn't read. This man would be hell to play poker with.

"Can you call this Luis back?" Tom asked.

Miguel shook his head. "I threw the phone into the sea."

"Where'd you get the phone in the first place?" Tom followed up.

"It was passed to me at a rest stop on the way to Texas," Miguel admitted.

"So, you've had it for months," Tom surmised, his lips drawn into a tight line of displeasure.

Miguel nodded. "I have. I hadn't used it until the explosion. I thought I could get more information, but I want no part of any mission that takes out an oil rig and pollutes the water. Nor do I want to be involved in anything for Kettering ever again. I told Luis that he'd have trouble finding any water-based shifter to cause that kind of damage to the ocean and he said he'd already learned that, so he had to have been asking around for others to do the job. He's a jackal shifter, so he didn't understand how polluting the water we live in is something even those sharks sworn to evil would find inconvenient. Regardless, I don't want to deal with the likes of him anymore. He's slimy, even for a jackal."

"I hear what you're saying," Sam said slowly, his eyes sharp as they met Miguel's. "But I can see there's a really good opportunity here to insert a spy into the enemy camp, so to speak."

"Maybe, but not me," Miguel protested. "I'm out of that game. If Deidre agrees, I won't be taking those kinds of risks ever again. Not on purpose."

Tom nodded. "Of course not," he agreed. "But that's not to say one of your pod

mates might not be able to help in that regard.” Tom looked over at Sam and they nodded at each other.

“It’s something to consider,” the Alpha allowed. “But it can’t be you or your brother. I see that. We’ll talk again about who among your number might be willing to go undercover for us, if that’s even a possibility. For now, I think we have enough to chew on. Thank you for the warning about the rig. I’m going to go over security and have a few words with the men working up there.”

Miguel stood from the table. “Please excuse me, then. I must talk with my brother.”

“By all means,” Sam said, nodding. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

There wouldn’t be, but it was nice of the Alpha to offer, Miguel thought. His head was spinning with all that had happened and all that had been said. He wanted to go straight to Deidre, but she was probably still asleep, and Miguel really had to talk to Jose. Urgently. Nobody knew when the island would reappear, and Jose had to be ready to go when it did.

Saying goodbye to his kid brother was going to be hard. Miguel wasn’t looking forward to it, but after hearing what the High Priestess had to say, he thought it would be necessary.

Miguel found Jose on deck, just as he came out of the galley. Apparently, his brother had been waiting his turn to talk to Miguel.

“Where were you, bro? I looked everywhere for two whole days.” Jose’s voice held hints of both anger and relief.

Miguel moved closer to his little brother and put one hand on his shoulder. “It’s a

long story, and you're going to hear it all because I believe you've got a mission, brother, if you're brave enough to take it on."

Jose frowned but allowed himself to be led over to the rail where they could talk privately. Well, unless there was a nosey selkie bobbing in the waters below, which was very possible. Miguel would choose his words wisely, and when it came to the top-secret part, he would speak them so only Jose could hear. That thought firmly in mind, he began with his arrival on the fey island and described what, and who, he had found there.

Jose listened as if they were back in the mercenaries and he was attending a mission briefing. Come to think of it, that's how Miguel was running down the occurrences on that mysterious island. Old habits died hard, apparently. And it really was like they were back in action for the first time in a long time. Or, at least, Jose would be, once he got to the island and met with that fey lady.

Miguel didn't feel the expected pang of regret that he wouldn't be in on the action. No, his days of chasing adventure were over for good, though he hadn't quite realized it fully until this moment. He would much rather be with Deidre, his only mission to make her happy and to protect her from all harm.

"How long were you on the island?" Jose asked, a frown between his brows.

"On the beach? Altogether it couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes. The swim there and back took about a half hour. The influence of the island dissipates about a hundred yards or so from the shore, I think," Miguel answered as precisely as he could.

"And yet you were missing for two days," Jose mused. "So, if I go out there and end up in the fey realm for any length of time, weeks, months, or even years could pass here while I was hanging with the elves." A wry smile twisted Jose's lips.

“That’s true, and I’m sorry, but after hearing what the High Priestess had to say about the lady on the island, I think it’s something you have to do. For all our sakes. It likely won’t be easy, and it may take all of your skill, but I believe in you. I always have. You’ve got what it takes to do anything that needs to be done,” Miguel told his brother, meaning every word.

“I guess this puts us both firmly on the side of Light from now on,” Jose said quietly.

“With everything that’s going on in the world right now, we weren’t going to be able to straddle the line much longer anyway,” Miguel reasoned. “We were always on the right side, though it suited me to let others wonder where we really stood.”

“Yeah, you’re right, of course,” Jose agreed readily. “It’s just hard to come out of the shadows.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I think at least part of your value to that fey lady lies in your morally gray reputation, so I think you’ll be able to keep it under wraps a bit longer than me. If Deidre accepts me, I will declare my allegiance publicly among the Kinkajids. I can do no less with her in my life. I can’t really hide my true beliefs any longer. But you, my brother, will be operating in the shadows for a while yet. Only a few will know you’ve gone to the fey realm, and from what the lady said, when you return, you’ll be at the head of an army.” Miguel had lowered his voice so only Jose could hear.

“Are you serious?” Jose asked, looking astounded.

“You always were the best strategist I’ve ever known. There is no one more suited to lead the sea-going forces of Light against the darkness, which is the role I think is intended for you.” Miguel was careful to keep his words barely audible only to Jose. “It is a great secret. The High Priestess thought that perhaps our morally gray reputations might fool the enemy. They’re probably expecting someone like the water

elemental admiral or one of these selkies to lead the resistance in the ocean. While the enemy is watching them, you'll be free to train your forces and be ready to act when needed. That much was obvious once I had a chance to think this through."

"I don't think I'm worthy of such a task," Jose objected quietly.

"You are," Miguel said, putting his hand back on his brother's shoulder and looking deep into his eyes. "You are the best man I know. The best brother. The best soldier. The best leader of men. You will be magnificent. I am sure of it."

They spent a bit more time together, just enjoying one another's company while Miguel told his brother everything he could about his limited experience with the island. Then they went below so Jose could pack up. He had to be ready to go when the island next appeared.

It was clear that Jose also wanted to spend time with his friends and fellow hammerheads, since it was unlikely he'd be seeing them for a while. The group had formed a little family of bachelors that had been together a long time. It was going to be different now, but Miguel hoped he could keep the group together and working toward the common goal of finding mates and a steadier life for them all.

His brother took what he could with him in a waterproof satchel that they sometimes used when traveling from place to place. It was easy enough to snag the straps in either their mouths or on their hammerhead, though that looked a bit silly. Still, it meant that they could bring clothing, weapons, and other gear with them for when they shifted back to human form, so it was worth a bit of discomfort.

Jose gave the rest of the few belongings he'd had on the boat to Miguel for safekeeping. It wasn't much. They'd learned to travel light during their years as mercenaries. Still, Miguel would keep his brother's possessions safe for him, no matter how long it took for Jose to return.

The other guys realized Jose was leaving, but they didn't ask questions after Jose said he had a mission from the Alpha. They understood missions and the need for secrecy. One by one, they said their goodbyes and wished Jose well. Then it was just Jose and Miguel up on deck. The island could appear at any moment, and Miguel had a feeling it wouldn't be long now, though he couldn't say exactly why he thought that. Still, it was best to be ready. He would wait with his brother until the island appeared and see him off. It was the least he could do.

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“For what it’s worth, I wish you well with Deidre. She is a good woman,” Jose said, gazing out at the calm water. “Too good for the likes of you,” he added, grinning as he turned to look at Miguel.

Miguel chuckled and agreed good-naturedly. “Thanks. After I see you off, my next task is to get her to agree to be my mate.” He still felt nervous about that and shook his head. “Wish me luck,” he muttered.

“You won’t need luck. I’ve seen the way she looks at you,” Jose said encouragingly. “I predict success. And if she rejects you at first, just keep at it. Wear her down. She will be the making of you, bro. I feel it in my bones.”

“If it is the Lady’s will, Deidre will be mine,” Miguel replied, his tone a bit philosophical. Then he shrugged. “The fey lady you will meet is quite something. Ancient, even for one of their race. She is an old friend of the High Priestess Betina, who gave her this ring.” Miguel held up his pinky, where the ring was still riding between his first and second knuckle. “The lady of the island gave it to me so Betina would know it was really her, and they both told me to give it to Deidre.”

“So, in essence, they gave you an engagement ring to give to Deidre,” Jose summed up, smiling. “Sounds like they have every faith that Deidre will agree.”

“I hope so.” Miguel looked out at the water. “I really love her, you know? I’ve never felt like this before. Both halves of my soul want to be with her. Always.”

“Sounds just about perfect, bro,” Jose said softly, clapping his brother on the shoulder. “I am both happy for you and a bit envious too.”

“The only problem—if you can call it that—is that my priorities have necessarily shifted. I’m no longer willing to take on the risky missions. My mate has to come first.”

“As it should be,” Jose readily agreed.

“Regardless, the lady said I wasn’t the one she was waiting for. It’s you, Jose. You’re the one destiny has tapped on the shoulder, and I know you’ll make us all proud.” Miguel felt an overwhelming sense of magic as he reached out to hug his little brother for what would be the last time in a long time, if he was any judge. Without looking out to sea, he knew somehow that the island was about to reappear. “It’s almost time for you to go. I will miss you, brother. Be good. Be careful. And come back to us when the time is right. You will always have a place in my life.”

“As will you, Miguel.” Jose kissed his brother’s cheeks, then drew away. “You and Deidre and whatever little rugrats you might be blessed with before I return.”

“Hopefully, you won’t be gone that long,” Miguel said, squeezing his brother’s shoulder as they both turned to look out at the water.

“It’s time,” Jose said, opening the door in the rail that would allow him to jump straight into the water from the deck.

Jose shucked his clothes, folding them and stowing them in his pack, which he took with him as he went over the side. He went into the water as a man, then turned to wave up at his brother. They exchanged a salute, and then, Jose positioned his pack on top of the water where he could snag it as soon as he shifted.

He went shark and hooked the strap of the pack with his elongated head. He wiggled his fins in salute, then dove beneath the surface and headed straight for the island that was shimmering with magic in the late afternoon sun.

The island was closer than it had ever been, but it would still be a significant swim. Miguel watched his brother's path for as long as he could before realizing that Tom had come up beside him. The older man held out a pair of high-powered binoculars to Miguel, who took them gladly.

"You see the island now?" Miguel asked, just to be sure. For so long, it had seemed that only he, Deidre and Jose had been able to see the phenomenon.

"I see it," Tom confirmed.

Even with the advanced tech of the binoculars, Miguel had a hard time spotting Jose, but he finally saw him walking on that faraway beach that wasn't truly in this realm at all. Jose walked up on the beach, bent to get his clothes out of his pack and dressed quickly. A moment later, the lady walked out of the greenery, and they exchanged a few words.

The lady smiled, then waved directly at Miguel, who drew in a breath. Then, very unexpectedly, she gave him a thumbs up. Miguel started to laugh. The lady had the right brother this time, and she'd just let Miguel know it.

Miguel shook his head as he turned to glance at Tom. He, too, had military-grade eyepieces and was watching the action on the island. Miguel shouldn't have been surprised.

"They're filming this up in the wheelhouse. None of us have ever had a glimpse of the fey realm and probably won't ever get another chance like this," Tom said, still looking through his own pair of binoculars.

Miguel looked back at the island, which he could feel fading even as he spotted his brother waving from the distant shore. The lady stood with him, and she was smiling in that serene, fey way she had.

“It’s fading,” Tom observed.

“I feel it,” Miguel confirmed. “They will not be back again anytime soon.”

The island disappeared from view before Tom lowered his binoculars and turned to regard Miguel. “I almost forgot you had a touch of mortal magic in your family line. Could come in handy in the events to come if things really heat up. I’m glad you’re on our side.”

Tom clapped a stunned Miguel on the shoulder as he drew even with him, heading back up to the bridge. There, he paused, probably gauging Miguel’s reaction to his words.

Miguel had no idea how the sneaky old selkie had uncovered so much about his family’s history, but then again, he was a Kinkaid. They had a reputation for resourcefulness.

“The Clan has ties to some human mages firmly on the side of Light if you ever want to get formal training,” Tom offered, surprising Miguel yet again.

“I don’t have all that much magic,” Miguel admitted, “but I’ll keep the offer in mind.”

“Do that.” Tom said as he dropped his hand from Miguel’s shoulder. “I think Deidre might be awake soon. She was just beginning to stir as of the last report I had before coming on deck.”

Miguel’s spirits lightened, and an unconscious grin spread across his face. He thanked the selkie and handed back the binoculars, then headed straight for the cabin where Deidre was resting. It was time to figure out the rest of his life.

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Deidre surfaced from a deep sleep to find herself tucked in bed in her cabin. She looked around, finding Miguel seated next to her, watching her with concern in his lovely dark eyes.

“How do you feel?” he asked before she could say anything.

She leaned up on one elbow and shook her head a bit. She felt sort of hungover, but she couldn’t remember drinking anything. Then she recalled the island.

“That fruit...” Her sluggish mind was trying to put two and two together.

“Do you remember the lady on the island?”

“Vaguely. You were talking with her, right?” She sat all the way up. “But I can’t recall what you were saying. Her voice was like music, though. I remember that.”

“She was fey,” Miguel told her. “She is a mage of great power and has been bringing the island into the mortal realm looking for someone. My brother just went there. He’s the one she was seeking, though that is a bit of top-secret knowledge.”

“Oh, Miguel.” Deidre cringed as compassion filled her heart. “Jose is gone?”

Miguel nodded, and she could see the sadness and bravery on his face. “He’ll be gone for some time. We were only on the island for a few minutes, and yet, two days passed here. They had search parties out for us.”

“You got me back to the boat?” The passage of time confounded her. How much time had she lost?

Miguel nodded. “That was yesterday. The fruit you ate was part of the defenses of the island, meant to knock out those who ate it so they couldn’t cause mischief. The lady said you would sleep off the effects since you hadn’t had that much, but you were pretty much out of it when I found you.”

“I don’t remember much after biting into that apple. Or whatever it was.” She pushed a strand of hair back off her forehead and shook her head.

“Why did you?”

“It just seemed so inviting. Like I couldn’t go farther into the tree line without pausing for a moment to take a bite from that fruit.” Her eyes widened. “The lady was a mage, you said? Was the fruit enchanted?”

Miguel firmed his lips and nodded. “I believe it was. Not just to put the person who ate it to sleep, but probably also to entice them to eat it in the first place, judging by what you just said.”

“Wow.”

She levered her legs over the side of the bed and put one hand to her head, feeling a little dizzy. Miguel was there instantly, sitting down beside her on the edge of the bed and putting his arm around her to steady her. He felt so strong and good. She’d missed his touch, she realized. She snuggled into him, enjoying his warmth and solidity for a long moment, until other needs took precedence.

“I’m going to take a quick shower,” she said, straightening away from him with reluctance. “I must look a fright.”

“You are always beautiful to me, Deidre,” Miguel said in the sweetest tone as he brushed her hair away from her face, and their eyes met and held.

“You say the nicest things,” she whispered back, but she couldn’t allow herself to be distracted. She needed the bathroom and a chance to clean up a bit. “Hold that thought,” she told him as she rose to her feet, taking a moment to get her bearings. She really did feel sort of hungover, and her mouth felt furry. Yuck.

She made her way to the small, attached bathroom and took care of things, including brushing her teeth and getting into the shower. Pity the shower stall was so small. She’d have liked to have invited Miguel to share it with her, but he was just too big for the tiny shower cubby.

She decided she’d have to get him on land and lure him into a bathroom large enough for them both where she could seduce him properly. That is, if they were still together once this job was over. She really wanted it to be. She wanted to keep him forever, if only he felt the same. She thought maybe he was beginning to feel something. She didn’t know how sharks mated, but her inner seal wanted to keep him. It really, really, really liked him. In fact, she thought maybe it loved him as much as her human side did.

That thought made her pause. Well, if that didn’t beat all. She loved him. No more questions in her mind about it. She was well and truly, deeply in love with the man.

Now she just had to get him to say it first so she would know for certain that she hadn’t pressured him into a premature declaration. She’d jumped the gun before, and it had ended disastrously for all concerned. This time, she was going to cultivate a patience that was nearly impossible for her, but she would do it. She swore she would. This was just too important.

“Are you all right in there?” Miguel’s voice came to her from the other side of the thin door.

“Fine. I’ll be out in a minute,” she called back, finishing rinsing her hair.

She shut off the water and stepped out of the little cubby to wrap a towel around her wet hair and put on the terrycloth robe that hung on the back of the door. She felt enveloped in fluffy white fabric when she opened the door to find Miguel on the other side, with that look of concern on his handsome face.

He held out his arms, and she walked straight into them. She loved the feel of his strength surrounding her. He made her feel delicate and cherished. He made her feel special. Really special.

“I was worried,” he admitted, “but I’m glad to see you are recovering from your encounter with fey magic.” His words touched her deeply, spoken in soft, caring tones. “I want you to know something. Something important.”

He moved back and sank to one knee in front of her. Confused, she frowned at him. What was the man up to now?

He brought his hands together, and only then did she notice the glint of something sparkling on his left pinky finger. It was a ring. Her heart leapt in her chest as he took the ring off and held it up to her.

“The lady on the island gave this to me, to give to you,” he said, and her hopes flattened. “I later learned that it was a gift to her years ago from the High Priestess Betina, and she used it as proof of identity. When I spoke to the High Priestess, she recognized it immediately. I offered to send it back to her, since it had been hers to start with, but she also wanted me to give it to you. Because...you see...” He took a deep breath. “I love you, Deidre.”

“You do?” she breathed, hope blossoming again in her heart.

“Yes, meu amor , my shark knew almost from the first time we met that you were someone special to me. The shark has never before noticed any female I have

pursued. It didn't care, because none of them were its mate. You are the one, Deidre. You are my mate." He held up the ring, and his expression seemed a bit nervous. "The question is, do you feel the same?"

"Do I?" She was floored. All her dreams were coming true. She reached for the ring and felt a little tingle of magic when their hands touched. For a moment, the ring shone brightly, and a chiming sound filled the small cabin. When the light faded and the sound ended, she smiled at him. "I love you too, Miguel. With all my heart. You are my mate, and I would be proud to wear this ring as a symbol of our love. Even though I think this ring is a little bit more than just a ring."

They both laughed as he placed the ring on her finger.

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“I have no doubt this ring is imbued with very potent magic. The High Priestess said it was protective magic that would serve you well,” Miguel told her as he held her hand and gazed up from the ring to meet her gaze. “I will love and protect you all the days of my life, Deidre, and this ring will add to that protection, for which I am grateful. I have no doubt we are living in dangerous days, and I want you to know the time for me to hide my true beliefs and allegiances is over. I have declared myself a servant of the Goddess and Her Light. So has Jose, and the rest of my pod will do the same. I’m allying myself to Sam and your Clan.”

“You’d do that for me?” She was touched by the distance he was prepared to go to make himself acceptable to her family. She loved him so deeply, it took her breath away. This time, it was forever. She knew that in her heart and in her soul.

“Of course. You are my mate, Deidre. I love you. I would move mountains, if you ask it.” He stood and swept her into his arms. “I’ve always been on the side of Light, though, if that makes any difference to you. I just didn’t allow anyone to know for certain. Sometimes, we sharks need to swim in murky waters.”

“Like the contract that brought you here,” she teased, reaching up to put her arms around his shoulders. He was everything to her. Her heart. Her soul. Her love.

“That was a mistake. If we’d known exactly what Kettering had in mind, we would’ve turned down the job,” he told her, cringing a little, “but ultimately, it worked in our favor. Perhaps coming to the Kinkaidas as prisoners will preserve the bad reputations of some of my men so they can be double agents for our side. They do say the Goddess works in mysterious ways.”

He leaned down and kissed her then, very gently. When he lifted his head, she wanted to object, but their gazes met, and the look in his eyes was so tender, it made her breathless.

“I love you, Deidre.” His words sounded like a vow to her overflowing heart.

“And I love you, Miguel. Forever.”

There were no more words then. Not for a very long time. He swept her off her feet and carried her to the bed. Laying her down as if she was made of the finest spun glass, he untied the belt of the fluffy robe and proceeded to lavish every inch of exposed skin with hot, wet kisses that made her squirm with desire.

Her eyes flew open when he left her, and she realized he’d risen from the bed to stand at the side, above her, looking down on her naked body, the robe still on her arms, but spread around her like a fluffy white blanket. Then he started to strip.

He took his time, making sure she was watching him as he removed first his shirt, then his pants, in a slow, tantalizing striptease that made her mouth water. He was such a good-looking man, with a good heart too. Everything she could ever want, wrapped up in a hunky, muscular package.

She could easily see the evidence of his desire as he came to her, finally, as naked as she was. He joined her on the bed, reclining at her side. He leaned up on one elbow to meet her gaze.

“I am the luckiest man alive,” he breathed, pushing a tendril of her hair behind her ear with gentle fingers.

His words and his actions made her feel cherished in a way she had never experienced. Never had she been with a man who made her feel as if she was the

beloved center of his universe. Of course, she felt the same way about him, so it was only fair. This, she realized, was what it meant to find your true mate. Never would she seek another. Nor would he. They were joined together, forever. Until the stars went cold and the universe itself ceased to exist. Two souls traveling through the realms of existence together. Forever.

The thought made her want to weep at the beauty of it. She had dreamed of finding her true mate but hadn't been altogether certain she would ever find him. Now that she had, she knew her dreams had been pale imaginings of how it really could be. Now she knew the truth of it, and it was so much better than anything she could have dreamed up.

She reached for him then, bringing her mouth to his as she strained upward. He met her halfway, and their kiss was one of fulfillment. Of joy realized. Of happiness achieved.

Desire—which was never far away when they were together—sparked happily, and she let the flames come to engulf them both in a world where only they existed. Together.

She stroked his muscular shoulders, loving the feel of his skin beneath her fingertips. Then she caressed his chest and downward, over his washboard abs to the hardness that seemed to leap at her touch. She gripped him, and he growled, making her smile up at him.

“I didn't know sharks could growl,” she teased, squeezing him gently.

“Keep that up, and I'll show you all sorts of things you never knew.” His voice was a deep, quiet whisper that set her senses on fire.

“Is that a promise?” She looked at him coyly, enjoying this banter that was so new to

her in this intimate situation. She liked that they communicated so well, even though their beasts were of different species.

He growled again and lowered his head to her neck, kissing her there and biting gently in a way that excited her. She almost laughed as she realized she'd just been bitten by a shark, albeit in his human form, and she wanted him to do it again.

He followed that gentle bite with little nibbles going down her body. She had to let go of him, but she was just about mindless as he paused at her breasts, then moved lower. When he spread her legs and kissed her more deeply in the most sensitive spot she owned, she just about came off the bed. She stifled what would have been screams of pleasure had they been in a place where they wouldn't be overheard by nosy relatives.

Someday, she promised herself silently. Someday soon, they would be alone in a place where they could let their passions run wild without worrying about making too much noise. She could hardly wait!

After bringing her three hard little climaxes, he stalked up her body and claimed his place between her thighs. She was already wrung out but ready for more when he slid inside and began to pulse within her. Gentle movements, at first, increasing as he watched her response until he was rocking her world with hard thrusts that sent her back into the stratosphere.

She stifled her moans and exclamations by hiding her face in his shoulder. She thought, at one point, she might have even bitten him, but at the moment of crisis, she was too far gone to care. He joined her in bliss a moment later, and they spent a long time coming down from the pinnacle. Together. As it should be between mates.

A long time later, Miguel held Deidre in his arms as they lay side by side in the small bed. Neither of them were asleep, but they were both tired from their exertions.

They'd made love a few more times until they were able to just lay quietly, though they still felt the need to touch one another with gentle caresses and outward signs of their commitment and care.

"Where do we go from here?" Deidre asked, seemingly out of the blue.

Miguel leaned up on one elbow to meet her gaze, his eyes narrowed in concern. What did she mean? They were mates. Where she went, he went, and vice versa. She must have realized his confusion because she clarified.

"I mean, after I finish my task here, do we go back to my home or should I try to extend my stay here, or what?"

Ah. That settled his inner beast. She was talking logistics. The shark went back to sleep, allowing the human side to deal with that sort of thing. The shark only cared about swimming, hunting and being with its mate. Not necessarily in that order. It was a creature of basic needs. Scheduling wasn't its strong point.

"Well, I'll talk with Tom and the Alpha, but since your family already wanted to expand their business, I think me and my men would serve as a ready-made crew, if your family is willing to hire us. We know the work already, after all. We could help you expand and train others." He loved how nicely this plan dovetailed with their needs.

Sending the hammerheads as a group up to Deidre's home wouldn't seem suspicious if they were being watched by the other side, and they'd be in place to act as agents for the lion Alpha and the side of Light. Miguel hadn't forgotten about Kettering either, and since he was based in Europe, being a bit closer might help Miguel shut that avenue of evil down. If the Goddess so willed.

He'd come clean about everything to do with Kettering, wanting there to be no

secrets between him and his mate. She'd taken it all in stride, admitting to having heard some of it from Tom when he'd been trying to talk her out of mating with a shark.

"I think he was just testing my resolve, to be honest," she admitted as they cuddled together. "But nothing could shake my seal from wanting this. From wanting you, Miguel."

"I'm glad. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't accepted our mating. I know I've always cultivated a shady reputation and I'm not saying I'm a saint. I've done things I shouldn't have done. Accepted jobs I shouldn't have accepted. But that's in the past now, though your Alpha may ask me and my men to take a walk on the wild side if push comes to shove. I told him I was done doing the really dangerous stuff, but he reminded me that if the coming battle heats up, we all may have no choice. Just living in this world with armies of Light and dark at war will be dangerous. But I want you to know I'll always be on your side, Deidre. Always."

He kissed her then and she melted into him. He loved how responsive she was to his slightest touch. They were going to have a magnificent life together, despite the rough start he'd had in life and their differences. They'd work it out. And he'd do whatever it took to keep her safe.

He wouldn't do anything that might put Deidre in danger, but if he could quietly gather intelligence, surely that wouldn't be too big a risk. He might not be able to stop Kettering himself. Not with his mate's safety to consider. But he might be able to help in the process. It would irk him a little not to be in on the actual take-down, but as long as the work got done, he would console himself with the fact that he had a mate and would never risk either her or the happiness they had found together.

Miguel could still do good work from behind the lines, so to speak. He had the skills and the experience. It was time to let the younger, unmated men have their shot at

glory in the field. It was a thought he'd have to get used to, but having Deidre in his life made it so much easier.

"I think you going back to Ireland with me will work out nicely," Deidre replied with a hint of excitement in her otherwise tired voice. "It could look like Kinkaid is handing you off to a subsidiary for good behavior, or something, to preserve the bad-boy reputation of you and your pod. I do love a bad boy."

She giggled a bit, and he was enchanted by the sound. He wanted to make her laugh every day of their lives. He set that as a goal with an inward smile of his own.

"Great minds think alike," he agreed. "I believe the Alpha already has that plan in place. The man thinks three steps ahead."

It was a sincere compliment. Miguel admired that about the lion Alpha. He was a strategic thinker, which was probably one of the main keys to his phenomenal success in both business and with his Clan.

"Yeah, Sam is a sly one," Deidre agreed, smiling. "He's been good for the Clan. Even for us, back in the old country. Since he's become Alpha, we've prospered like never before." She was silent a moment, then spoke more softly. "I can't wait to show you my home. I hope your shark will like the waters." She sounded a bit worried about that last part, so he leaned over to kiss her.

"I'm sure I'll love it. Anywhere you are, is perfect for me. Truly." He kissed her forehead and then leaned back again to lie beside her. They'd had a long, loving, luxurious night, and it was getting close to dawn, he reckoned. He could sense her worrying, so he added a bit more. "I've been in those northern waters before. My shark enjoyed it. Have no worry about that, my love."

"I can't believe the island was actually from the fey realm," she said, surprising him

with the change of subject. "I hope your brother is all right."

"Having spoken with the lady on the island, I think Jose will be fine, but I confess, I'll miss having him around," Miguel admitted.

"I'm sorry," Deidre whispered, stroking his arm.

"Don't be. It is as the Goddess wills, and I think Jose would have been both happy and sad to see me draw back from the truly dangerous missions, now that I've found you. He was happy for us, of course. But I think he would have been sad at the constant reminder that he hasn't found his mate." Miguel shrugged. There was nothing to be done about the situation in any case. He just had to accept it all.

"Yet."

"What?"

"He hasn't found his mate...yet," she clarified. "I like to believe that any shifter who truly wants to find their mate, will. No matter how long it takes." She turned to face him. "It feels like I waited a lifetime to find you, Miguel, but it was definitely worth the wait."

She reached over and kissed him and that effectively ended their conversation for the next hour or more.

Later that morning as they were standing on deck, enjoying some fresh air and looking out at the waves together, Miguel put his arms around her from behind. He didn't care who saw them together. They were mates now, and nothing would ever keep them apart. Her people would just have to get used to it.

So far, though, there hadn't been any overt objections. A few of the selkies had

congratulated them quietly and even welcomed Miguel to the family.

“I think I’ll miss this warm weather when I get back home,” Deidre murmured as the sun sparkled off the water. “But it’ll be good to get back there, see my family again, and start the new branch of our business.”

Miguel had already been introduced to her parents and brothers during a video call in which they’d announced their mating. If Deidre hadn’t called them, they would’ve found out from someone in the extended family, she’d explained. Apparently, selkies were terrible busybodies, according to her. Miguel was intrigued by the idea and couldn’t wait to learn all about her people.

“You know I’m happy to help in any way I can. Your brother Dermot has me making notes to give him about what we’ll need for a training program to expand into multiple crews,” Miguel reminded her.

“Yeah, give Dermot an inch and he’ll take a mile. But I won’t let him cut into our together time,” she promised him. “And I know you’re going to be doing some kind of super secret spy stuff for Sam and Tom, too. I know how those guys operate.”

“Well, none of us are happy that Kettering is still out there, trying to lure my brothers-in-arms into nefarious deeds,” Miguel murmured close to her ear. “Being closer to his base of operations might help me do a bit of in-depth research on him and his operations. Maybe even some in-person surveillance.”

“As long as you always come home to me, I can support that idea. I don’t like that he’s out there, either. Men like that should be stopped, and I know it’s personal to you and your men after what he tried to get you to do.”

“You never cease to amaze me, my love,” Miguel said, rubbing her cheek with his from behind. “And I will always come home to you. Never fear.”

“I’m not afraid of anything as long as you’re by my side,” she whispered, and her words melted his heart. “I’ve been searching for you all my life and I can hardly believe you’re finally here.”

He squeezed her waist and felt his heart warm with joy. She was so amazing. How had he been so blessed as to find a mate as perfect as Deidre?

“I waited a lifetime to find you too, you know,” he whispered in her ear as they watched the waters. She turned in his arms to face him.

“And I’m really glad you did.”

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The burner phone vibrated in Marco's pocket like a wasp caught in a jar. He froze. Nobody should have this number. Nobody but ghosts from the past.

Glancing around the dimly lit storage bay, Marco made sure he was alone before pulling the phone free. The tiny, disposable device was cheap, meant to be used once and tossed. He stared at the screen, the number unlisted, an unknown caller ID flashing in the dim light. He already knew who it was. A slow exhale. He pressed accept and lifted the phone to his ear.

Silence. Then...

"Marco," came a voice, rich as old oil and twice as slick. "I was wondering when you'd pick up."

Marco's fingers tightened around the device. Abdul Kettering. The bastard. Marco turned toward the bulkhead, keeping his voice low.

"I don't know how you got this number, but—"

"Come now," Kettering cut him off, chuckling. "You and I both know there's no such thing as an untraceable number. If I want to find someone, I find them."

"What do you want?" Marco gritted his teeth, glancing toward the stairwell.

"A favor." The word dripped with amusement. "And to offer you an opportunity."

Marco forced himself to stay neutral. "I don't work for you anymore."

A beat of silence. Then, a soft, knowing hum. “Ah, but you see, I don’t believe that. You may have walked away from our prior agreement, but I know a man like you doesn’t waste his talents playing oilfield handyman for a bunch of bleeding-heart lions. You were always meant for more.” Marco stayed quiet, but Kettering continued. “Tell me, does it bother you? Taking orders from seals and lions? Pretending that sharks can ever truly integrate with them? With their rules, their righteousness? You were an apex predator in the deep, and now you’re a fish in a tank, waiting to be fed.”

Marco’s jaw clenched. “I made my choice.”

“No, you made a choice. But you haven’t yet made the right one.” Kettering’s voice darkened.

“And what, exactly, do you think that is?” Marco felt a cold chill creep up his spine. He hated Kettering. Hated that he’d ever agreed to a private deal with this snake in an Armani suit.

Kettering chuckled again, low and knowing. “It’s simple, really. The world is changing, Marco. You feel it, don’t you? The old balance is breaking. Those in power won’t be in power much longer. The tides are shifting.”

“What are you talking about?” Marco frowned.

“You think the Kinkajids will always be on top? No, my friend.” Kettering’s voice was smooth as glass. “Something bigger is coming. A reckoning. And when it does, those who stand on the wrong side of history will be swept away.” Marco swallowed, the weight of those words settling into his chest. Kettering continued, voice lighter now. “But I’m offering you something better. A place on the right side. You were always smarter than the rest of them. More practical. More...ambitious.”

Marco’s pulse quickened. A test. This was a test. Had to be. Kettering wasn’t just

fishing—he was looking for leverage.

“You’re wasting your time,” Marco said, forcing steel into his voice.

“And yet, you haven’t hung up,” Kettering murmured. “That tells me you’re at least curious. That’s good. I like curiosity.”

“You still haven’t told me what you want.” Marco exhaled, his mind racing.

“For now? Nothing difficult. Just watch. Keep your ears open. Pay attention to Miguel and the others. When the time comes, I may need a small favor. And in return...” The voice dipped lower, coaxing. “You’ll have your reward. A real one. Not this temporary forgiveness the Kinkuids have given you. I can offer you freedom. Power. A place in the new world order.”

Marco’s grip on the phone tightened. A place in the new world order. The words echoed in his skull, laced with both promise and poison. Those were Venifucus promises. Venifucus words. They whispered of dark things cloaked in pretty language.

He should shut it down. Say no. Walk away. But instead, he hesitated. And Kettering caught it.

“Ah,” the man sighed, triumphant. “There it is. That glimmer of doubt.”

Marco gritted his teeth. “I’m not giving you an answer.”

“Not yet.” Kettering’s voice was soft now, almost indulgent. “But you will.”

The line went dead.

Marco stared at the phone for a long moment before slowly lowering it. The Gulf

whispered beyond the steel walls, endless and dark. And for the first time since he had left the mercenary life behind, Marco felt truly, deeply unsteady.

He wouldn't forsake his pod for the devil, even if he'd never thought of himself as a truly good man. He had darkness in his soul and wasn't proud of some of the things he'd done in his past career and life. But Miguel was giving them an opportunity to change. The Kinkajidos were, as well.

Marco had to think long and hard about what he wanted from life and how he would go about getting it. Kettering—as they had all agreed—was an ongoing problem. Perhaps there was a way to turn this situation around and use it for good. Maybe then Marco could redeem himself for some of the terrible things he'd done in his life.

Or not.

He had a lot to think about.

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The High Priestess Betina sat down to dinner with her apprentice, Allie, and the twin Lords of all were in North America, Tim and Rafe. They were identical twin werewolves and were both mated to Allie. Together, the three of them were in charge of every shifter that followed the Light on this continent, and they took their responsibilities seriously.

The surprising news from the Gulf had caught them all a bit unaware. Even Betina. Which wasn't a common occurrence. But then, her old friend Mirabella had never done anything the easy way. The expected way. No, Mirabella was a law unto herself. Always had been.

Especially since the breakdown of her family...

“What can you tell us of Lady Mirabella?” Allie asked quietly as they ate the hearty meal set before them.

Betina always felt a little out of place in the mortal realm, but less so than she felt in faerie these days. Even so, being with Allie and her mates was the most comfortable place in this realm for her right now and she valued their friendship, and their leadership. They all had important roles to play in the coming conflict and Betina wanted them to be as prepared as possible. Which is why she told them more than she’d told anyone about her past in a very long time.

“Mirabella is truly ancient. Even for one of us,” Betina began, sipping the very fine wine they’d served with the steak they’d grilled.

A Maxwell vintage, she surmised, glancing at the bottle. Young Atticus, who was a bloodletter with several centuries under his belt as a vintner, had really come a long way in perfecting his craft.

“Does she live on that island that kept appearing and disappearing?” Allie asked when Betina got momentarily lost in thought about the vampire and his delicious wine.

“Oh, no. I don’t think so. But her chosen place of exile is along a rocky coast, so I assume the island is part of her lands.”

“Exile?” Tim asked, pausing in his consumption of the rare steak he was enjoying to look at her. “Why is she in exile?”

“Well, it’s a long story, but suffice to say, Mirabella has not had an easy time of it with her family. Her husband...” Betina shook her head. That was a story they didn’t need to know. “No, the important part for you to know is about Mirabella’s daughter.” Betina took a deep breath. Even after all this time, it was hard to say this out loud. “Elspeth is Mirabella’s daughter.”

“The Elspeth? The Destroyer of Worlds?” Allie breathed, her eyes going wide.

“That would be the one,” Betina confirmed, taking another sip of the hearty wine. “Ellie didn’t start out the way she ended up, but a thirst for power combined with what I think was more than a bit of mental instability turned her into what she is now. What she has been for more than a thousand years by your reckoning.” Betina sighed. “It just about destroyed Mirabella to discover the path her beloved daughter was taking and when Elspeth went on her rampage, Mirabella retreated to her tower and gave up her position.”

“What position did she hold before?” Allie asked after some time had passed as the three mortals absorbed the new information.

“Mirabella was our queen. She went off the rails for a while and earned a rather bloodthirsty reputation that’s carried even here into the mortal realm.” Betina paused before delivering the final bit of information that would make it all click into place. “They used to call her Mab.”

“Elspeth is Queen Mab’s daughter?” Rafe finally asked, putting it all together.

Betina nodded, her thoughts sad. Elspeth had been a precocious child, but she’d grown into an absolute monster. Her mother’s reaction had earned her a terrible reputation in many realms and finally led to her self-imposed exile. It was tragic, really, but Elspeth had to be stopped before she destroyed even more lives and ended more realms.

They hadn’t given her that nickname for no reason. Elspeth had destroyed entire realms and all the life in them in her quest for power and chaos. She was truly demented at this point and her followers didn’t even realize that she was feeding off their power and would kill them just as easily as everyone else in her frenzy.

Insanity was the only thing Betina could come up with to explain why a lovely fey

child had turned into a monster. And when Elspeth had gone bad, so had Mab for a time. Giving up the throne and exiling herself had been Mab's way of trying to make amends. She'd needed to get away to help herself get sane again.

Betina hadn't seen her in a century or more in the mortal realm, but she hoped Mab was well on her way to recovery. The fact that she was actively recruiting warriors was a good sign. Mab, for all her faults, had always been a good strategist and it would take the best to overcome her daughter this time.

For, if they failed to stop Elspeth this time, the mortal realm would be lost forever. It was make or break time. Do or die. Quite literally.

"Well that explains a lot," Tim commented wryly. "And Queen Mab is on our side? Against her own daughter?"

Betina nodded again. "She has to be. Otherwise life as we know it could cease to exist. Not just here, but in every realm. Elspeth has to be stopped before she destroys the multiverse in her madness. Her mother knows this and although it's painful, she also knows Elspeth has to be stopped. Mab can't do it alone." Betina took a deep breath. "None of us could do it alone. Elspeth is too powerful and has too many foolish allies on her side. But together, if we get things just right, we might stand a chance."

"It sounds like we really have no other choice," Allie observed, her expression stark.

"I'm sorry to say that you're right," Betina agreed. "We really have no other choice, at all."

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Thank you for reading Hammerhead , part of the Kinkaid Shifters series.